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The Changing Queerness of *Homo Superior* in *The Tomorrow People*

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The Tomorrow People was produced by Thames Television and broadcast in the UK from April 1973 to February 1979, running for 68 episodes across eight series. Like its forerunners, *Doctor Who* and *Star Trek*, interest in *The Tomorrow People* has remained strong enough for there to be two TV reboots as well as a continuation of the 1970s show in the form of several audio dramas from the production company Big Finish. The first of the reboots was produced by Tetra Films on behalf of Thames, and ran from November 1992 until March 1995 for a total of 25 episodes over three series. Then, in October 2013, US TV channel CW premiered a series produced by Fremantle Media, which ran for 22 episodes until May 2014. Although each version is separated by approximately twenty years, the central novum remains the same: the eponymous Tomorrow People are the next stage in human evolution, *Homo superior*, a term coined by Olaf Stapledon in his novel *Odd John* (1935). The series' teenage heroes possess superhuman powers such as teleportation, telekinesis and telepathy, which manifest around the onset of puberty. This premise provides the narrative drive not only for the action but also the emotional content. In each version, the Tomorrow People are united in their shared sense of difference, something they keep secret from the wider world. This heady mix of physical and social alienation, growing pains and teenage angst enables the series to be read as an allegory for queerness, especially sexual difference. However, as the broadcast history of *The Tomorrow People* spans forty-one years between its first and most recent TV versions, each depiction has differed in accordance to their respective social, historical and cultural contexts. This article, then, explores the history of *Homo superior*, tracing the concept's queerness back to Stapledon's novel, and through how each version of *The Tomorrow People* shapes and reforms such ideas according to their historical moments.

Identifying and Defining Difference in *The Tomorrow People*

The original version of the show has been praised for ‘the sense of empowerment it offered: all teenagers, it suggested, could “breakout” into being a Tomorrow Person during adolescence’ (Lewis and Stempel 1996: 184). As adolescence also marks the onset of puberty, and the Tomorrow People are aware that their status distinguishes them from the wider population, the series may also be interpreted as a metaphor for sexual difference. This particular reading, however, has been both acknowledged and simultaneously dismissed: ‘As a metaphor for puberty, it wasn’t all that subtle, and indeed in retrospect some viewers have read the metaphor as being more about dawning homosexuality (though of course that kind of reading can be imposed on practically any children’s programme...)’ (Sangster and Condon 2005: 765). Similarly, series chronicler Andy Davidson has observed:

It doesn’t take a psychologist to identify the concept of breaking out as analogous to puberty. There’s a recurring argument that it’s a more obvious parallel for coming out as homosexual, but to my mind such an interpretation marginalises an experience that every single child goes through. (Davidson 2013: 38-9)

In both instances, a potential reading about sexuality is recognized only to be discounted. Whereas Sangster and Condon claim that it is too generalized, Davidson forecloses it as being too specific, overly focused on one particular identity to the exclusion of a universal reading.

To an extent, it is easy to understand the reticence of these authors to make an explicit connection between the series’ concept and sexual orientation. Homosexuality was only partially decriminalized for men in the UK when the first incarnation of the series was

broadcast in 1973: homosexual acts were permissible for a maximum of two men over 21 in the privacy of their own home, in England and Wales only (Weeks 2016: 175). It was not until 2001 that the age of consent was equalized to 16, nearly a decade following the Tetra Films version (Cook 2007: 211). Furthermore, by the time of the second incarnation of the series, the Conservative government had implemented Section 28 in response to the HIV/AIDS crisis, legislation to ensure local education authorities did not ‘intentionally promote homosexuality’ nor teach the ‘acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship’ (Cook 2007: 205; Weeks 2016: 240). While the policy was targeted at schools, it nevertheless demonstrated the taboo surrounding the depiction of homosexuality in media aimed at children, thus lending credence to the arguments that *The Tomorrow People* is not concerned with homosexuality. Indeed, in the encyclopaedic volume *Broadcasting It* (1993), an ambitious attempt to document all references to homosexuality in the UK broadcast media, *The Tomorrow People* is absent although there are entries for *Doctor Who* and *Star Trek* (Howes 1993: 193, 430-1). This omission is all the more notable since *Broadcasting It* was published contemporaneously with the broadcast of the Tetra Films’ version of *The Tomorrow People*.

