

**“Most of you are wondering who the heck I am”:**

***Carmilla* (2014-2016, online) as Digital Reimagining of LeFanu’s “Carmilla.”**

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Canadian web series *Carmilla* (2014-2016) is both an adaptation of Sheridan LeFanu’s 1872 novella and a successful transmedia production in its own right. The web series consists of three 36-episode seasons, with one Christmas special and a 12-episode season zero, accumulating around 70 million YouTube views by 2017. It has been translated into 20 languages and found an audience in 193 countries. In October 2017, a movie was released, acting as a conclusion to the story. The series was created by Jordan Hall, Steph Ouaknine and Jay Bennett and was initially available on the YouTube channel of Vervegirl, which became KindaTV in 2016. As a low-budget web series, *Carmilla* indicates how TV horror evolves and innovates by reimagining a Gothic text from the nineteenth century for a twenty-first century audience surrounded by digital technologies.

For those unfamiliar with the series, one fan on Tumblr offers a neat description highlighting features that make *Carmilla* a ‘niche’ production but one that satisfies its audience in ways that more mainstream television or visual media cannot, or does not:

who would have thought that my life would be consumed by a canadian web series on youtube thats funded by a tampons and pads company about a supernatural school where half the students are ginger and gay and a naïve provincial girl thats oblivious to her whipped lesbian vampire roommate yet here we are (praytothegay 21 April 2014)

This description—reposted many times by fans of the series—may seem to bear little resemblance to LeFanu’s novella, yet *Carmilla*’s first season sticks quite closely to the source text. Summarising Margaret Rose’s work on adaptation, Simon Dentith (2000) notes that she

highlights how “parody is especially strong in drawing attention to *the negotiations that are involved in reading a parody text, as the reader’s expectations are disrupted and adjustments are required*” (15; my emphasis). While I am not arguing that *Carmilla* the web series necessarily functions as parody, for a reader familiar with its source, similar expectations and adjustments are in play. LeFanu’s novella is set in Styria (Austria) where protagonist and narrator (for the majority of the story) Laura lives in a castle with her father and two governesses, her mother having died when she was young. Laura is starved of the companionship of her peers and therefore delighted when an accident nearby results in a young woman staying with them for a period, especially as this comes after an eagerly-anticipated visit from a friend has been cancelled. Laura’s relationship with the mysterious young woman, Carmilla, quickly becomes close, though it is not always comfortable. Soon after Carmilla’s arrival Laura becomes ill and weak. Eventually her father and some of his acquaintances decide that Carmilla is a vampire preying on Laura and other young women and they determine to stake her. The story ends with a report of this violent end to Laura’s friendship and Laura’s reflection that sometimes she imagines Carmilla’s footstep at her door.

In *Carmilla* the web series Laura is a first year student at Silas University and setting the series in present day North America inevitably results in adjustments. This chapter examines some of these, arguing that they challenge and subvert many of the gendered assumptions and hierarchies at work in literature, popular media, genre, and the media industry<sup>1</sup>. The series’ creative decisions are analysed in relation to shifts in popular serial narratives, Gothic and horror, TV production and reception, and the erosion of boundaries between mainstream and cult. Arguably both LeFanu’s novella and the web series are ‘niche’ texts with small, if loyal, audiences. Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* tends to overshadow “Carmilla” in terms of vampire fiction and mythology, and when one of *Carmilla*’s lead actors, Natasha

Negovanlis, received the Fan Choice Canadian Screen Award in 2017, she began her acceptance speech with the words I have used as the chapter title: “Most of you are wondering who the heck I am” (in Zimmerman 2017). Given that the designations Gothic and horror have also been considered niche in relation to more mainstream fiction or more prestigious works of literature, I make no apologies for focusing on a lesser-known text adapted into an even less-known series. In the first section of this chapter the web series’ representation of gender and sexuality designed to appeal to twenty-first century viewers is examined, while the second part of the chapter looks at elements of the series’ distribution and positioning in the market as low- or no-budget production<sup>2</sup> in relation to its (gendered) audience appeal.

