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"LOOKING AT NOTHING IS SEEING YOURSELF": SPECULATIVE PODCASTS AND  
FANS IMAGINING QUEER RADICAL FUTURES

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## ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

### "LOOKING AT NOTHING IS SEEING YOURSELF": SPECULATIVE PODCASTS AND FANS IMAGINING QUEER RADICAL FUTURES

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This project analyzes three speculative podcasts and their fan's transformative works to demonstrate the ways in which together they imagine radical and queer futures. Spec-fic can be seen as a way to take back a future that is traditionally imagined without certain voices and bodies. Because podcasts are a solely audio medium without visual representations at all, bodies in this arrangement are brought in *via fanworks*. I use close reading to look at *The Penumbra Podcast*, 2016-; *The Magnus Archives*, 2016-; and *The Bright Sessions*, 2015-2018. This thesis asserts that speculative podcasts and their fans' works build off of each other to envision the future, while also being complicated by contemporary discourse and understandings of race. Utilizing queer theory and fan studies, I argue that queer podcast creators create space within their audio medium for fans to continue to grow upon their stories. Fans then do so by bringing in (raced) bodies and visuals via fanworks. In this understanding, fanworks and fans themselves have changed understandings of the original media to create a collaborative version of the future.

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## Introduction

This project will examine speculative fiction podcasts as well as their fans' speculative works to see how these products imagine radical and queer futures. Speculative fiction can be seen as a way to take back a future that is hegemonically imagined without certain voices and bodies. With an accessible audio-only medium, spec-fic podcasts have a unique position to access fans and listeners, as well as having a particular relationship to bodies. This project aims to examine the series' speculation, fans moving through and beyond those futures, and finally, look at the amalgamated future that was forged by the podcasts and their fanworks. This project seeks to assist in the creation and imagination of radical futures, through resisting the hegemonic ideal even within scholarship that the typical fan or 'market audience' is a cisgender heterosexual white middle-aged man, and by locating power and excavating it through finding the body within the audio.

The three podcasts this project will address are *The Penumbra Podcast's Juno Steel* storyline (2016-), *The Magnus Archives* (2016-), and *The Bright Sessions* (2015-2018). All the shows have LGBTQA+ characters and queer relationships in the foreground. In addition to this, all could be seen as speculative fiction, or spec-fic.

Because the creators care about making radical and queer futures, are more accessible to fans, and seem to care more about them as constituents as opposed to big media conglomerates, their interactions with fans are shaped differently than larger creators. Beyond their direct feeds on social media and Patreon, the creators also engage with fans in other ways. Kevin Vibert, lead writer for *The Penumbra*

*Podcast*, has been streaming videogames on Twitch during the covid-19 pandemic; *The Magnus Archives* creators Rusty Quill runs a fan Discord server for Patreon supporters. As the fanbase grew in size the creators stepped back from interacting as much. Despite this, it is clear that for these smaller independent speculative podcasts, communicating with the fans is part of their relationship. The connectivity that Patreon, as well as other online sources, lends to creators and fans, combined with a sense of safety and representation coming from the inclusion of queer and trans characters means that the fanworks and fan behaviors and cultures differ largely from larger fandoms of other source media.

In addition to looking at speculative podcasts and their fanworks, this project aims to look at how the latter changes the former. The product of speculative work done by an independent podcast + queer and trans BIPOC fans is more than the fanworks and the original works themselves. Regarding speculative podcasts and their queer and minority fans, the combination of fanworks + works should be taken together as a whole project to work toward radical queer futures via speculation. When fans and creators have a relationship like these small podcasts' fandoms do, the product is more than the sum of its parts. One way that podcasts and their fandoms are exceptional in this regard, though, is the relative accessibility to create and consume podcasts. All of these podcasts are free to listen to, accessible to anyone on the internet due to transcripts, and are produced by small independent creators who at least partially are funded by fans. Websites like Patreon, which allow fans of creators to donate monthly or based on content updates, have changed the nature of fan-creator engagements, as well as making it possible for minority

creators to produce work. Patreon allows creators to avoid larger production companies and others who may interfere with their content, including potential censorship of queer and radical themes. Because queer radical podcasts are funded by their fans at least partly, the relationship is unique and fandoms may weigh heavier in decision making, where traditional media has media corporations. This is not to say that fans have direct input or control over these podcasts, but the small, close-knit nature of this relationship may mean that creators are more likely to be influenced by their fans than larger companies and creators with less access to fans. Social media like Twitter and Instagram where creators and fans have direct connections have certainly changed fandom overall. However, these small-scale productions from indie podcast creators and their queer fans are closer than that. For this reason, fan behaviors, culture, and fanworks can be seen as affecting the overall cumulative project that is the speculating of the future through podcasts. Part of this is the podcast's plots and characters, actors and creators, fans themselves, fanworks depicting bodies and identities, the relationships between creators and fans, the community of fans, and what a potential listener and fan might see when searching for the show. Moreover, the reciprocal relationship means we can read the futures created in works + fanworks as a cumulative, if not collaborative, project. We can understand fanworks and original works as a cycle in which these small productions are influenced by their fans, and fans influence each other, therefore changing the entire product that new (potential) fans might see.

There is very little scholarship on podcasts, particularly fiction podcasts/audio dramas. There are some burgeoning discussions within the past

year surrounding podcast fandoms and conversations and race, sexuality, and representation. Despite the growing fanbases and general popularity of podcasts over the past *two decades* there is little written about them. Besides, the majority of podcasts mentioned are not audio dramas. Podcasting is generally written about as a media tool, referring predominantly to news, nonfiction talk radio, or humor. The specific location of fiction podcast audio dramas is flattened under general ideas of 'radio/audio drama' or podcasting as non-fiction. Some are mentioned in Spinelli and Dann's *Podcasting* from 2019, but what the authors call 'podcast dramas' are linked intrinsically to the history of radio plays. Something is missing in their discussion: they assert that despite "freedom" in the space of the internet that "independent podcast drama producers create works that appeal to the core podcast listening demographic. . . 'middle-American Millennials', male and under fifty, and 'geeky'" (Spinelli and Dann 109). This, to me, seems incongruous with the politics implicit and explicit in these speculative podcasts, as well as what can be learned about the fanbases of these shows. While ostensibly anyone can listen to podcasts due to their accessibility, there *is* a phenomenon of queer and minority fans gathering around these speculative podcasts. Regarding an international, diverse swatch of thousands of fans as geeky men is flattening the work done by, around, and through fiction podcasts.

## Methods

A way to see the queer future-creation of these podcasts is through close readings of passages. Due to the audio medium, there are transcripts available on the website of all these series<sup>1</sup>, which I use to cite and quote. These transcripts do obscure some of the audio-specific traits of the show, like tone of voice, but there are also certainly fans who use them as accessibility tools for engaging with the fandom when they cannot listen to the shows themselves. Many who read faster or easier than they can listen, engage with the series primarily through these transcripts. To represent the cumulative project consisting of original work, fanwork, and reception, the choices I have made in terms of passages selected from these podcasts are duly influenced by fans. What fans emphasize as queer and radical moments is, to this project, crucial; one cannot easily separate what one reads as queer from what the fan community does. This is due to the influence fans have on anyone's reception of the podcast. The moments that fans find most interesting, more relatable, most memorable—these are the moments that stick around in the collective memory in the fandom as a whole. When, for example, they draw art of a scene, it then becomes a scene that is emphasized by *other* fans. So, in choosing passages to highlight, fan emphasis is considered.

That influence is permeating. While there may be more overtly legibly queer moments—such as queer romance—there are less obviously evident moments that fans emphasize and further develop in fanworks. Many fandoms that have been

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<sup>1</sup> Some transcripts cited in this project are *not* produced by the series creators themselves, but by fans. Notably, *The Magnus Archive* has a fan-run collaborative archive that consists of fanmade and officially-released transcripts.

studied over the past few decades emphasized the bringing in of queer themes, the *queering* of ostensibly heterosexual men most commonly. Fanlore, a fan-run wiki site, defines “slash” as “a type of fanwork in which two (or more) characters of the same sex or gender are placed in a sexual or romantic situation with each other. *Slash* can also be a verb; to *slash* is to create a slash fanwork or to interpret the chemistry between the characters in the source text as homoerotic” (Fanlore Contributors, “Slash”). Often, these characters considered slashed were straight and fanworks were queering them in their fanworks. These fandoms differ. As opposed to fandoms with source texts in which queer themes are absent, these podcasts give fans not only gaps with which to fill with queer fan content but also queer moments and themes upon which *more* queer fan content can be layered. As opposed to many other fandom’s source media, fans of speculative podcasts are not bringing queerness into the fold. However, there are moments that even within the queer podcasts, are moments fans see as implicit fodder for slashing characters. This notion will be expanded upon, but it is perhaps important to note that some of the moments/themes selected from the texts were selected *due to fandom importance*, not just what may be evident as queer to a nonfan.

In addition to original texts and episodes, social media posts from the creators, actors, and other official accounts are useful when excavating queer futurity from the text, especially when considering the fandoms as audiences. These out-of-text interactions range from official art to questions asked outright about a character's sexuality or gender. Similar to the discussion surrounding what fan moments are interesting and relevant to *fans*, social media posts that gain traction

in fan communities are also relevant to this project, highlighting the back-and-forth between fans and creators and media. With social media, question-and-answer sessions, and other moments where creators speak to fans or address fan concerns, we can see how the series and their fans' project of envisioning the future is cumulative. Moreover, since there are limitations to a fictional work's narrative structure, it is often with external confirmation that certain queer themes are legible. This will be addressed. Importantly, especially with online-only mediums like podcasts, the social media of creators are locations in which fans *do* look for answers about the text, confirmation of their beliefs, and other matters which influence the way they perceive the series themselves and create fan responses. So, to ignore these moments is to miss part of what fans are looking at. This project then addresses not only the series themselves but out-of-text content produced by the creators.

More than just the podcasts and their creators, another way that these queer and radical futures are created is through fans' creations. Thus, this project will examine fanworks as well as fan behaviors and cultures. Fandom behavior is communal, and part of the power dynamic inherent in fan-creator relationships stems from the fact that fanworks are not created— nor fan theories discussed— solo. Put another way, the communities of fans are what create fan cultures, and the cultures should be understood as a collaborative experience. Fandom being a community, and therefore more than just derivative works is key to this project and my understanding of how fans operate. Each piece of fanart or written story should not be viewed in a vacuum or as solely influenced by the original creative work. The

communal nature of fandom means that groups of people are forging futures together. One major way that the communal nature of fans is evident is in the way that many people will render characters looking similar, following a group consensus, with little or no input from the creators. Therefore, as opposed to 'reading' individual fanworks the same way one might the source media, this project zooms out to examine commonalities with many fans' depictions. This is not to flatten the individual contributions each fan makes, but to see the inherent community in these fan spaces' productions. Accompanying the close readings of the transcripts themselves are fan receptions, in the form of meta-analysis, discussion, and fanworks such as fanfiction or visual art.

## A Note on Podcast Selection

*The Penumbra Podcast* is more than just *Juno Steel*. While there are currently two main storylines updating alternatively, the show started as an anthology of multiple genres, including horror and western, all with a queer slant. This changed as the series gained fans and picked up momentum, with two shows *Juno Steel* and *The Second Citadel* running concurrently on the podcast feed. The main reason I will focus on *Juno Steel* is that despite being in the same feed, it is vastly more popular than the *Second Citadel*. Also, it attends to a utopian queer sense of the future than *Second Citadel* might—the latter is a fantasy series that often brings up oppression and privilege to deconstruct or address it, while *Juno Steel* appears to have eradicated many systems of oppression entirely, as will be shown. While many fans do listen to both series, *Juno Steel* is much more popular, garnering more fanworks and discussion. In these ways, the *Juno Steel* storyline is very much seen as a fandom in its own right. The storyline beginning in early 2016 also puts *Juno* in the same cohort as the *Magnus Archives* and the *Bright Sessions*. For these reasons, I will address solely the *Juno Steel* stories in terms of queer future forging. Similar to *Penumbra's Second Citadel* storyline, it is worth mentioning that the creators of the other two podcasts also have other series. *The Bright Sessions* continued creating in their universe with *The AM Archives* podcast and *The College Tapes* podcast, as well as in Lauren Shippen's YA novels. The original series was free to listen to, however, and therefore these newer works can be considered separately, as they are not free content and therefore require more resources or money to obtain. The paywall separates the free original storyline from *more* content. In addition, *The Bright*

*Sessions*'s story an ending, so the other shows are seen as additional. For this reason, while the canonical universe may continue, we can read the fan community responses relevant *only* to *the Bright Sessions* as comparable to the other podcasts in this project. Rusty Quill, which produces *Magnus* produces multiple shows. These include an actual-play show called *Rusty Quill Gaming*, which began in 2015, and the science fiction show *Stellar Firma*, which began in 2019- both of these are still running. These other Rusty Quill shows do have overlap in production and acting staff, but the creator and writer Jonny Sims does not create or write for the others. While the *Penumbra* team keeps their various storylines within the same podcast feed, slating them all as part of one show, Atypical Artists and Rusty Quill both do many projects, and their various podcasts are published in their own feeds. This separates the shows and means one does not have to—and indeed, many do not—engage with the other productions from the same creators. Therefore, the fan communities do not necessarily overlap; that is, many are fans of only one production by each creator. The popularity and production of fan content are what this project is addressing, so while there are many reasons someone would be in the fandom or listen to one podcast but not another, due to each series having *its fan communities*, this project stays localized only on the *Juno Steel* storyline, *The Magnus Archives*, and the original run of *The Bright Sessions*.

Podcasts are (generally) free-to-access, which makes being a fan of them more accessible than a television show or other form of media that audiences have to pay (or illegally attain) to consume. In addition, the relative accessibility of the technology means that anyone, in theory, can be a creator independently of large

publishing companies. While there are potential barriers to success and finding an audience for all artists, for the purposes of this project it is critical to know that these creators were able to use the format of free and online-only podcasting to tell their own stories, not beholden to a management company or network, etc. Therefore, racial, gender, and sexual minorities can create works of their own, and audiences can find this work easily and accessibly. While it is difficult to ascertain the identities of these creators without their disclosure, we can know some of them. All the creators of all these podcasts identify as queer, and the majority of them are white. Sophie Takagi Kaner identifies as 'hapa'. The races of these creators are illuminating when examine their works' relationship to race. While the creators are more easily understood given their Q+A's or social media posts, their actors are not always as easily found. Looking beyond the creators to actors, it is less clear, and they are often less accessible, as opposed to actors of a visual medium. Therefore, we do not know the races of every actor and our understanding of them comes from potentially murky ways of knowing, such as assuming based on their voice or photos of them. Importantly, fans and listeners of the podcasts may not know at all the races of these actors. This project is therefore not interested in discerning the 'real' race of characters but deconstructing and examining the relationship of the series and race as a concept.

## Queer Speculation

Aimee Bahng's understanding of speculative fiction in *Migrant Futures* comes from marginalized voices who see the future itself as an "always already occupied space" (12). In Bahng's view, the future is figuratively and literally the project of already dominant and privileged forces. For BIPOC to speculate via fiction their own futures, works of many genres can "speculat[e] from the margins" (23). Bahng asserts that speculation can be seen "not so much a genre, but rather as a discursive practice" (169). In this way, the practice of speculating migrant futures is to continue to try to decolonize the future. The podcasts in this project are not all created by BIPOC, but all by queer creators, and the fanbases *are* made up of marginalized groups. Bahng—and Alexis Lothian in *Old Futures* as we will see—utilizes the term speculative fiction to encompass many genres that attempt to forge the future, in Bahng's case specifically to decolonize the future that has been kept from the marginalized. Podcast creators and fans of these podcasts are all speculating to imagine and create a version of the future that is radical and queer. Fans, fan behaviors, and fanworks work through and with the podcasts and creators to forge queer radical futures. Listeners, in the context of fandom, are also speculating; and reading the podcasts and their fan's works in tandem shows ways that white queers and queer BIPOC/migrants 'speculate from the margins' as well, with and without the podcast creators.

Wendy Pearson's book chapter from *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction*, "Science Fiction and Queer Theory" helps us understand this relationship further. This project encompasses multiple genres into speculative fiction, including

science fiction (sf). Utilizing queer theorists including Foucault, Sedgwick, and Butler, Pearson examines various examples of queer spec-fic, some intentional and some not, to address the relationship between spec-fic and queer theory. Pearson clarifies intention as follows: “the purpose of applying queer theory to sf is not primarily to recuperate a gay and lesbian history of the field, although that is an important basis for any comprehensive study of sexuality in sf, so much as to examine the conceptual bases of all possible depictions of sexualities within sf” (157). With Pearson's understanding of the confluence of queer theory and spec-fic, I intend to not only look at LGBTQA+ characters or creators but to examine the ways sexuality plays a part in each of the podcasts. That is, moving beyond representation and fixed identity and instead unearth the concept of sexuality in the instances of fiction. The purpose of using queer theory is that speculative fiction “which describes bodies, genders, sexualities as fluid is much more in harmony with approaches that celebrate fluidity, liminality and other radical tactics for deconstructing the rigidity of binary identity categories” (Pearson 157). Because these works eschew heteronormative understandings and fixed identities, understanding them necessitates a theoretical framework which 'harmonizes'. The podcasts in this project have the best of both worlds, in many ways—there are many LGBTQA+ characters as well as creators, but the mode of speculation to forge queer futures with these podcasts eschews traditional heteronormative roles, and this is inclusive of *all* their characters. Pearson asserts that “the real aim of queer theory is to make possible a future in which society is radically restructured in order to invalidate fixed identities and deconstruct the Cartesian binarisms which

automatically value white over black, male over female and straight over gay" (157). Rather than emphasize various identities, in this view queer theory aims to invalidate fixed identity altogether in the quest to deconstruct 'binarisms' that value the hegemonic. Pearson states that not every story with LGBTQA+ characters and themes "not necessarily involve any sort of unsettling of a heteronormative regime; at the same time, stories which interrogate alternative possibilities for sexualsocial structures are not necessarily sympathetic to alternative sexualities" (150). So, having characters and space for LGBTQA+ people does not inherently upheave hegemony, and not every spec-fic story that tries to forge a new hegemony in its project does so with queerness in mind. Many of spec-fic's versions of the future "take for granted the continued prevalence of heteronormative institutional practices - dating, marriage, the nuclear family and so on" (Pearson 150). The specter of cisheteronormativity and hegemonic power often hangs over stories that try to change up the system, leading stories to continue to reiterate traditional power in a new form, not deconstruct it.

Alexis Lothian, twelve years after Pearson's piece, addresses a similar topic in her book chapter "Feminist and Queer Science Fiction in America". Her opening sentence is "What would a world without gender be like?" (Lothian 70). Lothian also takes a look at the history of spec-fic, specifically in the United States, and connects queer theory to representations of gender and sexuality. Lothian highlights the tension between "the utopian imaginings of nineteenth-century progressive movements" (71) before the genre of 'science fiction' was identified. Lothian asserts that there were also feminist attempts to imagine the world through fiction, and

while they were "critiqued for gender essentialism[...] and racial exclusivity" (72) there were works that sought to imagine the future as a utopia for women. These futures often were necessary without men. The authors, like Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Mary Bradley Lane, were exclusionary and essentialist because their notions of removing men from the future meant women "might have had an inherent capacity to create a better world" (Lothian 72). Despite these early feminist utopias having only women, these worlds were not queer- and trans-inclusive. Lothian states that "the all-women landscapes of early feminist utopia make no mention of the possibility of erotic connections between women" (72). Like Pearson, Lothian also says that in spec-fic "heterosexuality has been presumed to be the natural outlet for human – and even alien – desire" (77). The lack of queer and trans people in these stories is part of it, but as Pearson said even the inclusion of LGBTQA+ characters does not make a story inherently queer and anti-heteronormative. Lothian extends this to even *alien* desire often being imagined as heteronormative in spec-fic. To Lothian and Pearson, queer themes are few and far between in spec-fic. However, Lothian also asserts that "to think about feminist and queer science fiction purely from the perspective of textual production is to think about it in a relatively impoverished way. Feminist science fiction is also a community and a world that has invited readers, writers, fans, and scholars into new ways of understanding, thinking, and living gender and sexuality" (79). To look only to published works—possibly even only texts—is to do a disservice to the ways that queer feminists imagine and create futures. Fanworks and cultures can be seen as another way. Lothian says that "mindful political knowledge production and

preservation perpetuates and expands the radical explorations of queer and feminist science fiction – through fiction, theory, and conversations on paper, in digital form, and in person" (80). To Lothian, texts, activism, community, collaboration, and archiving are all ways and necessary parts of the whole project to radically explore the future. Following Lothian's point about new ways of understanding, we can also see spec-fic podcasts and their fans as also utilizing new technologies. The belief that many different forms are crucial to these 'radical explorations' drives this project. Fanworks specifically, and the connective, collaborative nature of these podcasts' fanbases are radical in form as well as content. Through excavating online perspectives from social media and transformative works, this project seeks to create an expanded notion of queer feminist spec-fic analysis.

