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Reconciling Contradictory Feminism
Law & Order: Special Victims Unit and the Queers Who Love It

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Reconciling Contradictory Feminism
Law & Order: Special Victims Unit and the Queers Who Love It

by

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This thesis is dedicated to survivors of all kinds and the people who love them.
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Abstract

Reconciling Contradictory Feminism
Law & Order: Special Victims Unit and the Queers Who Love It

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Law & Order: Special Victims Unit is a locus of the production of feminist anti-rape discourse as well as messages promoting carceral justice. These contradictory ideologies are somehow reconciled by queer viewers of the show. I use interdisciplinary methods and a variety of feminist and queer theories to investigate this peculiar reconciliation. First, I analyze the narrative of an episode of Law & Order: Special Victims Unit through a queer critical lens of reading media. Then I examine the fans and the industry players of Law & Order: Special Victims Unit in the context of the show’s problematic messaging. The conversation between the contradictions of the show and the populations who are fans of the show but who also suffer under the same conditions I criticize in my narrative analysis is important to the larger feminist conversations about rape culture, capitalist media enterprise, and queer and feminist self-identification and community building.
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Chapter 1: Reconciling Contradictory Feminism

INTRODUCTION: A RECONCILIATION IN CONTEXT

When I was seven, and my mother forty-six, she became ill to the extent that her doctors believed it a terminal sickness. Defying those predictions, she survived. I admit, it is not immediately apparent what this has to do with Law & Order: Special Victims Unit. I promise this is not a sob story I am pulling out to win the eighth grade oratorical contest. During this time, roughly 1992 - 2000, my mother and I regularly watched live surgery programming on The Learning Channel. I was horrified by her choice to watch televised body trauma when she was simultaneously experiencing real trauma of the same kind. I relentlessly criticized her for intentionally exposing herself to the gore that she herself was intimately knowledgeable of on a daily basis for several years. She did not seem to get enough. She tried to explain that it made her feel better, and that it was interesting to see it happen from a different perspective, to someone else, with a different outcome.

Twenty years later I was finishing my long delayed bachelor’s degree at San Francisco State University and I loved watching Law & Order: Special Victims Unit. I assumed my attraction to the show was due in large part to the sexual trauma that I have survived. Watching made me feel better. It felt good to know Olivia Benson would be there every episode to advocate for characters I could, at least in one way, identify with. It helped me re-imagine my own narrative. As an adult queer woman I had taken up trauma survival as a guiding principal. I had difficulty reconciling my core values of anti-racism, feminism, and social justice with the hegemonic patriarchal messaging of Law & Order: Special Victims Unit. But I realized that watching the surgeries was cathartic for my mother, and watching sexual violence occur and then be resolved has been cathartic for me. “Healing” is an obvious term I might use here, but I do not think it is sufficient. If I opted to describe the pleasure of watching televisual trauma as “healing”, I fear I would imply that there is
some way to move beyond the trauma, and leave it behind forever. I think a more accurate way to describe the pleasure of watching these shows, for myself and for my mother, is to say we are able to relive, in a vague way, our personal traumas, and to continuously rewrite them. I do not dare to estimate what value this reimagining might have, but I am certainly no worse for it.

While reading this document, I ask the reader to continually return to a framework of a hierarchy of grievability. This hierarchy is my elaboration of Butlerian grievability, Mbembeian necropolitics, and Foucauldian biopolitics. It establishes the routinization of the bodies which are suitable to live or die, and those which are suitable to be publicly grieved, as well as the degree to which the public is permitted to grieve them and which public is permitted to perform that grief. I am writing this to multiple audiences. Law & Order: Special Victims is an important text for multiple audiences. For those who are familiar with a critique of rape culture, I think that Law & Order: Special Victims Unit is open to a critical interpretation of its problematic methods and messaging. For those viewers who do not regularly contemplate rape culture, Law & Order: Special Victims Unit is at least a stepping stone towards consciousness of rape culture, as fraught as that stepping stone may be. Both sections of this document utilize very different methods of analysis and are framed in conversation with different readers. But they (the sections and the readers) still need each other for this conversation.

In the first section “‘Spring Awakening’ and the Consequences of Contradictory Feminism”, I use a queer critical narrative reading of a specific episode to outline the harm a typical Law & Order: Special Victims Unit episode is capable of through representations of sexually violent scenarios. This harm and these consequences, are grave. There is much to be desired from Benson’s constant degradation of certain feminine qualities in favor of others. And the very quality of law enforcement that is so easy to take for granted in the
show cannot be underestimated. The carceral component is intrinsic to the feminist discourse of *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*.

The episode I chose for this narrative analysis is the twenty-third episode of season fifteen, titled “Spring Awakening”. This episode features representations of appropriate motherhood and femininity, sex work, substance abuse, racialized interactions and social policing, and a particularly gory image of a woman’s corpse. It is one of the most shocking and offensive episodes of *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* that I have ever seen (and I have seen most of them). This is precisely why I chose the episode for analysis. It has every quality a typical episode of the show should have (if its producer plans to keep its reputation): regulation of abject femininity through appropriate femininity/appropriate feminism, rape and murder, and racial scapegoating. The violence the show itself is capable of committing against vulnerable populations is premised on avenging those same populations. I rely heavily on the scholarship of Lisa Cuklanz and Sujata Moorti while evaluating these contradictory displays of abject femininity and acceptably feminism. Cuklanz and Moorti are two of a very small group of scholars who have performed in-depth analysis and theorizing of *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* and their elaboration of the contradictory feminism located on the show has been crucial to building my queer critical reading practice.

In the second section, “Trauma-Inspired Pleasures”, I look towards and beyond my own pleasure in the show to make sense of that pleasure. I draw on interdisciplinary methods by using anecdotes of conversations at parties and theorize a queer continuum of sexual violence to attempt an explanation of why we queers love *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*. The people I write towards in the second section are people who are surviving under the violent conditions described in the first section.
I hope that my analysis and conclusions resonate with other queer folks, other survivors, other fans of *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*. My project requires an interdisciplinary method of research as well as analysis. The narrative analysis of the first section lays bare the violent and exploitative messaging of *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*. In the second section I employ an industry analysis and fan studies approach. This triangulation of approaches expresses the necessary role all three play for each other: without one, none can be. A queer critical reading of narrative, industry, and fans elucidates the way understandings of the show circulate and produce particular and nuanced understandings of the content outside of the show. This mode of critical reading is not an uncommon practice for viewers of *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*, but it is uncommon in academic interventions. Queer reading strategies that center the survivor in the narrative as well as using similar reading faculties as a tool for analysis beyond narrative are crucial to the reconciliation of and meaning making for the pleasures and problems found in *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*.