### **A “whipped lesbian vampire roommate”: *Carmilla*, Gender, and Sexuality**

If the tropes of Gothic are updated and reimagined for modern audiences, traditional gendering of the genre is also subject to adaptation and adjustment, largely in terms of twenty-first century thinking about gender and sexual identities. For *Carmilla* the web series, this is facilitated by a relocation in time and place: expectations and assumptions about gender and sexuality in the storyworld are those of contemporary Western society. Of course, LeFanu’s novella both is and is not a typical Gothic in its representations and negotiations of gender. *Dracula* is generally seen as the “sire” of vampire fictions, though aficionados might observe that it was predated by several other vampire tales, most notably “Carmilla” and its female vampire. This means “Carmilla” is regularly positioned as countering the traditionally patriarchal tendencies of the vampire story. “Sheridan Le Fanu’s *Carmilla* is one of the major sources of films dealing with female vampires,” notes Sharon Russell, “especially those portraying lesbian relationships. Its story of the vampiric love between two women that lives on even after the death of the title character is often seen as a version which foregrounds

affection and passion” (1999, 28). Despite entrenched assumptions about the horror genre and who it is ‘for’, women have long been horror fans and “Carmilla” seems ready-made for adaptation: the web series certainly has a loyal fan following of “creampuffs”, as fans call themselves, adopting highly gender-conscious terms used by the character Carmilla in the web series. (Audience and audience address will be examined in the section below).

Traditional gender representations have been challenged by the boom in horror on TV, historically a domestic media and like much TV horror, *Carmilla* negotiates gender, identity, and queerness. As several scholars have noted, female protagonists have long been a staple of Gothic and horror. Horror, like fairy tales, “often [champion] protagonists who dare to disobey,” according to Sue Short (2006, ix) who draws attention to “horror’s focus on female outsiders and the traumas they experience” (2). The lonely and naïve orphaned heroine of Gothic tales where curiosity leads to trouble is just one model for such protagonists, and the Laura of LeFanu’s story certainly fits this description. She is motherless, raised by a loving but somewhat clueless father who appoints two governesses to try and make up for his daughter’s lack of companionship. When the languid and mysterious Carmilla appears on the scene, it is a dream come true for Laura who feels starved of female interaction on her own level and is soon lured into a dangerous intimacy with her new friend. It can be argued that LeFanu’s story is a cautionary tale about predatory lesbians, resolved by the re-establishment of conventional patriarchal norms. Yet LeFanu’s use of first person narrative framed by official (patriarchal) documents is open to queering, raising questions about the violence that is necessary to subdue unruly females like Carmilla, and failing in the end to quash Laura’s fond feelings for her companion.

Judith (now Jack) Halberstam has argued that the monsters of Gothic and horror serve to “make strange the categories of beauty, humanity and identity that we still cling to” (1995, 6) since “[w]ithin the traits that make a body monstrous—that is, frightening or ugly,

abnormal or disgusting—we may read the difference between an other and a self, a pervert and a normal person, a foreigner and a native” (8). In other words, the monster has tended to function as the negative of human (white, male, middle class, heterosexual, cisgendered). Halberstam thus argues that any tale where empathy for the monster is present “disrupts dominant culture’s representations of family, heterosexuality, ethnicity, and class politics” (23) and more recently Michelle Smith notes that “contemporary monsters are no longer necessarily imagined as racially different or set in opposition to the human. Moreover, they are often represented sympathetically, especially in stories told from their perspective” (2018). The web series’ versions of *Laura* and *Carmilla* enact this function, and the decision to adapt the narrative by surrounding them with almost exclusively female and non-binary characters foregrounds the queer nature of horror in ways that no longer lurk at the level of subtext. In this way, *Carmilla* extends the queer tendencies of Gothic, and also targets a niche audience by producing a distinctive take designed to engage and retain viewers in a competitive market that offers little mainstream queer-centred drama.

Initially, *Carmilla*’s updating and transpositioning to a university campus might seem to maintain a focus on female domestic space, familiar from earlier Gothic tales. Although the institution is in the public sphere, the restricted location of the camera and thus the action is effectively female domestic space—“everything happens in Laura’s dorm room,” as one of its creators, Jordan Hall, puts it (in O’Reagan 2014). Writing in the latter part of the twentieth century, Tania Modleski argued that because popular, mass-market female Gothic “novels so radically displace reality by putting the action in distant times and strange and ghostly lands, they are uniquely equipped to become a site for the displacement of repressed wishes and fears” (1996, 20). In this case, however, the familiar campus setting (recognisable even to those who have not attended a university) and the unfolding narrative invoke contemporary notions of campus rape culture (see the high-profile trial of “Stamford swimmer” Brock

Turner in 2016, for example), the era of #MeToo, and Everyday Sexism v. Why I don't need Feminism (social media posts beginning "I don't need feminism because...").