So, while the evasiveness of Davidson, Sangster and Condon specifically concerns homosexuality, a more fruitful way to understand the sense of difference that *The Tomorrow People* conveys would be to take a broader focus using the term ‘queer’. Queer is a flexible concept, encompassing not just homosexuality but more diverse forms of difference. Matt Cook has traced the changing shifting meanings of the word, locating 28 separate meanings in the mid-1800s: ‘In the last part of the nineteenth century and the first part of the twentieth these touched eccentricity, Bohemianism and exoticism. Thereafter they signalled homosexual difference more distinctly’ (Cook 2014: 7). Likewise, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has listed 20 contemporary sexuality identities that can be listed under the umbrella of

‘queer’, as the term refers to the complexities and contradictions ‘of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or can’t be made) to signify monolithically’. However, she goes on:

A lot of the most exciting recent work around ‘queer’ spins the term outward along dimensions that can’t be subsumed under gender and sexuality at all: the ways that race, ethnicity, postcolonial nationality criss-cross with these *and other* identity-constituting, identity-fracturing discourses... (Sedgwick 1993: 8-9)

‘Queer’ gives us then a broader framework to challenge normative, white (and mostly male) heterosexual identities, one that includes alternative sexualities but which is not exclusive to homosexuality. Sedgwick herself provided the terminology to describe this shift in approaches to sexuality, claiming our understanding of sexuality is structured around a contradiction, between a minoritizing understanding, that is, a viewpoint that posits a ‘a small, distinct, relatively fixed homosexual minority’ and a universalizing one that sees sexuality as an ‘issue of continuing, determinative importance in the lives of people across the spectrum of sexualities’ (Sedgwick 1990: 1). It is the contradiction between these two frequently held views of sexuality that leads to the simultaneous acknowledgement and dismissal of *The Tomorrow People* as an allegory for sexuality.

The Queer History of *Homo Superior*

This is not to erase homosexuality from the picture. Indeed, if we examine the concept of *The Tomorrow People*, we can see it has always been imbued with a queerness that skirts close to

the explicitly homosexual meanings of the term. In his original pitch, series creator Roger Price outlined the central idea as the existence of *Homo superior*:

Scientists and science fiction writers have long predicted the advent of a Homo superior, a descendent of Homo sapiens who will be better adapted to the Nuclear Space Age [...] In the series Homo superior is already among us. Nature has introduced a new and improved type of Man, so new that the few who exist are all still children. They are the Tomorrow People of the series. Outwardly they look quite ordinary, but around the age of 13 they begin to notice they are different from most other people. (qtd Davidson 2013: 17-8)

The term *Homo superior* had currency in the pop culture of the early 1970s, thanks to David Bowie's 'Oh! You Pretty Things' (1971), itself partially inspired by Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *The Coming Race* (1873). Price had claimed to have met Bowie in 1972 and discussed the series concept with him: 'Bowie was the one [person] who knew immediately knew what the writer was aiming for' (Davidson 2013: 18). Bowie's endorsement of *Homo superior* already lends it some sexual ambiguity; the singer had outed himself as bisexual to *Melody Maker* also in 1972, albeit retracting this statement during the AIDS/HIV crisis (Cook 2007: 191). The term would also have been familiar to readers of Marvel's *The X-Men* (1963-), which follows a similar concept, although the phrase is not used by the heroic Professor Xavier but by the villainous Magneto, who declares his intention 'To make *Homo sapiens* bow to *Homo superior!*' (Lee 1963: 8, 11). However, the term can be traced further back to Olaf Stapledon's novel *Odd John* (1935).

Odd John tells the story of John Wainwright, the titular character who represents a new form of humanity, apparently the next stage in human evolution. Although John lacks the

abilities possessed by the Tomorrow People, he benefits from a vastly superior intelligence and physical dexterity. The phrase *Homo superior* is first used by the novel's unnamed narrator, a journalist and John's friend, when he protests 'I'm only *Homo sapiens*, not *Homo Superior*' (Stapledon 1972: 40). Curiously, the term is little used in the novel, remaining an unofficial category, whereas *Homo sapiens* occurs frequently as part of John's observations on humanity to suggest his separation from the species. However, the word 'queer' also appears repeatedly throughout the novel in connection to John; for example, on the opening page he is described as a 'queer child' (5) whilst 'his eyes were the most obviously "queer" part of him' (7). Stapledon's repeated use of the word provides an insight into its varying uses in the early twentieth century to suggest difference, however it also confirms its underlying connotations of sexual difference. In the chapter entitled 'Scandalous Adolescence', the narrator charts John's sexual exploits during puberty, including experiences with both men and women. Following his seduction of an older boy next door, Stephen, John then turns his attentions to an older woman, Europa. Upon breaking into her room in the middle of the night, 'revulsion and horror invaded him' (52) before their encounter is consummated and John flees. He later explains this was due to recognizing humans as a separate species, but the narrator also reveals that John carried out one final sexual act: 'John told me something which it is better not to report [...] to assert his moral independence of *Homo sapiens* [...] He needed, therefore, to break what was one of the most cherished of all the taboos of that species' (53). The lack of details only adds to the strength of the taboo. In contrast, the narrator is happy to relay that John killed a policeman during his childhood (5). Such evasion, however, leads to a conflation of possible meanings. Harry Benshoff, describing how the Hollywood Production Code came to censor horror films in and around time of publication of *Odd John*, notes a similar conflagration of taboos due to ambiguous on-screen depictions: 'as censorship became more pronounced after 1934, this only increased the connotative queerness

