

“YOU ARE AN EXPERIENCE!”: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF
TRANSGENDER AND GENDER NONCONFORMING CHARACTERS IN CHILDREN’S
ANIMATED SERIES

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ABSTRACT

Western society has slowly evolved to accept the identities of LGBTQ+ people. With strides forward in laws and public opinion, queer people are overall more accepted now than they have been in previous decades. However, there remains a social resistance to accepting transgender and gender nonconforming (TGNC) people. While queer sexualities are more widely embraced, queer genders are not. Public debate surrounding the rights of TGNC people provide evidence to the prejudice, as cisgender people discuss whether transgender people should be allowed to participate in sports or hold any position of recognition in the social sphere. This discrimination can be seen reflected and perpetuated by popular culture. Television in particular serves as both a mirror and teacher of social norms (Herek, 1990; Luther & Legg Jr., 2010), including the consensus around queer identities. As such, this study approaches popular television from a critical discourse analysis framework in order to understand the power dynamics that exist within television communication. Specifically, I focus on the affordances and audience considerations of children's cartoons, which are often the first media socialization that children encounter. Because of this, children are apt to learn social norms from whichever cartoons they consume. When children watch television programs containing positive depictions of queer people, they can learn to understand and respect the existence of queer people, and possibly even understand their own gender and romantic identities more thoroughly. Likewise, children who watch television featuring TGNC people can learn more specifically what it means it means to exist outside of arbitrarily mandated binaries of sex and gender. My analysis considered a sample of episodes from 20 children's cartoons which featured TGNC characters. In the subsequent discussion, I concluded that the series analyzed often represented five major themes: TGNC people as exceptional at all costs, the backgrounded roles of TGNC people, TGNC characters favoring masculinity as a default, the rebellions of TGNC characters, and

utopian series contexts which included TGNC characters. I end by presenting implications and recommendations of the study.

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my child, August, who is the center of my universe. Your smiles and laughter are the motivation that keep me going after the hardest days.

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INTRODUCTION

Hundreds of years ago, before historical conquests of settler colonialism, transgender, and gender nonconforming (henceforth TGNC) people and queer people as we understand them existed across the world unquestioned and often celebrated by their cultures (Nicholas & Clark, 2020). In their respective cultures, these individuals would not be described as TGNC or queer; instead, their respective languages may or may not have names to identify their existence. Today, we have new language to identify these people as members of society whose existence allows others to understand the ever-present nature of sex and gender expectations of all human beings. While many queer people wish their acceptance was a nonissue, or something unquestioned, this possibility was lost with the canonization of a sex and gender binary (Perry, 2018). Dominant discourse would lead each person to a life of complacent cisgender heterosexuality, with disregard or disdain for the queer deviants who refused to follow doctrine. Instead, queer theory and queer experience illuminates the potential for a life beyond the rigid expectations of society. Queer people and straight people alike can now exist in a way that was once unacceptable in Western society. For that matter, straight people may experience the relief and awakening that comes with realizing they are not as straight as they once thought. Regardless, there is something to be gained by everyone in the successes of queer thinking which diverges from narrowly formed roads of social thought. From largely taken-for-granted victories like the right of women to vote or wear trousers, to future victories of acceptance for TGNC people in our society, queer theory pushes for and celebrates breaking from tradition (Butler, 1990). When traditions support a status quo, we all suffer. Through queer theory and queer thinking, humankind can make strides towards a collectively equitable social reality which better serves its population. The present study seeks to be a piece of the theoretical and the practical which can be employed

toward the larger goal of understanding the queer human experience alongside a complicated power imbalance in society.

The purpose of this study is twofold: to continue the conversation in a long tradition of both theoretical discussion and practical recommendations in critical studies. On the theoretical side, critical theory, feminist studies, gender studies, queer theory, and trans* studies often emphasize the interaction between people, culture, and cultural texts. I continue that legacy by providing my own voice to this discussion in a modern context, in which queer acceptance is growing but TGNC people are still facing discrimination. Because of these facts, popular culture and cultural norms are evolving, too. This study is one snapshot of the in-between space we currently occupy. Secondly, I offer my insight and recommendations surrounding the roles of media creators, audience members, and allies of queer people. As discussed more below, I have found that television is making progress in its representation of TGNC, which can in turn push societal progress closer to a queer utopia in which people are not discriminated against for their sex/gender.

Studies surrounding queerness are more relevant than ever. We are currently seeing the growth of the queerest generation in recent history. A Gallup poll in 2021 found that one in six of the current “Generation Z” identify as LGBTQ+ (Schmidt, 2021). Not only are queer identities more common, but also more well-known and accepted, even by non-queer people (Parker, Graf, & Igielnik, 2019). Many kinds of queer people exist, and more of the general population are aware of this cultural phenomenon. This does not mean that queer identities, specifically transgender or gender nonconforming identities, are now completely respected in society. Realizing that people can have a non-cisgender identity may be more common, but it is not without criticism. In fact, people whose identity includes a queer gender identification are

more likely to face criticism than their peers of queer sexuality (GLAAD, 2021b). While some may dismiss transgender or genderqueer identities for their perceived trendiness, these identities provide a valid avenue for gender exploration and societal reformation through the mere act of existing (Nicholas & Clark, 2020). People living with these identities do not do so to follow a trend and may actually help others realize their own true selves. By existing in public, transgender and genderqueer people present others with the possibility to exist outside of strict binary sex and gender categories. The existence of those outside of categorical expectations becomes in and of itself a disruption of the status quo. Because of the massive impact that queer people have on heteronormative ideology, public attitudes towards TGNC people have been a hot topic of debate in the recent past. From arguing over the very existence of TGNC people to deciding whether they have the right to use public restrooms or participate in sports, the prejudice of some people is now more blatant than ever.