“**Spring Awakening**” and the Consequences of Contradictory Feminism

In the following pages, I perform an in depth analysis of “Spring Awakening”, an episode of *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* (s15, e23). Detective Olivia Benson, a main character on the show, is crucial to my analysis. As Lisa M. Cuklanz and Sujata Moorti have described in their work on televisual feminism, female lead detectives on police procedural dramas are locations of the production of a mainstream feminist discourse. In order to frame the meaning and stakes of the destruction of queered bodies on feminist television, I find Cuklanz and Moorti’s theorizations of televisual feminism—the homogenized feminism that appears regularly in a variety of programs—most useful. Importantly, their definition details that aggregate depictions of such feminism over the
past fifty years of television history, since the first example of tevisual feminism, found in The Mary Tyler Moore Show, establish tevisual feminism as “an attenuated brand of liberal feminism” (Cuklanz and Moorti 305).

They emphasize that this form of feminism is constricted by the format of television as well as the political economies unique to the production of each individual show. Time restraints, censorship placed on the content of programming by networks, and the personal-political agendas of producers and investors all impact the final iteration of tevisual feminism. This is particularly observable in prime time dramas because of the high profile of the prime time air slots—these shows get the highest ratings. The feminism that emerges on television is by necessity truncated and ambiguous, having gone through many filters before finally emerging in a given episode. Law & Order: Special Victims Unit notoriously employs a “ripped from the headlines” strategy in the writers’ room. After the relatively well-known headline is appropriated, it is often compiled with other high profile headlines. The “best” one is chosen, and then showrunner Warren Leight works up a script with his writers. According to Dick Wolf, creator and producer of the Law & Order franchise, writers are required to keep the plot “apolitical” and “balanced” so as to not alienate advertisers from purchasing ad space. But he and his writers are also careful to not alienate their viewers, who are conceptualized as a women’s audience.1 The agendas of commercial investors that make the production of the show possible are in opposition to the viewers, who are just as vital to the show’s existence. Every aspect of network television is mediated through a patriarchal and capitalist lens. The truncation that comes with this patriarchal mediation is the only way any version of feminism can be taken up in mainstream television. It is no wonder that the acceptable feminism is one unanimously described in

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1 See D’Acci’s Defining Women for more on the history of the mythological “women’s audience”.


terms of incompleteness and omission. Tenets of more subversive feminisms that defy and seek to dismantle capitalist systems of power (including mass media as well as government and law enforcement systems) are unimaginable on television, much less prime time NBC. Televisual feminism is a translation meant for mass legibility and inoffensiveness, and thus much is necessarily lost in the negotiation.

Cuklanz and Moorti further define televisual feminism by expanding their argument with the term “contradictory feminism”, subdividing the particularly problematic televisual feminism portrayed in *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* (Cuklanz and Moorti 305). This specific form of televisual feminism is characterized by the selective advocation of some feminist values while simultaneously denigrating particular “feminine” qualities. For instance, the episode I have selected to perform my analysis of “Spring Awakening” is rife with contradicting priorities. As I will discuss later, the politicized feminist agenda to promote the health and safety of sex workers is abandoned in favor of upholding Benson’s brand of power feminism.

This brings me to a third term set forth by Cuklanz and Moorti to make meaning out *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit’s* peculiar feminism is “lifestyle feminism”. In “Spring Awakening” the standards for gender behavior depicted rely heavily on Detective Olivia Benson’s performance of a particular feminism. According to Cuklanz and Moorti, lifestyle feminism is “characterized by independent, assertive women who find self-actualization through work outside the home, often in male-dominated professions” (Cuklanz and Moorti 305). So, lifestyle feminism is the televisual representation of bell hooks’ ideation of “power feminism”: “[t]he voices of ‘power feminism’ tend to be highlighted in mass media far more than the voices of individual feminist women who have gained class power without betraying our solidarity towards those groups without class privilege” (hooks 42). By being a police officer, a woman, and a survivor of sexual violence
in her own right, Detective Benson is guilty of just such a betrayal of those women lacking class privilege. Power feminism is distinguished by the idea that economic gender inequalities in the professional workplace can be overcome through assertiveness and hard work. Power feminism advocates for women’s claim to their own agency (primarily in the middle class work world) and the rest will take care of itself. An economically and racially exclusive form of feminism is the only one deemed heroic. Further, hooks explains that, ‘‘power feminism’’ of the ‘90s offers wealthy white heterosexual women as the examples of feminist success” (45) and that “the vision of power evoked [by power feminism] is power gained through the exploitation and oppression of others” (6). Because of its relationship to the reaffirmation of the exploitative nature of hegemonic racist heteropatriarchy, Benson’s brand of feminism is worthy of representation on mainstream television. The way that Benson’s character is constructed throughout Law & Order: Special Victims Unit, as the aggressive rape avenger, positions her as an expression of exemplary femininity. And thus, the messages in this episode are markedly unfeminist, instead promoting normative standards of gender performance and rejecting more radically inclusive ideas.

Our lead detective is Olivia Benson, a character who is accepted and adored for her reputation of being a rape avenger. Ellie Porter is the woman of interest in this episode. Ellie has many counts against her in regards to violating appropriate white femininity. She is an unapologetic sex worker, the mother of a mixed-race child, the lover of a black Dominican immigrant, and a drug addict. I argue that her gender is queered by her claims to agency through sex work and class, poor mothering skills, and sex life. We might see her murder as a collaborative effort between the New York police department and her lover Little Tino’s gang to regulate white femininity. In the context of Law & Order: Special Victims Unit’s televisual representations of feminism and sexual violence, white femininity
must be regulated in order to assure the audience and advertisers that the familiar junkie sex worker is not a sympathetic character. Although her death is gruesome, Ellie deserved what happened to her.

Reinforcing this hierarchy of grievability, the episode features collaborative efforts of law enforcement and the featured victim’s social network—friends, family, employees, and coworkers—to regulate the unruly and ultimately unassimilable femininities. One cannot help but be reminded by the image of Ellie’s charred corpse of the United States’ rich history of witch burning. In addition to the historicity of witch hunting, a tradition of televisual representations of witches is crucial in terms of those representations’ contribution to the broad definitions of witch. The multitude of examples of symbolic or fantasy witches and literal witches transform literal witches into referents for symbolic witches (read: faggots, dykes, and sluts). The tradition dating back to 17th century Europe, when witches first began to be burned atop flaming faggots is also important. It is no coincidence that the characters burned to death in the episodes I am addressing are queer.