Lothian furthers our understanding in her book *Old Futures: Speculative Fiction and Queer Possibility*. Queer theory is steeped in the in-betweens and tensions. Speculation itself, as Aimee Bahng helps us see, is seen as a colonizing effort done by privileged folks. Lothian sees the same potential, saying "it is not difficult to understand why speculative and science fiction futures seem antithetical to queer understandings of temporality that question the self-evident value of progress" (21). Building on Halberstam's concept of queer time, Lothian acknowledges that there is a dominant understanding of spec-fic that values the normative linear, progressive system that is not in line with queerness. Ways of imagining the future as utopian are "inextricably entangled with the reproduction of racialized heteronormativity, with spatial and cultural colonization [...] The notion

of traveling into space, colonizing what *Star Trek* called the 'final frontier' has often served conservative national political interests" (Lothian 21). The tool that speculative fiction can be to help creators and consumers/fans forge their visions of the future have historically been in service of recreating and reaffirming hegemonic powers and further relegating marginalized groups. The trope of space travel and colonizing what humans find there is an old one that does come up in one podcast of this project. There are many tropes or technologies that spec-fic uses that are likewise reproducing 'racialized [cis]heteronormativity'. Works of speculative fiction that create a vision of the future in this view are seen as the purview of dominant forces. However, there are queer creators and works of speculative fiction seeking to make queer futures. Lothian in her book emphasizes "approaches that take up the future as a transformative possibility without either idealizing or demonizing the past" (4). Queer speculative works deny both options of an either/or and reject a (hetero)normative relationship to time and progression.

Jack Halberstam's *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* inspired Lothian. Halberstam opens by asserting that "that there is such a thing as 'queer time' and 'queer space'" (1). Beyond non/normativity and other binaries, Halberstam uses queer time to "make clear how respectability, and notions of the normal on which it depends, may be upheld by a middle-class logic of reproductive temporality" (4). A major contribution from this text by Halberstam is the concept of the 'transgender look'. Building on Laura Mulvey's concept of a "female gaze", Halberstam establishes that there is a potential "nonfetishtic mode of seeing the transgender body—a mode that looks with, rather than at, the

transgender body and cultivates the multidimensionality of an indisputably transgender gaze" (92). It is perhaps amiss to extrapolate Mulvey and Halberstam's concepts from film to the audio-only medium of podcasts. However, the inclusion of fanworks and specifically fanart that brings transgender bodies back in the fold means the concept is still illuminating.

In *Bodyminds Reimagined: (Dis)ability, Race, and Gender in Black Women's Speculative Fiction*, Sami Schalk looks to speculative fiction made by and including Black women to express a confluence with critical disability studies and Black feminism. By looking at race, gender, sex, sexuality, (dis)ability, and speculation, Schalk's work helps us form a methodology to analyze these podcasts. As the other scholarship has alluded to, speculative fiction often presumes the future itself only has certain types of people in it, erasing marginalized groups, or is based on the dominant norms of the time of writing. Moreover, speculative fiction, in her view, is going underrepresented as a place for challenging hegemonic representations of marginalized people in literature, compared to 'realist' literature. To Schalk, "challenges to limited, problematic, or oppressive representations of marginalized people can also occur through speculative fiction, through nonrealist, fantastical, and nonhuman contexts that change the rules of reality, making us think more critically about how our current rules and assumptions about (dis)ability, race, and gender have come into being in the first place" (139). She does not see this better or more useful, just that spec-fic has gone unnoticed and that through imagining a different world, we are taken "outside of our rules of reality in order to draw attention to how these rules, which eventually become naturalized assumptions and

understandings, are mutable and contextual, rather than fixed" (139). To Schalk speculative fiction is a place to look for representation of alternate realities. Like the other scholars, to Schalk, this can tell us about the present in that our 'naturalized' understandings are not so. When these podcasts create a version of the future, we can hear about worlds that de-naturalize hegemonic norms that oppress us in our current world. Even in a fantastical realm, marginalized authors of spec-fic remind us of how traits are different and the same to our world now, making legible how *unnecessary* certain parts of the present are—i.e., oppression.

These theorists are useful in my analysis of the podcasts themselves, as well as this project's lens and understanding of speculative fiction overall. As my main methodology is close readings, these theorists fuel my interpretation of these podcasts. The theory helps when looking at not (just) representation and individual identity of LGBTQA+ characters but fluidity and challenges posed to cisheteronormativity. This project does not catalog a list of moments and LGBT characters but rather searches for how speculative works from the late 2010's showcase the future, revealing much about their own time. In addition, I will also utilize fan studies theorists to ground my analysis of fan behaviors. However, this project acknowledges that there is a collaborative, almost feedback-loop-like relationship between the podcasts and their fan's transformative works. Therefore, queer analysis of speculative fiction applies to the source media—podcasts—as well as fanworks. This next section brings in fan studies scholarship.

## Fan Behaviors

This project, in addition to looking at queer theorists and those examining speculative works, must necessarily take from fan studies works. Fanworks and fan cultures and behaviors have been studied for decades, and understanding the particular nuances of not just consumption of media, but *transformation* is crucial to understanding this project's subjects.

Fanfiction's legitimacy as works of text or labor have been discussed by fans and in fan spaces, as well as academics, for decades. In "Legitimacy, Validity, and Writing for Free: Fan Fiction, Gender, and the Limits of (Unpaid) Creative Labor", Monica Flegel and Jenny Roth address the 'legitimacy arguments' and assert that such debates are based within "a false binary created through opposing free gifts of love with paid works of labor" (1104). Fanfiction is devalued, the authors say, when participants in the conversation of what is 'legitimate' associate paid work with masculinized, public spaces and actively withhold value from work done – predominantly by women—in private spaces, out of passion. The authors utilize discourse analysis to examine conversations online, predominantly on John Scalzi's blog, from authors of fanfiction and 'real fiction'. So, these viewpoints are coming from fanfiction authors and published fiction authors. The conversations referenced in the piece addressed how fanfiction should not be paid—or appreciated at all in some cases—because it was inherently less work. "What Julie and others suggest is that fan fiction is inauthentic, a cheap short-cut, and that it is, consequently, not real labor—if true art requires originality and making things by oneself, then fan fiction is the overprocessed, ready-made, and decidedly lesser version of true creation. It

lacks “brainwork,” a word that captures its lack of both thought and labor” (Flegel and Roth 1094-5). As evidenced in this quote, fanworks are not seen in these lenses as *even work* and therefore seen as *taking no labor*. Moreover, some fans claim that part of fanfictions illegibility as labor is part of why they personally enjoy it, as evidenced by this quote from user ekaterinn: “But cupidbow’s post also touched a chord with some fans; as one notes, ‘my choice to read Supernatural gen rather than Dan Brown’s unreadable ramblings is an invisible one, and I think it’s connected to historical invisibility of women’s writing’” (Flegel and Roth 1104). More than just wanting to be reading fanwork, some fans see the invalidation of that *as work* is directly related to the overhype of ‘unreadable’ popular work by (white) men. While we do not know the identities of the fans quoted in this piece, there is inherently more involved than man- or womanhood in the marginalization of fans. So, the gender binary exists as another ‘false binary’ in ways to separate ‘real fiction’ and fan fiction, but the gendered dynamic is brought up *by* female fans. The fan point of view evident here is that their position as women writers is part of what invalidates them, and also part of what keeps them interested in other (women’s) work. Also relevant to that dynamic is the gift nature of fandom, the collaborative nature of creating works not for pay but *for others*. The community being predominantly women is important to female fans because they are *speaking with other women*. While the authors do not go into this, it can be understood that queer and otherwise marginalized podcast fans have similar dynamics, seeing their work as distinct from popular media flooded with white straight folks, and forming relationships about gifting work to each other and for their own communities. Despite these fan views,

the authors believe that most of the legitimacy arguments are missing the whole picture. As opposed to being totally a gift economy, utopianly free from capitalism, or wholly derivative and free labor given to media companies dystopian stuck in capitalism, the authors argue that fan writing—and indeed hobby creative writing, and *professional writing*—is more complex than being relegated to only one of these modes of relation.

Zihan Wang, in recent piece “The Complicated Digital Fandom: Empowerment and Exploitation of Fans in Digital Media Era”, also puts forth that there is a false binary in understanding fan behaviors. For Wang, the relationship with media professionals and fans nowadays is blurry with social media, and that fans exist as both exploited *and* dis/empowered in different ways. Wang addresses how fan activity could be ‘free labor’, their data sold for profit. Alternatively, fans *want* in some cases to avoid payment because they believe their activities are skirting copyright by being free or they *want* it to be a hobby. In addition, fans may be empowered by media recognition to their works but stay generally powerless to the creations they transform being actually changed. In the conclusion, Wang states “the actual fans in digital era are complicated and contradictory. Although fans in digital era are more significant than before, the exploitation of fans practices should be acknowledged” (49). This highlights that exploitation versus empowerment is not a binary—while fans may be exploited on levels of unpaid work, data being sold, and marketing being done through word of mouth, they also are empowered to create work that they want to without fear of crackdown from a giant company. Fans may not be *only* exploited *or* empowered, which Wang helps us understand.

Understanding the legitimacy argument that colors fan studies as well as fan discussions is important, but the authors highlight that these often-dichotomous modes of understanding are not the comprehensive answers.

Rukmini Pande's commitment to not reiterating oppressive ideologies about race in fan studies leads her to also address the legitimacy argument in *Squee From the Margins: Fandom and Race*. She does this in terms of the legitimacy of fanworks themselves as well as the perception of marginalized people. "By positioning media fandom as a postcolonial cyberspace, I am able to interrogate the operations, flows, interruptions, and reinscriptions of representational power within fan spaces without falling back onto simplistic ideas of resistance and co-optation" (Pande xii). Moving past ideas of either/or legitimate or not, resistance or not, 'good representation' or not, Pande sees media fandom spaces as postcolonial and fluid. Pande's main intervention in her 2018 text is to counter what she sees is an epistemological and methodological viewpoint of race and media fandoms that see race—in the identities of fans and characters—as additive. This attitude leads to race going often unconsidered in studies on fan cultures and media fandoms. Race being understudied in this way reinforces the hegemonic power of whiteness through unnamings that as a race and power structure. The first chapter of her book traces a history of fan studies and emphasizes that fans were often defined with a specific set of identities—"US- or UK- centric popular media texts and white, cisgender, middle-class women located in the United States or United Kingdom" (Pande 5). Additionally, Pande mentions race is often only brought up in non-Western fandoms or race-specific journal issues, for example. The continued

placement of a 'fangirl' or fandom itself as raceless also presupposes whiteness. The exception to this is studies specific to race, which again are often seen as additive, and therefore only relevant when race is specifically studied. Pande calls this "theoretical whitewashing" (6). Pande says this is especially apparent when white scholars write about shows with only or mostly white characters, presume their fans are all or mostly white, and therefore only mention race when regarding characters of color. Pande asserts that this avoids "considering the whiteness that is necessary for the entire conceit of the show (and further, the fandom) to function" (7). Further, Pande says "whiteness has remained the unexamined structuring force within discussions of the workings of media fandoms up to the present moment[. . .]. The unexamined yet assumed whiteness of media fan spaces has allowed for successive theorisations about their workings to have now solidified into accepted histories" (12). Pande's arguments about race and whiteness are therefore twofold. On one hand, whiteness as a force in fandom is going unexamined and assumed, which has led to the flattening and erasing of experiences of media with characters of color as well as fans of color. In addition, white fans and characters are also implicitly understood as raceless by white scholars, leading to studies of fandoms of media—such as *Hannibal*, the show Pande is referring to in the previous quote—to be unconcerned with race, since white fans are creating transformative works about white characters. In this way, race in fandom is linked only to people of color and not white people who are considered raceless. Therefore, the experiences and work done by fans of color—particularly in the West, where fans are flattened as white cisgender women—go understudied. To Pande, this obscuring of fans'

experiences has changed the way fan scholars view fandom history. What has actually happened is that predominantly white scholars have not broadened their studies to examine their own race *as* a race whatsoever in their work, leading to the normalization of whiteness as neutral in media and its fandoms. One of the ways that Pande recommends fan studies needs to be decolonized is to refuse to 'defer' race as seemingly less important than gender and sexuality, which she contends get more consideration in fan studies (188-9). Specifically in fan studies, there has been a lack of a comprehensive understanding of the ways that race, gender, sex, and sexuality affect fans and fandoms. The latter categories have received much more attention to the point the former is seen as additional and not entrenched.

My methods in sourcing fanworks are influenced by Kristina Busse and Karen Hellekson's piece "Identity, Ethics, and Fan Privacy". The practices of citing and sourcing fanworks seems to be rapidly changing as 'new media' and social media norms change, but this piece from 2012 looked to conversations within and by fans at the time for guidance. The "worst fannish sin" could be seen according to the authors as 'outing' a fellow fan, for this reason they advocate obscuring identifying traits like URLs while keeping context (Busse and Hellekson 38-9). For example, the authors emphasize a distinction I agree with- that a conversation between fans is not the same as a fanwork; an opinion shared in a reply to a fanfiction should not be seen as the same as a fanfiction itself. Citing such fanworks and conversations is necessarily bringing them out of their contexts into the context of academia. On the other hand, it is important to not fall into the trap of receiving fanworks as only derivative; Henry Jenkins in his field-defining piece refers to such

works as ‘textual poaching’. In the preceding decades there has been much discussion on legibility and fanworks, which I am barely touching on. However, it is important to me to emphasize that fanfiction, fanart, and ‘meta’ theorizing are all examples of work done often by marginalized groups and predominantly for free, but that should not mean they are not interpreted by academia as texts. Busse and Hellekson say that “to not attribute these ideas is unethical and perpetuates an uncomfortable power hierarchy between academia and its subjects. In turn, however, an approach that regards all journal material merely as textual representation is equally problematic” (50). The authors help us remember that such texts are still *not* the same as professionally published works in terms of the relationship of a consumer of them—i.e. other fans. Paying close attention to the context in which a work was uploaded or shared and disclosing that is part of the praxis that protects fans from harassment online and in their ‘real lives’. In addition, a comprehensive understanding of fan behaviors—and indeed, what all this *means*—*must* acknowledge when something was a tweet, a reply to another’s post, a story published on a popular website, etc. These different forms *mean* different things to fans and therefore must also to us who study them.

Another theorist this project draws from is Judith Fathallah, whose work *Fanfiction and the Author: How Fanfic Changes Popular Cultural Texts* addresses the ways in which fanworks, also called transformative works, alter the perception of work itself, and who a work is for. Fathallah examined three television shows and their creators. These particular shows all had writers or creators who were white men, some who can be considered a ‘fanboy auteur’ via Suzanne Scott, who keeps

his canonical power via seeming 'cool' about fanworks and being a fan of his own work. These modern creators do not shun fanworks but consider them part of the show's culture. Fathallah, after close reading and coding fanfiction, concludes that "statements from fanfic do alter the discursive formations of canonical media in fundamental ways, altering governing statements. However, fanfic's legitimization of othered properties frequently depends on the capital of the already-empowered White man, especially the author" (199). To her, the capital in these relationships is dependent on the ways that fanfiction inserts itself into the base media itself, as well as the connections to the creator. For example, one show she examines is *Game of Thrones* whose fanworks are seen as less transformational, in part due to the showrunners David Benioff and D.B. Weiss not being seen as empowered to alter and control canon as George R. R. Martin. Because the original book series is still ongoing and the creators are seen as having less of the 'final word', fanworks appear to have less potential to alter canonical perception. That is, fanfiction for *Game of Thrones* is seen as additive not alterative, in part due to the showrunners not having the ability to let that canon be altered. This relationship of fanfiction and popular television shows is not the same as independent queer podcasts, but Fathallah's understanding of the ways creators and fans work together to create the culture around a work is similar. When, for example, an official podcast twitter account retweets fanart of one of their characters, they are at least somewhat affirming that that character can look how they do in that art. By being 'cool' with fanworks and understanding how fandoms work, podcast creators participate in the whole fan culture including their work and fanworks. Fathallah opens up potential to discuss

transformative works not only in terms of discussing legitimate versus derivative, or copyright law, or personal opinions—this work showcases the ways in which fans *and* creators participate in a culture together and therefore fanworks *change* the original works for fans themselves, creators, markets, and potential fans/watchers/listeners.

Mafalda Stasi wrote in a 2006 publication that fans—in her work, specifically slash writers—build on each other. In “The Toy Soldiers from Leeds: The Slash Palimpsest” Stasi shows how seeing slash fanfiction as text leads to interpretations of multiple fics as intertextual. By seeing fan theories as cumulative, she posits that the slash canon is a palimpsest—building on itself and “constructed through a repeated collective fruition and interpretation of the initial text” (Stasi 121). So, when fans interpret the source media through fanworks, they also are building upon each other’s works and interpretations. Fanon—a fan-wide set of beliefs about characters, events, etc.—is quite influential in fan spaces. Earlier writers’ interpretations have more weight, and “the influence of these early authors leads to their choices being appropriated by later writers, either because they share the interpretation or because they are not yet completely steeped in the original text and thus take the fanonical elements as canon” (Stasi 121). This phenomenon of there being fandom-wide traits for a character, a certain way an event took place, or other details that go ignored or unsaid in the source material is something I have noticed in line with Stasi’s construction. For podcast fandoms, we can see the ways in which the first few pieces of art would be the first and possibly only visuals a new listener would see—this influences the way they picture that character, and

therefore many designs look similar. If fans do not recreate or build upon the fanonical designs, nigh impossible they are not aware of them if they are looking at fanworks and engaging with the community. In terms of canon potentially getting in the way of fanon interpretations, Stasi says that “despite canon being a construct, it is regarded by normative by most authors and readers: even when it is turned on its head or flouted, it is hardly escapable” (121). When viewing canon as something that is respected by fans and understood to have weight—like Fathallah helps us understand—we see fan culture as cumulative, and the traits fans believe to be true about characters to be built within and upon canon.

For the purposes of this project, fanworks and social media posts being cited are chosen that exemplify trends . The communal nature of fandom is what is interesting to me, and therefore fanworks should not be understood in a vacuum. Fans are not only influenced by the works themselves when they choose to depict characters looking certain ways, but by fellow fans. In this way, a particular drawing published to Tumblr, for example, should not be understood as a text, but part of a collaborative effort and a piece of work. Thus, fanworks should be analyzed for their own contributions as well as their influences via fandoms. There has been much discussion on how exactly to go about studying fanworks and fans. Ideas of whether fanworks—especially fanfiction—should be considered participatory, derivative, legitimate, illegal or immoral, consumerist or more have been the topic of many theorists. This project engages somewhat with these discussions, necessarily, as I engage with fanworks. Therefore this project looks to fan studies precedents and

understandings of fanworks to understand the relationship between podcasts, their creators, and their fans.