The Human Rights Campaign (HRC) reports that last year in the U.S., “25 anti-LGBTQ bills have been enacted, including 13 anti-transgender laws across 8 states. Overall, more than 130 anti-transgender bills were introduced across 33 states” (2021). Those who prefer adherence to gender norms and stereotypical expectations have made it their personal battles to prevent TGNC people from participating in society with respect from their peers. Disrespect is not the most threatening problem, either, when violence is also a very real threat to queer people facing disapproval. Each year, there are a record number of abuses and murders perpetrated against the TGNC community, most commonly against Black, brown, and Indigenous transgender women (HRC Foundation, 2021). There were 47 deaths of TGNC people at the time of HRC’s 2021 report being published, bringing the total of TGNC fatalities to 256 victims since the foundation began its count in 2013. Despite the fact that TGNC people have always been at the heart of

numerous civil rights movements, there is a lack of their inclusion when it comes to discussions of queerness and gender in a wider sense. Whether from their peers of queer sexuality, or from their cisgender straight counterparts, TGNC people face the unique struggle of existing in a society which defaults to sex being a categorical identifier—people are expected to simply be male or female, man or woman. By living outside of those poles, these individuals are simultaneously providing liberatory examples for people in similar situations while also causing discomfort and disruption in the unquestioning thoughts of people accepting heteronormative beliefs.

In one survey, 54% of non-queer people reported that “LGBTQ people make expectations about gender and how to interact very complicated” (GLAAD, p. 2, 2021a). Even in cases where there is not explicit prejudice towards queer people, there remains a discomfort surrounding issues of gender and queerness in many non-queer people. One study found an increased prejudice against trans people in cases where participants had higher levels of heterosexism, authoritarianism, and beliefs in a biological gender/sex binary (Tee & Hegarty, 2006). In other words, stronger convictions toward straightness as default, a preference for power exercised in dominating ways, and sex as determinant of gender made it less likely that people would feel positively towards transgender people. This finding offers part of the explanation for why people may feel negatively about their transgender peers. However, it seems these beliefs can be challenged and even changed for the better. Amid the debates over whether transgender people would be allowed to use the bathroom reflecting their gender, one study noted that framing issues of transgender rights in a positive way has the potential to create positive attitudes about TGNC people (Harrison & Michelson, 2017). This means that the strategy used by media creators in the presentation of TGNC people can have a direct impact on a viewer’s

interpretation of that media. Positive representations of the transgender community lead to more positive feelings about transgender people. In the general population, surveys have shown some predictors of positive attitudes towards trans people (Brassel & Anderson, 2020). In general, cisgender heterosexual men have higher levels of trans prejudice, along with more beliefs in gender traditionalism, and reduced cohesion with feminist beliefs. Cisgender women, even with the addition of higher feminist beliefs, likewise showed trans prejudice. It was the unique combination of feminist beliefs and less gender traditionalism that resulted in less trans prejudice. It is telling that feminist ideology alone is not a predictor of less trans prejudice: on the contrary, people need to have a deeper understand of gender outside of traditional conservative ideologies to embrace the inclusion of trans people (Brassel & Anderson, 2020). A basic understanding of gender inequalities is a good starting point for people to begin to develop a more critical gender lens which can piece apart sex and gender themselves as categories of oppression. The fact is that increases in support for gender equality do not equal increases in support for transgender peoples' rights. Focusing specifically on the participation of transgender people in sports, research has shown several identity correlations to whether someone supports transgender inclusion in sports and acceptance of transgender people overall; Females, non-fans of sports, people with gender-progressive beliefs, and more contact with transgender people are more likely to feel in favor of inclusion (Flores, Haider-Markel, Lewis, Miller, Tadlock, & Taylor, 2020). Additionally, it has been reported that men are more likely to show lower support for transgender rights overall, especially in the case that those men have a strong attachment to their gender identity and feel that their masculinity is somehow being threatened (Harrison & Michelson, 2019). A lack of personal contact with queer people can also be correlated with more prejudice towards transgender people (Norton & Herek, 2012). However, this contact need not

be in the interpersonal sense. In fact, the existence of entertainment media as a cornerstone of home life means that peoples' contact with the outside world need not be limited to the literal sense (Steeemers, 2013). Instead, people can reach out beyond their own experience through consuming media.

This brings me to the current study. My research is focused on this intersection of television as a cultural teacher along with its ability to shift audiences' thinking about minorities, whether that be through exposing those with privilege to stories of the under-privileged, or narratives that speak to the viewers whose identities have been a disadvantage throughout their lives. Between the discursive power of popular culture and the meaning-making of viewers, television has the power to enact drastic change in societal norms (Fairclough, 2003). Likewise, the personal beliefs of viewers play a role in determining which media they consume (Stevens Aubrey & Harrison, 2004), and by extension, impact the success of a given media text on its respective platform. For instance, a queer viewer may naturally gravitate towards series which support and affirm the existence of queer people, thus adding to the overall number of viewers that series receives. The popularity of that series, in turn, determines the type of success and funding it receives, ultimately being a major factor in the decision of television platforms to continue or cancel a series. The more popular a series, the wider its audience, and the greater its influence. This is all to say that the interaction between culture, people, and television makes a difference in the lives of many.