"Gothic," states Halberstam, "marks a peculiarly modern preoccupation with boundaries and their collapse... the monsters of modernity are characterized by their proximity to humans" (23). In *Carmilla*, at least some of the monsters *are* human (frat boys, demon worshippers, members of the Board of Governors) though others, notably vampire Carmilla, are indeed "characterized by their proximity to humans". Halberstam might thus categorise it as "postmodern Gothic" because it "warns us to be suspicious of monster hunters, monster makers, and above all, discourses invested in purity and innocence" (27). The language used here by Halberstam signals how social models fold together gender and morality to produce particularly gendered characteristics, foregrounded by the Gothic. In traditional Gothic stories (male) monsters prey upon innocent, pure (female) victims, reproducing and potentially reinforcing socially sanctioned gendered behaviour. As Modleski observes, the popular Gothic thus becomes a space for negotiating gender and can "testify to women's extreme discontent with the social and psychological processes which transform them into victims" (1996, 84). Likewise, discussing indie horror film *Teeth* (2007), Casey Ryan Kelly notes that it adopts the horror genre's "graphic displays of violence against women" and offers representations of "male monstrosity," but does so in order to provide "a meaningful connection between male sadism and fear of female sexuality" (2016, 99). In the #MeToo era, *Carmilla* avoids showing excessive violence against women, largely because of its fixed camera viewpoint, yet still connects the off-screen violence witnessed and described by its characters to what is often now referred to as toxic masculinity.

"Carmilla" has been adapted before, of course, most notably in various Hammer horror films from the early 1970s. Yet these versions tailored themselves to assumptions about the market for horror films by making their own adjustments. "Many critics have

acknowledged both *The Vampire Lovers*' relative faithfulness as an adaptation of *Carmilla* and the basic change that occurs because of its being reframed as the story told by a male vampire hunter rather than by Laura as in the Le Fanu tale," explains Russell. "The shift to a male perspective also facilitates the more pornographic aspects of the film where the interactions of the large-breasted female central characters, often in semi-nude states, are offered for men to watch" (28). The web series' return to Laura's perspective, literally and visually, re-centres the material on its female characters and their experience, while ensuring that they respond to threats—from everyday sexism to demons rising—with action and attitude. "We need to girl the hell up," Laura tells her friends as season one moves towards its major confrontation ("While You Weren't Watching" 1.18). This shift (or return) enables the story to regain its bite.

*Carmilla*'s characters certainly drive the story, given that most of the action necessarily happens off-screen, even though in this case story is also predetermined (to an extent) by the source. Today's viewers of 'quality' TV or complex serial drama are accustomed to and might well expect complex characters who develop and evolve over time and experience. In addition, the nature of the series' characters, as already noted, contests mainstream heterosexualisations of vampire romance such as the *Twilight* novel and film series, and (re)instates the queerness of Gothic, horror, and Weird texts. In fact, both serve to inform and reinforce the other. The centrality of female perspectives and experience, and the particular approach to representing queer identities, challenges the usual perception of margins and centre. As Lauren Chochinov observes, "*Carmilla* is a series that features characters that happen to be queer, but it is not *about* queer characters and by embracing that subtle, but important difference, the show manages to powerfully kick heteronormativity to the curb" (2015). The series' writers and creators certainly seem to be consciously taking this approach: "Having an almost exclusively female cast where everyone seems to be somewhere

on the LGBT spectrum is such a lovely thing, especially since the narrative acknowledges their attractions to each other without spotlighting or revolving around their sexualities” (O’Reagan 2014).

