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“You guys and your cute little categories”: *Torchwood*, The Space-Time Rift and Cardiff’s Postmodern, Postcolonial and (avowedly) Pansexual Gothic

Linnie Blake

This article is about Russell T. Davies’s decidedly grown-up *Dr Who* spin off *Torchwood* and Cardiff, the city in which it’s set: specifically the ways in which two seasons of inveterately Welsh misadventures in science fiction depict Cardiff as a pansexually and a decidedly postcolonial gothic location; a site at which historically embedded discourses of identity politics (specifically those to do with sexuality and nationhood) are purposefully deconstructed - with often hilarious, or wildly erotic, or erotically wild and hilarious consequences.

The Cardiff-based *Torchwood* Institute was founded by Queen Victoria to defend Britain from the highly gothic invasion of supernatural forces she witnessed in the Scottish highlands in the *Doctor Who* episode “Tooth and Claw.” As the voice over that accompanies the rain-slicked, leather clad, labyrinthine and partly subterranean credit sequence indicates, moreover, *Torchwood* exists “outside the government, beyond the police, tracking down alien life on earth.” But noticeably, even in the credit sequence, the Imperial Gothic’s fear of invasion, its fear of being contaminated or over-run by the alien other is tempered by a decidedly post colonial sense of overwhelming possibility. For, as we learn, “the twenty first century is when everything changes” and it is the job of the *Torchwood* team to facilitate that change – as humanity moves beyond its materially earth-bound and conceptually binaristic models of historically circumscribed and rationally underpinned human identity. It is, then, unsurprising that *Torchwood*’s Cardiff should be haunted by the gothic spectres that, for Ken Gelder, haunt the structural logic of postcolonial studies – a city totally saturated with ghosts of the returning repressed, monstrous hybrids, uncanny misrecognitions, possessions and dispossessions. For the entire *Torchwood* project, it seems to me, is an attempt (by Russell T. Davies, its creator, Chris Chibnall, its main writer, and their team) to pick away at the models of individual, gendered and racial identity that postcolonial studies takes as its subject and, through an insistent queering of those models, to break down what Captain Jack Harkness terms, their ‘cute little categories’ into their ideologically expedient components. What emerges from all of this, moreover, is decidedly postcolonial and insistently pansexual gothic celebration of all possible possibilities.

Torchwood’s Cardiff is, of course, a highly gothic location – an interstitial border crossing resting on a rift in both time (that allows two way traffic between our past and our future) and space (which results in all manner of aliens being washed up on the streets of the city and all manner of city dwellers being hurled into the furthest reaches of the cosmos). And as we discover as the series progresses, both sides of the rift are horrific to those catapulted into them. The good people of Cardiff, for example, are not above tunnelling with chainsaws into a giant aquatic alien life-form washed up by the rift, carving out slabs of its still living flesh over a period of weeks and selling it on as cheap meat. They are happy to place bets on fights to the death between men and aliens. And in both their past and their present, they are equally happy to fight and kill and rape each other on a seemingly daily basis.

This is not a straightforwardly Imperial Gothic paradigm in other words – whereby a sense of a strong and integrated national identity is counterpoised to the horrific excesses of an alien other. And the reason for

that, as the series' repeated reference to location underscores, is that this series is set not in London but in Cardiff – the capital of a nation itself colonised by the English since the twelfth century, a nation repeatedly vilified by its colonial masters who throughout the generations would teach their children that:

Taffy was a Welshman, Taffy was a thief,
Taffy came to my house and stole a leg of beef.
I went to Taffy's house, Taffy was in bed,
So I picked up the piss-pot and smashed it on his

So, whilst in *Torchwood's* sister programme *Dr Who* we see hostile aliens such as the appropriately named Sykorax invade the capital, knocking a symbolic chunk out of Big Ben's phallic primacy in the process, things are rather different on the other side of the Severn estuary. For Cardiff is itself a hybrid entity, born of the colonial past and the postcolonial present and generically characterised in this series by an intriguing admixture of gothic preoccupations and *mise-en-scene* and science fiction characters and narrative devices. And so, the first series alone takes in ghosts, demons and monsters, murderous fairies, cannibals, cyborgs, aliens and those who have simply fallen through time – a plague victim, a Roman soldier, the passengers of a 1950s light aircraft. The second series moves on to the existential agonies not only of the key characters but of *both* alien 'sleepers' living quietly in Cardiff until they erupt into alterity and slaughter everything they've ever cared about *and* those locals who have returned so hopelessly damaged from their experiences on the other side of the rift that they are unable to rejoin the human race. Most poignant of all is the plight of the shellshocked World War One soldier who must return to 1917 to be shot for cowardice despite saving the world in our present. I'll return to all of this later.