Nowhere is the impact of media more salient than in the lives of children. Their ability to absorb and reenact information is astounding (Bandura, 1977). While this is not a simple "monkey see, monkey do" scenario, it still holds implications for the social norms of upcoming generations. Combined with socialization, the attitudes learned from media in daily life can

easily become norms in the minds of children (Gerbner & Gross, 1976). Because of this, it is imperative that researchers keep abreast with the content and ideologies that the current young audience is being targeted by. To understand what kind of messages children are being exposed to, there is no more direct route than firsthand experience. Thus, the current study consists of my sampling, viewing, and analyzing children's cartoon television programs. And as discussed above, the population of queer people in the U.S. is consistently rising as social norms allow for more freedom of expression in terms of sex/gender and sexuality. Taking this as an important point worth considering, I conducted my research with queerness specifically in mind. While there is a steady increase in queerness in television of all genres, gender-specific queerness is still severely lacking in proportion to the real-world population of TGNC people (GLAAD, 2021c). Additionally, scholars of queer communication are now interested in the connection between media and queer identities beyond lesbian and gay sexual orientations brought to attention by older programming such as *Will and Grace* and *Ellen* (Joyrich, 2014). Interestingly enough, these moments of queerness beyond a binary can be found in children's television cartoons, which offer readings of queer gender in simple, yet nuanced ways that teach children lessons of diversity and self-identity (Olson & Reinhard, 2017; Valentín, 2019). The present study expands on the current body of knowledge surrounding television and queerness in a specific way that highlights developments in TGNC representation on media that directly impact the ideologies of upcoming generations.

This discussion begins with a review of current literature surrounding the topics of theoretical background, television, and cartoons. After proposing my guiding questions, I explain the use of critical analysis as the method for this study, along with my choices of sampling

series. Then, I present my analysis in a series of themes which arose throughout viewing. Finally, I conclude with a discussion of the implications of my findings.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The following literature review serves as both a discussion of theoretical backgrounds informing the current study, along with the dual purpose of presenting current trends and findings in critical media studies. I begin with a brief overview of critical theory and its relevance to the analysis at hand. Then, I discuss how feminism branched from critical thinking to directly address the shortcomings of a society which advantaged one sex over others. In the face of feminism's failure to consider the nuanced nature of identity beyond a white or binary existence, gender theory and queer theory followed, as they do in this presentation of concepts. Afterwards, the review of literature concludes with an exploration of findings in critical media studies that hold relevance to the goals of this research. Finally, I propose the guiding questions for the present study.

The presentation of these theories purposefully begins from a wider historical perspective of critical theory to provide an overview of the broad theoretical strokes informing my current analysis. With a logical lead-in to feminist studies and the concept of intersectionality, I position my current research within ongoing discussions surrounding the social nature of sex, gender, and other common categorical identifiers like race. These theories are useful later in my analysis for the explanation of how masculinity is performed in TGNC people, for example, regardless of their sex. By focusing lastly on queer theory and trans* studies, I situated my voice within the ongoing conversations of queerness and trans existence in culture. These theories all interact to construct the theoretical backbone of my thought process throughout this research.

Critical Theory

Researchers who utilize critical theory do so because of an interest in analyzing the taken-for-granted structures of power in society. It is easier to not ask questions about the

meanings of our thoughts, or our perspectives, to simply exist in a state of acceptance. While it is never comfortable to confront the nature of our reality, one must confront the constructed nature of reality if one wishes to further their understanding of human society. The way we think and speak is intentionally constructed in a societal context to reflect dominant discourses of the cultures we inhabit (Carta, 2019). Our perspectives, sometimes the most automatic and intuitive parts of our personality, are likewise developmentally constructed in a cultural climate. While we rarely think about it, our nature as social beings necessitate growth through social interaction with others. On a larger scale, societal norms form from the agreed-upon ways in which we see, speak, and interact with the world. These social processes cyclically complement one another to the point that any human communication and conceptualization of reality is inextricably linked to all others; our understanding of reality is shaped directly by our experience with our social environment (Fleckenstein, 2007). The shared social nature of this reality ensures that we learn from others, and where those with certain goals are concerned, the social nature of reality is quite the advantage of regimes of power (Foucault, 1972). Knowledge is, in a simple form, the understanding of certain beliefs and facts about reality; the ability to uphold or alter widely held knowledge is granted only to those few who have the material and ideological resources to popularize and standardize their ideas. While anyone can present knowledge contrary to popular belief, it takes an incredible amount of time, effort, and agreement from others to canonize beliefs as truth. The first step in resisting these regimes of knowledge, which use power for the advantage of some and the oppression of others, is in knowing of its presence. Critical theory as a category of social science research provides us with the language and tools needed to question realities that would otherwise be simply accepted.