Much hangs in the balance when the witch is an embedded metaphor for ill-behaved female bodies. Ultimately, the message is that inappropriate, and thus threatening, femininities are punishable by death. Death by fire is represented frequently police procedural crime dramas. The police procedural drama is a place where audiences learn to make sense of, and become educated about, the processes of law and order (Rapping, 2003; Nichols-Pethick, 2012). The destruction of queer bodies on a show with such a reputation for explaining and justifying hegemonic ideologies through law enforcement

2 Other female detective lead crime shows are saturated with fiery deaths. See Bones episode “Soccer Mom in the Mini-Van” (s3, e2), an episode that features the explosion of a former activist for an Earth Liberation Front type of group. See also The Closer “Pilot” (s1, e1), an episode that features a closeted trans man who is both murdered by his lover and misgendered by everyone who talks about him.
and the judicial system is notable, if not troubling. Although the issues these shows address may have liberatory messages, in this regard the destruction of queer bodies goes largely unreprimanded. The imperative to police white femininity in particular ways is crucial to my analysis, particularly in multiracial, multicultural New York and a U.S. empire where white femininity represents hegemonic, desired femininity. The regulation of white femininity has a trickle-down effect, gradually increasing the severity of regulation the further down the hierarchy it goes. When white women do not perform their femininity appropriately it seems that a uniquely gruesome level of violation to their bodies becomes necessary to set an example to those who have less racial, class, and gender privilege that the white cis gendered heterosexual woman. Televisual representations of this regulation naturalize violence against unruly and/or abject genders. They become ways to justify it, which further highlights the connection to historic and contemporary witch burnings and lynchings.

Whenever referring to characters on Law & Order: Special Victims Unit who have been sexually assaulted, I will use the term “victim” or “vic” instead of “survivor” or any other word that might be used to identify those who have been exposed to sexual violence. This is a conscious decision I make in order to keep my analysis continuous with the discourse Law & Order: Special Victims Unit engages. When I talk about people who are not characters on the television show and their experiences with sexual violence, I will use the term “survivor” or “person who has been raped/experienced sexual violence”. Through my language choices, I hope to reemphasize the titular squad of the show (special victims unit) and how that title lays bare that rather than seeing sexual violation as a social problem, the show is invested in the idea of sexual violence as an isolated incident.

In “Spring Awakening,” sex worker Ellie Porter’s unruly femininity is punished by her pimp Little Tino and his gang members. Her violations of white femininity are
characterized by her sexual and gender deviations. Ellie’s deviant sexual behavior centers around her relationship with her lover / pimp, Little Tino, who is a black Dominican immigrant and gang leader. He is the father of her child, the person who trafficked her into prostitution when she was a teenager, and one of two gang members who sought her assistance in the serial robberies and rapes of male European tourists to New York. Ellie’s deviant gender presentation is identifiable through her visual appearance, which is at best careless and at worst hideous. The writers of this episode construct her as a neglectful and ignorant mother who easily accepted that her infant son had died when he was in fact sold to two child pornographers. As a sex worker, her claims to agency frame her as ignorant of her own sexual oppression. She refuses rescue or assistance with her lot. While her sexuality is not clearly queer, her existence on the margins of social acceptability in terms of her chosen labor and her inability to perform her motherly duties has the potential for a queer reading. In order to elucidate what I believe to be Ellie’s undeniable queerness, I invoke the work of Cathy Cohen in her seminal piece “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?” Cohen’s definition of queer is by necessity an intersectional and social justice-focused one. By broadening the scope of queer interests, sensibility, and potential for political action, Cohen includes Ellie Porter’s particular identity intersections (interracial relationship, mixed-race child, sex worker, living in poverty) in a queer world of subjectivities worth fighting in defense of. I analyze Ellie’s story while working under the assumption that hidden metaphors of witch burning and appropriate white femininity are central to the effectiveness of the public murder of Ellie Porter and the demarcation of her queered body as abject. Her life is equally ungrievable to the Dominican gang who destroys her, the NYPD that finds her, and the audience who witnesses the narrative unfold.
First, a brief synopsis of the episode. Ellie Porter, a white woman and sex worker in her early or mid twenties, is arrested by officers in the special victims unit for being accomplice to a series of robberies and sexual assaults of European tourists. Little Tino, the gang leader with whom she teamed up to commit these robberies and sexual assaults, is a hot commodity for the Special Victims Unit and could be the key to cracking a child sex ring case spanning several episodes. Detective Olivia Benson tries every tactic she knows to coerce Ellie to testify against Little Tino: slut shaming, threatening jail time, and a painful withdrawal intravenous drug, and finally kindness and maternal nurturing. Despite this gauntlet of interrogation, Ellie refuses to testify against him, explaining that he loves her, is good to her, and that he is her family. She is apparently satisfied with her life and is very articulate in rejecting Detective Benson’s insistence that she is a pathetic victim of Little Tino’s exploitation of her body. She refuses until Benson reveals to Ellie that her (Ellie’s) infant son (Noah) is alive and in police custody. Ellie anxiously tells Benson that Tino told her Noah was dead. Suddenly her attitude changes and she agrees to go to court and put Tino in jail in exchange for custody of her son. After this revelation, the plot moves quickly, showing Ellie’s relocation to a safe house until her testimony the following morning.

Bolstering historical notions about racialized sexual depravity, Law & Order: Special Victims Unit portrays Ellie and Little Tino as manipulative rapists from the opening scene of the episode. The robbery / rape tag team is set up as follows: Ellie responds to a Craigslist contact looking for a sex worker to come to their hotel room. She specifically targets foreign tourists, and upon entry to her client’s hotel room she leaves the door unlocked so Tino can let himself in and rape the man. Meanwhile Ellie plays innocent until Tino directs her to grab their target’s passport and wallet. As a rapist, Tino’s already deviant sexuality—interracial, transactional, the lover of at least one of his sex workers—
is rendered as further sub-human. His body is demonically queered through the processes shown in the episode, and this only contributes further to the justification of Ellie’s demise. Importantly, Tino is never arrested, or punished in any way, for any of his violent crimes, especially not Ellie’s gang rape and murder. The Special Victims Unit’s inaction in the resolution of her murder gives the impression that Tino is performing his abject gender and sexuality appropriately and so requires little regulation from the squad.