The ways *Carmilla* adopts and adapts the tropes of vampire-human romance are evident in the presentation of the relationship between Laura Hollis and Carmilla Karnstein, or “Hollstein,” as fans refer to them. Leaving aside their gender, the pair experience the usual highs and lows of vampire-human intimacy: the fact that Carmilla will not age and die while Laura will is ever in the background (and sometimes the foreground); Carmilla’s greater age and experience contrasts Laura’s youth and optimism; and, as is typical, the duration of the relationship normalises Carmilla’s vampirism, so that Laura wiping blood from her chin becomes something viewers find “cute”. As the series’ main characters, Hollstein are immensely popular and the relationship has provided the emotional rollercoaster ride for characters and viewers that might be expected from such a relationship in a complex serial narrative. Season one offered the love triangle typical of popular vampire romance (the Team Edward and Team Jacob of *Twilight*, for example), though the usual two male and one female components are here Laura, “roommate” Carmilla, and third year student/ Teaching Assistant Daniella, or Danny. Laura and Carmilla split up during season two (complete with break-up montage), and in season three Carmilla gets to meet Laura’s father and the couple are reunited. Following the novella’s first-person narrative, the web series’ focus on Laura effectively retains her as both main character and focal character, while giving her rather more to do (even if viewers don’t see all of it). Story editor Ellen Simpson talks about “Laura’s shift from a victim to a young woman with her own agency,” saying, “[w]e wanted to present a girl who had a great deal of self-confidence, but who maybe didn’t understand the world as well as she thought she does” (in Piccoli 2014). In other words, Laura is a Gothic heroine for the twenty-first century.



**“a canadian web series on youtube thats funded by a tampons and pads company”:** Market, Viewing, and Audience

In the ways outlined above, then, *Carmilla* foregrounds negotiations of gender and sexuality by playing with Gothic tropes and stereotypes (the seductive female vampire, the overbearing mother, the innocent victim). Clive Bloom argues that the Gothic “seemed to lend itself to feminism as an ideal vehicle for the notations of gender” (1998, 8) and this is amply demonstrated by *Carmilla*’s adjustments to (enhancements of?) the source material and play with expectations of all kinds. Gothic and horror tend to unsettle or destabilise the status quo, to play with pleasure and transgression within as well as without the text. Halberstam’s concept of the monster as boundary-crossing sympathetic subject has already been discussed, and the transgressive nature of characters and actions in Gothic and horror mean that audience position is also potentially fluid and transgressive. Peter Hutchings points out that in many stories, “the complexities of an audience’s response to horror... can involve mobile identification with a range of characters unlike oneself, cross-gender identification, identification with monsters, etc” (2004, 89). He concludes, “In this respect, horror, like many other areas of entertainment, functions as a potentially queer space for its audiences, one that offers illicit and transgressive (especially sexually transgressive) identifications and pleasures, if only ultimately to recuperate and contain these” (89). Clearly, one of the reasons fans consume horror is to wallow in its excesses—of behaviour, character, or spectacle—enjoying the treatment of taboo subjects like violence, sex, and death.

*Carmilla*, as adaptation in an innovative format, certainly transgresses with relish. As much recent contemporary horror indicates, the recuperation or containment mentioned by Hutchings as once required at the end of the story no longer rules the genre, even in the closed narratives of films or other stand-alone stories. Increasingly, this unsettling is evident

in serial TV horror. After all, as Milly Williamson points out, “Serialisation as a narrative form is unable to sustain the clear categorisation of the moral universe through the unambiguous depiction of good and evil. Serialised narrative produces shifting perspectives and extended middles that, as many feminists have noted in relation to soap opera, contribute to the moral complications that surround character” (2005, 48). LeFanu’s “Carmilla” plays with moral ambiguity throughout its tale, and the web series’ “extended middle” serves up many shifts of perspective about character and, concomitantly, morality. The gradual development of all the series’ characters and relationships is integral to how serial drama operates, and unsurprisingly the serial format was commented upon as *Carmilla* started to attract attention. Leading one *AfterEllen* list of “reasons why you should watch Carmilla now!” is “**It is perfect for bingewatching.** So far, *Carmilla* has 20 episodes waiting for you to discover. The episodes are long enough to get you invested, but short enough to leave you wanting more” (Piccoli 2014; emphasis in original). Arguably, this particular type of bingewatching is perfect for contemporary audiences: the average length of a YouTube video is around four and a half minutes, and media—especially social media—privileges soundbites, clips and teasers, leading to the common perception that attention spans are getting shorter.