of the genre. “Unspeakable” (or unseen) horrors and the “love that dare not speak its name” moved into close proximity through the silences imposed by the Production Code Administration’ (Benshoff 1997: 36). We see a similar process in *Odd John* due to the narrator’s reluctance to disclose John’s actions. His act could be many things, from bestiality to incest, but given the theme of the chapter we can assume it is at least sexual. As John is repeatedly described as ‘queer’, we can further see how the term is collocated alongside sexual deviance. However, there is an additional category conflation in that John is not only queer but also *Homo superior*. Thus, as well as originating the term, the novel infuses it with an ambiguous queerness at the point of its creation, decades before its use in *The Tomorrow People*.

Yet, it is not just the terminology that suggests a queer connection. The concept of *Homo superior* was not unique to sf. The notion that evolution comprises a hierarchical progression may be traced to the theories of Jean Baptiste Lamarck in the early nineteenth century (Skelton 1993: 7-9). Ideas of evolutionary progression are problematic and need to be viewed with scepticism as they can easily be appropriated, most notably under Nazi Germany, but a more benevolent use of the idea can be found in the work of Edward Carpenter. His book *The Intermediate Sex* (1908) was written to celebrate same-sex desire in the hostile British environment under the Labouchere Act. With homosexuality criminalized, Carpenter was careful with his terminology and used the then-contemporary term ‘Uranian’ for male same-sex attraction. Nevertheless, Carpenter’s evolutionary speculation as an explanation for the prominence of Uranians in society was notable:

We do NOT know, in fact, what possible evolutions are to come, or what new forms, of permanent place and value, are being already slowly differentiated from the surrounding mass of humanity. [...] at the present time certain new

types of human kind may be emerging, which will have an important part to play in the societies of the future... (Carpenter 2007: 6)

This paragraph could easily be slotted into Price's treatment for *The Tomorrow People*, as both share an optimistic understanding of evolution based upon generational progression. While *The Intermediate Sex* is not an acknowledged influence on Price, unlike *Odd John* (Davidson 2013: 17), the work does demonstrate how ideas of evolution circulated and coalesced with aetiologies of sexual difference, again lending *Homo superior* a queerness even prior to being given a name. Can, then, traces of these ideas of queerness be found in the three subsequent television depictions of *Homo superior*, especially when the former UK versions were made in climate hostile to depictions of homosexuality in children's drama?

The Tomorrow People (1973)

The Tomorrow People began on 30 April 1973 with a story entitled 'The Slaves of Jedikiah', written by Brian Finch and Roger Price, directed by Paul Bernard. It opens with a scene of a teenager, Stephen Jameson (Peter Vaughn-Clarke), collapsing in a London market, while being monitored telepathically by three Tomorrow People: John (Nicholas Young), Carol (Sammie Winmill) and Kenny (Stephen Salmon). When Carol expresses concern about Stephen, we get our first spoken description of the Tomorrow People's difference:

Carole: I do hope we find him soon, he sounded so desperate.

John: Well, we all did when we *broke out*. At least I suppose I did. There was no one around to listen then. (Bernard, 1973a)

This is the first reference to the concept of ‘breaking out’, the process of realizing that one is a Tomorrow Person. ‘Breaking out’ is evocative of puberty: not only does it appear to coincide with puberty, but adolescence may be seen as a *break* from infancy, a teenager may *break out* in acne. Furthermore, due to the emphasis on the word ‘out’, the phrase is similar to ‘coming out’, the process of recognizing one’s own sexual difference. The phrase ‘coming out’ was popularized through campaigns by the blossoming Gay Liberation Front (GLF) in the early 1970s, which encouraged coming out to friends, family and employers, and even deployed the slogan: ‘the cottage is a closet, come out and live’ (Weeks 2016: 192). Queen’s subsequent single and pop video, ‘I Want to Break Free’ (1984), a declaration of liberation including possible sexual preferences, further consolidated this semantic link between breaking and coming out in the popular imagination. Even in 1973, it would have been possible for TV audiences to make a similar connection.