Clearly, then, this is a far darker creation than *Dr Who* – the chiaroscuro lighting, the subterranean or urban-labyrinthine *mise-en-scene* and its monochromatic colour palate evoking a decidedly postmodern sense of a destabilised urban space, where locations slide into each other, repudiating fixity and militating against a concrete sense of locale. Accordingly, the series' narratives, its camerawork and its editorial logic is seen to slide, with often vertiginous speed, between the shiny new buildings of the Altoluzzo development to the urban deprivation of Butetown, from the city's bars, clubs and restaurants to the suburban respectability of Pentyrch's manicured lawns, from Barry Docks to the Brecon Beacons to the picturesque shopping opportunities of the nineteenth century Castle Arcade. All are recognisable locations (and for those who do not actually recognise them a community of fans maintain a website to assist the uninitiated).(1) But the topology of *Torchwood* (most specifically its edits) ensures that they also exist in a constant state of spatial and temporal slippage that repudiates any commonly accepted sense of logic, cohesion or normality.

Clearly, there's something queer going on in Cardiff. For high atop the Altoluzzo building stands Captain Jack, a fifty first century alien assigned to watch over the city and its environs, a space where suburban woodland is infested with malevolent spirits that steal away little girls to dance with them forever; where the countryside is home to murderous cannibals (who can not even blame their actions on alien intervention, murdering and eating strangers being something of a tradition in these parts) and where, beneath the city, the demon Abbadon waits, until that nice old queen from the clock shop in the Castle Arcade opens the rift and lets him out. And this is just Series One! *Torchwood's* Cardiff, it seems, is nothing less than a grotesque urban body repeatedly penetrated by the fantastic spectres of other times and places. Its topology bulges and leaks, it bleeds into its own past and future, it oozes sexuality and dark

desire. And in so doing, of course, it displays a pronounced concern with questions of identity – individual, gendered, sexual, national ... human.

But if all this sounds rather Emo, then I should stress that one of the key delights of the series is the way it tempers its more pressing existential concerns with decidedly celebratory deployment of self-reflexive parody and archly camp pastiche. In *Torchwood*, in other words, we have a text that is characterised by a variety of queer representational and critical practice that undertakes a radical deconstruction of the ideologies of identity that have historically underpinned mass cultural formulations of both Welsh and British selfhood.

The universe of sexual possibility pointed to by *Torchwood* is nothing if not rococo. The central character Captain Jack Harkness – an indestructible Captain Scarlet figure, played by out gay actor John Barrowman, is (as I have said) of alien origin, hailing from the 51st century. As far back as the *Dr Who* episode "The Empty Child", though, he has been seen to rejoice in humanity's forthcoming sexual exploration (in distinction to militaristic colonisation) of the universe. Throughout both series, moreover, Captain Jack is seen to engage in a panoply of erotically charged relationships with men and women, humans and aliens, relationships that fly in the face of all heteronormative prescriptions.

Handsome, macho, authoritative and supremely rational (but with a naughty twinkle in the eye and charmingly boyish forelock), Captain Jack may appear to be the reasoning subject of Descartes' *cogito* on whose intellectual enquiries into the nature of being, post-enlightenment subjectivity rests. But he also contains within himself, those aspects of consciousness putatively antithetical to such a rationalist project – being possessed of an entirely rapacious and ostensibly indiscriminate libido and unable, however many times you shoot him in the head, to remain dead for long. Unable to sleep and prone to depression, he haunts the Hub's underground chambers, remembering the male (and occasionally female) lovers who have pre-deceased him, intermittently engaging in some very hot sex, but yet very much alone. In ways, one could argue, Captain Jack contains within himself that "wildly dichotomous play around solipsism and intersubjectivity" that for Eve Sedgwick characterised the "paranoid male plot" (2) of the Age of Frankenstein in which both the gothic and Foucault's homosexual (as identifiable subject) came into being. And so he chases himself down the corridors of memory, through the liminal spaces of the city, alone, even as his co-workers pursue their own pansexual adventures – and, in so doing, affirms his unknowable, noumenal, highly corporeal, yet decidedly spectral, self.