One way the communal nature of fandom plays in this project is how fans and listeners of each of these podcasts individually are often fans of the others. Many people who engage with fandom on website like AO3, Tumblr, and twitter, have been in multiple fandoms over their lives and understand the norms on fan behaviors and recreate them within speculative podcast fandoms. In addition to this, fans in spaces on websites like Tumblr, Twitter, AO3, and others often move from one fandom to another or are involved in two or more of them. It is clear looking at a fan's social media if they are listeners of *The Magnus Archives* as well as *The Penumbra Podcast*, for example. Beyond this, folks who tend think and act fannishly about works—making fanart, formulating meta, writing fanfiction, discussing theories with other fans, and more—have likely done this before with other source works. The potential fannish history of fans of speculative podcasts are important in understanding the viewpoint of the fan. I will expand this concept in the second section. Understanding these two aspects of fandom is crucial in researching the whole phenomenon of original work + fanwork and examining fanworks themselves.

## The Body in Audio

Similar to novels, fiction podcasts do not have visual representation of their characters or anything else. However, unlike novels, there are still actors and therefore the series have a slightly different relationship to issues of representation, and to bodies themselves. Many podcast creators try to keep their characters a-racial, or even not confirm any physical trait whatsoever. Unlike other fandom source media, podcast characters are not depicted by an actor, that being their visage. In fact, fans and listeners are often encouraged to imagine characters looking many ways, with creators refusing to pin down one specific look for a character. This opens up the potential for speculation beyond even the podcasts' stories themselves. Fans can and do push the radical and queer nature of speculation further, within and beyond the series themselves. When fans have the freedom to portray characters as looking in whatever way they imagine or desire, there can be even more meaning layered upon the experience of listening. Then, when more potential listeners and fans come across the series online, it is often because of the visuals created by fans. I will go in depth on the ways that this cumulative project consisting of work + fanwork plays out for creators, listeners, and fans as a new mode of future creation.

Many podcast creators establish that outside of the in-universe recordings, there is no set appearance for characters. So, if a character is never described visually, they could ostensibly look any way; this is often reinforced by creators refusing to pin down details. This means that podcasts essentially create characters without bodies. When fans engage with fanworks, it is sometimes seen as them

creating around canon, or within canon – filling in gaps, or changing things in canon to their own design. In this way, when characters are never described bodily, we can see them as having gaps left for fans to fill in. This is sometimes mentioned when fans ask explicitly about characters, but otherwise is simply a part of the medium’s norms in the current moment. Depending on the narrative structure, it may be more or less assumed—for example, in a *Juno Steel* scene, a character is described as having dreadlocks (Takagi Kaner and Vibert, “Stolen City (Part 2)”); this could possibly be understood as a trait to indicate a Black character, but this detail is all we know of their appearance and potential identity. However, there are many characters that never get physical descriptions in canon, and therefore are left virtually without a body. For example, in a *Magnus Archives* story that takes place within the narrative structure of a submitted statement, it is incredibly easy for characters mentioned to never have visual depictions including race mentioned. Gender is often easier to signal due to English having gendered pronouns, but if a character in canon describes a ghost without mentioning a race, or even a trait like skin color, we simply do not know it. The narrative structure here of an anonymous statement recorded onto paper and then read aloud by the protagonist lends distance from the characters within the statement. This means that it is perhaps too simplistic to call this phenomenon yet another work that implies whiteness by never mentioning racialized traits unless they belong racialized Others. Put another way, one could presume that if only some characters are explicitly established as having a race, and those characters are predominantly BIPOC, then we have yet another casually white supremacist work that un-names whiteness and supports white

hegemony. But given the prevalence of this phenom in the audio drama world, I think that is not quite fair. I believe that the narrative structure is, as opposed to filling a not-explicitly-racialized space with a presumably white character, seeking to radically leave that space open, whether for fans and listeners to fill in or just because the medium allows them to.

Many modern fiction podcasts have asserted claims similar to this, but there are potential issues with claiming racelessness in characters beyond just the actors' existence. Actual-play podcast *The Adventure Zone*, produced by The McElroys—all cisgender heterosexual white men<sup>2</sup>. A character in *The Adventure Zone* and the creator response exemplifies this issue. Griffin McElroy established what he saw as “Schrodinger’s racism”, a phenomenon specific to podcasts<sup>3</sup>(TTAZZ 2017) . One of the main characters, also a Dungeons and Dragons player character is an elf named Taako – intended to be a joke about how in a fantasy world without the food, ‘taco’ could be a name– but then when the fanbase grew and fans drew and wrote that character as Latinx, it became potentially problematic. The Schrodinger’s racism McElroy refers to can be understood as follows: “if you interpret these characters [Taako and his twin sister] as Latinx, then those names are problematic; if you don’t, then it’s just like, ‘Oh, what silly names.’ I, [...] as the DM, and the person who came up with the name for this other character can’t say [...] ‘Well that’s on you, if that’s how you interpret them,’ and also say [...], ‘I want everyone to interpret their

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<sup>2</sup> All using he/him pronouns.

<sup>3</sup> This could have also applied to novelists, but the decision of audio drama podcast creators to *specifically choose* to not assign a visual to characters is a common trait of the medium, and not often true of novels of similar genre.

characters however they want” (TTAZZ2017)<sup>4</sup>. What McElroy is referencing in the end of this passage is the notion that if descriptions of a character are not in the show itself, that character can be *any* race, and other un-stated traits. In this instance, the names of the characters could be perceived as racist *if* the characters were Latinx; thus, McElroy felt trapped between placing the onus of this racism on the fan who imagined his characters as Latinx, and his commitment to not pinning down the race and other details of those characters. The term Schrodinger’s racism therefore came from the idea that something—in this case a character’s given name—was only racist when one actually applied a certain race to their understanding of that character, the way the eponymous cat could only be considered dead when seen. Leigh E. Fine also mentions this same moment in “The McElroy Brothers, New Media, and the Queering of White Nerd Masculinity”. Fine’s analysis of this same episode discussing ‘Schrodinger’s racism’ is of racist intent versus impact—that the McElroy’s did not mean to be racist but could have been, “especially as it is some in the fan community and not [the McElroy’s] themselves envision Taako and Lup as non-White characters” (143). However, there is an important context Fine does not seem to account for, which is that *many* creators of fictional worlds with audio-only podcasts attempt to separate race from the characters. Every podcast in this project has some sort of reference from a creator about their characters being ‘a-racial’ or only tenuously a canonical race, since there is no proof in the form of visuals, at least for some characters. The McElroy’s are

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<sup>4</sup> I am utilizing a fan-made transcript since there is no provided transcription for this episode of *The Adventure Zone*. This document can be found at [tazscripts.tumblr.com/tazscripts](http://tazscripts.tumblr.com/tazscripts).

following in this tradition. Additionally, the setting of the world being a fantasy one, and the characters being a Dungeons and Dragons race 'elf' means that understandings of race are necessarily different. This is not to say that the McElroy's did not incite anti-Latinx racism by naming their character after a taco and their *intent* "absolving" them, as Fine claims McElroy is arguing (143). Rather, this moment is representative of a cultural understanding of race that was/is created and recreated by podcast creators and fans in the late 2010s.

In addition many creators try to separate *any* non-canonical details from their series, refusing to confirm anything not in the media itself as 'true'. This could be extrapolated to other traits as well, and has been in fan discussions, as will be addressed in this project. What McElroy and other podcast creators have established is that there is no wrong headcanon<sup>5</sup> about their characters if it is not stated in the series. This is not a necessary truth of audio drama or fiction podcasts and actual-play shows but is a popular notion for modern podcasts. The three podcast creators discussed in this project all have at some point asserted that their main characters have no determined race and, in many cases, have no canonical visuals whatsoever. Similarly to issues of race, this phenomenon of potential issues if a certain headcanon facet of a character is confirmed has also arisen for other traits, including neurodivergence. If creators agreed with certain headcanons for their characters, they could have potentially engaged in stereotypes, and at the least

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<sup>5</sup>A fan's personal interpretation of a character's traits, how an event went, etc. Similar to fanon, but a headcanon is one's own belief. Headcanons can become fanon when many people agree and recreate beliefs and they become fan-wide (Fanlore Contributors, "Fanon").

did not *account* for those facets of a character’s identity while writing. Many creators who engage with their fanbases will assert things that are not seen in canon. For example, when asked about his thoughts on autistic headcanons for *The Penumbra*, writer Kevin Vibert said “we have not done that intentionally..., I think that in, in terms of head canons, you can do what you want. I think that you can take [...] how characters behave as evidence for, what's going on inside them as much as you want. That is something that I would want to do a lot more research on also just in terms of what do our autistic fans want to see, what kinds of heroes do they want” (Takagi Kaner and Vibert, “Penumbra Q&A 2019”)<sup>6</sup>. What Vibert establishes is that there is still space to see his characters as autistic, but he feels uncomfortable agreeing, because his word is weightier as writer. Similar to how certain aspects of the McElroy’s characters could be seen as racist stereotypes if they were confirmed to be a certain race when the creators did not intend that, Vibert sees confirming a neurodivergence he does not experience and did not intend to write as potentially problematic. Podcast characters being looked at in different lights when certain identities and experiences are applied to them is part and parcel of the fandom experience of headcanon-ing, as will be explored.

This phenomenon of creators clarifying or adding details about their works is referred to as ‘Word of God’<sup>7</sup>. For example, if fans get the chance to speak to a creator—at a convention, on social media, or as part of a Q&A for example—they

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<sup>6</sup> All quotes from *The Penumbra Podcast* are from their provided transcripts, found on their website’s page for each episode. The formatting is from their documents.

<sup>7</sup> “Word of God is used to describe interpretations of canon that come directly from the author, show creator, and other authorities of this sort” (Fanlore Contributors, “Word of God”).

might ask ‘what happened after this scene ended?’ The creator might respond something to the tune of ‘I don’t know- it is not in the show’ or give an answer describing a scene, which can cause debates in the fanbase about how *true* that answer is if it was not in the text<sup>8</sup>. here are many ways fans go about ascertaining the ‘true’ way things happened in a series—if an actor or writer’s opinion matters more depending on what a particular fan *wants* to have happened, or because of their own point of view they are bringing to the fandom. It is not uncommon for a creator who knows their fans create fanworks to allude to that perhaps by saying ‘it’s up to *you* what happened post-that scene’. Leaving this sort of space open in the canon of their series is a way for creators to acknowledge their fans and keep the boundaries of their series clear. Multiple mediums have the potential to, in this manner, not solidify what a character looks like. What a character looks like, and subsequently their race, are for most mediums necessary, given the visual element. Even novels generally include visuals for characters through description, although notably some do not. The podcasts referenced in this project do not use, as I have mentioned, the sort of narrative structure that necessitates this type of character description. Therefore, the creators of these podcasts have a choice inherent in their medium. Regardless of whether it is simply an artistic decision or meant to purposefully leave space open for their fans, many podcast creators are taking advantage of their medium to continue to establish visuals for their characters. Even when these projects include merchandise or commissioned art, these depictions are

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<sup>8</sup> This project will necessarily engage more with ‘canon’ and ‘legitimate’/‘true’ matters within a series.

often said to be only one possible version of the character, or not *officially* what that character looks like. For example, *The Penumbra Podcast* has merchandise for sale that includes the characters; this is not received by fans nor creators as confirmation that those characters *must* look that way. There is not an assumption that the race attached to those visualizations is permeating the writing and the series itself. That is, if Juno Steel is Black in the artwork, it does not translate to him *being Black* nor that he is written as a Black person. This is due to the delineations made between canon, the text or series itself, and what is within and without it. However, as McElroy's quandary with racism shows, certain decisions and parts of canon could be seen as offensive or harmful depending on fans' interpretations. This leaves podcast creators in a bind when their intention is to encourage those interpretations. While there are obviously many facets of a character that could go un-stated, race—and indeed what a character looks like in a genre that is not intending to obscure it in-universe—is clearly important, especially when firstly creators care about representing minorities and secondly fans will create art based on those characters. The current relationship podcast creators share with their fans also is related to the current moment in which social media means creators are very accessible to their fans and these are *conversations*, not simply fans filling in a void in a text.

Despite the attempts on behalf of the creators in terms of writing and world-building, the series cannot possibly leave race, gender, and sex behind. This is due to the medium. The writing of a podcast can leave out descriptions of raced and sexed traits in characters entirely, but that does not mean these traits do not show up in

other ways. They cannot be *written* out when these characters are *acted*. While a character that is only mentioned narratively and not acted can have traits interpreted to be a race or gender, a character that is voice acted has more concrete connections to a body. Fans willfully sever these connections in their interpretations of podcast characters through fanworks, even creators themselves do not link the actors' bodies to their characters. The identities of an actor do not always line up with those of the character in any medium, but with podcasts it has become a specific phenomenon.

By locating fictional bodies, we can view the power that was made illegible when bodies were taken away by the audio medium. That is, by looking at the bodies *created by fanworks* we have assistance in finding raced, sexed, gendered dynamics, and power itself in the entire project of works + fanworks. We can see how queer fans and fans who are BIPOC are navigating the colonized future *through* the podcasts, even if the people making the podcast are not the same identities.

## The Penumbra Podcast

*The Penumbra Podcast's* twitter biography describes the series as “Queer af. Their websites’ “About” section starts with “You deserve to see yourself in stories” (The Penumbra Podcast Creators, “About”). It is evident by looking at these simple stakes given that the creators, Sophie Takagi Kaner<sup>9</sup> and Kevin Vibert<sup>10</sup>, care about creating an explicitly queer podcast, and representing something for other queer and otherwise marginalized people. While ‘see yourself’ appears to appeal only to representation, when we examine the podcast, we can see that it is a project creating a sense of queer futurity, radically including a myriad of voices, and working to imagine a picture of the universe that not only represents queer folks but in which queerness is entrenched seamlessly with the world. The *Juno Steel* storyline takes place in the distant, undetermined future in which humanity has colonized multiple other planets in the Solar system and beyond. The eponymous Juno has lived his entire life in a large city on Mars, which acts as the main setting of the show until the third season, in which the show moves towards an ensemble cast in which main characters travel to multiple other planets and special locations.

Of the three podcasts in this project, *The Penumbra Podcast* is the only one whose story takes place *in* the future. Speculative fiction does not necessitate this, and the other podcasts in this project engage with imaging alternate presents, but *Juno Steel* does not take place within a known reality whatsoever. Because the show is set in a far-away time and place, there is more space kicked open to imagine the

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<sup>9</sup> They/them pronouns (The Penumbra Podcast Creators, “About”).

<sup>10</sup> He/him pronouns (The Penumbra Podcast Creators, “About”).

future. One way this happens is with gender and sexuality. Essentially, in the future that *The Penumbra* forged, gender and sexuality are no longer considered part of one's identity. This is confirmed in a myriad of ways in-universe, but also by the creators outside. When asked if Juno would ever explicitly confirm his own identities with language in the show, creator Sophie Takagi Kaner answered in the negative, saying:

No, he won't. I know that *saying* "non-binary" is important to a lot of people for crucial reasons of representation and visibility, but that's not possible in the Juniverse because we're attempting to set up a world where the gender binary is irrelevant and queerness is completely normalized. Equally, he will never say the word "bisexual," even though he most assuredly is. Saying these words *is* very important, but we believe that another equally important task is creating worlds where the words no longer apply. [...] I know that people have been burned before with creator assertions like "Oh, no one's sexuality is relevant here" or "You can headcanon whatever you want." That's why I try to be VERY explicit about the fact that Juno is canonically bisexual and non-binary [...] The point is that, in his world, those aspects of his identity can be central to who he is as a person without requiring him to label himself as such. (thepenumbrapodcast "You got dem...")

This confirmation from the creator—which has been repeated a number of times in Q&As, on social media, and commentary tracks—influences the ways that fans engage with *Juno Steel* characters. Essentially, in the future that *The Penumbra* forged, gender and sexuality are no longer considered part of one's identity. In addition to having a large number of LGBTQA+ characters, in the universe of *Juno Steel*, gender and sexual orientation do not exist. At least, they do not in ways that listeners and fans are familiar with. In this world, attraction to some or some types of people exists (or to no one!), the language of being a man, woman, or nonbinary person exists but power dynamics of sexism, and homo- and transphobia are written completely out of the future. Therefore, gender and sexuality as factors of

identity are wildly different. On further Tumblr posts, creator Sophie Takagi Kaner asserts that “gender is pretty darn fluid” (thepenumbrapodcast, “GANG IT’S TIME...”) and “people don’t lean too heavily on labels” (thepenumbrapodcast, “Hey, is Juno...”) in the universe of the show. Things that listeners would know as trans and/or queer characters are treated with no sense of difference from cis and straight characters, face no additional struggles and are immediately understood by other characters. Despite this lack of attention by characters in the series, there is evidently a great deal of attention made *by the creators* to showcase gender and sexual diversity *to listeners*. In the show’s vision of the future, wanting to be referred to with ‘they’ pronouns is effortless and immediately understood by everyone, and having a relationship with a man and then a woman has no affect at all on your human rights or social standing. Put another way, while it may mean very little for Juno to meet a character and instantly know they use they/them pronouns and use them with no hassle, since that is the norm to him, for a nonbinary person listening this acknowledgement shows a real consideration for their underrepresentation in media. This is evident by interactions with creators like the Tumblr conversations, as well as the podcast’s goal to have folks ‘see themselves’. This is one example of how the future is shown to be more expansive and more queer to listeners beyond representing characters as LGBTQA+. Beyond signaling solidarity to listeners who use they/them pronouns, *The Penumbra’s* conceptualizing of gender, sex, and sexuality is very queer. Alexis Lothian says in *Old Futures* that “queer scholarship does more than contribute to envisioning and activating possibilities for living queer lives in the future; it unpacks the significance of sexual norms and deviations to

cultural constructions of futurity itself” (20). Queer theory and queer speculation, in this understanding, is not about queer lives being in the future, but the future being queer itself by eschewing sexual and gender norms and even ideas of the future itself. *Juno Steel*'s world alienates any understanding of gender in its vision of the future. Therefore, the queerness in the podcast does not stem just from representing different types of people, but by creating a space and time in which there are no different types of people. The creator's commitment to clarifying labels and specific representations is framed as something 'we'—LGBTQA+ people, podcast fans—need now but do not in the future.

Power in the *Juno Steel* universe, as I have established, does not appear to be located in sexual or gendered dynamics. Sexism, homo- and transphobia do not exist and therefore gender and sexuality cease to be legible as axes of power. Moreover, power does not appear to be based in race. This project will address the real-world implications of this and locations of power in later sections, with particular attention to how fans and listeners interpret race in the show and fanworks. However, in-universe, there does not appear to be any power implications in terms of what listeners and fans would consider racism. For being a story taking place in space and the future, there also is not an allegorical stand-in for racism. While there is a plot regarding 'ancient Martians', confirming the story does have alien beings, they are long dead and not a type of person to be colonized or Othered. As will be discussed with regards to other systems of oppression and power, *Juno Steel* also does not establish a species or alien or any other stand-in or allegory to act as victims or representations of racism. Power is linked to capitalism, planet of origin

and the military but not to types of people we would understand as race, gender, sex, sexuality, etc.

The physical features in our world are yoked to the social construction of race—such as skin color, tone of voice, hair style, and the dozens of others—do *not*, in futuristic Mars, add up to a system of oppression or even identification of difference. There are no marked social or structural differences based on skin color or ethnicity that in our society on present-day Earth, stem from the concept of race. In the future, these traits no longer add up to an identity, and more importantly, no longer make legible a system of power. *Juno Steel's* creators have established they are purposefully naming characters with multicultural naming conventions (@sophiekaner), which can be assumed as a way to show in-universe less emphasis on older forms of culture from Earth, including race. At one point the Japanese language is referred to as “an old Earth language” (Takagi Kaner and Vibert, “Monster’s Reflection (P1)”). The language the main characters speak is referred to as Solar, which is also the term used for the planets’ governmental system. While the show is still released in English, these are signals within the series that destabilize hegemonic norms from listeners’ time.

There is power in the *Juno Steel* universe, but it is not located within gender and sexuality, as I have shown, and it does not appear to be located in race either. Where do power dynamics come into in futuristic colonized space? Evidently, within a modern American understanding of capitalism. Large corporations, corrupt politicians and governments, and the medical-prison industrial complex loom large. The themes of the show, in each season, deal with issues with life under capitalism.