The emotional process of breaking out is captured in John’s description of isolation. Again, there are parallels with sexual difference. In the Hall Carpenter Archive’s oral history collection *Walking After Midnight* (1989), we can find similar sentiments in the testimonies of gay men, for example: ‘I was never aware of my difference until I was twelve, thirteen – when you suddenly realize the boys in the playground are looking at the equivalent of page three... But by that point I was used to feeling different’ (Hall Carpenter Archives 1989: 131). John’s statement also has a historical specificity to it, in his lament ‘there was no one around then’. Partial decriminalisation of male homosexuality had only occurred six years previously in the UK. Formal gay social organisations were just beginning to emerge in the open, such as the British version of the GLF in 1970. The young men joining such groups would remember criminalisation; John’s experience, thus, captures this sense of novelty and recollection of isolation.

Likewise, breaking out is portrayed in medical terms. Later in the episode a doctor asks Stephen's mother about his background, querying whether he has epilepsy or mental health issues. Again this echoes the experiences of those coming to terms with sexual difference: homosexuality was removed from the American Psychiatric Association Diagnostic and Statistical Manual the same year, and the World Health Organization only removed homosexuality from its International Classification of Diseases in 1990 (Drescher 2015: 571). As another interviewee in *Walking After Midnight* recalls: 'I remember looking up "homosexuality" in sociology or psychology books and all I could find was that it was a disease. So I was convinced that I had a disease' (Hall Carpenter Archives 1989: 177). In such repressive contexts, to break out, like coming out, can also be seen as a rite of passage, a foundational moment in an individual's life:

...coming out sometimes doubled as a declaration of independence and adulthood. To the extent that individuals equated disclosure with 'being themselves,' coming out shared with growing up the sense of an individual set against society, developing a unique personality in the course of learning to 'take charge' of his or her own life. (Weston 1997: 69)

Breaking out therefore sees an abrupt change in established relationships. Stephen is automatically concerned about how his parents will react: 'What am I going to tell them?' (Bernard 1973a). In episode two, John volunteers to tell them on his behalf, materializing in front of Stephen's mother to declare 'What I am Stephen is' (Bernard 1973b). Stephen's mother appears resigned, although her reactions are not explored. This pivotal moment orientates Stephen away from his family and towards the Tomorrow People, as we see him sleeping and eating in their base while his mother makes no further appearance in the series.

In the real world, coming out presents a risk to the individual and their family relationships: ‘experiences have demonstrated to most lesbians and gay men that the identity presumed by blood ties can indeed be sundered by the species difference depicted in the historical construction of homosexuality’ (Weston 1997: 75). Unlike Stephen and his mother, when Andrew (Nigel Rhodes) breaks out in the 1978 adventure ‘Castle of Fear’, he is met with abuse from his religious fundamentalist father. While their tensions are ultimately resolved, the very notion of ‘species difference’, as used by anthropologist Kath Weston, evokes the separation of *Homo superior* from *Homo sapiens*.

If the above supports a minoritizing reading of breaking out, homosexuality is left unsaid: the central idea is presented within a universalizing framework. In ‘The Slaves of Jedikiah’, Carol finds Stephen in hospital and explains that he is a Tomorrow Person like herself, ‘the next development of the human race’:

As you know, *Homo sapiens*, that is ordinary man, evolved over many thousands of years from being primitive ape-like creatures until he became man as we know him... We’re different. We’re *Homo superior*, but we don’t like to call ourselves that, so we call ourselves ‘The Tomorrow People’.

(Bernard 1973a)

The disavowal of *Homo superior* is curious, especially considering the prominence that Bowie had recently given to the term. ‘Superior’ suggests, however, a species hierarchy, a eugenic distinction that the Tomorrow People combat in one of the most celebrated episodes, ‘Hitler’s Last Secret’ (1978). To assuage this violent prospect, Carol suggests a more optimistic scenario: ‘At the moment there are four of us, including you. But I expect that there are lots of others. *Perhaps every child is a Tomorrow Person but doesn’t realize it*’ (Bernard

1973a). Thus, a minoritizing framework is avoided by offering the possibility that everyone might also be included, a prospect that mitigates the idea that the heroes are literally superior to the audience.