With many short episodes (around 6-7 minutes each) making up a season, *Carmilla* indulges this supposed short attention span, while also offering cumulative extended narrative. The narrative, then, has to engage the audience very quickly for any given segment, so each episode must move the story along as well as enticing the viewer to watch the next, and the next, in order to acquire the ‘complete’ season narrative. This is partly achieved with an emphasis on character and character development, as discussed more fully later in this section, and partly by making a virtue out of necessity and showcasing creative low-budget production. Gothic imagines and inhabits many particular spaces—haunted houses,

crumbling castles, eerie enclosed spaces—and a prestige film production or big-budget blockbuster can capitalise on this, presenting lavish spectacle that sets the tone and atmosphere, as well as invoking the particular style and aesthetics of Gothic. While TV horror may have sometimes had to navigate this geography on a slightly smaller scale, it too is capable of rich texture and heart-stopping spectacle (see *Penny Dreadful* 2014-16, or *Hannibal* 2013-15, for example).

*Carmilla* has a very particular take on this, one that I would argue is influenced by the success of found-footage horror and the rise of user-generated media. The series adopts a vlog format: what viewers see is, at least initially, Laura’s work for “Journalism 102: Intro to Investigative Reporting” according to text in the bottom left of the screen. Therefore, although other spaces make up the storyworld and are inhabited and visited by characters, only one space is seen by viewers, and this is shown from the fixed position of a webcam on Laura’s desk. Jordan Hall admits

For my part, I find that limitations like “everything happens in Laura’s dorm room” can be very freeing. Do I have to think of a new location for every scene? Nope. Do I have to think of creative ways to pack the action into that one little room? Yep. The challenge is exciting, and when I come up with a juicy reason to bring the plot to the camera, it’s very satisfying, craft-wise (in O’Reagan 2014).

Naturally this requires an adjustment on the part of the viewer: a willing viewer has to accept the reasons for the limited setting shown, though admittedly this might be part of the expectation from a web series, which tend to be low-budget and thus adopt ‘raw’ styles and approaches as part of the overall aesthetic. The implied contract between creators and viewers dictates that faithful viewers will be rewarded by creative play with action, narrative and—here—the Gothic tropes of the source material. The success of both mockumentary (such as 2014’s film *What We Do in the Shadows*, or the Ghostfacers episodes of long-running TV

series *Supernatural* 2005-present) and found-footage horror (the *Paranormal Activity* film series being one of the best known) demonstrate the potential of ‘raw’, less polished visuals for enhancing the genre’s mysteries, uncertainties and glimpses. In the case of *Carmilla*, then, adaptation reimagines not only in terms of modernisation, but also in the way it approaches filming and brings plot to the camera, while still managing to show rather than tell its story.

This creative play results in engaging set pieces, such as the first season “flashback” to Carmilla’s past (lifted with little alteration from the novella), as told to Laura in her dorm room by Carmilla, who is tied to a chair for Laura’s safety since the gang have ascertained she is a vampire (“Sock Puppets and European History” 1.20). This first-hand account is translated by Laura via sock puppet theatre (“You don’t think this makes light of my tragic backstory?” asks Carmilla), resulting at first in a ludicrous parody of mysterious strangers and vampire seduction. Gradually the tone shifts, however, to something much more serious as Carmilla relates her love for one intended victim, Ell, resulting in Carmilla’s punishment for restraint by her mother, who locked her in a coffin for decades. Laura starts to empathise, abandoning the puppet theatre for rapt attention. This visually engaging negotiation of the period flashback common to vampire tales substitutes comedic parody for the lush textural detail often involved in productions with higher budgets but manages not to trivialise Carmilla’s character and experience in doing so, using the tonal shift into serious emotion to guide viewer responses, despite the lack of visualising point of view.