Ellie’s seduction and manipulation parallels traditional representations of witches in U.S. literature and television. In particular, I am referencing Marion Gibson’s discussion of Arthur Miller’s The Crucible and Thorne Smith’s The Passionate Witch. In her article “Retelling Salem Stories: Gender Politics and Witches in American Culture,” Gibson details the particular type of witch-naming misogyny that these two novels enact: bewitchment of men in order to deprive them of their virility, to steal their male-ness and masculine power. Like a witch, Ellie manipulates her clients to set them up for penetrative rape, the ultimate symbolic and literal act of emasculation and disempowerment. It could only be an unassimilable witch who so disobediently deviates from her socially expected behavior through a life of crime and commodification of her sexuality, the unscrupulous reduction to its transactional component. Representations of women committing crime and participating in their own sexual commodification are indeed two of the major veins through which sociologist Edwin M. Schur deconstructs the social controls necessary to labeling women deviant. It is the very claim to agency in the economic sexual transaction that disrupts the patriarchal controls of femininity.

If perhaps she had been a madam or procurer who did not engage in intercourse for money, then her inability to re-assimilate into society would have been one-dimensional and she may in fact have had an opportunity at redemption. But because she had sex with those whom she ought not to have in addition to her failure to meet the expectations of
gender standards (in appearance and behavior) for a white woman who is also a mother, her femininity is rendered abject in absolute. Ellie Porter’s sexual practices and gender transgression give a round image of her embodied debasement and ungrievability. In contrast, the other sex workers featured in the episode evoke no such imperative for rescue or regulation. This is because all of the other sex workers are women of color and, as I suggested early while discussing the discursive queering of Little Tino’s body through homosexual rape, are behaving appropriately. They require no discipline, they are perfectly in their place as abject, always already queered bodies.

Ellie’s visual gender presentation takes three forms throughout the episode: abject street walker, desperate drug addicted single mother who seeks redemption, and charred corpse. When she first appears in the episode, she looks like she was created from a costume in wardrobe with a sign reading, “heartless tweaker hooker”—her ensemble is very stereotypical of televisual representations of sex workers. Her hair is clean but not combed, her emaciated body is emphasized by ill-fitting club clothes: fuschia deep v-neck crop top, animal print mini skirt. The skin on her face is blotchy, bruised, and bloated. She maintains this look until the middle of her interrogation by Detective Benson. Ellie’s image changes upon learning that her son Noah is alive and in police custody. It shifts from this previous form of abjection to a gentler more maternal form. She is seen wearing a large warm jacket, her facial features have noticeably softened, and she is making an effort to care for herself by eating and drinking. Her transition to a caring mother is sustained throughout the episode until she is deposited at the safe house to be kept until she testifies. At the safe house, her hair is neatly combed and pulled back in a stylish ponytail and she wears a beige cord sweater and fleece pants while drinking tea and discussing with Detective Benson the plan of action for testifying the next morning. One asks oneself, “Has she been a Greenwich Village yoga instructor all this time?” This is a remarkable change,
considering just a few moments earlier in the episode her face looked like it was about to cave in on itself in an implosion of rebellion against the police and drug withdrawal. This process indicates, through visual cues, Ellie’s potential for redemption. That she is able to perform an appropriate white femininity makes her redeemable in ways that neither the women of color who do sex work with Ellie nor Little Tino can. Her affect, her behavior, and the shift in Benson’s treatment of her reveal as much about which kind(s) of bodies are ungrievable as they do about what it takes to transform Ellie into a redeemable subject. As Schur explains that “women’s ‘looks’ thereby become a commodity and a key determinant of their ‘success’ or ‘failure’…” (69). Judging by the third look Ellie works in the episode (charred corpse realness), one can only judge that her “looks” failed her.

The last time the audience and Detective Benson see Ellie alive is in the safe house, drinking tea, looking clean, and calmly preparing to testify against Little Tino. Benson and her unit neglect the issue of Ellie’s impending withdrawal from drugs, failing to safeguard against or even anticipate her escape from the safe house to cop narcotics up the block. While Ellie is out looking for drugs, Little Tino and other members of his gang kidnap her, take her under a bridge where many drug dealers, homeless people, and sex workers regularly hang out alone or in groups. There, she is gang raped, tortured, set on fire, and left for dead. Detective Olivia Benson finds her charred corpse, her gaze upon Ellie’s body becomes the audience’s, and the punishment for sexual and gender transgression is revealed in the graphic image of Ellie’s carbonized face and chest. Ostensibly, the message intended by the writers is that Little Tino and his gang members are terrible monsters that hurt white women when they agree to testify against the gang. However, my reading is different: in a way not dissimilar from Detective Benson during her interrogation of Ellie, the Dominican gang does the work of regulating her unruly femininity. As a sex worker managed by the gang, she is expected to be loyal to her pimp, quieted by the dope, and
most of all fearful, not trusting of the police. Little Tino and his gang have performed a corrective punishment that Benson hinted at but could never do on her own. Ellie’s demise reinforces the show’s message that police are noble and trustworthy--black men remain violent monsters.

How does Ellie Porter violate the standards of appropriate sexual behavior in terms of white femininity? To begin with, her willing involvement in the sex work and gang activity of Little Tino’s crew is in direct defiance of the “myth of the black rapist,” written about by Angela Y. Davis as a socially institutionalized and deeply embedded stereotype of black men’s animalistic lust for and violence against white women. Davis demolishes the logic behind the notoriously fatal racist myth by reassembling socio-historical contexts of white femininity and black masculinity. As much as the hegemony of Law & Order: Special Victims Unit’s New York wants Little Tino’s status as rapist to remain cut and dry, Ellie’s ruptures in stereotype create tension that makes space for a potential of humanness in Little Tino’s person as well as Ellie’s own agency to engage in a romantic relationship with Little Tino. Not only does her defiance fall in direct opposition to traditional demonizing stereotypes of black men but also continues historical characterizations of witches as sexual deviants. She ecstatically lays down with Satan himself (Little Tino) in exchange for whatever powers or social protections might be offered to her—drugs, just enough money to live, a community of other sex workers, and reliable housing. In his book Demon Lover, Walter Stephens details the metaphysical misogyny of the Malleus Maleficarum, which is a body of texts defining and theorizing feminized witchcraft. The institution of white women’s vulnerability is as important as the witch’s claim to agency when laying down with the devil. While the powers and protections offered to Ellie in exchange for her sexual labor might not be detailed beyond a steady supply of narcotics, I wish to highlight her persistence that her life is the way it is because of her own choices,
not because she was coerced by Little Tino. Televisual representations of sex workers must always portray them as victims lacking agency, desperate to be rescued and restored to appropriate femininity. The denigration of the agency of sex workers occurs simultaneously as the lauding of women who “marry up” or engage in any other type of indirect transaction of sex and money. These middle and upper class relationships possess commodified and transaction qualities. The denigration of the sex worker hearkens back to the inherent exploitative nature of “power feminism” and who and what qualifies as both “power” and “feminism” in mainstream representations. Further, if a woman chooses to commodify her sex, then she is outside state and patriarchal control. She is a threat to the efficacy and predictability of patriarchal capitalist hegemony. Her transactional sex is outside the limits of bourgeoisie exchange and therefore rendered unfamiliar, unnatural, queer. It is during Detective Benson’s interrogation of Ellie that Ellie’s maleficence is made plain: she chooses darkness. And in so choosing, a woman who may have once had access to racialized privilege is transformed into a perpetrator of base violence and sexual perversion.