This helps us understand the queerness of the Tomorrow People in broader terms, in that the series emphasizes inclusivity in contrast with normative assumptions. For instance, following Sedgwick's assertion that queerness challenges racial as well as sexual norms, the programme has been lauded for its 'determinedly optimistic multi-ethnicity' (Lewis and Stempel 1996: 184). Whereas hegemonic whiteness is constructed in film and television as a neutral, default position, 'a social group that is to be taken for the human ordinary' (Dyer 1997: 47), 'The Slaves of Jedikiah' opens with a shot of the Black Tomorrow Person, Kenny, on the iconic London setting of Tower Bridge. *The Tomorrow People* would go on to maintain ethnic diversity among its regulars, including Black teacher Elizabeth (Elizabeth Adare), Tyso (Dean Lawrence) from a traveller community, and Hsui Tai (Misako Koba), an Asian Tomorrow Person worshipped as a Buddhist deity. Such diversity harks back to the cultural origins of *Homo superior*. Although Carpenter uses racist colonial-era stereotypes, he nonetheless identifies Uranian comradeship among what he calls 'savage races' (Carpenter 2007: 24). Likewise, the eponymous hero of *Odd John* searches the world to gather *Homo superior* from all races and ethnicities, albeit described in racist terms by the British narrator rather than John himself. In *The Tomorrow People*, the diversity is necessary to avoid the distinction of *Homo superior* from being couched in terms of racial supremacy. Despite this attempt, their leader is still a white man (John) who, although only 17, assumes a position of parental responsibility and frequently condescends the others. In contrast, Kenny's youthfulness and lack of experience relegates him to a minor role. To an extent, this dynamic is remedied in the second series, due to Elizabeth being older upon breaking out, but the

treatment of her character is also troubling. In the adventure 'World's Away' (1975), her race is used as an excuse to relegate her to a secondary role:

Tikno: Forgive me, but are you from the same planet as these others?

Elizabeth: Well yes, why?

Tikno: Then there is an interesting variety of skin colour amongst your species. But I am afraid that there is no one on Peeri with your pigmentation.

Stephen: He means you can't go because you're black. (Kirkland 1975)

Adare's performance of her resigned acceptance suggests that this a common experience. So, while the diversity of *The Tomorrow People* enabled the series to challenge the idea of whiteness as a default, the racial dynamics of power remained uncontested.

Arguably, one of the series' more successful utopian ideals is its approach to violence. The Tomorrow People are unable to kill. As Carol explains to Stephen, 'We're peaceful. We can't wage wars, and we can't kill. Well, not deliberately anyway... It does make us a bit vulnerable though' (Bernard 1973a). This is a contrast to Stapledon's *Homo superior*, where his hero commits murder several times, but a commitment to non-violence can be found in Carpenter's Uranians: 'As a rule the Uranian temperament [...] is not militant. War with its horrors and savagery is somewhat alien to the type' (Carpenter 2007: 66). However, it is more likely that *The Tomorrow People* of the 1970s was influenced by the sixties' counter-culture and anti-war protests. Nevertheless, as his biographer Sheila Rowbotham records, while Carpenter's fame diminished after his death in 1927, interest in his work increased from the 1950s onwards (Rowbotham 2009: 452). Thus, Carol's speech contains echoes of Carpenter's progressive ideals, if not a direct transmission.

The Tomorrow People (1992)

The 1990s version of *The Tomorrow People* is often dismissed or overlooked: ‘To my mind, it’s *The Tomorrow People* in name only’ (Davidson 2013: 314). This response may be because the Tetra Films’ series is, according to its DVD release, ‘a remake rather than a sequel, there is no intended continuity between the original *The Tomorrow People* and the nineties version’. So does this version evoke queerness in the same way?

The first adventure of this version was written by Roger Damon Price (here using his middle name) and directed by Ron Oliver, and debuted on 18 November 1992. Curiously, the series concept is not explained in the opening episode as the Tomorrow People break out afresh: there is no one present to clarify their origins. The story opens with Adam Newman (Kristian Schmid) washed up on a deserted island in the South Pacific, whereupon he discovers an entrance to a buried alien spaceship. This location is reminiscent of Stapledon’s hero claiming an island in the Southern Ocean (Stapledon 1972: 124). In the second episode, Lisa Davies (Kirsten Ariza) teleports into the sea just offshore, part of the process of breaking out. The term ‘breaking out’ is not used here – it would only occur in the final series of the nineties’ version – but Lisa and Adam discuss the concept after telepathic communication with the ship:

Lisa: Why are we here?