However, critical theory in the modern sense largely arose from the theorizations of Marx and other philosophers who had the time and ability to discuss these issues with other intellectuals of their time (Storey, 2015). So, while their thought processes were the groundwork of critical philosophy in the popular sense, the ideas criticizing power were coming from the very minds of those who held societal advantage. Regardless, those thinkers understood that the belief of what is good, or desirable, is not inherent but rather socially formed. In other words, we are raised to follow the beliefs of what is normal based on those who have power in society. In the time of Marx, this meant that people worked, unquestioningly, to earn more profits for the rich. This class criticism is still alive and well today in the way we think about wealth and the division of labor in the world. For others, Marx's theories explained that children learn to follow the ethics, laws, and morals of whatever culture they grew up in because their parents learned the same thing. This is where traditional or conservative mentalities might come from: *This way of thinking served us well in the past, it goes, so it will continue to serve us today and into the future.* The most common or most comfortable beliefs are not necessarily the best, though.

While simple statements of what it is to be a good person might be easy to agree on (be kind, do not steal, et cetera), there are much more complicated facets at play in the way we learn to think. For example, the colonization of the United States and other Western countries fostered a belief in European supremacy over other countries (Perry, 2018). In much of this colonization, it also bred the belief that white, Christian beliefs were civilized and proper, while anyone outside of those categories was uncivilized and wrong. This persists today to the extent that many people raised in the same traditional beliefs hold views about religion, race, and ethnicity that unnecessarily enforce racism and other elitist prejudices, explicitly or implicitly. Thought trends surrounding racial supremacy led to barbaric standards like eugenics which played key

roles in some of the worst atrocities in human history. In this mode of thought, humans were considered a breeding stock from which only the very best people—in other words, white, able-bodied, Western—should reproduce. The generational wealth of the affluent accumulated in a similar manner, while the body of the working-class population was encouraged to multiply towards the goal of keeping the market active. Coming back to Marx, he would argue that this drive for reproduction was another way for the elite to use the lower classes: Workers eventually die, so to keep your factory running, you need your workers to make more workers. If you play your cards right, he continues, you end up with even more workers than you had at the beginning, which leads to more profit.

Additionally, the work of Foucault (1972) allowed thinkers to consider less polarizing views of power relations through his concept of power as a matrix. Rather than a limited resource available to a select few, he argued, power is a constantly present thing which we all have varying degrees of access to. Depending on peoples' identities and societal contexts, everyone has the potential to access and exercise power. Likewise, peoples' use of power does not consist only of dominant individuals using their power to oppress subordinates. Unlike Marx, Foucault insisted that power can work laterally. While those with more access to power can certainly suppress competing ideologies, he insisted that the presence of any power of suppression was guaranteed to cause reactions of powerful opposition. So, while some groups can indeed be oppressed, they likewise have access to oppositional power of resistance. Further, groups often exercise power amongst themselves in a way that perpetuates the ideology of the dominant thought processes. This idea of power from below gives way to the possibility of societal self-monitoring (Foucault, 1975). By watching and correcting the behavior of others which we see as undesirable, we perpetuate the ideology of dominant discourses without

requiring those in power to inconvenience themselves with interference or punishment of others. By giving everyone access to variable power, Foucault allowed other theorists to build on the idea that norms are maintained throughout a society, rather than just from those in positions of power.

The critical thinking of those philosophers of history like Marx and his contemporaries allowed for the evolution of modern critical studies as they exist today (Storey, 2015). However, this is not to unabashedly praise their work. Like any historical movement, there were shortcomings and blind spots along the way. For example, nearly all of the well-known critical thinkers of the time were white men. Less widely taught are the critical perspectives of those in positions of less access to power than others, as caused by their symbolic locations in certain identities or groups of society. From this concern arose modern movements like feminism and gender studies, which insisted on the importance of personal identity during other social power formations. While criticism of the dominant ideology is necessary, these movements insisted, everyone must be willing to criticize the most inherent pieces of our self-identity to understand the true extent of ideological influence.

Feminist Studies

The early stages of the feminist movement relied on the knowledge and experiences of women as a counterpoint to the hegemonic norms of misogyny and male superiority (Storey, 2015). The feminist branch of critical theory today has developed beyond the initial outcry to a worldwide phenomenon of thinkers and activists who seek to liberate girls and women from sex and gender-based oppression. However, early conceptualizations of feminism remain cornerstone theoretical pieces of the movement, some of which lacked a more complex understanding of gender, sex, sexuality, and the intersecting nature of human identity formation.

Feminist theory is largely founded from the perspectives of white women. As such, feminist discussion has the potential to forego important discussions of the intersections of sex, gender, and race. While an insistence on cohesion as women is certainly meant for the best, it ignores the fact that white women and Black women do not live the same experience (hooks, 1992).

Likewise, women from other cultures and ethnicities will have vastly different truths than the white women who founded traditional feminism in the first place. Additionally, the use of the feminine as a grounding concept still stems from essentialist depictions of a gender binary which position the feminine and the masculine as solitary, if not oppositional, ruling forces in society. This perspective disregards the possibility of an existence and theory which does not rely solely on gender- or sex-based categorization of the human experience of power and oppression.