While it is nigh impossible to envision a capitalist system that is not inherently also racist for us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the *Penumbra* creators have committed to speculating so. In the future, it seems, power is still located in political and monetary power, but that is not intrinsically linked to other facets of being as our system in the United States is now. While in our world, the hierarchal constructions of gender and race are yoked to assigned sex and skin color—among other facets—in the *Juno Steel* universe, these facets and traits are not linked to a system of power and are just traits of a person. In futuristic Mars, there is no overrepresentation of any category of person as rich or poor. What we read as race, sex, gender, and sexuality in terms of marginalized identities are not even categorical *identities* at all in the future- simply traits of being that have no relation to one's social status or means. The creators of *Juno Steel* speculate through their series a capitalist governmental system that does not intersect with racism and sexism, as these categories themselves appear to have been lost to time. This is part of what makes the show an example of forging a radical future. Listeners, though, do not exist in futuristic Mars. So, to acknowledge that the show has written out gender, sexual, and racial *identities*, one must at least subconsciously acknowledge that these forces are missing not only as identities but as axes of power. Put another way, *Juno Steel* creates a galaxy that not only does not have sexism, but does not have sex- likewise for race, gender, sexuality. Racism, homo- and transphobia, and sexism are *obviously* missing when the universe is not utopian but still controlled by capitalism. What the *Penumbra* creators have done with erasing these axes of oppression is create a vision of the future that is *not* free of power and harm but one in which these *facets*

*of being*, these *identities* are not the cause of that harm. In this sense, the series can be seen as *specifically* queer and radical, as attend to their listeners' current situation. *Juno Steel's* story is explicitly trying to make a queer future. The series' commitment to eschewing hegemonic—and indeed any—gender and sexual norms highlight it as a queer work of speculation. Unlike other examples like Lothian mentions, this is not a genderless future that is still somehow entrenched in heteronormativity. In the *Penumbra* creators' future, everyone is queer, sexism and racism are not factoring into being a person at all, *and* things are not perfect. This helps forge space for LGBTQA+ listeners to experience media that respects their identities but still is interesting, dynamic, and with conflict. *Juno Steel* is looking to the future and trying to solve capitalism and systemic inequality; but they do not want to, even fictionally, continue to perpetuate homo- and transphobia.

It is important to note that *The Penumbra*, while speculating a future in which individuals are still oppressed by capitalism and not their own identities, these identities are treated differently by the creators. As I have and will continue to address, the show is *specifically* and *purposefully* queer. However, is it also a show that purposefully leaves race behind, in-universe and out. While LGBTQA+ identities and people are acknowledged and confirmed as canonical through external sources like social media, race is likewise confirmed to *not* be present in the show. While *Juno Steel* does not perpetuate racism in-universe, unlike queerness, the series attempts to remove race entirely, while sexuality is very present. More on this later.

*The Penumbra Podcast's Juno Steel* storyline is a futuristic twist on the noir detective stories. The eponymous Juno at first may appear to be a traditional

curmudgeonly private eye following in the footsteps of countless others, but the creators endeavor to subvert almost every expected trope. There are many themes and instances within *Penumbra* that are intended to signal queerness to listeners. These moments, while often unremarkable to characters in-universe, can still be queer for listeners. I argue that these themes and passages in which queerness is evident to listeners but unremarkable for characters are a strategy for *The Penumbra* to universalize queerness within their show. Through conspicuously having characters listeners understand as LGBTQ+, having an almost-entirely queer cast, and confirming their character's identities with social media communications, they have created a speculative project that, with their listeners, creates a vision of the queer radical future.

In the series' first episode, Juno Steel is on a mission to solve a murder and is swindled and stolen from by—not a femme fatale—an 'homme fatale' (Takagi Kaner and Vibert, "Murderous Mask (Part 2)"). This character then becomes the recurring love interest. Immediately, the show is playing with sexualized and gendered tropes to subvert audience expectations and portray these tropes as specifically queer and radical. A recurring theme in the show is commitment to portrayal of mental illness—the curmudgeonly nature of the prototypical P.I. is constructed in *Juno Steel* as signs of depression, and the ramifications of this is explored within the show. The show plays with archetypes and follows them to conclusions that resonate with listeners, instead of seeing all traits as essential parts of a certain type of character. As I established, in futuristic Mars, gender and sexuality appear to essentially not exist but oppression—predominantly under capitalist forces—still does. By subverting

some themes but not others of the genre, the show establishes queer and radical themes to listeners. There are many, many smaller instances of this that add up to a sense of queer familiarity, and one of the common themes that is easiest to read, and address is the ways characters themselves are addressed. In space in the future, people ostensibly are immediately recognized for the gender presentation they inhabit.

These modes of establishing queerness—subverting themes and instantaneous gender recognition—are rendered clearly in season one’s episodes 11 and 12- *Juno Steel and the Midnight Fox*. This episode revolves around character Valles Vicky—a black market art dealer and fence who is being stolen from. Juno is assisting her in solving this crime in exchange for a favor, as the police refuse to assist him with his own mission (Takagi Kaner and Vibert, “Midnight Fox (Part 1)”). Vicky is immediately presented as a subversion on the gangster crime boss trope. When Juno first goes to see her, she is on the phone yelling at someone saying “listen, buddy, this was not part of our deal”, telling Juno this person had been giving “the wife” trouble. (Takagi Kaner and Vibert, “Midnight Fox (Part 1)”). This person she is on the phone with is immediately revealed to be her son, a toddler. Off the bat, Vicky is established as queer, as her wife and later her ex are both women, and her character archetype makes the image of a mob-boss-style leader with dozens of mooks, yelling on the phone crystal-clear to listeners. In addition, the scantily-clad assistant of hers that lets Juno in to see the boss is a man named Tod (Takagi Kaner and Vibert, “Midnight Fox (Part 1)”). These clear gender role subversions are not played for quick gender-uncomfortable laughs, and Juno does not notice anything at

all *off* about this situation. While humorous, the punchline is *not* gender nonconformity, and it reads like an in-joke for queer listeners. The joke is as simple as any other gangster boss treating their toddler like a business representative would be, and as familiar as a character trying to avert their eyes nearing a person in their underwear would be. The jokes are *not* on listeners, queer and trans people, or gender nonconformity; they simply switched the script and continued as typical. Despite playing on these tropes and subverting them, the show does not fall into pitfalls of reiterating heteronormativity. Vicky is not one of many couples with a child *similar to contemporary straight people*—there are no contemporary straight people where and when she lives. As the episode goes on, Vicky and Juno are hit with sleeping gas and forced to go to a fancy party hosted by Vicky’s ex as a set up to force her to run away or be killed. When they awake in the storage closet after this drugging, they are both in tuxedos. This is played as obviously upsetting as they were kidnapped by Vicky’s coworker and forced to dress up for this fancy party, but it is clear from context that *of course* Vicky would be in a tuxedo, with Juno saying “nice duds. I’m thinking our kidnapper wants us to enjoy the party” (Takagi Kaner and Vibert, “Midnight Fox (Part 1)”). This description of Vicky makes it clear to listeners that she is likely a butch woman, and that despite listeners’ contemporary hegemonic norms, in the Martian future, a butch woman wears a tuxedo to a fancy party, certainly. She is confirmed in-universe to be a woman when her ex-girlfriend-cum-kidnapper Ingrid Lake says this upon seeing her, saying “Vicky is a very capable woman. So very... strong” (Takagi Kaner and Vibert, “Midnight Fox (Part 1)”, emphasis in original). At one moment, Juno jokingly refers to her as “Dad” (Takagi

Kaner and Vibert, “Midnight Fox (Part 2)”). Even in this moment, the joke is not on that a woman would be referred to as ‘Dad’, but that for Juno to mockingly refer to another character as frustrated like a parent would be, of the optional titles ‘Dad’ is the correct one. To listeners, these word choices like strong and Dad, and the choice of a tuxedo act as signals for the masculine presence that Vicky inhabits. In-universe though, this concept is essentially a non-issue; these are just choices and traits surrounding Vicky. *The Penumbra Podcast*, in this way, showcases gender nonconformity and queerness to listeners through the implicit acceptance. The queer and trans creators have removed gender in the form of difference and power from their universe without removing what, to listeners and fans, read as masculinity, femininity, and trans and queerness. Takagi Kaner has confirmed her as “butch-as-hell” (thepenumbrapodcast, “GANG IT’S TIME...”)<sup>11</sup>. Vicky can be understood as what in the twenty-first century is a butch lesbian *and* in her universe such a concept does not exist. On Mars in her time, she is just a person who: is a woman, uses she/her pronouns looks a certain way, has relationships with other women, and uses terms like Dad. There is no connection from these traits to power or oppression, as gender and sex act in the twentieth century. While these traits are ostensibly gendered—seen as masculine or feminine—they are not seen as such in-universe. In Halberstam’s view, the reception of Valles Vicky and other characters might be seen as ‘universalizing queerness’. The lack of any reaction to butchness does not ‘normalize’ butchness since there is no hegemonic (cishetero)normative

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<sup>11</sup> The Penumbra Podcast’s Tumblr site was run by Sophie Takagi Kaner, but the series’ social media accounts are now run by an anonymous “Mod” which was announced in June 2020.

mode for gender presentation in the future. Therefore, queerness is not just accepted, or praised, rather it is universal<sup>12</sup>. By exemplifying this, Valles Vicky is a clear example of the ways *The Penumbra Podcast* showcases a queer radical future to viewers through worldbuilding.

Juno himself and his gender and sexuality are also exemplifying of this, as he is established over and over as nonbinary and bisexual in-universe. In terms of sexuality, Juno is shown romantically involved with a man and a woman in the first two story arcs, respectively, so is solidly established as queer and what listeners would know as bisexual very early on. As has been established, this vocabulary does not really exist anymore in Juno's universe, but it is known by creators and fans alike that *The Penumbra Podcast* is trying to convey this. In addition, Juno is nonbinary. While he uses he/him pronouns<sup>13</sup>, he is referred to by himself and others at various points as a lady, a man, a boy, madame, sir, mister, a wife, and more by people both close to him and strangers. These language choices are not considered by Juno or others in his world to be contradictory. They are also not indicative of genderfluidity, nor are they situational. That is, there are not moments where Juno is presenting feminine and therefore a lady, or masculine and therefore a man; he just is all of these terms and all are applicable to him at all times. As was mentioned in discussion of Valles Vicky, he wears a tuxedo at a formal event in season one, but in season three he wears a formal gown (Takagi Kaner and Vibert, "Man in Glass (P1)"); this is also not treated as if he was suddenly a feminine person, but rather

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<sup>12</sup> An especially fitting term since the series takes place across multiple planets.

<sup>13</sup>Takagi Kaner confirmed this on Tumblr, saying "that's the beauty of being nonbinary—he's just a lady who uses masculine pronouns" (thepenumbrapodcast, "GANG IT'S TIME...").

just a normal occurrence that one might wear one style then the other. To that end, Juno again wears a formal suit in the end of season three—his gender is certainly very queer. Sophie Takagi Kaner, in response to a question on Juno’s nonbinariness, stated that “If Juno lived here and now, he would certainly [use the term nonbinary]. All those times when he referred to himself as a lady, or when other people did? Not a joke (if anything, the joke is that “lady” connotes someone proper and put-together, whereas Juno is scruffy and A Mess)” (thepenumbrapodcast, " GANG IT'S TIME..."). One could assume that Juno is what we understand as transfeminine, since he has an identical twin brother (Takagi Kaner and Vibert, “Monster’s Reflection (P3)”), but given the importance placed on gender in mars—that is, none—one could just as plausibly assume both are transmasculine. Heedless of twenty-first century ideals of transitioning in relation to gender, Juno Steel is nonbinary and is able look how he likes, speak how he likes, and be perceived perfectly, due to the series’ galaxy-wide instantaneous gender recognition. His experience resonates with queer and trans listeners and fans, without experiencing oppression in the form of homo- or transphobia, as that simply does not exist. Gender and sexuality as forms of identity do not exist, so these traits Juno inhabits that we perceive as gendered are simply neutral traits and parts of him. In addition, while these traits change slightly over time, this is not read by fans as evidence he has changed in their understanding of his gender. That is, most fans do not take him wearing a tuxedo in season one and a gown in season three to mean that he has shifted from a person who wears exclusive tuxedos to one who exclusively wears gowns—or from an ostensibly masculine person to an ostensibly feminine person. Rather, these two

instances are generally perceived as signs of nonbinariness and show the fluidity of Juno's presentation despite his pronoun choice. The ways in which fans and listeners receive the gender, sexuality, race, and more traits of characters will be further addressed in later sections, but it can be said that potential listeners understand that gender and sexuality work *somehow* differently in Juno Steel's world.

Alexis Lothian in "Feminist and Queer Science Fiction in America" claims that "alterations to the process of childbearing have been among the most widespread technological innovations imagined by feminist writers" (75). Speculation by queer feminist creators can be seen as utilizing queer time to break out of the "logic of reproductive temporality" (Lothian, "Feminist and Queer" 4) and forming the future of the human race in alternate ways than the physical possibilities the present and past has made available. While Lothian says that heteronormative reproduction is still more often recreated in visions of the future, this is not true of all speculative works. Understanding how heteronormative the concepts of time and progression *themselves are* with regard to the furthering of the normative family helps us see the queerness in breaking that tradition. Juno Steel, in *The Penumbra* has no father. It has been confirmed by the creators that he does not have one when a popular fan theory was another character was going to be revealed to be so. In the show itself, his biological mother mentions how difficult it was to have children: "I paid a lot of creds to make you and your brother happen on my own, and for nine months you fed on my insides," (Takagi Kaner and Vibert, "Monster's Reflection (P3)"). This implies some sort of technological intervention in which Sarah Steel became

pregnant (potentially not even a futuristic technology) but then carried the pregnancy to term herself. This is the only mention of this; it is essentially handwaved by the creators as to *how* exactly Juno was conceived. Sarah's abusive relationship toward Juno colors the moment as well, as she is holding her willingness to have children over him, implying he has leeched her of resources. In addition, we know this family was poor. Therefore, we cannot assume it is necessarily expensive in the future to have children alone, but just an amount of money that Sarah emphasizes to upset Juno as an adult. A narrative structure that Halberstam claims "universalizes queerness" (94) is to have "no one react" to it. *The Penumbra* does this from the beginning, in the way that every character instantaneously knows everyone else's gender and pronouns. Halberstam describes how the film *By Hook or By Crook* "manages to tell a queer story that is more than a queer story by refusing to acknowledge the existence of a straight world" (94). Queerness in that cinematic lens is universal. The futuristic world that Juno Steel inhabits is universally queer, not only because there are no straight characters in the series, but because the concepts of reproduction, family, even time and space are not part of a straight world (or galaxy). This is evidenced in moments like Sarah Steel having children alone and there being no acknowledgement in-universe. Listeners know that most people have a mother and father, but Juno Steel just does not *have* a father. In *The Penumbra's* future, you do not need to have a father—not that one does not need to be in your life, but that you do not need to have two 'biological' parents. A character like Sarah Steel who has no partner nor shows any attraction or relationship with anyone is understood as queer—not that she is not

LGBTQA+, but that her relationship with the progression of time, space, and reproduction is not yoked to heterosexual norms. This is assisted by the podcasts' commitment to having essentially no heterosexual characters, though. Beyond 'normalizing' LGBTQA+ lives and concepts, *The Penumbra* according to Halberstam's theorizing, universalizes them in the speculative forging of a new queer world.

Another way the series creates queer futures is its radical inclusivity not just of a society that has instantaneous gender recognition, but also one in which trans people still exist. There are a few characters that have evidently *changed* what listeners would see as gender. For example, gender is not removed from the universe of *Juno Steel*, but it is a radically different concept. There are still differences between people that are connected to masculinity and femininity, for example, but they are not at all located within power. There are a few characters that are overtly trans. In the first episode, there is a pair of identical twins and they do not share the same gender—not dissimilar from Juno and his twin. The two are introduced as brother and sister, so it is an easy conclusion for listeners to draw that one of them is trans. Many assume it is the brother, as a female actor plays both of the characters. There is no way to know, though, since in-universe there is no sense of assigned-gender-at-birth and therefore no concept of transgender. To listeners though, it means more. In the season three premiere, there is a reveal of an explicitly trans character, in the understanding of one who *changes* their gender. This reveal is posed as a purposeful subversion to modern understandings of gender, and in particular the common trope of a reveal of a trans woman in media. At first, Nureyev

and Juno are looking for “the man with the terrible haircut” (Takagi Kaner and Vibert, “Man in Glass (P1)”). They cannot locate this person, and when they do, Nureyev is confused:

**NUREYEV:** She doesn’t look anything like the person in the photos Buddy gave us.

**JUNO:** That’s probably cuz she—

**NOVA:** My great transformation... the metamorphosis that nobody expected, the change that shows the real me, as I always was... I got a haircut, y’all!

**SOUND: ROUND OF APPLAUSE.**

**NUREYEV:** Oh, yes, a haircut! I see it now. That *is* good. Takagi Kaner and Vibert, “Man in Glass (P1)”

This moment is played for laughs, but not at the expense of the revealed character, just as the ridiculousness of a famous person needing to announce a haircut and receiving applause. The character with the last name “Zolotov” is referred to as “Zolotovna”, making clear to the listeners who know about Russian surnames that the haircut is connected to a 21<sup>st</sup>-century-concept of transition. Juno calls attention to this detail, as well: “She says she changed her last name cuz of some tradition on Earth. Must be really confusing, changing your name every time you get a haircut” (Takagi Kaner and Vibert, “Man in Glass (P1)”). The series makes fun, not at a person for transitioning or changing her name or style, but at the notion that those things are even important. To Juno, a person who is able to move through the universe as non-binary with no issue or even acknowledgement, gender is just ‘a haircut’. *The Penumbra* emphasizes the human desire to change one’s appearance and terms of address. By allocating Halberstam’s trans look to the auditory, we can see that in this moment listeners of this scene are *listening* “with, rather than at, the transgender body” (92). Juno—a trans character—is explaining, with none of the stereotyping or othering lenses that other media uses to make trans characters

stand out negatively, that a person has a new name and this woman in front of them is the person they thought was a man who they were looking for. The point of view of a queer gender-shunning society is evident in this moment.

A few episodes later, another trans woman is revealed in regard to her past self. In Season three, the podcast diverged from its narrative structure of only being in Juno's point of view to take turns, with the entire main cast getting a moment to be the narrator. Vespa's point of view is narratively quite different than Juno's. She experiences "visual and auditory hallucinations," (Takagi Kaner and Vibert, "Shadows on the Ship (P1)"). In one of these moments in which she is reliving a past memory, it is clear to the audience she went by a different name and gender as a youth. Vespa's experience of transitioning makes clear that while changing one's name and presentation or possibly even physically altering their bodies though that is not in the show—what we think of as *transition*—just because those things are commonplace in the future does not mean that trying to figure oneself out is any easier. In her auditory hallucination, she hears her father say "boy, come inside! The rice is getting cold![...] I know you're sick of it, but it's what we have. Now eat, Victor" (Takagi Kaner and Vibert, "Shadows on the Ship (P1)"). Vespa then thinks to herself that "that isn't me, and never was, even when I answered to that name. My name is Vespa Ilkay. And what those voices say is fake — it's all fake. It's gone" (Takagi Kaner and Vibert, "Shadows on the Ship (P1)"). The episode overall deals with Vespa's mental health and it is clear that this moment is as well. Vespa appears to be struggling with a hallucination she sees as trying to undermine her sense of self through her past memories, when she was 'not herself'. This moment is not

trying to misgender the character of Vespa—in fact, we have no idea what her father thinks of her as Vespa, or if he is even alive, as he is only referenced in the context of these hallucinated memories. This person’s understanding of Vespa is not relevant to her, except that she has a past in which she was not able to be herself. Vespa is another character with tension between the idea of representing a trans character in an audio medium and committing to a system of sex and gender that eliminates the category of transness in its universe. This moment signals to the audience that Vespa is what they would understand as trans, similar to describing Vicky’s tuxedos and wife establish her as butch. Fan response to Vespa has been mixed- there are some who see this moment as the narrative misgendering her, and therefore falling into a pitfall with regards to modern transgender representation. However, when looking at Halberstam’s understanding of the trans gaze, I do not see this as such. The use of Vespa’s deadname<sup>14</sup> is not *by* any other character, nor the narrative. Her status as having been perceived as a boy as a child is not posed as a reveal of some secret truth or her being. Rather, the creators used the fact the episode was taking listeners inside her thoughts for the first time to show us she has memories of being perceived as a boy child. In terms of the trans look or trans gaze, considering that besides this moment her status as a trans woman has been entirely uncommented on—because gender does not exist on Mars—there is an implicit support for her. Moreover, there is no attention paid to the overrepresented parts of trans women—her body. While we must transpose much of Halberstam’s work from film to audio

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<sup>14</sup> Term used by trans people to refer to their name given to them at birth before changing it in the transition process.

here, there is not a reveal of any sort of physicality of being a trans woman that Halberstam might call ‘fetishistic’ (92). Since the show cannot, due to its narrative constraints and in-universe gender system, have another call attention to her transition, and to avoid fetishistic and harmful modes of calling attention to transness, the show had few options left to do what the creators clearly wanted to—confirm that there was a trans woman among their main cast. So, when given the chance to quickly reveal this with her past memories, they did so. Given how this changes nothing about Vespa’s perception from the rest of the cast or life in *The Penumbra’s* universe, it is easy to see how queer such a mode of being is.