Special attention is warranted to the link between Ellie Porter’s inability to fulfill her motherly duties and historical allegations of infanticide against witches. Walter Stephens historicizes the folklore and later witchcraft theorization of witches’ infanticidal practices, reiterating what many already understand of the folkloric witch: “Witches are cannibals, and their favorite food is children, as Hansel and Gretel [and the victims of Baba Yaga] found out” (241). The numerous images of witches carrying off babies into the night and folklore about protecting the children of a town or village are common. In Ellie’s case, she simply allowed her son to die, or at least to undramatically accept that he has died. The bridge between Ellie’s gender presentation as a mother and her body’s availability for corporal punishment in the same style as the sexual and gender outlaw witches of colonial
America is located within Detective Benson’s construction of Ellie during interrogation as a callous manipulator who will not be able to care for her own child even if she should at some point be granted custody of him. “If a woman does not openly demonstrate stereotypically ‘feminine’ qualities—warmth, nurturance, supportiveness, and so on—she is likely to be defined as … ‘calculating,’ ‘manipulative’…” (Schur, 55). While neglect and infanticide are not exactly the same activities, the overlap here is great enough to draw a comparison between Ellie’s construction of inappropriate femininity by *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* and the violations of womanhood committed by a witch, particularly since she is publicly punished.

Little Tino and his gang’s actions mesh with Detective Benson’s (and thus the entire police unit’s) espousal of hegemonic ideas about appropriate or unruly white femininity. Even though Little Tino never tries to get Ellie to act “lady-like,” he and his cronies’ reactive rape, torture, and murder of her is an effective regulation of women who are already involved in gang activity or sex work as well as women who may deviate from an acceptable performance of white femininity. Little Tino and his gang inadvertently do the work of the state, aligning them more with hegemonic patriarchal and carceral projects than with subversion. Ellie’s body is queered through her claims to agency in sex work, through her inability to fit the description of a caring mother, through her unfeminine visual presentation, and through her sexual involvement with men of color. *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*’s demonstration of her unassimilability, resolved through her murder and uncommonly graphic depiction of her corpse, mirrors the public displays of witch hunts from colonial American history. Ellie is looked to as an example of what white women should not be and how they should not act. The regulation of white women’s bodies have grave stakes, positioning racialized and queered bodies in subordinate relation to white femininity. This way, subjects are contained neatly by category: this is how white women
act, this is how Latina women act, this is how black men act. When one behaves unpredictably, or outside the bounds of their social containment, the whole system is at risk. The bodies of those white women who deviate from their prescribed roles must be destroyed in order to keep the hierarchy of violence and social priority so necessary to the smooth operation of current social conditions in tact. Through my analysis of this episode, I hope to have demonstrated the direct link between the feminist discourse produced within *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* and the social imperative of gender regulation.

*Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* is a problematic program. The show has a reputation for its feminist anti-rape agenda. But, after a closer interrogation of “Spring Awakening” I find certain people are sacrificed in service of this agenda. *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* promotes racist, misogynist, homophobic social hegemony by imagining fatal consequences of gender, sexual, and racial deviation. “Spring Awakening” centers around the graphic depiction of Ellie Porter’s charred corpse. This image is the threat the show makes against willful sex workers who dare to mix race. The normalization of corrective punishment such as this recalls historical and current witch hunts, metaphorical and literal. Degrading white femininity for this purpose is indicative of the promise of punishment for people of color whose genders are always already unruly. The stakes of such contradictory feminist messaging are very high. As I have shown, *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* performs a function of Foucauldian governmentality through its truncated feminism. It reiterates messages of biopolitical priority as well as the resulting hierarchy of grievability. Queer fans of *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* bring a critical reading necessary to reconciling these contradictions in order to find the possibility for a reimagining of their own sexual violence.
**TRAUMA-INSPIRED PLEASURES**

Scene: A dive bar filled with freaky queers milling about. Legendary dyke punk band Tribe 8 reunited briefly to accept a local queer arts fest’s version of a lifetime achievement award, playing a not-so-secret show. After being written about by such queer theorists as Ann Cvetkovich and Jack Halberstam, Tribe 8 draws a certain academic crowd at this point, and I dare say I fit the scene. While there were tons of elder punk dykes present, the younger intellectual crew was there, still punk, still nasty, still fucking on the bathroom floor of the bar. Yes, it felt like something similar to home. Thrilled at this notion, I went to the venue alone, hoping to run into acquaintances who lived in town and whom I had not yet seen since my move to Austin. There was one friend which I was particularly excited to connect with and when I saw her at the bar I stood nearby and waited for a break in the conversation. I had been in college in Chicago with her and identified her as a landmark influence on my burgeoning expressions of queerness. Intimidated but persistent, I waited patiently until I heard her utter three syllables to her friend, after which I could wait no more.

“Did you just say SVU?!” I asked, almost screaming with glee.

“Oh my god, yes! Do you watch it?”

“Hell yes! I moved to Austin to go to grad school to write about it!”

And so, in addition to an unexpectedly enthusiastic rekindling of friendship, my personal associations with the pleasures and disappointments of *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* blossomed into community, or at least the awareness of one. I learned my friend had plans of making a video where all the characters were Detective (now Lieutenant) Olivia Benson, played by friends who would invariably be butches, soft butches, femmes, pillow queens, size queens, or femme presenting faggots, going from one
to another gently pushing stray hair behind ears and offering comfort as though one were Olivia Benson and the other were a victim on *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*.