Adam: I’m not sure, but it’s been waiting for us for thousands of years.

Lisa: Us? Or people like us?

Adam: The next stage of human evolution.

Lisa: The Tomorrow People! (Oliver 1992a)

Again, we find a pre-Darwinian understanding of evolution occurring in progressive stages. While Lisa announces their informal name, the term *Homo superior* is absent. This is unsurprising in the cautious era of Section 28: in the intervening years, the term had been further connected with homosexuality when the lyric '*Homo superior/in my interior*' in Pete Shelley's 1981 single 'Homosapien' was deemed to be a reference to anal sex, apparently resulting in the song being banned by the BBC (Hilderbrand 2013, 429). Additionally, avoidance of the term here lessens the idea of a separate species. Later in the episode, the show's concept is framed in universalizing terms. When Lisa asks Adam if there could be more of them, he speculates:

Every kid in the world could be a Tomorrow Person. Maybe it's the kids that feel different, feel like they don't fit in. There's nothing wrong with them though, they're just like us. (Oliver 1992a)

While echoing Carol's speculation in the original series, the notion of feeling different is explicitly stated here, reminding us of the original uses of the term 'queer'. Ironically, the experience of feeling excluded offers the possibility for inclusion. This queerness does not necessarily have to be sexual – but it doesn't preclude it either. Notably, the sense of being a Tomorrow Person *precedes* breaking out; rather than the rupture of puberty, the identity is foreshadowed. In the second series, there is no sudden 'breaking out' for Ami (Naomie Harris), instead it is a long-held intuition:

Adam: Ami, you've always felt different, as far back as you can remember.
We all have...

Ami: I do feel different. It's like I don't belong or something. (Horrox and Albertine 1994)

Again, this exchange is reminiscent of the respondents' experiences collected by the Hall Carpenter Archive. However, the gradualness of the process lessens its parallels with puberty.

The nineties' Tomorrow People are more similar to each other in age. Whereas previously John, Elizabeth and Carol performed the role of parents for the younger team members, the nineties' cohort are all teenagers, acting with more independence than their predecessors. This introduces some on-screen sexuality, in particular, Adam's attraction to Lisa upon their first meeting, and his heterosexuality helps mitigate against any overt gay readings in the era of Section 28. The friendship between Megabyte/Marmaduke (Kristian Tessier) and Kevin (Adam Pearce) has a comic queerness to it, particularly when Megabyte disguises Kevin in drag to gain airport access (Oliver 1992a). However, their youthful, pre-pubescent ages allows their relationship to be depicted with a playful naivety, avoiding questions of sexuality. Where breaking out does overlap with the risks of coming out is in its potential to change a relationship with adults. Ami's mother refuses to accept her daughter is a Tomorrow Person, and only after Ami rescues Adam and Megabyte does she acknowledge her status and independence (Leonard 1994).

There are other areas where the nineties' version of *The Tomorrow People* continues the themes of the 1970s. There is racial diversity throughout, with Lisa and Ami both being Black. However, as Adam remains the eldest and more experienced member of the team, the same problematic power dynamics of gender and race remain. More optimistic is the commitment to non-violence, here explicitly extended to animals as well as humans. When Adam reveals he was unable to fend off a shark while armed with a knife, he states: 'I think it's an instinct of ours. I don't think we can kill, not even to save ourselves' (Oliver 1992b).

Again, this is a rupture with Stapledon's *Homo superior*, as his hero consciously plans the killing of a stag as a rite of passage (Stapledon 1972: 81). Thus, even though marketed as separate from its predecessor, the 1990s version of *The Tomorrow People* carries over similar themes, ambiguities and problems.

The Tomorrow People (2013)

Although an American reboot, the 2013 version of *The Tomorrow People* includes many references to the seventies' UK version. The series again begins with a character called Stephen Jameson (Robbie Amell) breaking out; it again features a group of Tomorrow People with a leader called John (Luke Mitchell); and both series feature a computer called Tim and a villain called Jedikiah (Mark Pellegrino). Additionally, character surnames contain extra-diegetic references to production personnel: Jedikiah Price references series creator Roger Price, and John Young namechecks Nicholas Young, who played his seventies predecessor. Furthermore, Young stars also as a new character, Aldous Crick, thereby providing some production continuity. With the series consciously making connections to its forebear, does it also connote queerness in the same way?