While early feminists pointed out their persecution in society as women, they often failed to consider their standpoint as women from a certain race (usually white) or from a certain class (usually middle- to upper-class) (Perry, 2018). The echo chamber of the feminist discussion became a veritable black box of theory accessible to a select few. In this process, white feminists created a false sense of generalizability of their experiences, and by extension, created goals that served only a narrow sect of people who have the potential to gain something through feminism. While Black and brown women, queer women, and women of other cultural traditions could have been offered community and opportunity through feminism, they were largely left out of early feminist conversation. Modern criticisms of feminism (rightfully) cite racism, transphobia, and homophobia as festering wounds to a body of academic work meant to create positive social change (Keegan, 2018; Lorde, 2015). Because of these shortcomings, intersectional feminism was born of a necessity for a more inclusive feminist perspective.

Intersectionality

One key argument made for intersectionality is that it is most powerful in action, or that intersectionality *does* something within the given disciplinary context. Intersectionality, first and foremost, highlights that everyone embodies their own intersection of lived experiences in a culture of identity categories (Crenshaw, 1990). While older critical traditions often drew binary categories of polar opposition (white/Black, men/women, rich/poor, et cetera), intersectionality twists and pushes these boundaries into spaces where people can express the multitude of their human experience. At once, intersectionality allows for an inspection of our place in the greater matrix of identity, society, and power relations that would otherwise be simplified to distinct categories (Foucault, 1972). It shows us not as unrelated check marked boxes, but as complex webs built from our lived relationships, experiences, and place in the world.

Scholars like hooks (1992), Collins (1998), and Lorde (2015) employed intersectional perspectives in their criticisms of white feminists' thought. These writers used their unique position as Black women to critique the shortcomings of feminism using their own experiences and theoretical arguments, arguments which would have never been realized in a whitewashed discipline. Lorde famously criticized the adherence of feminism to whiteness in her discussion titled "The Master's Tools will Never Dismantle the Master's House." In it, she explains that white feminism relies too heavily on the knowledge and experiences of white society, the history of which runs directly in conjunction with colonialism, slavery, and modern racism (Perry, 2018). Additionally, the above theorists contribute greatly to the conversation of intersectionality regarding gender, race, and sexual identity. Their philosophical and qualitative endeavors into research advanced the validity of intersectional perspectives for scholars in future years.

Other philosophical routes take feminist thought out of the library and into the real, lived worlds of intersectional identity. Scholars Anzaldúa (1987) and Soja (1998) bring thought to the “real-and-imagined places” of human experience outside of dominant discourses. Where feminism brought the knowledge of the personal as political, we must likewise acknowledge the theoretical as practical. Anzaldúa (1987) revolutionarily articulates this idea through her borderlands theory, born of the intersectional nature of her upbringing. In a genre-challenging piece, she elaborates on the racial, ethnic, and gendered implications of growing up at the borderlands of Mexico and the United States. In it, she argues that historical formations of identity, such as race, religion, and culture, are largely constructed through social experiential processes. By interrogating the multitude of crossovers between these discourses, she reasons, we stand to gain a more thorough knowledge of human experience from different perspectives. Likewise, Soja (1998) insists on the value of inhabiting a betweenness, or *Thirdspace*, which is neither here nor there. Ethnographies and studies of physical spaces utilizing this concept allow researchers to ask previously unthought questions that push our limits of reality. By forcing our thought processes away from black-and-white binary standards, we can understand more.

Finally, Soto Vega and Chavez (2018) add to the in-between intersectional theories of Soja and Anzaldúa by positing that an intersectional analysis must simultaneously consider both the access to power and lack of access to power that is inherent in the experience of identity. They add specifically that, through embodiments of multiple simultaneous categories, social power can become a more complicated issue than those in dominant positions and those at the margins. They posit the example of Latinx people who may embody a cisgender, straight identity, or a religious Catholic way of thinking. In these cases, they state, a person may be simultaneous disadvantaged as a Latinx person in white society while being advantaged as

someone who fits into dominant categories of sex, gender, sexuality, or belief system. In this way, power is not a formulaic, additive equation that can be easily solved and evidenced by an inventory of identity. Rather, our complex relationships with society, culture, and who we are result in a unique positionality that can be contradictory in nature while still being a valid place of experience. Inspections of the self, along with interviews or ethnographies and surveys, allows this concept to flourish in a space of research; the more complex and thorough the look at the diversity of human power relations, the better. As demonstrated by these scholars, the intersection of gender/sex identity interacts with the racial identity of a person (among countless others, despite choosing these pieces of identity for the present discussion). Placing these scholars and their theories in conversation reveals a discordance in feminist theory, gender theory, and queer theory. Essentially, feminist theory as a discipline still relies heavily on a sex and gender binary, despite its growth towards a more inclusive future. Additionally, feminist theory is still founded on white perspectives.

Gender Theory

Theorists of gender theory and gender studies aimed to push feminism into a more inclusive way of seeing the world. Rather than considering only a person's assigned sex or gender as a piece of a binary gender system, gender studies allows for the removal of gender, sex, and sexuality from its societal pedestal as a “natural” division. As discussed above, gender and sex divisions are ideological norms which are necessary for the perpetuation of human society as a normative machine of reproduction and heterosexuality. The sorting of humanity into two neat boxes of female woman and male men allows for the dominance of one group over the other. As demonstrated through the founding of feminism, this division clearly favors men over women. However, theorists of gender studies seek to explain the societal engraining of sex

and gender on the human body as a way of categorizing us outside the many other pieces of human identity which hold more importance and relevance to our experience as people.