It was clear to me that the aesthetic of the video would be campy beyond reproach, as it certainly would need to be considering the typical content of an episode of *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*. The narrative of the fan video would depict a hate crime and all the actors would have an opportunity to play themselves as high school aged characters victimized by racist and homophobic acts that represented, or reenacted, events of their lived experiences. Except in this video, Olivia would be there to save them whereas often there was no one to save or protect us from the violences we were subjected to. This is the feature of *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* and other police procedural dramas that handle cases of sexual violence that comes up repeatedly in scholarship, informal intellectualism, and fan community conversations. On its own, *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* offers an opportunity to witness a state-produced resolution to an act of gendered or sexual violence on someone we can identify with.

How did my friend meet all these queer *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* fans, I wondered. The answer was easy: she and some friends had gotten in the habit of binge watching it on Netflix. This community was not built intentionally but rather organically, around relationships that already existed and a program that has a notorious reputation of relentlessly depicting gruesome sexual violence each week and the promise of a tight, unrealistically optimistic, solution and a new “ripped-from-the-headlines” atrocity in every episode.

Arguments have been made criticizing the exploitative nature of *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*’s repetitive depictions of violence. In her book *Watching Rape*, TV scholar Sarah Projansky theorizes the consequences of regularly consuming fictionalized sexual violence and arrives at the conclusion that exposure to televisual and filmic
representations of sexual violence reifies sexual violence into the fabric of our lives, weaving it in so tightly that we cease to notice the subtleties of rape culture. However, by assuming that viewing a moving image is a passive action, Projansky’s conclusion forecloses the possibility of thoughtful, transformative consumption of such representations, erasing the engagement and activity involved in consuming media in the first place. Viewers of Law & Order: Special Victims Unit are not blind to these exploitative moments on the show. Indeed, there was a considerable amount of backlash to a Law & Order: Special Victims Unit episode titled “My Funny Valentine” (s14, e16) which came four years after pop singer Rihanna was hospitalized for injuries related to an attack by her then-boyfriend Chris Brown. The main criticism against the episode was that the character that is read as Rihanna is eventually murdered by her boyfriend. Of course, this was a speculation by the public at the time that these headlines dominated celebrity news. Viewers were outraged by the conclusion of the episode, expressing disgust in the decision to conclude the episode with her murder. Viewers wanted to see the character live, not resign her to the fate allotted her. Projansky’s argument cautions against and analyzes the normalization of rape culture located in media representations of sexual violence, but how does this argument account for the active engagement of fans of Law & Order: Special Victims Unit with this (and other) episodes? Some TV critics, like Emily Nussbaum, critique the problematics of the show in this context while including their admission that watching Law & Order: Special Victims Unit is a pleasure, however often that pleasure might be a “guilty” one.

For folks who belong to minoritarian communities and who have endured a spectrum of chronic sexual violence, there is an opportunity to find a redemptive pleasure in watching Law & Order: Special Victims Unit despite the problematics and the possible social consequences of repetitive exposure to representations of sexual violence. Scholars,
feminist and ambivalent alike, have pointed out that the pleasure in police procedural dramatic television lies in the achievement of the unlikely resolution to cases (Nichols-Pethick; Cuklanz & Moorti). Particularly in regard to Law & Order: Special Victims Unit, the moral economy between fan and show is one that fosters an expectation and a sense of trust that the perpetrator will be brought to justice. In the context of an archive replete with evidence of racialized and sexualized police brutality, one might consider it unthinkable that people who are targeted by both civilian and police violence—overlapping populations of people of color, trans people, feminine-/ized, and queer people—could be convinced to trust the goodwill of a NYPD special victims squad. However illogical it may seem on the surface, these viewers of Law & Order: Special Victims Unit do exist, and they possess critical responses to each episode they watch. While an ethnographic study of Law & Order: Special Victims Unit's queer fans and queer fan communities is far outside the scope of this project, my arguments rest firmly on the assumption and experience that such fans and communities exist.

Detective Olivia Benson performs an ambiguous lesbian-leaning identity in terms of fashion, comportment, call of duty, and personal lifestyle. Law & Order: Special Victims Unit compels fans of all ages, sexualities, and gender identities to closely follow the program, build online fan communities, and produce copious amount of fan art and fan fiction. Despite all this evidence of the show’s virtue, two common responses to my research interests come up repeatedly. One response condemns the pleasure found in watching the show as perverse and oddly violent, while the other expresses shame of that pleasure. In a talk given by Lisa Duggan in February 2016 at the University of Texas at Austin, she casually remarked that, for her, watching Law & Order: Special Victims Unit was “shameful”, and went on to compare it to her perverse pleasure of watching Donald Trump’s presidential campaign. I can only speculate she meant that the two are similar
because of their dramatically excessive gestures of violence. Fortunately, Eve Sedgwick has some insight into queer shame:

“Why might ‘Shame on you’ be a useful utterance from which to begin imagining queer performativity? Appearances are strongly against it, I admit. What’s the point of accentuating the negative, of beginning with stigma, and for that matter a form of stigma—‘Shame on you’—so unsanitizably redolent of that long Babylonian exile known as queer childhood? But note that this is just what the word queer itself does, too: the main reason why the self-application of ‘queer’ by activists has proven so volatile is that there’s no way that any amount of affirmative reclamation is going to succeed in detaching the word from its associations with shame and with the terrifying powerlessness of gender-dissonant or otherwise stigmatized childhood. If queer is a politically potent term, which it is, that’s because, far from being capable of being detached from the childhood scene of shame, it cleaves to that scene as a near-inexhaustible source of transformational energy. There’s a strong sense, I think, in which the subtitle of any truly queer (perhaps as opposed to gay?) politics will be the same as the one Erving Goffman gave to his book Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity. But more than its management: its experimental, creative, performative force” (4).

“Shame floods into being as moment, a disruptive moment, in a circuit of identity-constituting communication” (5).

In a way, Sedgwick explains what is happening when Lisa Duggan or anyone else expresses shame or guilt about enjoying watching Law & Order: Special Victims Unit. The queerness is located in the way the show is being watched, or at least the person expressing
shame is performing that shame as a way to prove their oppositional reading of the show. Further, in these quotes she explains that the experience and performance of shame are indeed forms of repetition of the root experience that authorized the shame initially. Queer BDSM scholar Robin Bauer theorizes the experience of shame as intimacy. This idea suggests a new layer of the possibility of the intimacy of a shared experience of past sexual trauma to the “guilty pleasure” of watching *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*.