*The Penumbra Podcast* had an official artist, Mikaela Buckley<sup>15</sup>, from October 2016 to April 2018 (Fandom.com Contributors). Her artwork, particularly her character designs, have left a lasting impression on the fandom’s interpretation of the characters. As opposed to the other two shows, *The Penumbra* has depictions of their characters. The creators have said that this is just one interpretation of their appearances, though. *The Penumbra* creators said after her designs became “official” that this was not in conflict with anyone’s headcanons. When Buckley was first announced, Sophie Takagi Kaner was asked and said that Buckley’s “art is ‘official’[...] But headcanons are always the privilege of the audience. We welcome fanart and fanfiction, even if it diverges from what we’ve produced canonically” under the condition fans “keep it queer” (thepenumbrapodcast, “This sounds silly...”). The creators commitment to leaving space open for their fans, in their eyes, does not contradict the idea of something being ‘canon’. Later on, Sophie Takagi

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<sup>15</sup> She/Her pronouns.

Kaner was asked again and answered in more depth. A specific question directed to their Tumblr was “are the characters’ races canon or can we interpret them as other races?” (thepenumbrapodcast, “I meant to...”). This question is specifically about race, not just character design or any other aspect of physical appearance. Sophie Takagi Kaner again says the designs are ‘canon’ and headcanons or imagining are still possible. They compare their official artwork to novel’s illustrations, saying one could have not seen the artwork for a novel and imagined a character another way, but that artwork still had intention. They then say:

Unless a character’s appearance affects plot and/or characterization, I really can’t say you’re wrong to imagine them however you want. (And even if you are “wrong,” I’m *still* not the thought police and you can *still* imagine them however you want.)

Given that we deal mainly in fantasy worlds on our show, race is not a big factor in determining plot and characterization, so it generally doesn’t come up. However, Mikaela has chosen to depict almost all of the Penumbra characters as POC because she thinks (and we agree) that visual representation of POC is vitally important.

So: yes, Juno is black *and* also in your head you can imagine him however you want to. I hope that helps! (thepenumbrapodcast, “I meant to...”)

Takagi Kaner’s response highlights a few tensions—canon or official character details, fan or listener interpretations as legitimate or allowed, and the representation of people of color. Their answer specifically references Juno, but the question-asker had also mentioned other characters, of which most of the cast of seasons one and two were depicted by Buckley in her time as artist<sup>16</sup>. The creators’ commitment to having designs for merchandising, and just to add to their audio medium, necessitated solidifying *some* character details. Unlike *The Bright Sessions*

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<sup>16</sup> Before Buckley was the official artist, she did draw fanart for *The Penumbra*. Before that she drew fanart for *The Bright Sessions* and has since drawn some for *The Magnus Archives*. Buckley herself is a fan-creator in this way.

and *The Magnus Archives*, whose creators deny considering their characters as having races due to the audio medium, *The Penumbra Podcast*'s creators establish one potential way to interpret their characters. As I have established, race as a concept works different in the universe Juno lives in. Racism and oppression based on identities like gender and sexuality no longer exist. Because of that, there are no in-universe ramifications beyond physical appearance for the characters being any different race. Similar to how Takagi Kaner stated that Juno was bisexual and non-binary specifically so LGBTQA+ fans could see themselves, they confirm that they and Buckley believe that it is important to include racial diversity in character designs.

This phenomenon of having 'official' art differs from the other fandoms. The fans of the other series are making designs based solely on their own or other fans' interpretations of the characters. For *The Penumbra*, the vast majority of fanart is in line with Buckley's designs, especially for Juno. In 2021, looking at fan spaces, one would be hard-pressed to find fanart of Juno Steel in which he is not drawn as a Black person with a nose scar. Buckley's art style is simple, leaving room for another's to fill in more details, and much has happened story-wise since season two, so many fans change up that design, for example giving him longer hair, stylized eyepatches<sup>17</sup>, different styles of fashion. Part of why Juno specifically may have more consistent designs than the other characters so that he is recognizable as the main character. By making art that is recognizable, fans' works may be shared

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<sup>17</sup> Juno loses an eye in the season 1 finale, gets a prosthetic early season 2, and removes that prosthetic in the end of season 2. He is mentioned wearing an eyepatch in season 3.

more easily—at the least their work is more legible *as Penumbra fanart*. It is possible that having such a strong collective focus on what Juno looks like actually makes varying designs for the other characters around him more legible to fans. Juno’s love interest Peter Nureyev is drawn as ethnically Korean by Buckley, with short dark hair and glasses. Many fanarts use her designs or stay relatively similar, but many also draw him explicitly as different races—this is often confirmed by image descriptions<sup>18</sup>. For example, one set of fanart that was shared on the official *Penumbra* Tumblr account has an image description that describes the racial and ethnic identities depicted in the artwork, describing Nureyev as “a light skinned Kazakh man<sup>19</sup>.” There are a few details that podcast fans often recreate to make their artwork legible to other fans when there are no physical details. For Juno, it is often the nose scar, eyepatch, and trench coat. For Nureyev, it is often glasses as well as a dangly earring. This is not from the series itself, but a fandom-wide collective commitment to the point that at a live show multiple people’s photos were taken because they wore dangly earrings. Buckley’s art is likely the most widespread reason fans have these—her designs have him with these accessories and they spread from fan to fan. The other characters that have details like hair color or sense of style are also easy to make understandable as those characters with fanart. The phenomenon of fans collectively recreating details that are not in the show itself is

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<sup>18</sup> The practice of adding images descriptions to fanart is becoming more and more popular on sites like Tumblr and twitter. Such descriptions may say the color of a characters skin or specify a race or ethnicity. Similarly, if a character is drawn with for example top surgery scars, a description might say ‘a flat chest’ or clarify the scars to make clear the transmasculinity in the artwork.

<sup>19</sup> Shared on thepenumbrapodcast Tumblr account by “The Mod” on May 13, 2020.

interesting and highlights the collaborative nature of these designs. They do not all come *from* Buckley, though her status as an official artist lends her more weight. She started as a fanartist, though, so one can see even her designs as potentially part of a collaborative effort, influenced by other fans in the early days before she was hired. In addition, while she was artist there were times Patreon supporters were randomly chosen to request Buckley draw a specific request of theirs. So, there became ‘official’ art based on what fans wanted to see. Knowing the context of many *Penumbra* fans decisions in physical appearance helps us understand the connected nature of fanworks and official content.

After Buckley left the *Penumbra* team, they hired two new artists for the *Juno Steel* and *Second Citadel* series. At some point after this<sup>20</sup>, they put a disclaimer notice linking to a separate page underneath all the episode pages that included Buckley’s art. The new artwork by Sharon Oh for *Juno Steel* is much more stylized than Buckley’s style. Many of the new posters do not include characters and the ones that do are colored in purples, blues, greens, oranges, and other non-human skin colors. The show has released a statement “Regarding Race in Our Early Artwork” that addresses this change. The reason behind removing the explicit drawing of their characters as people of color appears to be because of “misleading” listeners (The *Penumbra* Podcast Creators, “Regarding Race”). While, like Kaner said on Tumblr in 2016 and 2017, the designs were seen as additive to the show, since the physical appearances and race of the characters held less bearing within the

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<sup>20</sup> There is no date on the page or website, but Buckley left the show in 2018 and Sharon Oh—the new artist—first appeared in late 2019. So this note was presumably added some point in 2019 or later.

show itself, these depictions were created to be representative in the real world of their listeners. However, according to their statement, there was a flip side as the series grew more popular and the fan base larger:

After [Buckley] left *The Penumbra* in 2018 to move onto her own projects, the team realized that the show had grown in such a way that the illustrations were no longer “bonus” material, as we had envisioned them, but rather many listeners’ first impression of the characters. Thus, many people understandably assumed that these characters were written to tell stories specifically about POC and that the actors playing the roles in question were also POC. Though that was not our intention, we realize that our early art decisions were misleading to many listeners. (The Penumbra Podcast Creators, “Regarding Race”)

This project’s understanding of fanworks and original source media being a sort of ‘feedback loop’ is based on the notion that fanworks are also the ‘first impression of the characters’. However, unlike fanworks, *The Penumbra* creators were selling artwork of these depictions, which they have phased out and committed to donating all proceeds of remaining merchandise. The statement continues “the depiction of these characters as POC, while not appropriate for us to use in our marketing and merchandise, has nonetheless become personally meaningful to many POC listeners” (The Penumbra Podcast Creators, “Regarding Race”). Buckley as a fan who made her own depiction of the characters as various races and ethnicities did so specifically to push further than having a futuristic cast of all white people. She wanted to challenge the dominant picture of whiteness as the future. However, when she began to make money off those portrayals, and the series itself began to with posters and merchandise, the situation was re-mired in the present day. While the show is trying to be raceless, the artwork made it appear that the show centered characters of color, and also perhaps even *hired and paid* people of color. While the

show certainly has actors who are BIPOC, it is not the majority, which their statement acknowledges. “Though we do want to make it clear that many of the main/featured voice actors are white and that we did not write the characters to represent any specific POC experience, you are, as always, free to imagine these characters in any way that you like” (The Penumbra Podcast Creators, “Regarding Race”). This statement comes back to their point about legitimacy, canon, and the truth of their characters. The show’s commitment to envisioning the future as a universe in which race as a concept no longer exists, because factors of identity like race, sex, gender, sexuality just are not seen as difference between people anymore, is an endeavor that does not translate to the present day and their listeners. The show cannot escape race, because the creators, actors, listeners, and fans all live in the present day in which race is pervasive. To ‘represent POC’, the show would have to deal with that, and the series’ refusal to is a friction. So, they removed the ‘representation’ from the equation. However, many fans who are BIPOC *do* feel seen by these representations. These designs are widespread in the fandom, so they are still the first impression a potential fan might see when searching, or from a social media account they follow, either from Buckley’s art on the wiki or the thousands of fanworks using these or similar designs. The actor who plays Juno is not Black, but Juno himself is Black to ostensibly every fan. *Juno* is not a raceless series and cannot be when the fans’ connectivity to the source exists. The character designs, in this way, are maybe one of the most illuminating examples of the ways fanworks are *changing* the whole picture of these speculative podcasts, and their vision of the queer future.

## The Magnus Archives

*The Magnus Archives* was created by Jonny Sims<sup>21</sup>, who also writes the show. It is released by Rusty Quill, a UK-based production company, and directed by Alexander J. Newall<sup>22</sup>. The show appears at first to be a horror anthology, but an over-arching plot becoming readily apparent as the first season progresses. At time of writing, the series is in its fifth and final season, scheduled to end in spring 2021. The narrative structure plays with the idea of horror anthology; the protagonist is an archivist for the eponymous Magnus Institute, a paranormal research institution in London, and each story that is told is a ‘statement’ that someone has submitted to this institute for research purposes. The show’s genre is cosmic horror, as it creates a world in which the sense of fear has manifest itself into powerful ‘entities’ that continue to terrify the Earth’s population. The Magnus Institute is a locus and representation of the fear of being watched, having your secrets known, etc. (Sims, “MAG 111”). The statements given and recorded by Jonathan are revealed to be part of how this fear— ‘the Eye’, ‘the Beholding’—gain and continue to have power. The protagonist ends up transforming into a less-than-human being of power with the ability to read minds, and other powers related to knowing things and stealing secrets. There are fifteen fears in total, each touching on a discrete human—or animal—fear, from spiders (and manipulation) to falling to being harmed physically, to being alone (Sims, “MAG 111”). The overarching plot turns into Jonathan trying to stop the other fear entities from taking over the world in season 3 and 4, although

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<sup>21</sup> He/Him pronouns.

<sup>22</sup> He/Him pronouns.

that appears to be a fool's errand in that he himself becomes the vehicle for the apocalypse from his own entity in the finale of season 4. The final season takes place in a post-apocalyptic world in which the fears have taken over. Unlike *The Penumbra Podcast* which takes place in the far future, or *The Bright Sessions*, which takes place in our world with the addition of 'atypicals', *The Magnus Archives* appears to start in a very familiar world, and then moves away from it. Speculative fiction can take many forms, and there is the forging of queer futures even when that future is post-apocalyptic. Similar to the other shows, though, *Magnus* also has many LGBTQA+ characters and queer themes. Perhaps most notably is the relationship with Jonathan and his archival assistant Martin that begins to be developed in season four and begins in earnest at the season finale and is the emotional drive of season five (Sims, "MAG 159"). Beyond this, there are many characters with established LGBTQA+ identities in the main cast and many of the one-off statement givers and recurring characters are ostensibly queer or trans. In addition, it is obvious at times that Jonny Sims's personal project and goals with writing are anticapitalist antiracist, anti-bigotry. For example, a character who is working for a fear-powered academic institution is assumed by her therapist to be working "for the Tories" (Sims, "MAG 150")<sup>23</sup>, and a recent season five episode was about the fear of needless police violence (Sims, "MAG 185"). The cosmic horror forces that often act as antagonists are seen as just as dangerous as systemic racism

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<sup>23</sup> Quotes from *The Magnus Archives* have been sourced from a fan-made archive, similar to *The Adventure Zone*. Some of the transcripts are from the official source—originally only found on Patreon—and many were made by fans. The formatting comes from this resource. The archive can be found here: [snarp.github.io/magnus\\_archives\\_transcripts/](https://snarp.github.io/magnus_archives_transcripts/).

and transphobia, for example. Without linking systemic forces of oppression to bigger horrific forces—the series does not blame capitalism on a horror monster—*Magnus* does contrast and compare these things, as if in this world there would be people taking advantage of cosmic forces as well as their own privileges. As will be discussed, part of why the show is so popular among certain fans is the ways in which power and oppression do and do not play a part of the protagonists and main characters' lives. Real-world privilege and oppression *are* in this world but are also speculated to be and not be related of larger powers, without those forces acting as analogy for the issues the show knows its listeners experience.

This protagonist is also named Jonathan Sims, a character choice that was residual from the series' early developmental roots as a more traditional anthology, in which the writer-creator would act less as a character and more a narrator. The creator and character are not similar. In the subsequent years Sims has tried to distance himself and his personality from this character as the fictional Sims took on his own personality (@jonnywaistcoat, "Seems people..."). Fans and listeners do *not* associate traits about the character with the creator, likely due to his social media presence and other opportunities fans have had to hear him speak, in which he acts unlike the character. Despite the name being the same, the points of view of both fans and creators is that Jonathan Sims the character has nothing in common with Jonny Sims the real person<sup>24</sup>. Despite the connection with the name and voice, many

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<sup>24</sup> To make clearer which is being referred to, the creator/writer is referred to as Jonny Sims, and the character Jonathan or John/Jon by the fandom. In a tweet, Sims clarified that he spells it *John* to further distance from himself, but many fans use the spelling *Jon*. For clarity's sake in this project, I will endeavor to use the full name *Jonathan* for the character and follow in the tradition of using *Jonny* only for the real person. The protagonist, or the

fans do not assume that Jonathan Sims looks like Jonny Sims, or that they have all traits in common. More on the fan reception to Jonathan and Jonny will be in later sections. In addition to this, the names of many of the other characters in the series—especially early on—were taken from other members of Sims’s community, or other workers at Rusty Quill. Therefore, fans *know* these names, especially if they have heard the other series produced by these folks. Also, many of the cast named in season one get their surnames from prominent horror figures in history. This distance could be seen as a relevant factor in the way that fans and listeners navigate forming visuals of the characters. Put another way, the phenomenon of listeners knowing that the names were forged from a combination of horror staples and Sims’s friends and family means that they are perhaps less inclined to take those names as evidence of the characters’ traits. It is important to attempt to understand the nuanced ways in which fans address these characters, especially Jonathan, as connected to but not the same as their actors.

One way that *Magnus* establishes the world is by mentioning real locations throughout the United Kingdom throughout its statements, down to the neighborhoods in London . Also, sometimes real-world figures are included or alluded to; most prominently may be architect Robert Smirke, who is expanded into a character in his own right in this series (Sims, “MAG 138”). The inclusion of real places, real people in addition to real feelings helps bring the horror home to listeners. On the other hand, as will be discussed in later sections, some of the

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Archivist also refer to Jonathan Sims, the character. In this project, the surname *Sims* by itself will refer to the creator/writer and not the character.

included real-world figures have spurred controversy from listeners. Regardless, the show's connection to real places, people, and concepts lend credence to the parts of the series that are *not* real, the paranormal powers and events. In terms of horror, the unsettling nature of that is evident, and it helps listeners connect to the protagonists and main cast.

It is important to note that for many characters in *The Magnus Archives*, their names are not revealed or attached to their identities until later in the series. Recurring characters at first appear to be one-off characters, nameless characters whose appearance is described over and over become revealed as having names readers are familiar with, and multiple worldbuilding threads are connected through characters knowing each other. As the series goes moves from being an anthology of ostensibly separate stories to a cosmic horror about fourteen specific fear powers, one of the ways Sims shows the story growing in that way is resurfacing characters and locations that listeners would recognize to show they are major players. One of the more notable examples is Gerard Keay. In his first appearance in episode 4, Gerard is named and described as having artificially dyed black hair and wearing a "long, dark leather coat" (Sims, "MAG 4"). Subsequently, when other statement givers mention the name Gerard Keay, or a person with dyed black hair—and as is later associated with him, multiple distinctive tattoos (Sims, "MAG 12")—listeners know that this is the same character. These repeated mentions of the same characters assist listeners in seeing the world as the characters do, even while the statement givers themselves—and in the beginning, the Magnus Institute workers—do not see or know these connections. In addition to

this form of narrative structure, these consistent character references assist fans and this project in locating descriptions and details about characters, especially on re-listens. So, the repetition of references to characters without naming them aid us in knowing more about characters before, after, or without their actual speaking on the show itself.

*The Magnus Archives* has many moments that listeners would read as queer in line with their previous experience in fandom. Compared to the other series, *Magnus* is quite popular; on fanfiction website *Archive of Our Own* (or AO3), the series has (as of December 2020), around five times more published fanworks than *The Penumbra Podcast*, and twenty-four times more than *The Bright Sessions*. This website is not a be-all end-all for fan creation and community content, but in terms of fanfiction—of which the AO3 is predominantly made up of—*Magnus* is quite more popular. Also, *Magnus* has been a trending topic on Tumblr more and more recently than the other two shows. It is difficult to measure the number of posts on Tumblr or twitter .

In terms of fan communities, one can assume that many of those fans have been in previous fandoms, perhaps also creating fanworks and discussing theories. This is likely true of all of the series addressed in this paper but considering just how sizable the *Magnus* fandom is, it is perhaps more relevant. So, when looking at moments that fans emphasized in the series as queer and radical, we can safely assume that fans previously engaged with for example slash and similar modes of 'queering'. This is important when understanding the 'Jonmartin' ship, consisting of the protagonist Jonathan Sims, and Martin Blackwood, one of his archival assistants.