It could also be argued that the restricted camera view and consequently the limited space in shot throughout the series alludes to the claustrophobic domestic interiors of Gothic stories with female protagonists. The action for this version of *Carmilla* has been moved to what is essentially the public sphere—a university campus—yet the interiors that function as setting are living quarters for two of the three seasons. It is possible to track the expansion of space depicted on screen across the seasons as variations result in incrementally less

restricted space/s as setting. The series shifts from Laura's dorm room in season one; to a more lavish apartment, revealed to be the Dean's study, in season two; to the university library (complete with a door/ portal to different dimensions) in season three. Not until the final seconds of the last season, is any external shot given—an arcing pan across the campus as the sun rises on the aftermath of yet another apocalypse. As Tony Williams has argued (1996), US horror film moved from the period drama of the Old World to the suburbs of the New World from the 1970s, envisioning a home-grown threat and a much more immediate “return of the repressed” (see also Robin Wood's influential chapter on 1970s horror in his book *Hollywood From Vietnam to Reagan*). *Carmilla* may even be paying homage here to films like *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974) with its wide-shot sunrise: Tobe Hooper's film ends with monstrous antagonist Leatherface dancing with his chainsaw in the early morning, as survivor Sally is driven to safety in a truck. *Carmilla*'s move outward to the basement and library in season zero and three respectively, as well as this glimpse of outdoor open space, could also signal a move away from the shadowed institutions of traditional patriarchal society into the light and air of contemporary public spaces—a literal coming out story for vampires, queers, and lesbians.

Similarly, the unfolding seasons introduce variations on the fixed webcam view as multi-screen video formats and new modes of presentation to camera creep in. This, I argue, links to the series' strong character development. Other users start to generate content: for example, in season two a bored, reluctantly under siege Laura starts up the Silas News Network (“SNN” 2.3) to report on campus events, which is soon countered by “Official Campus-Wide Communication” from the Dean of the university (one of Laura's university friends Perry, currently possessed by the Dean, who happens to be Carmilla's mother). Rather than one fixed-camera view, two-way video calls between characters give us shifts of perspective and different locations, but also allow for multiple voices to tell the story and for

character enrichment. Additionally, they act as signposts to narrative extensions as content on different social media, as discussed below.

A key attraction for viewers and fans is the ensemble cast (which expands season on season) and their relationships, romantic and otherwise. The two governesses of LeFanu's story become (Lola) Perry and S. (Susan) LaFontaine, childhood friends and university roommates whose bonds are tested by the new environment of university, and by Susan's decision to be gender-neutral LaFontaine (characters later just call them LaF). Actor Kaitlyn Alexander has revealed in interviews that playing LaFontaine helped them realise their own queer identity as non-binary, and the character is one of very few regular non-binary representations in visual media (see, for instance, Strapageil 2017). In addition, the campus and its "rape culture" are balanced by rare male characters who become part of the gang: Logan Dalton points to the "detoxification" of Wilson Kirsch, a Zeta Omega Mu frat boy through his contact with Laura and the others, as one of the series' major achievements (2016). Likewise, the unexpected arrival of Laura's father, Sherman Hollis (Enrico Colantoni, possibly the most well-known actor appearing in the series) in season three (starting in "Meet the Parent" 3.9) reinforces how heterosexual men can be allies—both Laura and her father refer to her coming out casually, as just another part of her childhood. While Mr Hollis has no qualms about his daughter being a lesbian, he is somewhat concerned that dating a vampire is putting her in harm's way. In the end, he comes around and regales Carmilla with baby-Laura stories, in a move every parent and child recognises as a relationship rite-of-passage.

The pre-production process of the web series also demonstrates an increasing focus on women and horror, on screen and behind the scenes.

[Natasha] Negovanlis [Carmilla] was immediately taken by the idea of working on something that was "very female-driven behind the camera." Having female creators,

writers, and producers had a tangible impact on the project from the get-go, she says, recalling the "beautiful description" that writer Jordan Hall wrote for her character.

"So often as an actor you read breakdowns for female roles that are like "fun-loving and pretty," and there's no real meat to them. And I think that's changing, but at the time it was the most interesting breakdown I'd ever seen. It described her as someone who was languid and sarcastic but charming but lonely, all of these words where I was like, "I need to play this, that's me." (Zimmerman 2017)

This neatly parallels the findings of the 2016-17 *Boxed In* report on women in US television, which observes "***On programs with at least 1 woman creator, females accounted for 51% of major characters, achieving parity with the percentage of girls and women in the U.S. population.*** On programs with exclusively male creators, females accounted for 38% of major characters" (Lauzen 2017, 3; emphasis in original). Negovanlis' comments suggest that female characters in series with female creators are not only more prevalent, as is certainly the case with *Carmilla*, but also more complex and less stereotyped (see also Lauzen, 2).