So, why would anyone watch that garbage? Why, indeed! Amongst the fans of *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* are often survivors of sexual violence, and some of them are fans because they are survivors of violence. There is something in *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* that positively interpellates the queer survivors of sexual trauma whom I talk about. The shame likely comes from the notion that, as queers, we must reject all cultural productions associated with the promotion of status quo, particularly profit seeking endeavors that on the surface appear to exploit sexual violence for financial gain.

Violence is a factor in the emergence of queer identities and sensibilities--precarious and vulnerable subjectivities endowed with shame for their inherent wrongness. In this portion of my document, I refer frequently to a broad range of sexual violence as defined by Liz Kelly in her article "The Continuum of Sexual Violence". Kelly cites *The Oxford English Dictionary* to explain the usefulness and truth in the concept of the continuum of sexual violence, because the testimony to acts of sexual violence in the lives of those people who chronically endure it (LQBTQ+ folks and women generally) gives shape to “a continuous series of elements or events that pass into one another and cannot readily be distinguished” (48). Kelly’s point is that every woman experiences sexual violence throughout her entire life and those experiences of sexual violence can fall anywhere on the continuum: street harassment, rape, child molestation, stalking, and sexual harassment at work to name just a few examples. The racist, misogynist, homophobic
conditions of society may make some of us queer or queerer, and if nothing else it punishes us from an early age for signs of legibly queer affect. Studies and speculations about the capacity for empathy and understanding around the issues of sexual violence and the relationship it may have with Law & Order: Special Victims Unit are particularly interesting to me, since such speculation presupposes that viewers of Law & Order: Special Victims Unit have no prior experiences of sexual violence.

**A Queer Continuum of Sexual Violence**

As Kelly describes, sexual violence is experienced in a variety of ways, all of which produce their own set of complex affects:

“Nor should the term continuum be interpreted as a statement about seriousness either at the time or over time. Marie Leidig (1981), the only other writer to suggest using the concept of a continuum, in relation to sexual violence, uses seriousness as the basis of her analysis. She argues that those forms of violence which she places at the extreme end of her continuum—domestic violence and incest—are necessarily more serious and, therefore, have greater negative effects. But the impact of sexual violence on women is a complex matter. With the important exception of incidents of sexual violence which result in death, the effects on women cannot be read off simplistically from the form of sexual violence women experience. How women react to and define their experiences at the time and how they cope with them over time differs and a complex range of factors affect the impact of particular experiences [...]” (49).

This argument is key: to privilege one experience of sexual violence over another is the perfect way to undermine a feminist critique of chronic patriarchal abuse. Further, it
justifies the division of survivors so as to compel psychic competition rather than collaboration. While conceptualizing a community of people with the characteristic of having a shared experience with completely unique qualities and affects, it is critical to honor the unique sets of affects a survivor of violence might experience over the course of the rest of their lives, as well as the certainty that other types of sexual violence will continue to be survived by those people targeted, is crucial. Further still, Kelly’s model illustrates the material strategies and consequences of imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchal hegemony. I wish to extrapolate those more general claims of the relationship between sexual violence and queerness to help in the exploration of my thesis. It is a sticky situation to both group survivors of sexual violence and simultaneously acknowledges their very material differences, but yet and still I am trying to do that. Those targeted for violence to uphold the status quo are subjected to a chronic sexual violence so relentless that much of this violence becomes quotidian, with survivors accustomed to the day-to-day spectrum of abuse by a society that has no use for them other than to uphold them as examples of how not to be.

Sadly, Kelly neglects to expand her model to include those populations I am focused on. However, the continuum of sexual violence is not limited to middle class heterosexual cis-gendered white women, although these were the only people included in her original study. In their comprehensive study of racist, homophobic, religious, transphobic, and ablist motivated hate crimes, Neil Chakraborti and Jon Garland (criminologist and sociologist, respectively) use Kelly’s work to illuminate the violence endured by a much broader range of targets: people of color, religious minorities, LGBTQ+ people, and people with disabilities:

“Kelly’s (1987) assertion that victims of sexual violence experience a ‘continuum of violence’, which has been so influential in the context of
discussing racist harassment, for example, can also be adapted and applied to the types of [...] victimisation highlighted here. As we saw, all of the groups of victims referred to in this chapter face the risk of potential victimisation on an everyday basis. And, like the recognised victim groups, the ones discussed in this chapter often present an easily identifiable, and perhaps ‘soft’, target, for those hostile towards them. Some of them – for example, sex workers and the homeless – regularly find themselves in very vulnerable situations, prone to assault and harassment. Indeed, the intersection of different aspects of identities evident within these groups on the ‘margins’ – androgynous goths or transgender sex workers, for example [or indeed androgynous goth transgender sex workers of color]—makes them more susceptible to targeted harassment [...]” (100).

We must honor the differences among a group of people with a shared experience, and simultaneously acknowledge the compounded potential for continued and multifaceted violence in the future. Chakraborti and Garland importantly extrapolate the useful portions of Kelly’s work to help us understand the equal-opportunity nature of compulsions to hateful violence.

When does the sexual violence begin, before or after the queerness? Those who do not benefit from hegemonic structures, and who by virtue of existing challenge those structures, are thus unnatural, unfamiliar, and queer to those systems. The current status of socio-economic hierarchies produces queer subjects, both by comparison to the hegemonic norm as well as through pervasive forms of sexual violence that span a range of characteristics including, but not limited to: correction, punishment, and patriarchal convenience.
Queer Critical Cultural Reading

Recently, the University of Washington released a study claiming that regular viewers of prime time crime dramas have a more sophisticated understanding of consent and sexual violence. The study featured a questionnaire completed by roughly 500 undergraduate students. The data set pulled from these surveys indicated a strong correlation between regular watching of police dramas and the rejection of rape myths suggesting the mendacity of survivors of violence and the fault of the survivor based on sartorial comportment or intoxication. They found that students who watched more of this type of television programming tended to trust bystanders to intervene on their behalf to prevent an assault and likewise tended to express confidence if faced with a situation in which they were themselves bystanders to a potential sexual assault. Further, as part of the conclusion of the data analysis, the authors assert that surely the specific show being watched, and the representations of violence in that show, would produce more nuanced results. The suggestion of the study is that viewers of Law & Order: Special Victims Unit specifically have a more advanced understanding and empathy for survivors of sexual violence than do viewers of other police procedural shows (citing explicitly the CSI franchise). Afield of the UW sociological study, television studies scholar Carlen Lavigne elaborates on the unfeminist and victim blaming strategies that occur regularly in the episodes of the CSI franchise in an article exploring the political stakes of episodes that “consistently associate women, queer cultures, and sexual subcultures with shallow stereotypes, negativity, and death” (Lavigne, 383). The study’s conclusion suggests that another investigation be performed to determine whether or not that secondary hypothesis can be substantiated. I wonder whether or not their speculation is influenced by more than just the reputation of the program’s content. It may be that the empathy and comprehension highlighted in UW’s study is less a result of the content of Law & Order: Special Victims
Unit and more a result of the positionality of these viewers as survivors of sexual trauma a priori to the pleasure of watching the show. Obviously, they are watching because something about the show attracts them. The queer fans of *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* have a sophisticated understanding of sexual violence, but not because *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* taught them to empathize with people who have been sexually assaulted. I think it is more likely because they have experienced this variety of sexual violences throughout our lives and some survivors already possess the capacity to empathize.