Captain Jack's pansexual prerogative is echoed, in other words, in those of his colleagues. Toshiko Sato is a gauche and geeky computer genius (complete with glasses and pre-pubescent demeanour). The voice of logical calculation, Toshiko spends much of both seasons in unrequited love with whiney misogynist medic Owen Harper, in the episode "Greeks Bearing Gifts", Toshiko nonetheless partakes in an erotico-philosophical project very similar to that of Captain Jack. Here Tosh indulges enthusiastically, if rather remorsefully, in a passionate affair with a woman called Mary, who is in fact an alien serial killer living inside the appropriated body of a C19 Cardiff prostitute. Wearing the alien's pendant, Tosh, in classic female gothic mode, is granted the ability to feel the feelings and think the thoughts of others; her own sense of self melding with the thoughts and desires, fears and dreams of the city, as indeed it does later in her affair with a cryogenically suspended time travelling infantryman from World War One.

But not only does this underscore Tosh's aloneness, it further differentiates the human-seeming Captain Jack from the humanity he protects, reading his mind being compared to reading that of a corpse. Clearly,

the sexual fetishisation of the abject-pansexual-dead is an essential part Torchwood's pansexually gothic project – being further explored in the second series when Owen too becomes the living dead.

So, for all Captain Jack is perhaps not quite as hot as he believes himself to be, dead or not he remains a pretty attractive proposition – his glorious affirmation of all possible sexual permutations and hence modes of being spilling over the boundaries of the heterosexist world. Gwen Cooper, for example, the newest member of the team and the series' Welsh Everywoman, is ostensibly straight - not a term, of course, that sits at all at ease with this series. She is engaged to bovine boyfriend Rhys, who does a nifty line in housewifely role reversal, and she later marries him. But she is nonetheless wildly attracted to Captain Jack – even whilst indulging in extra-curricular sexual shenanigans with the considerably more dangerous Owen Harper. What is more, Gwen also partakes enthusiastically in a passionate same-sex encounter in the episode "Day One" – in this case with a serial killing alien who feeds off orgasmic energy. Nothing is as clear cut or as straightforward as it initially seemed. Gwen, like us, has had her eyes opened to a world of possibilities that lie well beyond our everyday imaginings of the world. What is more, the tall hyper-Welsh cutie that is Ianto Jones, devastated by the death of his half-human, half-cyborg girlfriend whom, in a manner that can only be described as parodic of every crazed scientist picture the viewer has ever seen, he has kept in the Torchwood cellar for some time, eventually finds abject consolation in a rumbustuous affair with his tender, paternalistic (and still dead) boss, Captain Jack.

Around the characters a world of erotic possibility holds out its hot flushed hand. Sex with aliens, sex with machines, sexualised murder and murderous sexuality are all paraded before us – in a highly humorous, highly self-referential fashion. Even the body, the topos of sexuality itself, is repeatedly invaded – Gwen being physically impregnated by a shape shifting alien called a Nostrovite in the episode "Something Borrowed" and alien parasites called Mayflies curing experimental subjects of terminal illnesses by 'resetting' their body mechanisms to 'well' in "Reset". These are only two examples of many. Identity, it seems, is a far more fluid entity than one has been conditioned to think.

What *Torchwood* seems to be affirming here is a decidedly Foucauldian sense that the heterosexist patriarchy that lies beyond the hub (on the streets of Cardiff, in its nightclubs and workplaces, cafes and bars) rests on a series of illusory binarisms (self and other, male and female, straight and gay, natural and unnatural, human and inhuman, Welsh and not-Welsh). And this comprehensively fails, of course, to acknowledge the fact that most people participate in a range of identities and sexual desires that fall well outside such neat binaristic logic. For if the rococo sexual practices of *Torchwood* show nothing, they show that there is no such thing as a 'natural' state or an essential orientation. "You guys and your cute little categories" remarks Captain Jack, in the awareness that whilst medical, psychiatric, political, legal or historical discourse may name, categorise or taxonomise people as straight, gay, human, alien or indeed Welsh, it does not change the nature of things in and of themselves. For "Captain Jack Harkness" is itself a pseudonym ... our hero having long ago appropriated the identity of a dead World War Two fighter pilot – a man he meets, and is strongly attracted to, in the episode that bears their name. It's a delightfully erotic, playful and arch moment of doubling that again calls into question both identities and identity politics in a highly gothic way.