*Carmilla* clearly signals how television frequently overflows its boundaries to become what Henry Jenkins has called "spreadable media" (2013). Chochinov points out, "As a transmedia production, *Carmilla* is able to constantly engage with its ever-growing fan base, using social media as a bridge between the web series and its audience" (2015), just as broadcast or VOD series increasingly rely on social media "interaction" to maintain viewer loyalty and encourage "trending" around new season premieres and other events. Social media enables the continued production of new material, as mentioned above, by official creators and by audiences, while awaiting another season. *Carmilla* has a number of paratexts and related content/ narrative extensions in addition to its dedicated playlist on Kinda TV's YouTube channel, including a Christmas special released following season one, a season zero released on Kotex's YouTube channel in 2015 (between seasons two and three), podcasts

from Carmilla's sister Mel that complement season three, a feature length movie (2017) set five years after the conclusion of season three, presence on Twitter, Instagram, Tumblr, Facebook, and its own fan-founded Wiki. In fact, there are so many paratexts that the official series' Tumblr site is headed by a post "Canon Transmedia" clarifying which are "canon" or contribute to the overall narrative and universe (or producer-generated), and which are "fanon" or user-generated.

Hi Creampuffs,

Given the explosion of sentient objects, characters - and their pants - getting their own fanon social media feeds, we thought we'd clarify which ones are canon and officially part of the transmedia storytelling:

Laura & Carmilla's feeds will offer the most insight and important pieces of the puzzle:

#### **Laura's Feeds**

[Laura2TheLetter](#) Tumblr Blog

[@Laura2TheLetter](#) Twitter Feed

#### **Carmilla's Feeds**

[HeyCarmilla](#) Tumblr Blog

[HeyCarmilla](#) Twitter Feed

#### **Other Canon Feeds**

[@SilasUniversity](#) twitter - A Very Legitimate Educational Institution.

[@LaFilphormes](#) twitter - LaF telling it like it is.

[@SilasConfidential](#)-The story of Laura's floormate Mary, which is told through her

**Wattpad** account.

And new to Season 2, the [Voice of Silas](#) tumblr. Watch it closely... (n.d.).



These paratextual materials demonstrate and reinforce the value of character to the series. As expected from transmedia tie-ins, the accounts are in-character and in-storyworld, and serve not only to produce new content when no season is currently airing, but also to riff on what fans already know about the characters. For example, Carmilla's sister Mel is seen during season three via video calls from another location to the main characters based in the library. The podcasts tell her side of the tale, complete with backstory, snark, and fuller characterisation than the web series has time for.

The target audience of *Carmilla* is younger women with an interest in queer representation, or as one article on a marketing website puts it, “millennials with fan communities and social media” (Reid and Burgess 2016)—exactly those who might be expected to be part of existing digital communities around common interests and values. After all, “Queer women are still underrepresented on our TV screens, and even less are the leads of their own series, but the internet has provided a space for years filled with these interesting stories” (Down 2018). Unsurprisingly, as *Carmilla* found its audience of viewers seeking normalised queer characters and relationships on screen, some of this user-generated content focused on the Hollstein ‘ship and one reviewer observes that a “[supercut](#) of all the Hollstein kisses over the course of the series’ 100-plus episodes has 5 million views on YouTube, several times more than any single episode of the show itself” (Romano 2017). This is the beauty of spreadable media.

Operating across media platforms and distributing a series via YouTube requires new strategies for funding, as well as for attracting underserved audiences. *Carmilla* was sponsored by Kimberly Clark Corp. thus arguably becoming a kind of branded content for U by Kotex. This led to some criticism of product placement, but also to memorable additional material including “Do Vampires Get Their Periods?” (2014) and the whole of season zero (all but the first episode released on U by Kotex’s YouTube channel), which revolves around

female characters on campus not having periods and takes place in a basement used to store sanitary supplies. Sponsorship by a major brand might be seen as selling out, yet without Kotex, *Carmilla* might never have achieved the success it enjoyed and, product placement aside, the sponsorship does not seem to have adversely affected its female-centred ethos. Rather, the chiming of a female-centred series and the female market for the sponsor's product makes this a natural pairing and in an era where the "tampon tax" and "period poverty" are being hotly debated, the cultural relevance and zeitgeist are undeniable.