The two are now the official couple of the series as of the end of season 4, acting as protagonist and deuteragonist in season five together as boyfriends. This relationship started being developed heavily by the creators in season four, but there are moments in every season that fans latch onto as ‘proof’ of their romantic connection. This is typical slashing behavior. Martin is seen from nearly the start of the series as having a crush on Jonathan, which is alluded to by multiple other characters, and Martin himself as he continues to dedicate himself to Jonathan’s causes. Jonathan himself seems to disdain Martin but comes around and ends up valuing and eventually developing feelings back for him over the course of season three to four. I believe a crucial element to fan reception of this relationship specifically, is that fans in the beginning were ‘shipping’ Jonathan and Martin—that is, seeing a relationship between two characters that were not, at the time, being written as romantically involved. When fans emphasized certain moments early in the series, they were doing so without the belief that the characters would end up romantically involved within the actual show; they were speculating on what that relationship would look like or reading into moments for romance that was not necessarily intended by creators. In this way, shipping and slashing are methods that queer fans use to expand queer possibilities within *Magnus*. It was mentioned by the creators that they did not intend these characters to end up together from the beginning. Therefore, fans would have been right to assume that they were reading into the work a connection that was not intended. Much of fan cultures, behaviors, and creations hinge on reading into a series what was not necessarily intended by the creators. Moreover, the fannish history of what feels ‘slashy’ or queer, is much

more expansive than romantic tones to scenes, for example. Due to heteronormativity, queer romance and sexuality is so much less represented, and straightness is often presumed in media. Therefore, the moments or traits that fans pick up on for 'slashing' are often pulled from *fannish* norms, not mainstream LGBTQA+ norms and certainly not heteronormative norms. However, in the case of *Magnus*, these characters then went onto to be written as explicitly queer and in a relationship. The earlier scenes though, were confirmed to not be seen as such by the creators or actors. The transition from characters being slashed to an being in an established queer couple in the spotlight of the show changes the way that we can read fanworks and discussions from before the end of season four, when the two get together. Knowing this helps explain us see the ways in which fan cultures influence the moments seen as queer.

In addition to Jonathan and Martin, there are more representations of queerness in *The Magnus Archives*. As I mentioned earlier, part of *Magnus's* strategy in showing radical themes and queerness is evident in the ways that they *do not* use it. A main example is how there are not supernatural stand-ins for difference. While there is a fear entity surrounding the fear of someone knowing your secrets, this is not inherently tied to, for example, being closeted. In *Magnus*, the sweeping fear entities are not allegories for queerness, or oppression like racism and homo- and transphobia. These forces are still at play since the series starts in a world ostensibly similar to our own. In this way, LGBTQA+ characters are part of the grounding of queerness in the series. This extends beyond the developing relationship of the protagonist and Martin. There are many LGBTQA+ characters

referenced in statements as people who experienced the fear entities. There are also many who are working for or apart of these entities. In addition, the main cast also includes many queer characters. Tim Stoker, an archival assistant along with Martin and a member of the main cast of characters from seasons one-three, is established as queer in episode 49, early season 2. Jonathan Sims, while looking for information references Tim's connections with workers in the police records office: "apparently, he is involved both with one of the young ladies there, as well as the gentleman who manages the other shift" (Sims, "MAG 49"). This is mentioned in passing and not prominently brought up again, which can be seen as way that *Magnus* creators wanted to show a queer character casually, without putting emphasis on any difference. In-universe, considering Jonathan Sims himself has had romantic involvements with a woman and a man in canon, it make sense that he would not see Tim's behavior as especially interesting, beyond his distaste for potential "pointless personal drama" (Sims, "MAG 49") that might stem from Tim's philandering being discovered. Tim's sexuality as it stands is brushed past. This is another evident moment of Halberstam's concept of 'universalized queerness'. Beyond just 'normalizing' or making it clear characters are 'okay' with Tim's bisexuality, it is not of note *whatsoever* to Jonathan or any other characters. Casually having characters like Jonathan and his ex-girlfriend Georgie both go on to date members of the same gender, and Tim flirt with people of two genders, universalizes bisexuality. In addition, it helps us see the whole show as queer since it carves out a space *for* such non-normative understandings of sexuality within hits narrative.

As mentioned, Jonathan Sims has other queer traits beyond his same-gender relationship with Martin. He had a past relationship with a woman, Georgie Barker, who is a main character as of season three. Jonathan, while hiding from the rest of the archives post-season two, is found to be living with Georgie and laying low; the two are revealed to have dated in university (Sims, "MAG 106"). Moreover, Jonathan is established as asexual. In discussion of Martin's crush on Jonathan which extends before the series start, presumably, archival assistants Melanie and Basira have the following conversation:

**BASIRA:** Yeah, [Martin]'s got it *bad*. [...] Do you know if he and John ever...

**MELANIE:** No clue, and not interested! Although... according to Georgie, John *doesn't*.

**BASIRA:** Like, at all?

**MELANIE:** Yeah.

**BASIRA:** Yeah, that does explain some stuff. (MAG 106).

This exchange prompted fans to ask Jonny Sims if this moment should have signaled that the Archivist is "possibly on the asexual spectrum" (@AnnaLandin), to which he responded in the affirmative: "You are [...]. Although whether that's how the Archivist himself would actively identify, who knows? He's never struck me as the sort to discuss that sort of thing particularly openly" (@jonnywaistcoat, "You are..."). This moment, which could have slid right by within the other gossipy facts dropped that listeners already knew about Martin's crush and Georgie's podcast, instead became *the* moment that confirms the Archivist's sexuality, thanks to Sims's tweet. Sims as writer clarifies with these tweets that the Archivist would not self-identify, which delineates the limits the narrative structure of the show would have hindered such a moment without more 'evidence'. Thus, the tweet combined with this conversation in the show are ways that Sims can make clear an identity that is

so rarely represented. Despite this confirmation, the show itself has a queer mode of going about this by again not confirming a label for the Archivist in terms of asexuality or his attraction-in whatever form- to multiple genders. This is similar to *The Penumbra's* strategy for being inclusive of fans and creating a speculative structure that is queer. Sims confirms to a fan who directly asked that their understanding of the character's asexuality is correct and intentional. But that same understanding in the show is queer—fluid, and undefined. Yet, it still *is* referenced in the show. It is not as if a fan asked if the Archivist was asexual due to his personality, a stereotype, or randomly. There was an implicit queer moment in the form of Basira and Melanie's conversation then was confirmed as explicit representation by the creator. This helps us see the ways queerness is part of the show itself, not additive when relevant to fan's experiences, as it might be if there were no basis, but a creator simply stated a character was queer<sup>25</sup>. This moment is indicative to the ways in which, despite the narrative structure of the show not quite lending itself to conversations of sexuality, Sims as writer purposefully made queerness universalized among the main cast.

Georgie, the Archivist's ex-girlfriend, herself also produces an in-universe podcast and eventually befriends another archival assistant Melanie King, who up until season two was running a paranormal YouTube channel (Sims, "MAG 28"). The two get closer and by season four are revealed to be in a romantic relationship as well as living together (Sims, "MAG 157"). Georgie and Melanie are both in this

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<sup>25</sup> This in opposition to, for example, J K Rowling's infamous declaration Albus Dumbledore was gay without any mention in the text itself—additive.

moment identified as queer characters. Georgie has dated men, including Jonathan as well as another man early season three, and subsequently dates Melanie, which gives the potential to read her as a queer woman, whether bisexual or lesbian is unknown. Melanie is similarly seen, with her only romantic connection within the show being with Georgie, she can be seen as a queer woman, with more specificity unknown. In the case of all of these characters, for Georgie and Jonathan it is not seen as at all surprising or negative that the two of them went to date someone of the same gender. In this way the series appears to be normalizing queer relationships, as it treats them no differently in the eyes of the majority of the characters and in the narrative structure itself. As of December 2020, these two female characters are some of the last survivors of the main cast, which has the potential to change, but even if they do die in the series, they will have lasted much longer than many others. This is notable due to the large number of LGBTQA+ characters that die before and at the service of other characters, especially lesbians<sup>26</sup>.

However, it is not true that no LGBTQA+ characters die; the show is still a horror show that is deadly for the majority of people mentioned. Part of the appeal for queer and trans fans is possibly the ways in which LGBTQA+ characters are not exceptional, and that does mean that they are not all safe from harm. Obviously, reception to this is not universal, but it is evident from the series' treatment of main characters that the show tries not to fall into stereotypical representations of

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<sup>26</sup> For more on this, see Erin B. Waggoner's 2017 article "Bury Your Gays and Social Media Fan Response: Television, LGBTQ Representation, and Communitarian Ethics".

queerness. In addition to the main cast, there are many other characters who are evidently queer or trans. One such recurring character is Jude Perry, who is a queer woman, presumably a butch lesbian. While we do not know her identities, she is only mentioned as having girlfriends and being attracted to women, and she is described as “a squat, thickly muscled woman with close-cropped black hair” (Sims, “MAG 87”) in one episode, and a short Asian woman, with close-cropped hair and a thick, muscular frame [...] just wearing a tank top”, (Sims, “MAG 67”) in another, both by other statement-givers. As was stated earlier, characters often go mentioned repeatedly with a small or no acknowledgement of their name or identity in the series, because statement-givers do not know who these recurring characters are. Jude Perry is one of these characters; of the two statement-givers that describe her this way, neither know her name. In “MAG 67: Burning Desire”, Jonathan Sims does not mention Jude Perry in his post-statement notes, while she does mention other recurring characters. We can assume he does not know her name, and later in “MAG 87: The Uncanny Valley” his predecessor Gertrude hears an almost-identical physical description and immediately recognizes the person as Jude. This means listeners can connect that earlier episode with her character. Jude is evidently queer—again, likely a butch lesbian—which is hinted at before confirmed during her own statement. The hints begin with her evident connection another female character Agnes Montague. Agnes is considered the messiah of ‘The Cult of the Lightless Flame’, a cult that worships ‘the Desolation’ which is the fear entity Jude serves and Agnes was created to represent (Sims, “MAG 145”). Jude is in love with Agnes, as evidenced by her referring to Agnes as beautiful and the following

pondering from Jude on her relationship with her girlfriend at the time: “perhaps she suspected how much my mind drifted to Agnes when I held her in my arms” (Sims, “MAG 89”). Jude Perry, under the influence of this fear power, turned her body into wax and became nigh-immortal, appearing far younger than she was (Sims, “MAG 89”), and survived until the apocalypse when the Archivist killed her for harming him after giving her statement in season three (Sims, “MAG 169”). As with the main cast of Magnus Institute-associated characters, Jude Perry is treated no different from the narrative or other characters as other ‘avatars’ of fear entities. There is no association with her being a lesbian/queer woman and a particular form of tragedy, and she is killed at the hands of the Archivist in the post-apocalyptic world in season five in identical fashion as other straight characters of all genders and races. While Jude Perry is described by others as a butch woman, and is shown to listeners to be a lesbian, these traits do not marginalize her or separate her from other characters. The audio narrative structure means that for reference of physical description can be seen as a tool to display information that necessarily calls attention to things. While Jude is recognized as a specifically butch person, it is not to call attention to that as not heteronormative, but to signal to viewers ‘the butch woman whose name you might remember is back even though this character does not know her name’. Despite that signal, the narrative also effectively universalizes butchness, as the narrators who view her do not see anything nonnormative or strange. Jude Perry exists as an example of the ways in which *Magnus* creates queer futures through speculation, in part by universalizing queerness and gender nonconformity.

There are also multiple moments from statement givers that establish them as LGBTQA+. In “MAG 38: Lost and Found”, a statement-giver named Andre Ramao mentions his husband David (Sims, “MAG 38”) who disappears due to a paranormal item. In “MAG 172: Strung Out”, the person victimized by the fear entity is nonbinary. A user on the fan-run wiki pages said of the episode “Neat to see characters with they/them pronouns, even if they're being tortured and manipulated the entire time” (Carnieliancat). This comment highlights how fans receive the sort of LGBTQA+ representation *Magnus* gives them. Taken at face value, this comment shows that horror fans *want* to see people of all types—people like them—treated the same, with their identities not a matter. The character Francis does not evidently face any transphobia in their episode, though they struggle with addiction and other hardships in the theme of the fear entity controlling them (Sims, “MAG 172”). There are dozens of statements that simply *have* LGBTQA+ characters, and listeners have provided positive feedback to their being treated the same as cis and/or straight characters.

In “MAG 110: Creature Feature”, the statement-giver mentions off-hand that she is transgender and outed against her will. This character, Alexia Crawley, mentions her being trans only in reference to why she was working as a cinematographer, presumably due to systematic transphobia aimed at her that got her blacklisted in the industry:

Maybe if I'd got a feature under my belt before I was outed as trans, it might have been different, but as it was, that revelation burned too many bridges. And when the dust had settled, it was made abundantly

clear to me that I was never going to get a movie of my own, and it was either cinematography, or nothing. (Sims, "MAG 110")

In addition, after reading her statement, Martin states Alexia also faced similar adversity for disclosing her supernatural story to the public. In this way, transphobia is not *linked* to the fear entities and disbelief of the paranormal, but the reception to Alexia is similar, so in her life they are perhaps similarly afflictive. In this context, *Magnus* establishes that the fear entities and trauma from surviving an encounter with one is traumatizing and has lifelong effects—a common theme within the series as a whole—and this is not dissimilar to the social effects of being outed. Continuing to establish real-world issues like transphobia acts to ground the portrayals in reality for LGBTQA+ listeners, while still invoking larger themes of horror and oppression vis-à-vis the fear entities. The entities are not stand-ins for queer oppression, and so while many of the LGBTQA+ characters in the main cast are not actively fighting oppression the entire time, those forces are shown to still affect many in the world. Having those moments within the context of statements and not affecting characters whose points of view we see, however, forges a space in which LGBTQA+ listeners are not exceptionalized as only victims of horror entities, as multiple queer and trans characters die, but many also survive. LGBTQA+ identities are not tokenized or set aside as side characters only.

As shown, *Magnus's* cast includes a large number of queer characters, and they are rarely shown facing any more narrative struggles than straight characters. In this way, *The Magnus Archives* acts as a speculative podcast in which LGBTQA+ listeners can let their guard down about homo- and transphobia. This is not

dissimilar to *The Penumbra Podcast's* writing out of these forces, but since *Magnus* starts in a familiar world, it is slightly different. *Magnus's* characters do not live within a world without these forces, like Juno Steels' contemporaries do, but such hardship is not the focus of the series. This can be seen as a strategy for how *Magnus* creates queer futures. As the series goes on, it becomes less and less tethered to reality and much more a cosmic horror, which leads to the protagonist accidentally unleashing apocalyptic powers in the season four finale (Sims, "MAG 160"). The series fifth and final season takes place in now an alternate world, in which powerful fear powers have taken over and run rampant. Despite this, Jonathan and Martin's relationship has just started, and they act as each other's tether to goodness while trying to re-right the world. The series does not quite say 'queer love will save the day'—creators Sims and Newall have made it clear this horror series will likely not have a happy ending—but it does appear to say, 'queer love will survive into the future, despite other suffering'. Given how many stories about queerness and same-gender love end in directly-related tragedy, there is perhaps radicality in establishing that being queer, asexual, or any other identity bears little on your relationship to horrific experiences. In addition, the series also posits a future in which time and space itself are no longer tied to our metric understandings. In the final season, the main characters are sustained by seemingly nothing, they do not need to eat or sleep, and since the fear powers rule the world, very few people die. The system of time itself falls away, multiple locations exist on top of each other in impossible ways, and reproduction itself is no longer a concern. As opposed to the heteronormative futures Lothian writes about, *Magnus's*

apocalyptic future actually does *not* reinforce racialized cisheteronormativity. Except, of course, presumably if someone is individually afraid of that and a fear power is taking advantage of it to torture them eternally. But for our main characters—which by season 5 consist of two same-sex couple—the future is actually safe for them in many ways. Especially given the horror genre’s relationship to the killing of minorities—extensively written about—*the Magnus Archives* is a clear standout in the tradition of fear-based media. In terms of speculative fiction, *Magnus* is forging a queer and radical future in which even the apocalypse is a relatively safe space for its queer listeners.

Similar to the other series in this project and many other fiction podcasts, *Magnus* adopts a stance that there are facets of their characters that go unacknowledged in-universe, and therefore are not pinned down. For example, in an episode description, the Archivist was referred to with ‘they’ pronouns, but when asked about this, Sims said on Twitter that “the use of the ‘They’ pronoun for the Archivist is not directly reflective of anything currently within the canonical text” in which Jonathan Sims is only referred to as he/him and a man (@jonnywaistcoat, “Just to clarify...”). He then went on to clarify in the replies of this tweet that “this is not Word of God that John is NOT [nonbinary], but he hasn't been deliberately written as such” (@jonnywaistcoat, “This is not...”) and that his actual gender identity would likely never be confirmed, so there was space to have that be one’s “chosen headcanon”. He then said the same was true of the interpretation that the Archivist was autistic (@jonnywaistcoat, “Similar to some...”). As was discussed earlier, many creators, especially these independent creators of speculative

podcasts, leave open the gaps within their works for fans to fill in with headcanon, or their own speculation. The race of almost every character in *The Magnus Archives* also falls under this, similar to the other series studied. The ways that fans interpret these spaces is the subject of the next section, as well as the ways they go on the speculate through and with them. The names of the Archivist and archival assistants are all taken from Rusty Quill members and friends, with the last names coming from prominent horror figures (Sims, "Season 3 Q+A"). Unlike *The Penumbra Podcast's* form of making a a-racial future in which names are traded and shared without regard for ethnicity or nationality, *Magnus's* naming conventions eschew a sense of identity by yoking the characters to horror itself, not any particular identifying name. This is not the case for the majority of *Magnus* characters however, as their nationality, ethnicity, or race are often conveyed through their names, as written statements are the only ways many characters are identified at all. In a recent statement, Rusty Quill addressed this and other issues of insensitivity and racism in *Magnus* and their other series, which will be addressed further in the section on fan relationships. Their statement on the issue incorporated their sense of their main cast's a-racial status while side and recurring characters went implicitly raced. "Specifically, because all characters are either antagonists, victims or otherwise morally dubious as a result of the horror genre, there is a disproportionate number of antagonists who are described as non-white when contrasted against the general a-racial presentation of the main cast" (Rusty Quill). This statement confirms what is true of many of these series: that they see the main cast as a-racial, leaving that space specifically open for fan interpretation. It also

recognizes that there has been comment on the rest of the characters, whose race goes more noticeable when in the face of the main cast, especially when the majority are antagonists. What this statement also reveals is the ways in which white writer Jonny Sims was *not* thinking about race and systemic racist implications when writing. Rusty Quill was not intending to create an all-white main cast and wanted to leave that space open, but by confirming the races of other characters and defining only by the marginalized, the series has the potential to be understood as upholding white hegemony. This statement also identified the steps they plan to take to address their issues with race, but the work that was produced will not be changed. Thus, fans reception to the show and fan cultures relationship to the characters with and without canonical racial identities still stand; *Magnus* especially, unlike Rusty Quill's other projects, is slated to end soon with no new main characters likely to appear.

## The Bright Sessions

*The Bright Sessions* was created, directed, and written by Lauren Shippen<sup>27</sup> and produced by Atypical Artists. Later on, a few episodes were written by other cast and crew members; Shippen also acts in the show as Sam and runs the social media accounts for the show. The series identifies itself as “a science fiction audio drama about people with supernatural abilities in therapy” (Atypical Artists). The first episode was officially released in late 2015, and the original run ended in 2018, although the world continues in different ways, including YA novels, a potential television series, and two more podcasts produced by Luminary. While these later projects continue the story of *The Bright Sessions*, they are all less accessible than the original show—Luminary is a paid subscription podcasting network, so the sequel podcasts are not free to listen to. The novels and potential other mediums coming in the future are also separated from the original podcast due to the different medium. For listeners when the show was originally running or new listeners, the show itself has a complete storyline and the other series are additional. Also, the fact that the series started at the same time as *The Penumbra* and *Magnus* helps us see them as comparable shows with interconnected fandoms. For these reasons, despite the universe continuing beyond *The Bright Sessions*, the original series itself will be analyzed.