One such theorist, Butler (1990) brought the term *performativity* into the collective academic consciousness. In this concept, gender itself becomes an avenue for power that is accessed by both the one enacting gender and the people surrounding the individual. Instead of a simple belief that we are born male or female, and thus must become boys or girls, the theory of performativity states that we are trained actors performing the role of our gender based on the categories we have been taught. From before our birth, we are already being socialized into our gendered traits. Ultrasounds reveal prospective genital configurations of the fetus and signal the beginning of our marches towards gendered ultimatums. In our divisively gendered Western world, the grainy black-and-white image of a fetus' perceived penis ensures the infant will never be allowed to comfortably wear a dress, while the lack thereof ensures plenty of cooing, coddling, and cutesy attire.

Throughout our entire lives, there is constant communication of and about gender which we must negotiate with our every word, action, and outfit. We are, Butler proposes, always “doing” gender to some extent. It is not our bodies or hormones that dictate gender, or solely society. Rather, it is a complex interaction of multiple facets that result in the symbolism of gender in society, groups, and individuals. Like Foucault (1990), she insists that our conception of what gender is, and what is acceptable in gender, comes from our peers. When we break from norms and perform gender in a way that is unexpected, we commit *gender trouble*, which is a way for people to challenge oppressive social norms. It is from this understanding of the nature of gender that queer theory blossoms. By acknowledging existing possibilities outside of male men or female women, Butler opened doors for other theorists to elaborate on the existence of

queerness in the world. Additionally, gender theorists brought into question the relied-upon sex binary which inscribes us categories based on elaborate biological systems which are chronically oversimplified to fit a conservative agenda.

For example, Salamon (2010) wrote on gender, sex, and the body to reveal that the sexual and gendered experience of people is much more complex than scholars had thought in the past. Indeed, her take on gender as something socially constructed and physically negotiated shows a far more complex understanding of gender than previous recent generations had conceived. The body and mind work in tandem with information from society to construct a unique existence in everyone, regardless of their gendered expression or intent. It is the biological factors of the body which begin the process of gendering from birth, but it is the ever-growing tapestry of experience and life that alters the gender a person feels. Our modern understanding of sex and gender is a direct result of cultural norms, and in other contexts, our understandings would differ. By studying the experiences of people from differing sexes and genders, we can thus see the expressions and possibilities created through gendered action in human society.

Gender theory, while more advanced in terms of understanding the constructed nature of the binary, falls short in the sense that it often foregoes discussion of transgender issues. By sometimes falling back on standard “sex is biological, gender is social” arguments, gender theory runs the risk of invalidating the experiences of those outside of Western social gender conceptions. Gender theory allows us to confront the binary and constructed nature of sex and gender in a way that feminism may not. It allows us to look at gender as a constructed and performed identity category (Butler, 1990) alongside the assignment of sex. Using gender theory, we can discuss the ways that an intersectional identity ascribes the body with sex, gender, and race through our physical and social characteristics. Unfortunately, some gender theorists run the

risk of dependency on the sex binary as the “real” determinate of identity (Siebler, 2012). In this way, the theory unintentionally relies on binary systems of categorization. And, while it may take race into more consideration than feminism, it may fail to consider the intersection of race and sex as it interacts with the embodiment of sex (LeMaster & Johnson, 2019). The major shortcoming of gender theory in the present moment is its shift towards more individualistic and identity concerns that move away from discussions of inequality towards ideas of neoliberalism (Risman, Myers, & Sin, 2018). Queer theory allows for some resolution of this tension. However, an insistence on the destruction of the gender binary, though seemingly desirable, disregards the binarily lived experiences of transgender people who may feel their reality embedded in transitions and/or dysphoria.

Queer Theory and Trans* Studies

Finally, queer theory offers a promising compromise for analyzing the intersection of sex, gender, and race as pieces of identity which reveal deeper workings in a societal power struggle. Formed as the antithesis of binaries and categories, queer theory is especially suited to the deployment of intersectionality in theory and practice (Halperin, 2003). Taken in its truest sense, queer theory allows a researcher to explore the experiences and spaces outside of established norms and definition (Muñoz, 2019). By its very nature, the discipline itself resists standardization and encourages forays into underexplored avenues of thought. While all this flexibility and open-endedness is certainly appealing to academics who seek to go beyond theoretical limits, it remains that this tradition, too, has its weaknesses. As a way of foregoing categories, queer theory necessarily disassembles the binary structures of sex and gender, alongside the categorical laws of other identities such as race. Scholars of queer theory must be careful that they do not invalidate or erase intersectional identities completely in their quest to

escape borders. While race is certainly a social construction, it is also a very real lived reality with very real consequences. Likewise, the destruction of a gender binary system may result in invalidation of the experience of transgender men and women who (seek to) embody a binarily-gendered self through transitional means (Salamon, 2010).