The Tomorrow People debuted on 9 October 2013 with an episode entitled 'Pilot', written by Phil Klemmer and directed by Danny Cannon. It opens with a montage of Stephen's daily routine, taking psychiatric medication and attending school, before tying himself up with restraints when in bed as he teleports in his sleep. This cuts to a sequence of John breaking into a psychiatric hospital to steal medical records. While John evades capture by teleporting, he is followed by another group of teleporters who then attempt to apprehend him, initiating a fight. After he escapes, it is revealed that the Tomorrow People are being hunted by an organization called Ultra, paradoxically manned by other Tomorrow People,

which we later learn is run by Stephen's uncle, Jedikiah. John hands over the medical records to his partner Cara (Peyton List), who reveals them to belong to Stephen.

Cara makes telepathic contact with Stephen and directs him to their hideout, where she explains the series' concept: 'We're called "Tomorrow People", and we didn't choose the name' (Cannon 2013a). Like its predecessor, the terms 'breaking out' and *Homo superior* are used:

Stephen: If I'm not human what the hell am I?

Russell: You my friend are a *Homo superior*.

Cara: We didn't pick that name either. (Cannon 2013a)

Again we find the same disavowal of *Homo superior*. However, Cara's explanation here is framed in specific terms, describing the cause of the Tomorrow People as 'a genetic mutation that lies dormant through adolescence' (Cannon 2013a). While this updates the concept in the wake of the Human Genome Project, and adult sf series such as *Heroes* (2006-10), it alters the focus in several ways. Firstly, the condition of being a Tomorrow Person is now depicted in minoritizing terms, restricted to those who possess the genes. The 2013 version frames *Homo superior* in terms of biological essentialism when Jedikiah reveals to Stephen that his absent father was also a Tomorrow Person: 'I was born human and he was born like you. The whole reason I became a geneticist was to understand him and perhaps one day help him' (Cannon 2013a). Unlike the previous two versions, there is no speculation here that any child could be a Tomorrow Person.

Secondly, the emphasis is now shifted from optimistic evolutionary progression to the Social Darwinian ethics of survival of the fittest. Jedikiah delivers an ultimatum to Stephen, to either help him at Ultra or refuse and let the underground Tomorrow People be eradicated:

‘You’re threatening them if you don’t help me contain the spread of your species’ (Cannon 2013a). The tropes of an implacable ‘us’ rooting out a negatively constituted ‘them’, a sinister technological corporation and a paranoid conspiracy thriller situate the series not only in the wake of 9/11 and the War on Terror, but also alongside such sf franchises as the *X-Men* films, *The Hunger Games*, the rebooted *Battlestar Galactica* and the contemporaneous *Orphan Black* (2013-7). The ‘imposed dog-eat-dog Hobbesianism’ (Fisher 2012: 33) upon the original concept results in a notable departure in the 21st century version: it is significantly more violent. Indeed, there are two fight sequences in the first four minutes of episode one, and we later learn John has been augmented to possess the ability to kill (Bee 2013). Thus, this *Homo superior* is closer to Stapledon’s more competitive vision than Carpenter’s benevolent Uranian.

Furthermore, Cara’s assertion that the *Homo superior* mutation is ‘dormant through adolescence’ tacitly acknowledges that this generation of the Tomorrow People are older than their predecessors, having all entered adulthood. Although Stephen is apparently 18 years old, an ongoing plotline of him working at Ultra – occupying much of his day and night – sits unconvincingly with his background as a full-time high-school student. Likewise actor Robbie Amell is clearly older than his on-screen age. With the cast more mature, sex is a more overt topic. John and Cara are already in a relationship, and this is disturbed by Stephen as he and Cara are attracted to each other. Such avowed heterosexuality does not erase the homoerotic potential in the series. Sedgwick has argued that the heterosexual love triangles in early modern literature contain and disguise homoerotic tensions: ‘the bond that links either of the two rivals is as intense and potent as the bond that links either of the rivals to the beloved’ (Sedgwick 1985: 21). Similarly we can find strong traces of homoerotic triangulation in the Cara/Stephen/John relationship. When John discovers that Cara and Stephen have secretly consummated their relationship, John goads Stephen into fighting him.

Later in the same episode, Stephen nearly dies from drowning but is saved by John giving him the kiss of life. As John sums up to Cara: ‘Technically now, we’ve both made out with Stephen so I’m willing to call it even’ (Alcalá 2013). In the episode ‘Smoke and Mirrors’, Stephen telepathically interrupts John and Cara’s lovemaking, prompting John to make a suggestion of a ‘threeway’ (Downs 2014). Cara assumes this to be a joke, but we see no reaction shot from John. At the end of the episode, Stephen is seduced by his female work partner from Ultra, reassuring the viewer of his heterosexuality. Nevertheless such prominent, if unfulfilled, homoeroticism does remind us that Stephen was the name of the boy seduced by Stapledon’s John.