The premise of the show is that there are people in our world with ‘atypical’ abilities—supernatural powers. The world of *The Bright Sessions* is at first,

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<sup>27</sup> She/her pronouns.

remarkably similar to ours, but for the inclusion of these abilities and the ways the world has had to make space for them. Enter Dr. Joan Bright—the eponymous character is a therapist for ‘atypicals’ and the “Sessions” are the ones with her clients.

The premise of *The Bright Sessions* also acts as the narrative structure of the show. What listeners of the podcasts hear are recorded therapy sessions in Dr. Bright’s office. As the series goes on, there are other in-universe explanations for why and how listeners are hearing the conversations between characters. As the atypicals who see Dr. Bright begin to meet each other and form relationships between themselves, there are scenes heard that are recorded in other ways. For example, at one Dr. Bright has Chloe record her thoughts into a tape recorder since it “might be easier for [her] to talk into ...than writing” (Shippen, “17B”)<sup>28</sup>. This is one of the first instances that we hear something that is not Dr. Bright’s therapy sessions, and it opens up the show to other types of scenes, particularly between the atypical characters. The show’s narrative structure centers the therapy sessions as a location for storytelling, but also allows for other realistic and legible ways for listeners to get more information from the characters, especially as they talk to *each other* not just as separate patients of Dr. Bright. *The Penumbra* does not often have an actual in-universe reason for listeners to be hearing what Juno is doing, while *The Magnus Archives* follows similar logic as *The Bright Sessions* with tape recorders mentioned by characters and those recordings existing for a purpose in their world.

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<sup>28</sup> Quotes from *The Bright Sessions* are pulled from their provided transcriptions, found on their series’ site page for each episode. The formatting comes from their resources.

Understanding the limits of the narrative structure of these series assists our analysis of the podcasts. One by-product of these narratives choices by *Magnus* and *The Bright Sessions* is the confirmation that there are scenes we do not hear. Without a tape recorder or phone microphone following Juno Steel around, we hear any possible conversation he has and everything he does. Conversely, *The Bright Sessions* lets listeners know that there is relationship development happening where and when the listeners cannot hear.

Like *Magnus*, the series tries to balance realistic portrayals of marginalized characters without yoking their issues to their broader supernatural antagonists. In the world of *The Bright Sessions*, some people have supernatural abilities and are called 'atypicals'. Dr. Bright is a therapist specializing in helping such individuals, and the main cast consists of her and her patients—an empath, a mind-reader, and a time traveler, among others. While the show itself and Dr. Bright's practice in-universe are based on the idea that atypicals would have specific needs out of talk therapy, their abilities do not act as a stand-in for mental health in *The Bright Sessions*. Like how *Magnus* has powerful fear monsters *and* real-world oppression, in this world there are people with supernatural abilities who may or may not also have mental health issues as listeners in the 2010's would be familiar with. The speculation in *The Bright Sessions* is inclusive of humans having mental illness. This is made evident by not having a stand-in where a character a supernatural ability that affects them like a mental illness would a listener- the characters in Dr. Bright's office deal with both. The choice to be inclusive of mental health struggles resonate

with listeners and fans, similarly to LGBTQA+ folks<sup>29</sup>. A clear example is established early on – the first client of Dr. Bright’s we meet is Sam, who time travels beyond her control when she has panic attacks, and her character arc largely involves her getting both her anxiety and her time powers under control (Shippen, “01”). The two issues are linked *for her*, but only because she experiences both- it is not seen as though being atypical is due to mental illness or vice versa. Sam has anxiety *and* the ability to travel through time and these are two separate but connected things she deals with. Caleb, who is an empath, has issues controlling his—and others—emotions. He is going to therapy with Dr. Bright because she is an expert, not because his atypical ability is *akin* to mental illness. Caleb and Sam would presumably still have anxiety and anger issues without their atypical abilities, so their powers are not linked to mental illness. The dedication to realistic representation is evidenced by the inclusion of a ‘psychological consultant’: Elizabeth Laird, Shippen’s sister (Atypical Artists). According to the series website, Laird supplied notes and consultation on the structure and techniques employed in Dr. Bright’s practice. This shows how the series tried to speculate *with* an understanding of ability and mental health, not erase these as issues that would not exist if the world were different.

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<sup>29</sup>I do not have space in this project, unfortunately, to go into depth the ways that *The Bright Sessions*, and all the podcasts in this project are (mental and physical) disability-inclusive for speculative fiction. With *The Bright Sessions* and *The Penumbra Podcast*’s commitment to honest mental health portrayal, and *Penumbra* and *Magnus*’s having disabled main characters, these shows also go against the common vision of the future that “solves” and erases disability and disabled people. For more on this, see: Garland-Thompson, McRuer, Kafer, and other disability and crip theorists.

This inclusiveness in *The Bright Sessions*' speculation aids in Atypical Artists' project to create queer futures with this show. In *the Bright Sessions*, nearly the entire main cast is LGBTQA+, and the show clearly takes queerness as well as mental health seriously. The series shows people discovering their queer sexualities, articulating them for the first time, reiterating their identities after decades being out, as well as characters just *living* while queer. In many ways, their universe appears very similar to the real world, but as a spec-fic story, the show imagines familiar queerness as part of a bigger, different, and fantastical world. Speculative fiction often reiterates the hegemonic power structures that exist in the culture they are written in. By purposefully showcasing mental health and queerness as relevant in a story about superpowered young people, *The Bright Sessions* paved new ground in a tradition oft excluding of characters like its main cast. Due to its setting, the series also resonates strongly with listeners struggling within those cultures though—the main characters struggle with bullying, homelessness, abuse and more hardships that are certainly familiar to some listeners. The show is not so fantastical that the obstacles the characters face are foreign to listeners. The grounding in real experiences that come from having queer writers and actors, and the inclusion of real-world therapy techniques supports the series' goals of inclusivity.

Similar to the other podcasts, *The Bright Sessions*' characters and their actors do not share identical identities. The show, like the others, commits to leaving space open in their canon for fans to fill in. On Tumblr, writer Lauren Shippen confirmed this, saying “it is unlikely that we’ll confirm any physical appearances while The

Bright Sessions remains in the audio format<sup>30</sup>. I hope it doesn't become a sore spot, but one of the reasons I wanted to make a podcast is so that people could imagine whatever they wanted" (thebrightsessions, "Before Chloe officially..."). Shippen's response when asked directly for racial and ethnic identities for her characters was to confirm that the podcast medium is why there is no definition. Fans themselves do not assume that the race of an actor is the same as the character for any of these podcasts, but for the Bright Sessions it would be especially impossible—the casting of characters includes relatives whose actors are evidently different races. Fans of all these series take liberty where possible about what podcast characters look like when they create fanworks. Shippen is like the other creators in that she actively encourages this, refusing to define of physical appearance except for small pieces that are explicitly in the show itself. In the tags of the same Tumblr post, she goes on to highlight details from the podcast, refusing to add any more: "we know that Frank's great-grandfather was black. And that Caleb is a large human and Adam is smaller than him. Those are all the canonical things we know about appearance" (thebrightsessions, "Before Chloe officially...")<sup>31</sup>. This is the only post referencing physical appearance on the show's official blog. This is especially obvious with the character of Frank. The only allusion to a characters racial identity at all in the text comes from the first time we hear Frank speak:

**Dr. Bright:** Why don't we start at the beginning. Why did you choose to join the military?

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<sup>30</sup> While the series is in the process of being translated to other formats currently, it has not yet, as of February 2021, nor have any visuals been released.

<sup>31</sup> As these sentences were shared in tags of a Tumblr post, I have added punctuation to clarify in this essay.

**Frank:** My father was a Marine - fought in the Gulf War. And well, there's a long tradition of service in the Sawyer family. My great-grandfather fought with the 369th in the First World War.

**Dr. Bright:** The 369th? Otherwise known as the Harlem Hellfighters, correct?

**Frank:** Yes, ma'am. (Shippen, "28")

This is the confirmation that Shippen's Tumblr post is referring to, on Frank's great-grandfather being Black. Before this moment, race ostensibly does not exist in *The Bright Sessions*. At minimum, it does not affect the main characters. This is further compounded by Shippen's commitment to not defining her character's races. The potential issue is that in a world that race exists that is similar to the real world, it is a logical conclusion that racism exists. Therefore, when the main characters have zero experience with any struggle of racism—especially when other oppressions affect the main characters, these characters are most easily understood as not raceless, but *racism*-less, or almost certainly white. However, fans do not replicate this when envisioning the characters, as evidenced by their fanworks. *The Bright Sessions* as a podcast, has the capability to avoid physical description of its characters, and let fans and listeners imagine themselves or whoever they want without committing to one iteration. However, given the thoughtfulness surrounding the depiction of LGBTQA+ and mentally ill experiences, there is an obvious lack of consideration for how race affects those characters.

Similar to the other two series, *The Bright Sessions* has a cast full of queer characters. Unlike the other two series, many of this cast have supernatural abilities. Similar to its treatment of mental illness, *The Bright Sessions* feels grounded in reality for queer listeners, as instead of a fantasy stand-in for otherness such as queerness, the characters are queer *and* fantastically othered. Of the main

characters, most are specifically identified as queer, and some are less clear but still can be understood as queer. The perhaps most prominent queer relationship and characters in the series are teenagers Caleb and Adam. Caleb is one of the first characters listeners meet, as the second client Dr. Bright has a session with; he is seeing her because his powers of empathy have gotten him in trouble for anger issues (Shippen, "02"). Caleb is sixteen at the start of the series, and on the football team (Shippen, "02"). Adam is a classmate of his and starting in Caleb's first appearance it is clear that he has a connection to Adam's emotions. In his second recorded session with Dr. Bright Caleb makes it clear that Adam's emotions resonate different with his empathic sensibilities:

**Caleb:** Not exactly. I mean, sometimes he's blue, and he stays blue. But yeah, sometimes, his feelings make green and I know that they're his feelings but they feel real to me. Like more real than other people's.

**Dr. Bright:** And he is the only person you've encountered that has this particular effect on you?

**Caleb:** Uh, yeah. I guess. (Shippen, "05")

Caleb then describes a situation in which a girl in his class has feelings of attraction directed at himself, and he is uncomfortable (Shippen, "05"). In his next appearance, though, he does not express discomfort about Adam's similar feelings towards him: "The butterflies don't bother me the way they do from other people. It feels kind of...nice" (Shippen, "08"). Caleb, early on in the series appears to be a jock stereotype teenager. In his first few episodes he describes things as "girly" and "gay" derogatorily, suggesting he is in a long line of teenage football player characters with a particular mode of masculinity. However, Adam's presence from the beginning helps us understand Caleb as a queer teenager who is actively figuring out his own feelings. Adam is out the entire time, as evidenced by an offhand

comment from Caleb: “Everyone at school has kind of always known that Adam was gay” (Shippen, “15”). However, a few minutes later Caleb says “I know that people are going to call me gay for liking him that way, but I don’t think that I am. I mean, I’m definitely not straight either, but- it just never really came up. Because the only person I think about that way is him” (Shippen, “15”). Immediately after this, Caleb and Adam mutually express their romantic interest for each other over the phone. After this, Caleb and Adam are in a relationship for the rest of the series. While Caleb appears early on to have internalized homophobia, he is comfortable with his actual attraction to another boy. Caleb, in a way, has to ‘come out’ as an empath, not as queer. His storyline is familiar to listeners without being cliché, by having him be queer and in a queer relationship, but also not facing issues of discrimination and marginalization for that in the show. Instead, his issues of feeling like he doesn’t belong stem from his empathy abilities. Despite being overtly queer, Caleb, unlike Adam and the other characters, is not considered specifically bisexual, gay, or asexual.

Lauren Shippen has confirmed on her Tumblr that Caleb does not have a label for his sexuality. Fans have asked so many times after the subject that she has a dedicated section on her FAQ and a tag on her Tumblr, as well. Shippen clarifies she sees Caleb’s story as a love story but not a story about sexuality, going so far as to say, “I can say with...96% certainty that no, there probably won’t ever be a label attached to him” (thebrightsessions, “I was wondering...”). In terms of fan response, Shippen affirmed that fans can “headcanon what [they] want! Caleb could easily identify as bi, pan, demi, gay, or a myriad of other things in the future if that’s what

he feels fits for him” (thebrightsessions, “So just like...”). Like *The Penumbra*, Shippen confirms that there is a value in explicitly labelling LGBTQA+ characters, but Caleb is posited as a character that is questioning, not unlabeled. Bisexuality specifically, Shippen acknowledges, can be considered a ‘dirty word’ and that many fictional characters with attraction to more than one gender or sex are not labeled out of biphobia; she just continues to say that Caleb “isn’t necessarily bisexual” (thebrightsessions, “hi! I LOVE ...”). As opposed to Juno Steel, whose vocabulary does not have the language for the word bisexual, but who is confirmed to be so by the creators because of the biphobia *listeners and fans* experience, Caleb’s sexuality skirts this entirely in Shippen’s eyes. It is clear in the show itself that Caleb is attracted to and loves Adam and is queer; his reluctance for labels is not out of an internalized sense of avoiding being seen as such. Rather, he embodies queerness by eluding simple understandings of sexuality. Shippen compounds this by affirming that those who see themselves or their experiences in Caleb all have the potential to be a way to interpret him. In the show and on Shippen’s Tumblr, Caleb can be understood as a character who is figuring himself and his identity out, not a character that fits the mold of a bisexual or gay person but refuses to acknowledge it. More space is created in the show with the other characters as well, who openly use terms that often go un-stated like asexual and bisexual. *The Bright Sessions* has characters with multiple queer experiences that are explicit and implicit within the text of the show and affirmed by Shippen on social media.

As I stated, most of the cast is queer. Even the characters that are not revealed to be during the show itself, like Sam, are hinted by Shippen’s Tumblr to

not necessarily be straight. Sam is an ostensibly straight woman who enters a relationship with Mark, but Shippen on Tumblr confirms that she “know[s] Sam’s sexuality, but I’m not sure she knows yet, if that makes sense? She knows how she feels about Mark and I’m not sure we’ll get more into her specific identity” (thebrightsessions, “I have a...”). The original series does never get into ‘specific’s for Sam in this way. This response from Shippen though, affirms the queer nature of *The Bright Sessions* even without an explicitly label for Sam, although differently from Caleb. In the same post, Shippen confirms Adam is gay and “we all wonder about Damien” (thebrightsessions, “I have a...”), who I will return to. The latter two have moments in the text alluding or confirming their queer attraction to other characters. In this way Sam is linked to queerness without having that be in the text of the series. The speculative podcasts in this project leave a lot of space open for fans in a myriad of ways. While Caleb is established as queer, his identity is not only left open but Shippen says outright fans may interpret him in different and varying ways. We can extrapolate that the other characters who Shippen hints are not straight are not only queer but what they are can change due to fans’ interpretations. Shippen confirms that Caleb experience sexual attraction, due to a moment in the show itself in which Caleb is nervous about getting physical with Adam and calls Dr. Bright (Shippen. “33”). Shippen in this way defers to the text for defining what canonical traits her characters have in this regard. She also does this with physical appearance, which I will go into more detail further on. As opposed to Sims and the *Penumbra* creators who confirm their characters’ identities on social media because the characters do not say them in the show, Shippen leaves this

space as open as it is in the show itself. Shippen refers back to her own text for the 'truth' of characters' experiences. Since, in the show, Caleb expresses attraction only to Adam, Shippen reaffirms when asked that there is not an answer on what Caleb 'really' is. Queer characters like Caleb are then layered on my fans with the more specific experiences of being, for example, bisexual or demisexual. Beyond this, Caleb represents, for some, the specific identity of being queer-questioning, or unlabeled. What could in another context be seen as erasing queer potential by refusing to acknowledge queerness in a character, Caleb instead becomes an open space for fans and listeners to understand a queer experience within a traditional character like the 'star football player'. Part of why this works is that there are other characters in the series who are openly LGBTQA+ and *do* use words like bisexual and asexual, averting the trope of characters going unlabeled to *avoid* queerness in texts.

Another character established early on to be queer is Chloe, who is asexual. In episode 28, Frank discusses her sexuality with Dr. Bright, which is the first time it is explicitly said. Frank is around eight years older than Chloe and homeless at the start of the series, so after Chloe becomes friends with him, he starts staying with her family while she is in college dorms. Frank's relationship with Chloe is a potentially odd-seeming one, so he explains to Dr. Bright in their first real conversation:

**Frank:** There's nothing untoward, ma'am. Chloe's a very beautiful young woman but I'm not- you don't have to worry about me.

**Dr. Bright:** I wasn't worrying.

**Frank:** Because Chloe doesn't do that sort of thing.

**Dr. Bright:** Well, that. But also, she's a very good judge of character. If she trusts you, then I do as well.

**Frank:** That's good. I didn't mean to be defensive, but I don't want you to get the wrong idea. Some of the folks in her studio have- well,

they've made some off-color comments. About our relationship. I guess they don't know Chloe all that well. Or they just don't get it.  
**Dr. Bright:** Some people find asexuality a difficult concept to grasp. (Shippen, "28")

On Shippen's Tumblr, there are multiple messages she received, all tagged *asexuality* and the majority of them are fans celebrating *The Bright Sessions* for explicitly naming Chloe's identity. Asexuality, like bisexuality, is an identity that often goes unlabeled in media. Chloe also alludes to her sexuality in conversation with other characters, but this moment with Frank is when the word is specifically used. Chloe is a very bubbly character whose ability to read minds means she often speaks without thinking based on other's thoughts and not words. When Caleb comes to Dr. Bright for advice about his relationship with Adam, Chloe says "It's about dating. Well, not dating necessarily- about what people who are dating sometimes do...you know, what you want to do with Mark and what I don't want to do with anyone?" (Shippen, "33"). Chloe's asexuality is shown explicitly through the use of the word she clearly identifies with from Dr. Bright who she has confided in, as well as allusions like this one. Another character who is casually established as queer is latecomer Rose, a nineteen-year-old who can dream-walk. Her first session with Dr. Bright immediately establishes her as queer, as she asks Dr. Bright if she is allowed to share her ability with a potential "serious girlfriend" (Shippen, "37"). Later, when Rose meets the rest of the cast she is inspired by Caleb and Adam, another couple with only one member atypical:

**Rose:** But you and Caleb-

**Adam:** Yeah?

**Rose:** You guys are together.

**Adam:** Yeah, we are. Is that a problem?

**Rose:** Hey, yeah, chill, I'm gay too, I just— you're cool with it? Having an atypical boyfriend?

**Adam:** Yeah. Yeah, of course, why wouldn't I be?

**Rose:** I don't know. That's good to know, though. Thanks. (Shippen, "47")

Both Chloe and Rose are revealed to be explicitly queer with a label for their own identities in ways that feel natural and not forced into the series. In addition to that, they also have conversations with others in which those sexualities are referenced less overtly. Even characters like Rose, who come later into the show and are in less scenes and episodes, have well-developed personalities that include their queerness without flattening it. With Chloe and Rose's sexuality being revealed this way, Shippen is balancing the fine line of showcasing representation of LGBTQA+ identities, telling a story with well-developed characters and not stereotypes, and giving queer experiences their weight.