Society is slowly, but surely, embracing the possibility of queerness in its citizens. While historical research shows us a vibrant and diverse past of gender, sex, and sexuality across ethnicities of the past, our modern conceptualization of sex and gender relies primarily on Western colonial viewpoints that dominated human ideology in much the same way that colonial Europe dominated diverse populations during its conquest. Once celebrated by their peers, queer people became heavily laden with labels of illness, perversion, and hatred under the lens of colonial ideology. For an empire that depended on its populace subscribing to strict binaries of sex and reproduction, the possibilities outside of man/woman, male/female provided a threat to its expansion (Perry, 2018). In the ongoing tide of violence in the name of manifest destiny, people and land became property to a regime which held itself superior to all others. For the white colonizer in power, property did not just constitute the things around their homestead; their property was constituted of their money, their power, their land, their family, and their slaves. With these resources, colonizers had the ability to drive away (or kidnap or kill) Indigenous people in grabs for more land, use that land for production through slave labor, and accumulate a status of wealth supported by their family legacy. To this day, generational wealth is one of the major economic imbalances impacting capitalist cultures, as those with money have the power to exponentially grow their fortunes while the majority struggle to scrape by. Beside the material echoes of past wrongdoing, Western culture remains ideologically locked in place by the values of these past settlers.

Critical theories provide us with the tools needed to confront these modern manifestations of historical ideology. Our cultures remain steeped in the beliefs of dominant discourses, which directly impact our internal understanding of who we are and how the world works through subtle pushes toward compliance (Foucault, 1975). Without a critical eye, it is easy to let these entities slip by unnoticed. However, by questioning the unquestionable, critical theory provides an avenue for scholars and activists alike to consider the way power imbalances worm their way into everyday cultural symbolism. Queer theory, which pays special attention to the ways that sex and gender intertwine in society to perpetuate a binary system, proves especially useful in disentangling the role of categories of human identity in the way people can (or cannot) access power. The following sections will detail the basic concepts of queer theory, along with its scope and purpose. From there, recent queer theory scholarship on media will allow us to consider modern discussions surrounding gender, sex, and the queer possibilities therein. These concepts will enable consideration of key issues of queer theory today, which in turn provide recommendations for those who wish to advocate for the advancement of LGBTQ people in society. This turn towards recommendations will directly relate to my work of analysis in the face of gendered popular culture texts.

The pervasive belief in human beings as first and foremost reproductive animals poses a significant threat to the wellbeing and advancement of society. In a culture that values the continual production of new humans to maintain its hold, we receive the essentialist division of male and female sexes from birth. Queer theory allows for interrogation of biological sex categories even further than gender theory. These categories are framed as both absolute and unchanging, to the point that our very personalities and habits can be inferred (often incorrectly) based on the genitals we are born with (Bordo, 2004). Despite the disapproval of two

unquestionable binary categories of sex (Hyde, Bigler, Joel, Tate, & van Anders, 2019), it remains a ‘basic fact of biology’ that one must necessarily be male or female, but never both nor neither. Our sex identity remains inscribed on us throughout our lifetimes: we learn what it means to be a certain sex from socialization with those around us, the words we hear, and the actions we enact. In this way, sex becomes a constructed category in our social script that we must follow to be accepted as a member of society. Our body parts and structure—again, far from perfect indicators of a certain lived category—therefore influence the way others perceive us and interact with us (Butler, 1990). Instead of listening to and understanding a person’s communication, our visual understanding of someone’s sex category becomes a major queue in how we interpret them. In turn, those of a transgender identity are taught that to be accepted as legitimate members of society, we should alter our bodies to fit into the binary sex category we feel more aligned with (Siebler, 2012). In this way, the sex binary has become a cyclical part of human identity which we are inscribed with, inscribe upon others, and may even re-inscribe upon ourselves through a different sex construction than we were previously sorted into (Dozier, 2005). While sex is indeed a socially and scientifically constructed category, then, it plays an important role in queer theory as a complicated body of discourse encompassing the appearance of the self, the subjectivity of a sexed life, and the embodiment of gender (Salamon, 2010). Along those lines, gender is a popular topic of discussion in both queer theory and the general population.

In queer theory, and some related critical theories, the concept of gender construction and performativity is well known (Butler, 1990). With the claim to sex as a biological backbone to our identity formation, gender fits on this backbone in the construction of our social lives and cultural identities. Now understood in its more complex reality, gender was once considered the social aspect to the “true” aspect of sex (Bordo, 2004). Based on sex, people were assumed to fit

into binary gender categories of personality traits, strengths, and weaknesses. Those labelled female by sex standards were expected to enact several personal traits and stereotypes depending on the culture at the time. In earlier iterations of gender norms, women were expected to be emotional, nurturing, and submissive, while men were assumed to be tough, competitive, and dominating. Along with this gender dichotomy came the belief that women must then be controlled or owned by a man to prevent her wasting her potential or losing her way in society—often along with the argument that she ought to follow a mystically religious destiny accumulating in motherhood. Gender misconceptions such as these were the catalysts of historical injustices such as witch trials, fights for legal rights, and struggles over self-determinacy. Adding other socially determined demographic categories only complicated these struggles (Soto Vega & Chavez, 2018). The intersectional experiences of women and other non-male aligned people were largely overlooked if they were black or brown, poor, disabled, elderly, queer, or immigrants. As such, queer theory today still shows limitations in understanding and inclusion of queer realities outside of whiteness (Lorde, 2015) or categories of existence they are not familiar with (Anzaldúa, 1987). The existence of people between or completely outside of categories (of sex, gender, nationality, ability, age, race, et cetera) is thus another conceptual advantage offered in iterations of queer theory. This occupation of a real and symbolic life outside of binaries creates a “Thirdspace” of experience and knowledge beyond margins of the normally conceived (Soja, 1998). Looking from these perspectives, or listening to those who hold them, allows queer theory an imagination and flexibility that other disciplines may lack (Collins, 1998). People inhabiting multiracial identities and lives of spatial movement employ this way of living, along with transgender people, who hold a particularly relevant place in the study of queer theory.