**The Joyful Hargitay Foundation**

*Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* began airing fall 1999, and in 2004 Mariska Hargitay, who has starred as Detective Olivia Benson since the show’s inception, founded an anti-rape organization called The Joyful Heart Foundation, an organization that engages public conversation about domestic abuse and sexual violence. The mission of the organization is centered around the vision of “a community with no sexual assault, domestic violence and child abuse.” While the website’s content developers clearly made it a priority to steer clear of overt feminist rhetoric, the message remains explicitly anti-violence and critical of police force practice and policy, and thus implicitly anti-patriarchal. The three major tenants that shape the programming for The Joyful Heart Foundation are “healing & wellness,” “policy & advocacy,” and “education & awareness.” The organization certainly has problematic points upon which one can deliver strong racial and class critique, including a mirror image of the valorization of security and carceral state violence, in addition to social critique of the nonprofit industrial complex. But the fact remains: endthebacklog.org, Heal the Healers, and the slew of The Joyful Heart Foundation’s other organizational trainings for lawyers, police officers, and community
organization members have made significant impact on the organizations that perform what Patricia Yancey Martin terms “rape work” in her book by the same name. On page 18 of The Joyful Heart Foundation’s 2012-2013 annual report, the organization reports that 917 rape kits in the Detroit PD’s backlog were tested, “leading to the discovery of 46 serial rapists and linking to crimes committed in twelve additional states and the District of Columbia.” This detail is included as a victory in the annual report, ostensibly meant to convince investors to continue or increase support. However, the statement still shows the JHF’s adherence to carceral justice and the multiple violences that follow incarceration.

One particularly high profile Joyful Heart Foundation project is the NO MORE/NO MAS3 project, which has frequent domestic abuse awareness-raising campaigns. These campaigns span a large range of forms and are always endorsed by celebrities. One campaign features emailed letters to The Joyful Heart Foundation’s email subscribers from celebrities detailing their experiences with domestic violence4. Another annual campaign is the foundation’s purchase of commercial airtime during the Superbowl. This purchasing power is evidence of The Joyful Heart Foundation’s ample funding. The project is so well supported that the ads aired in the commercial slots immediately preceding the 2015 Superbowl halftime show. This is an unprecedented phenomenon, particularly since it is

3 According to nomore.org, “NO MORE is a unifying symbol and campaign to raise public awareness and engage bystanders around ending domestic violence and sexual assault.” Among the campaign’s committee members are representatives from such big name organizations as the Avon Foundation for Women, Kaiser Permanente, Kimberly-Clark, Mary Kay Inc., The Allstate Foundation, and of course The Joyful Heart Foundation.

4 It is fascinating that the relationship between Hargitay’s activist / charitable work has such a multitude of connections and layers. For example, Dave Navarro, former guitarist of the Red Hot Chili Peppers, who was cast as the sound engineer who witnessed the beating of the Rihanna character in “My Funny Valentine”, was featured in a letter writing campaign. His letter detailed his own childhood experiences of witnessing domestic abuse between his parents, sharing his trauma as a way to raise awareness about the issue.
not a government funded public service announcement campaign. The impact of the NO MORE campaign, another pet project of JHF, has been exceptionally active in raising awareness of sexual violence and domestic abuse all over the U.S. In light of the recent exposés of NFL players domestic violence, these commercials proved to be particularly poignant.

The idea that *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* teaches its fans to cultivate their empathy and sophisticated understanding of consent and sexual violence is disrupted by the origin story of Hargitay’s Joyful Heart Foundation. According to the Joyful Heart Foundation’s website:

“But what really opened her eyes—and subsequently, her heart—was the fan mail she received. The letters didn’t say, ‘I love your show. Can you send me an autographed picture?’ They said, ‘I was raped when I was fifteen. I’m forty now and I’ve never told anyone.’ Survivors were disclosing their stories to her, many for the first time.

The fact that these individuals were revealing something so personal to someone they knew only as a character on television demonstrated to Mariska, and to all of us, how desperate they were to be heard, believed, supported and healed.”

In a 2013 *Variety* article, Randee Dawn quotes a comment Hargitay made in reference to these confessional fan letters: “I sometimes get confused myself; I spend so much time as an actor and advocate, and they are interwoven … These girls are looking for someone to look up to. Olivia is empowered, and they aspire to be like that. They say, ‘I wish Olivia was my mother. Then she could have protected me.’” That her observation echoes the sentiment of the anecdote introducing this chapter is no surprise.
CONCLUSION

Law & Order: Special Victims Unit is more complicated than it seems at first glance. More than degrading certain femininities, as I discussed earlier, Law & Order: Special Victims Unit also supplies a new story for those viewers who have survived sexual violence. Survivors of violence choose to watch Law & Order: Special Victims Unit intentionally, precisely because of the images of sexual violence depicted on the show. These same images are criticized by television scholars and lauded by no one. However, the queer viewers of Law & Order: Special Victims Unit whom I have discussed and theorized are inspired by these depictions. Meanwhile some queer viewers often take a guilty pleasure in their viewership and fandom of the show, and that seems to be due to the association of a prime time NBC drama with racist heteropatriarchy. It is conceivable that a queer person would experience shame if they were seen as potential colluders with racist, misogynist, homophobic hegemony. That shame does not foreclose the pleasure found in Law & Order: Special Victims Unit, though. The pleasure found by queer viewers of the show can be identified as a form of repetition with a difference. This is a queer mode of coping with trauma and emerges in other ways too: through the creation of video art, punk music, and BDSM sexual practices. Law & Order: Special Victims Unit offers a prime time opportunity to reimagine the chronic sexual violence many of us face.
References