U by Kotex sponsored the web series, yet the release of *The Carmilla Movie* (2017) was made possible by the series' dedicated fans (Romano notes that it "was largely [crowdfunded](#) by fans preordering the film" 2017) and U by Kotex did not, in the end, help fund the feature (see Jennings 2017 for more on the funding model for the film). While at least one review opines that the film is for fans only (Romano 2017), and a young adult novel of the web series is due for release in 2019, the main text of *Carmilla* the web series now seems to be concluded. Some of those involved in *Carmilla* have launched new web series, *CLAIREvoyant* (2018-) and *Couple-ish* (2015-17), funded by Kickstarter and Indiegogo and promoted to *Carmilla*'s creampuffs. Since these ventures, an in-progress *Carmilla* TV pilot was reported via the series' Twitter feed (carmillaseries, August 14, 2018). Almost certainly, though, these opportunities would not have arisen without support for the first web series, its success in gaining a loyal audience, a major sponsor, and several industry awards.

## **Conclusion**

In his article on horror film remakes, Kevin Heffernan concludes that "Far from 'cannibalizing the past,' this trend was vitally engaged in both a changing movie marketplace and long-term changes in the horror genre" (2014, 72). The same can now be said of *Carmilla*, produced in and interacting with a changing landscape of VOD and must-stream

TV, of #MeToo and #TimesUp, of public discussions about “period poverty,” and of increased consumer and audience pressure for “better” representation and visibility of “minorities” behind and in front of cameras. Rebecca Down, writing for GLAAD’s Amp, recalls

Logging into my YouTube account to watch *Carmilla* every week became routine for this exact reason. I needed to see women who were like me and who I wanted to be. Women who represented people that I know in real life. Women who were my friends, my classmates, my coworkers. Getting to see characters that were complex, real people was an experience that I needed at that time. (2018)

*Carmilla* may well have succeeded because of this gap in the market, the desire of audiences to see women like them and women they wanted to be, and the will to capitalise on this desire by adopting new platforms. In the introduction to his book *Open TV*, Aymar Christian points to changes in production and development practice facilitated by new technologies, leading to “increased opportunities for small-scale independents” (2018, 8) because they can speak to “markets underserved by mainstream industries, and [broaden] society’s base of producers” (7). Christian argues that this type of independent production circumvents established, commercial “legacy production” and the institutional structures and biases that come with it. Independent web television can afford to accommodate, indeed relies on, interactions with fans to inform its representations. Moreover, the fact that Annie Briggs (Perry) and Natasha Negovanlis (*Carmilla*) have launched *CLAIREvoyant* in conjunction with Shaftesbury, one of the production companies behind *Carmilla*, and that Kaitlyn Alexander (LaFontaine)’s web series *Couple-ish* was nominated for a Streamy award indicate the potential for addressing gender inequalities, diversities, and opportunities in the media.

Equally, however, *Carmilla* succeeds because it adapts LeFanu’s Gothic tale adeptly, remaking the tropes and structures of the vampire and the Gothic heroine and aligning them

with today's pressing cultural issues and trending topics, presented via the unique combination of constructedness and vital immediacy that is social media.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Barbara Creed 1993, or Jowett 2017. The *Boxed In* report noted: "In 2016-17, women comprised 28% of all creators, directors, writers, producers, executive producers, editors, and directors of photography working on broadcast network, cable, and streaming programs. This represents an increase of 2 percentage points from 26% in 2015-16" (Lauzen 2017, 3; emphasis in original).

<sup>2</sup> Costs of web series are difficult to track down, unless published by those making the show—see Freddie Wong—but an average scripted TV series episode for a one-hour slot might cost \$2-4 million dollars. *Carmilla*'s feature length movie was reported as being in the \$700,000 to \$2.5 million budget range (Reid and Burgess 2016) so the web series episodes are clearly much less. Wong reported that the 9-episode season one (totalling around 137 minutes) of web series *Video Game High School* cost \$636,010.71 in 2012.