Shippen addressed the difficulties in "trying to make things more inclusive" for listeners in a Tumblr post (thebrightsessions, "Loving all the queer..."). For the characters that, unlike Caleb, have their sexualities solidified and are therefore part of their identities, it does not come up in conversation with their friends and families who already know. In reference to this, Shippen said "Finding ways to bring [character's sexualities] up that doesn't feel forced is sometimes difficult. For instance, I have no idea if the word bisexual will come up in reference to Mark in an actual episode - everyone in his life already knows" (thebrightsessions, "Loving all the queer..."). The word is actually used to describe Mark quite early on in his story, in a moment it became relevant. Since the cast is filled with LGBTQA+ characters and they are all out, they are not often relevant to the conversations at hand. Mark is Dr. Bright's brother, and his atypical ability is that he can mirror other's abilities when near them. At the start of the show he has been trapped in the year 1810 for

years; time-traveler Sam eventually is able to get him into the present, but he is then kidnapped by Damien. Damien's ability is to make people 'want what he wants'—he can plant thoughts into people's minds to get them to do what he wants (Shippen, "10"). Mark and Damien's relationship is ambiguous and queer and the subject of much fanworks and discussion. Sam and Mark are romantically interested in each other while she visits him in the past, and when he is rescued into the present, she and Dr. Bright are concerned for his welfare when he is kidnapped. A voicemail he sends to them includes Damien saying "honey, I'm home," in the background, which causes Sam to be concerned Damien is possibly coercing Mark into a sexual or romantic relationship due to his powers of persuasion:

**Sam:** You don't think- I mean, Damien wouldn't- I mean, I know that Mark is bisexual, but do we know what Damien- I mean, is he- do we really have any idea about his...intentions?

**Dr. Bright:** I'm...not sure. It's never been a subject he's spoken about with me - his sexuality, that is. But...but I don't think he'd go there. Not intentionally. (Shippen, "33")

This is the first instance Mark is confirmed to be bisexual, and while Damien and Mark never enter a relationship within the show itself, Shippen has never denied a potential for one when talking to fans. Like with the other traits, Shippen does not confirm things that are outside of the show itself, but within that space she confirms Damien's feelings, saying "it's just...extremely messy and toxic, but Damien definitely does have more than platonic feelings for Mark, even if he doesn't know how to acknowledge that" (thebrightsessions, "Hey! I just ..."). Damien does not seem to have kidnapped Mark because of these feelings—he is not aligned with the many villains in pop culture that try to capture someone to be their spouse or any such trope. However, because of Mark's mirroring ability, Damien thought Mark

could understand him the way no one else could (Shippen, “48”). Damien later in the series loses his ability, and calls Mark on his birthday while drunk, which causes him to define his relationship with Mark as follows:

**Damien:** He’s not an- I mean, he’s not- it was never like that.

**Rose:** Ah, gotcha. Not an ex-boyfriend, just an ex...something?

**Damien:** Yeah. Something. (Shippen, “46”)

Mark’s girlfriend Sam not long after this says to him:

**Sam:** We’re in love with the same man, I think that’s enough common ground without trying to call us friends.

**Damien:** I’m not in—

**Sam:** Don’t be stupid, Damien. (Shippen, “53”)

Damien acts as one of the main two antagonists in the series from season two

onward, and it is his feelings toward and relationship with Mark and his desire to be understood that are his driving forces. The series appears to avoid falling into homophobic tropes like having a queer villain when the majority of the cast is LGBTQA+. After Damien threatens members of the main cast including Sam and Adam, and actually physically harms Chloe, Mark finally decides to get closure on their relationship and confronts a now-powerless Damien.

**Mark:** Did you ever actually care about me?

**Damien:** Of course I did. I- I do. Maybe I wanted to- to use you at first but I stayed, didn’t I? I kept taking care of you, I listened to you, I—

**Mark:** Yeah, yeah you did, Damien, and that’s what had me so fucked up because I never could tell what was real and what was you trying to get information from me.

**Damien:** Does it matter?

**Mark:** Of course it matters. Pretending to be my friend just to use my ability is not the same as being my friend.

**Damien:** Why can’t it be both? Why couldn’t I have been your friend and wanted to share my power? I didn’t want to use you Mark, I wanted us to be together, to be equals—

**Mark:** To do what? What was the plan?

**Damien:** I don’t know, man! I didn’t have the next few years mapped out, I just thought it would be nice to be with someone who understood me—

**Mark:** But you never asked me! You never asked what I wanted, how I felt. You just- you made all the decisions for us. (Shippen, “48”)

This conversation highlights the charged dynamic between the two men. Mark's feelings towards Damien are ambiguous, but up until this moment he has been at lightly slightly defensive of Damien despite the wrongs he has committed. This conversation highlights part of why that might be—Mark is unsure if Damien's persuasive powers affected his feelings. Damien's powers are established as making people want what he wants, and he is not in full control of them. Therefore, Mark—whose own mirror abilities were not working much of the time he was kidnapped by Damien—had no way to know which thoughts were his own. In addition, Damien himself, due to his lack of control, does not know either. Damien's romantic feelings towards Mark become entwined with his own sense of wanting to be understood, and he believes his actions were justified. This conversation between the two men who were not in a romantic relationship reads remarkably like a breakup of a toxic and manipulative relationship. This is compounded by Mark saying Damien “made all the decisions for us”, showcasing how Damien's image of their relationship overtook any autonomy Mark could have had, especially since his desire may not have been his own. After this conversation, Damien does leave the main cast alone, although he has a few conversations with them later in which he tries to apologize. The fan reception to Damien and Mark is strong; , there are 74 fanworks published on the AO3 tagged with their romantic relationship, while only 54 are tagged with established canonical couple Sam and Mark<sup>32</sup>. This is illustrative of fans being interested in the dynamic of two characters despite their relationship being a troubled one.

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<sup>32</sup> As of January 2021.

In *Bodyminds Reimagined*, Sami Schalk discusses Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower*, and a character's "hyperempathy" as a disability. Schalk claims that "very few scholars have taken the more nuanced approach that [the character] seems to embrace and which, I argue, demands changing the rules of interpretation in ways that expand our conceptualization of (dis)ability, especially in regard to its practical, political, and theoretical relationships to race and gender" (91). The nuance Schalk is calling for is to treat this character's disability not with only positivity nor negativity, or to ignore "read it as a metaphor for something not related to disability" (91). Such negative readings, according to Schalk, often assert that this character was made disabled to invoke pity, without acknowledging Butler's subversions of such tropes (92). According to her, "representations of disability tend to provoke emotion, particularly pity or inspiration" (Schalk 92). So, scholars have looked at either the wholly positive or negative aspects of this character's hyperempathy, if they see it at all as a disability.

It is important to acknowledge (dis)ability in *The Bright Sessions*, considering all Shippen and Atypical Artists's work to make a series that centers mental illnesses and the ways it affects the lives of those with them. Schalk argues we need a nuanced approach to looking at disabled characters in speculative fiction, not boiling down an ability to a metaphor, or only looking at the positive or the negative. I believe that *The Bright Sessions* itself does engage with this method. Near the end of the series, Caleb is in much more control of his own empathy powers, but also has had a moment of violent outburst due to the anger around him. Sam is likewise more in control, but still has a panic attack in a late episode that transports her. In

addition, Damien loses his powers which is treated with mixed opinions by the different characters, due to his manipulation abilities. In this way, the series does not seem to be treating these atypical abilities (despite the terminology used) as positive, negative nor metaphors. They are slotted within the character's lives along with their mental illnesses<sup>33</sup> and other traits.

Due to the universe continuing through the sequel podcasts and Shippen's YA novels, it is slightly harder to gauge the relative popularity of different characters and pairings, since some of them have much more canon to draw from or are part of series actively updating years after the series ended. Since the show did officially end in 2018 though, this project focuses on that. The three podcasts within this project's scope all started around the same time, and therefore can be considered together.

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<sup>33</sup> In addition, after Chloe is physically assaulted, she not only has issues with her telepathy, but also experiences chronic pain. The series evidently does not treat disability as a metaphor nor written it out of their speculation.

## Conclusions (The Future)

Unlike the *Juno Steel* world that explicitly takes place in the future and has evident changes—like the lack of enforcement of binary gender—that are obvious from the start, the other two shows speculate from the point of view of the current moment and all the baggage it entails. All the podcasts in this project have committed to a sense of a-racial identities for their main cast, if not their entire cast. *The Penumbra's* world, being in the far future, justifies this in-universe, but *The Magnus Archives* and *The Bright Sessions* take place in a world that appears to be very similar to the world the listeners would be hearing it in. The podcast creators are evidently keeping race away from their main characters *for* the purposes of fan imagination. However, it is slightly harder to fathom a world in which so many real-world issues plague the main cast, but not racism. This is not to say the creators had to include this in their story, but compared to *The Penumbra*, whose speculation explicitly and implicitly erases race as an oppressive force and factor of identity, the other two—both with white writer/creators—sense of racelessness required a suspension of disbelief for listeners who are immersed in an almost-real late 2010's United States and England. A perhaps unintended consequence to not naming a minority identity is that the privilege left in that silence is space for a hegemonic identity. Put another way, if a character has no canonical race, but does not experience racism, is written and acted by white people, and experiences other oppressive forces, there is a high chance that the spaces meant to act as empty may actually just be recreating the hegemony of whiteness. If a character is meant to live

in the present-day United States, one could assume certain levels of privilege would make certain actions more accessible. Given the podcast medium being audio-only, many of these creators determine that there is no canonical physical appearance at *all* for their characters, and race is yoked to that, so also goes undetermined. This understanding of race as only relevant when it is literally seen is the undercurrent to many of the decisions made with regard to race and podcast characters. Lauren Shippen specifically said in a Tumblr post that the freedom for listeners to create their own image of characters is “one of the reasons [she] wanted to make a podcast” (thebrightsessions, “Before Chloe officially...”). This was said in response to a fan asking for race or ethnic identities of her characters. This shows that not only do these white creators want to avoid racing their own characters, but they also associate race with physical appearance and therefore are non-canonical in their audio-only medium. *The Penumbra* subverts this in two ways—by explicitly writing race and racism out of history in its story, as well as re-introducing the representation of people of color when they hired an artist and the visual was brought back in. Beyond this, fans of these podcasts bring race in when they depict physical bodies for these characters.

This project is about race, gender, sex and sexuality in speculative podcast fandoms. But, importantly, it is also about the sense of racelessness or a-racial characters in fandom. The ‘theoretical whitewashing’ that has happened in fan studies is difficult to navigate in this project, as there are characters that are not seen as a-racial because they are white, like Pande is referring to. In essence, there are characters that do not have bodies or races whatsoever, until fanworks (or other

artworks) bring them into existence. This is a different transformation of media than for example, choosing to draw an established white character as a person of color instead, which fans have done in almost all fandoms. The behavior of representing and creating a body that is raced from an a-racial voice shows that fans are pushing *against* white supremacy and whitewashing by purposefully representing marginalized bodies.

The flip side of moments like the trans woman Alexia Crawley in *Magnus* is that her explicit experience with transphobic oppression implies a cisnormativity in the other characters in the series. There are many spaces for fans to presume, for example, that because transphobia still exists in this alternate-London, that since the main characters do not appear to be oppressed by that force, they are necessarily cis. This is not necessarily what fans *believe*—many headcanons or even fanon interpretations of characters involve them being trans. However, unlike sexuality, gender is weighted seemingly heavier in the world of *Magnus*, which gives fans slightly less room to play. This is part of the fine line that podcast creators walk, in which they want to portray marginalized people as well-rounded characters and not gloss over the experiences that come with their identities. However, then there is the difficulty that—like Shippen had said—many people do not just say ‘I am so-and-so identity’. So a legible way for characters to be seen as trans is for them to mention it when it is relevant, which it would be in an instance of oppression. This, combined with speculative podcasts wanting to keep certain aspects of their characters un-named, means that it is easy to presume that the other characters who have not disclosed experiencing transphobia, are then cis. Fans do not

inevitably ascribe to interpretation, though. Jonny Sims tweeted that the Archivist's gender does not impact the series, so fans can interpret the character to be nonbinary or any other gender (@jonnywaistcoat, "All that said..."). The issue is that in modern-day London—a world in which a trans woman describes her marginalization—how can gender *not* affect the Archivist? Even cisgender men who are privileged to not experience gender oppression are still *affected* by their genders. It is clear that the *Magnus* creators wanted to make a world in which race (and gender identity) did not affect their main cast so fans could interpret any number of possibilities. It is unclear, however, if their efforts are successful when examining the treatment of other characters. Even Caleb, whose sexuality goes unlabeled, is described by Shippen to *be* questioning, not just un-stated. In regard to race though, all the podcasts have this in common. The questions of legitimacy and truth in canon are the reasons—that because there is no physical appearance, it necessarily does not matter. But examples like Alexia Crawley in *Magnus*, and Frank in *The Bright Sessions* muddle the message, and imply that these marginalized identities actually *do* matter to the characters' **experiences. This means it is much easier to imagine the main cast as privileged in these regards. The *Penumbra's* statement on race**. The creators struggled with the tension between speculating a raceless future and their desire to represent people of color in their current time. In another way, this tension might also highlight the conflict between these desires for a creator. Lothian helps us see that looking at depictions of the future tells us about the present. It is perhaps impossible for creators in the United States and Britain to create a future without race that does not mire itself in prescient understandings of

race. The back-and-forth relationship of these small independent creators, who are supported financially by their fans and see their post and creations, means that these creators know that their fans want to see themselves. However, their projects in their speculation is evidently to tell a story in which *anyone* can see themselves in any character. This brings friction, when people with conflicting experiences read different traits into a character, for example. From the perspective of the show, race is unimportant to their fantastical setting. However, this is not the only way to speculate, as many other creators of color have explicitly included race in their futuristic or fantasy tales, not just ‘representations of people of color’ but *race*. *The Penumbra* again seeks to leave this space purposefully open and un-addressed within the series itself. They want fans to fill in space they leave with their own depictions of the characters. This seems to be partially because of their relationship with fans and fanworks, but also because they see their story as being race-irrelevant. It appears that the series struggled in meeting both of these goals. So, even while *The Penumbra* takes place in the future the series—like the others—still struggles with present-day racism and issues of white hegemony. All three of these series attempted in different ways to use their lack of visuals to make space for bodily diversity. The series can be understood as trying to create a fluid understanding of the body in which fans can fill in space with multiple depictions, as opposed to being tied to one particular character interpretation due to an actor’s appearance. However, these shows also have made it clear in their attempts that the visual is not all race is, and their attempts at speculating without race appear not to be as successful as their visions of queer futures.

Of the trans body, Halberstam says “for some audiences, the transgender body confirms a fantasy of fluidity so common to notions of transformation within the postmodern. To others, the transgender body confirms the enduring power of the binary gender system. But to still other viewers, the transgender body represents a utopian vision of a world of subcultural possibilities. Representations of transgenderism in recent queer cinema have moved from a tricky narrative device designed to catch an unsuspecting audience off guard to truly independent productions within which gender ambiguity is not a trap or a device but part of the production of new forms of heroism, vulnerability, visibility, and embodiment” (Halberstam 96). Fans of speculative podcasts can be understood as representing trans bodies not as utopian and not grounded in reality, but in line with their own experience as trans fans. Podcast fanart and fanfiction that depicts characters as transgender, made by trans and non-binary fans, is part of a project for a future with trans people in it. Not just as an allegory for the fluidity of the future—though that is certainly part of the appeal for some—but because they see trans people in the present and the future. Lothian believes that looking at queer speculation of the past that tries to see the future “can lead us to the queer present” (Lothian, *Old Futures* 4). Queer and trans depictions of speculative podcast characters in fanworks help us understand what queer and trans folks see the future looking like. The podcast settings being radical and queer, speculating from the margins lays a foundation for marginalized fans to push visions of the future further than the generally-understood oft-colonized modes typically presented. In the future, the idea of the

transgender body and queerness itself has become so universalized that in the world of fanworks for these podcasts, .

Speculative podcasts give marginalized listeners a confirmation that they exist in the future. As opposed to the future being a colonized space in which marginalized people are written out of history, erased by the continuation of cisheteronormative modes of being, the podcasts in this project show that queerness has a place in the world alongside fantastical elements. In addition to making the timeline inclusive and open, these podcasts also open up space. It is easy to see how *The Penumbra Podcast* with its setting off of Earth and across the galaxy, makes room for queerness in space. In its future, there is no oppression based on any facet of identity. In one of the final episodes of season three, there is a wedding between two of the main cast members. As Juno watches these two women take their vows, he considers space:

when you look at it, really look at it, you remember why we call it "space." A gap between things. Looking at nothing is seeing yourself in more detail than looking in a mirror, because there's nothing to distract you, no light, no break in your nose or gray in your hair. "Nothing" gives you nothing back, and all that's left is you, your thoughts, and all that space to put 'em in. I look at [the two women just married] and I know what they see in all that space. They just gave us a tour of all the parts we get to know. The rest is theirs. (Takagi Kaner and Vibert, "What Lies Beyond (Part 1)")

This passage from a podcast released in late 2020 romanticizes space, links nothingness to romance and potential and queer love. To Jack Halberstam, "'queer space' refers to the place-making practices within postmodernism in which queer people engage and it also describes the new understandings of space enabled by the production of queer counterpublics" (4). Halberstam's sense of queer space is connected to subcultural physical spaces and the ways in which heteronormativity

has removed queerness *from* spaces, such as New York City. There are a myriad of ways in which queers eschew space like they do time. Space and time in the speculative podcasts of the late 2010's, are possibility. This is true in the free-to-access, relatively-easy-to-produce nature of podcasts themselves. Online-only, travelling through word of mouth through queer circles, the speculative podcasts themselves are an example of a counterpublic. Within the speculation itself, there is more space. When Juno Steel looks at open space, he sees a place for thoughts and love, a nothingness that can be transformed. When podcast fans listen to these shows, they are not only given the sense of time that speculation and visions of the future kicks open for them, but they are also given space. There—with the few exceptions—are entirely empty spaces where the bodies, place, and visions of these podcasts might be. Not only can fans 'see themselves' but there is space in the future for fans to imagine anything. These creators explicitly say they want to leave fans to interpret things themselves, in terms of characters races, sexualities, and neurodivergence; the creators also leave space after conversations, for example, for fans to imagine scenes and more. Knowing that fanworks will be made of their work, these creators continue to create more space for their fans to fill in. *The Magnus Archives* creators Sims and Newall have confirmed that unlike other shows they will not have kissing noises on their show, but this does not mean their characters never kiss. What it leaves is a space in which hundreds of fans take a transcript saying "fabric rustling" to be a moment of queer love. *The Bright Sessions* visits each of its characters in rotations, leaving spaces for development that is shown in stitches—for example, Adam and Caleb's courtship takes place mostly off the air, and fans

have the express permission from Shippen to write fanfiction about their queer love. In addition, there is a void in the show where Sam and Caleb's sexuality could be, as fans have asked for. Queerness fills these voids. Not just 'LGBTQA+ representation' but counter-hegemonic understandings of love, relationships, sound, bodies, and even space and time. These shows do not just leave room kicked open for their fans to add—these fanworks and productions are not merely additive. The creators are *making space and time* for their queer and marginalized fans. Together, the podcasts, their fans and creators are communally creating queer futures.

Fans draw these podcast characters with visible impairments and disabilities, of various races and body types and sizes, as explicitly trans, and in any way they want; the future now includes those people. It goes beyond the specific labels or identities of the characters and fans. The future is a world in which gender does not exist, and race does not affect folks' lives. The deeper notions are stronger than the more surface-level notion of representing LGBTQA+ people or BIPOC. These podcasts care about 'representation' not because they are ticking boxes, but because they want fans to "see themselves". This is not so simplistic the much-critiqued notion of recognizing every label or mode of being. Rather, it is a reaction, prescient in 2016 when these shows started, to the notion that certain types of people do not belong in the future. The shows radically include trans and queer folks and attempt to establish BIPOC in the future through official art and supporting fan representations. Even the flawed strategy of leaving out physical descriptions of characters is in service to this mode of speculation. It is more than just representation, but collaborative building of a sense of the present and future.

For podcast creators, the mantra of fans ‘seeing themselves’ is not at odds with their audio-only medium. They have left the visuals up to fans, and the spaces for fans to establish their own futures are in the art and writing—what they see.

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---. "Seems people are disturbed I spell the Archivist's shortened name "John" not "Jon". A few points: a) I mainly did it for a bit of psychological distance given we share a name b) I've had others shorten my name like that before c) It's my name and my character so y'all can lump it." *Twitter*, 25 June 2019, 7:12 P.M., [twitter.com/jonnywaistcoat/status/1143658327605428224](https://twitter.com/jonnywaistcoat/status/1143658327605428224).

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