For *Torchwood* is nothing if not arch. It delights in the artful stylisation of its sets and settings – that in all its slick constructedness draw attention not only to the shiny newness of modern Cardiff, but to the over determined symbolic machinery of the gothic itself. Characters, accordingly, are frequently androgynous - kitted out (by Bafta Cymru winner Ray Holman) in exceedingly fetishistic costumes that are themselves a

pastiche of styles from the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries. And time travellers, of course, arrive in the exceedingly fetishised outfits of their respective eras – centurions, civil war soldiers, 1950s family men. All meticulously, pitch perfectly, realised.

Torchwood's performance style, in contrast, is pretty theatrical, characters often being 'blocked' into improbable lines and clusters more suited to the stage than the screen. Delivery veers between genres, from the contemporary histrionics of soap opera to the monochromatic repressiveness of 1940s British melodrama (all clipped delivery and thwarted passion) with a little of the technicolour queerness of American melodrama of the 1950s (all Rock Hudson in a workshirt) on the side. In either case, it's a pretty overdetermined, pretty pastichy bricolage. And so, in a fashion that's recognisably camp (camp being, as Jonathan Dollimore has termed 'the pervert's revenge on authenticity')(3) *Torchwood* delights in an aesthetic valorisation of form over content. For however many loose ends of character, plot and indeed probability there are, it usually looks pretty damned sexy - being ironic, extravagant, slick and decidedly outrageous. For unlike much contemporary television that rejoices in such camp practices yet erases their historically queer referent (I'm thinking of television like *Sex and the City* here) *Torchwood* never loses sight of its subject – the queer in all its abject, alien, grotesque, fantastical manifestations; the queer in all of us.

It's at this point though that I should probably make mention of *Torchwood: Children of Earth* – the miniseries that ran on the BBC between 6 and 10 July 2009. Revolving around the evil plans of a three headed alien species named the 456 to remove ten percent of the earth's children for use as a form of drug (because, as the alien says, "they feel good") the narrative sees Captain Jack not only insistently heterosexualised by the death of his male lover Ianto but deified with the appearance of not only an adult daughter but a grandson whom (as Nobodaddy in a Greatcoat) he must sacrifice to save the eponymous children of earth.

Having lit the fansites ablaze with equal measures of praise and condemnation, *Children of Earth* can be seen as a kind of anti-*Torchwood* that deploys earlier characters and character relationships in the telling of its tale but is considerably more SF than gothic and considerably less queer than it ought to be. Set mostly in London's corridors of power (repeated use of bird's eye view shots of Whitehall replacing those of Cardiff that characterised series one and two), *Children of Earth* highlights the morally bankrupt nature of government, the militaristic underpinnings of everyday life and the invidious nature of the British class system - bourgeois English children, for example, remaining safe by virtue of their private schools' excellent league table results while children from working class communities, such as Cardiff's council estates, are herded off in busses to their doom. A conceptually binaristic piece, *Children of Earth* thus pits good guys against bad guys, humans against aliens, Americans against Brits and the English against us all in an entirely un-*Torchwood* way. It is shot and edited in a straightforward TV Realist style (lacking the funky edits and incongruous tonal juxtapositions of earlier series). It lacks the decidedly queer love action between men, women, aliens and cyborgs that has characterised earlier series and is almost entirely po-faced in its approach to the subject matter. It is, I would argue, an anti-gothic *Torchwood* for a mainstream BBC1 audience – which may explain the fact that some 5.8 million viewers (a staggering 26.7% of the available viewing public) watched the final episode. And as such, it is far removed from the first two series.

Self-consciously concerned with questions of regional, national and individual identity (as gendered subject, as human being, as alien) these series participated joyously in queer theory's critique of all

essentialist identity discourses as they sets out to deconstruct the hetero/homo binarism and the power/knowledge regime that underpins it and consequently shapes the ordering of desire, behaviour, social institutions and social relations in the world. In so doing, of course, the first two series set out to explore exactly what it is to be enculturated (as British and as Welsh) to call oneself a man or woman, straight or gay; whether, of course, one is ‘essentially’ anything at all or whether, as Judith Butler has argued at length, one’s identity is itself is nothing more than a melange of both disavowals and identifications, wherein parodic representations of what it is to be a British or Welsh person encourages consideration of the ideological underpinnings of these effectively contingent though historically situated categories.(4) So, for all the first two series of *Torchwood* were insistently set in Cardiff, for all they signified a sense of ‘Welshness’ that entails the idea of community, a sense of linguistic homogeneity and geographical contiguity, a system of economic exchange and, putatively a common culture underpinned by a shared psychological make-up,(5) these series were very keen to explore precisely what all of this adds up to.