The series is less diverse in its depiction of race. Although there is a group of underground Tomorrow People, there are just four major characters – Stephen, John, Cara and Russell (Aaron Yoo). Russell is Asian-American whereas the others are all white. Any Black characters are reduced to minor roles; the only Black regular is Astrid (Madeleine Mantock), Stephen’s school friend who is not a Tomorrow Person. While Russell does feature more heavily, he performs a subordinate role in the group, often reduced to making wisecracks for comic relief. Thus, the racialized power dynamics of whiteness again remain uncontested. In addition, Sami Schalk has criticized the treatment of Stephen’s apparent mental illness: ‘the series erases any semblance of Steven [*sic*] as disabled by his experience of an often frightening, confusing, and stigmatized differing reality. Instead the show positions Steven not only as hyper-able, but also part of a community of super humans’ (Schalk 2018: 60). Schalk’s criticisms are applicable to all three versions of *The Tomorrow People* since their ‘hyper-ability’ over-compensates for their teenage bodies. Dan Goodley has linked ableism, ‘the stifling processes associated with a contemporary society that increasingly seeks to promote [...] a citizen that is ready and able to work’, to heteronormativity in its promotion of an idealized citizen: ‘capable, malleable, compliant’ (Goodley 2014: xi). The 2013 series

explicitly idealizes a particular body type through its objectification of its male cast members: throughout the series, Amell and Mitchell frequently remove their shirts to display their muscular physiques (which compounds the underlying homoeroticism). However, Goodley observes that ableism co-exists with disablism, which he defines as ‘the oppressive practices [...] that threaten to exclude, eradicate and neutralise those individuals, bodies, minds and community practices that fail to fit the capitalist imperative’ (Goodley 2014: xi). While the previous series valorise hyper-ability, the 2013 series makes the erasure of disability explicit. For example, the episode ‘Girl Interrupted’ (Cannon 2013b) explores Cara’s past as a deaf child who communicates via sign language. She breaks out after an attempted rape, initially fleeing from her family. At the end of the episode she re-establishes contact, revealing that she is now able to hear and also speak. Her deafness (or signing) is never referred to again; breaking out literally erases disability. Such idealization of normative bodies further compromises the queer potential inherent in the series concept.

Conclusion

There is a good deal of ambivalence in the central concept of *The Tomorrow People*. On the one hand, the series promises to celebrate difference. This queerness offers numerous parallels with homosexuality – linguistic, experiential and latterly homoerotic – as well as a vaguer, broader sense of difference that helps disguise these sexual readings. However, the series equally promotes an unrealistic ‘hyper-able’ ideal of superpowers that compromises its potential for inclusion. To an extent, the problematic aspects of *Homo superior* are anticipated in Stapledon’s novel, which ultimately depicts the species to be in competition with, and perceived as a threat to, humanity – indeed, Stapledon’s novel could be seen as a rebuttal of Carpenter’s naïve evolutionary optimism. To compensate, *The Tomorrow People* has – not altogether successfully – attempted to offer a universalizing depiction of *Homo superior*; an

identity that incorporates all races and potentially includes everyone. However, for the 2013 series, the emphasis on white heroes and explicit erasure of disability undermines the flawed-but-hopeful inclusivity of its predecessors. With its explicit homoeroticism, one can view the 2013 series as an example of what Lisa Duggan has termed ‘homonormativity’: ‘a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative presumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them’ (Duggan 2003: 50). However, while it is tempting to read the 2013 series as part a narrative of neoliberal domination, all versions of *The Tomorrow People* reproduce the ableist trope of superhuman powers. While the latter series more explicitly erases disability and valorises white masculinity, it is notable that disabled characters are not present in the previous incarnations either, and representations of race and gender have been uneven.

There is one final irony: while technically superior, the most recent series is perhaps the least successful version and failed to be recommissioned after only a single season. Again, it is tempting to view this as a sign of neoliberal failure, but this could also be because the intended audience is very different, shifting its emphasis from children to adults. Indeed, the 2013 series lacks the comic-book colour palette of its forebears and draws on a narrower range of sf concepts. By contrast, aliens, ancient cults and weather control were staples of the earlier series. However, with three versions across fifty years, I doubt we have seen the last of *The Tomorrow People*. With luck, future producers will take note of problems inherent in the concept, and hopefully present a truly queer vision for the descendants of Stapledon’s *Homo superior*.

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