All three series of *Torchwood*, in other words, are as hip to the dangers of nationalism as Homi Bhabha who has warned of the ways in which nationalist discourse offers an ideologically expedient “continuous narrative of national progress” that reflects both “the narcissism of self-generation” and troublingly “the primeval present of the *Volk*”(6) – with often cataclysmic consequences. In their depiction of what Benedict Anderson would term the “imagined community”(7) of Cardiff, it is then notable that the distinctive cultural forms and practices of the nation that have been historically manifested in icons, ceremonies and symbols of Welshness, are noticeably absent. There are no miners here, no rugby players, no male voice choirs and no eisteddfods, for *Torchwood* is keen to explore the ways in which such symbolic signifiers of nationhood effectively mediate our experience of the real and, in so doing, offer only illusory resolution of the conflicts of interests groups and contradictions of identity that in actuality beset the nation state, its varied cultural products and the histories of both.(8)

If, as we’ve seen, the transparently ‘normal’ spatial relations of the city are challenged by a forceful interjection of the ‘abnormal’ into the ‘real’ world – an interjection which prompts a reconsideration of what it is we consider by ‘reality’ in the first place – then the same can be said of time. *Torchwood* insistently undermines the rationality of linear time by collapsing all time periods - repeatedly bringing the past into the present, the present into the past and the future into all. Alien technology brings back the dead and interjects the living into past time, the rift plucks unsuspecting individuals from the past and lands them, understandably stressed (though occasionally delighted), into our present, whilst the eponymous "Adam", a particularly inventive alien, feeds off the psychic energy of others, altering their memories of the past and in turn the ways they perceive themselves and each other in the present. And at every turn, these logic defying events provide opportunity for the team to indulge in further erotic adventures.

In a piece entitled “Gothic Sexualities,”(9) Steven Bruhm pointed to the ways in which sexuality, filtered through Freudian, post-Freudian and queer thought, is itself “nothing short of gothic in its ability to rupture, fragment and destroy both the coherence of the individual subject and the culture in which that subject appears.”(10) For like the queer episteme, he argues, “the Gothic disrespects the borderlines of the appropriate, the healthy or the politically desirable. It resists the authority of the traditional or received and insists with more or less gleeful energy, on making visible the violence underpinning the sexual norms that our culture ... holds most sacred.”(11) In the postcolonial context of contemporary Wales, such observations, I would hazard, are doubly relevant. Itself an interstitial entity that has worked

tirelessly to affirm its linguistic, cultural and historical alterity in the face of four hundred and fifty years of “union” with England, Wales may now enjoy limited autonomy in terms of the economy, environment, health, social services, education and culture.

What *Torchwood* would seem to suggest is that full autonomy lies not in identity discourse (such as nationalism) or even in the kind of ‘paranoid reading’ of the world practiced, as Eve Sedgwick has argued, by much queer theory (including her own). For *Torchwood*, if nothing else, can be seen to offer a far more reparative exploration of subjectivity and desire than most popular culture – underscoring possibility, pleasure, understanding, belonging and healing. And I’d hazard that’s precisely what the pansexual postmodern postcolonial gothic is all about.

1. www.torchwoodlocations.com
2. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *The Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008), p. 163.
3. Jonathan Dollimore, “Post/Modern: On the Gay Sensibility, or the Pervert’s Revenge on Authenticity” in Fabio Cleto (ed), *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject* (Ann Arbor: Michigan UP, 2002), pp. 221-236.
4. See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).
5. Stalin, Joseph, ‘The Nation,’ in Bruce Franklin (ed), *The Essential Stalin: Major Theoretical Writings 1905-1952* (London: Croom Helm, 1973), pp. 57-61.
6. Homi K Bhabha, ‘Narrating the Nation,’ in Homi K Bhabha (ed), *The Nation and Narration* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 1.
7. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1983).
8. As Althusser would put it: ‘In ideology men [...] express not the relation between them and their conditions of existence, but the way they live the relation between them and their conditions of existence; this presupposes both a real relation and an ‘imaginary,’ ‘lived’ relation. Ideology [...] is the expression of the relation between men and their ‘world,’ that is, the (overdetermined) unity of the real relation and the imaginary relation between them and their real conditions of existence.’ Louis Althusser, *For Marx* (London: Allen Lane, 1969), p. 233-4.
9. Stephen Bruhm, “Gothic Sexualities,” in (eds), Andrew Smith and Anna Powell, *Teaching the Gothic* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2006), pp. 93-106.
10. Bruhm, p. 93
11. Bruhm, p. 94