The widespread knowledge of the existence of transgender people has led to complicated discussions around the body, identity, and human rights in the modern world. While queer people are becoming less persecuted because of their sexuality, those who transverse sex or gender binaries are facing more risk than before (HRC, 2021). Yearly, in the United States alone, the rate of murders for transgender women shows the disproportional hatred and violence faced by transgender people, especially Black and brown transgender women. Even though the modern gay rights movement was sparked by the riots of Black and brown transgender and gender nonconforming (henceforth TGNC) queer people during the famous Stone Wall riots of New York, many modern understandings of queerness remain severely limited in racial and gender diversity (GLAAD, 2021a). The erasure surrounding TGNC people stems from a societal distaste for those who diverge from the self-evident categories of sex and gender, along with systematic racism which insidiously erases the experiences of anyone not perceived as performing gender and sex in white way. In fact, when social interactions with TGNC people increase, feelings of prejudice are quick to fall by the wayside (Flores et al., 2018). The reality remains that few people have the willingness or ability to communicate with TGNC people for a variety of reasons: Those of us who identify as queer understand the level of risk associated with TGNC identification, so TGNC people may avoid highlighting their identity to cisgender or heterosexual peers in self-defense. Likewise, these individuals may choose to present as cisgender and/or gay to divert suspicion of gender delinquency (Mayo, 2017). Additionally, a TGNC person may present purposely as cisgender through transitions which perform gender and sex to the extent that others would not clock them as transgender in the first place (Salamon, 2010). So, while the numbers of queer-identifying people rise in both population and acceptance by others, the validity of their experiences remains questioned by a general population which can

claim ignorance of their existence. Those identifying with queer sexualities have received the validation of the Marriage Equality Act and public reduction of negative attitudes, in turn. Those identifying with queer existences in other ways have their identities continually scrutinized and questioned by public debates over their existence and their right to act within the larger societal sphere. This is not to say that queer sexualities have a total freeness over their rights and respect in society, though. On the contrary, queer theory allows us to consider the shortcomings of a society which continues to disadvantage queer forms of desire over heterosexual desire, while simultaneously acknowledging the advances that have been made regarding LGB rights.

Alongside the social and physical identity formation of the individual, queer theory allows us to look at the interpersonal potentials of a queer existence. Returning to our discussion of reproduction as the end-all-be-all human purpose, cisgender heterosexual supremacy relies on the linear timelines of the straight family to uphold its place of power (Perry, 2018). Marriage is one such social entity demonstrating this ideology, as its legal practice initially came about as a way for men to claim women as their own personal objects of pleasure, social status, and reproduction. In a racial sense, it allowed colonial settlers and their descendants to simultaneously control white women through family and marriage while Black and Indigenous women could be literally owned as property and symbolically as livestock (Bordo, 2004), ensuring the genetic material and bloodline of the white man could be passed on for years to come. Though these ideologies have begun to fade, and marriage has taken a tamer aura, it remains that women and feminine-perceived people of all backgrounds are expected to desire men and ultimately create children. To do otherwise is then considered a failure on the part of the individual, as straight marriage and motherhood are held up as the ultimate summit of a woman's life (Anzaldúa, 1987). However, the possibility of queer desire disrupts these temporal and

familial norms. First and foremost, many queer people are faced with discrimination or rejection from the families they were raised in; in some cases, despite not being completely ousted, queer people find they lack identification with their family after coming out. In these cases, it becomes desirable and sometimes vital to form a new family of people who mesh more comfortably with queerness (Muñoz, 2019). These found families then become a place of deliberate love, platonic or otherwise, rather than forced relationships that sometimes occur with a reliance on “blood” relatives. Similarly, the practice of queer attraction, romance, and desire do not rely on societal expectations of heterosexuality or reproduction. While queer people can certainly reproduce or create families with children in other ways, it is not necessarily the first thought in a queer relationship. There is knowledge and understanding between involved parties that identities can diverge from societal expectations. Thus, a queer relationship may facilitate partners that are not expected to be cisgender, or seeking marriage, reproduction, or even monogamy; these entities are all practices of a straight timeline, rather than the undetermined and cyclical nature of queer life which can be started, restarted, and ended at any point. The morbid knowledge of the looming threat of violence over us forces us to keep one foot in the present and one foot in the future, always anticipating that we may see the end of our own genetic legacy on any given day. Standing astride the present like this allows queer people a temporal perspective unlike that of their cis-het counterparts. Likewise, epidemics—such as the AIDS pandemic—disproportionately wipe out marginalized populations. The experience of mortality, and by extension, embodiment, give queer people and scholars of queer theory a purpose of understanding, criticizing, and advancing a society which would once see us exterminated or erased before accepting us.

As such, the scope of queer theory encompasses these major concepts: the ideological and embodied knowledges of sex, gender, and sexuality alongside other societal contexts. It is a flexible body of theory that allows for questions and answers beyond the expected, as it was introduced as a way of talking about queerness that had not yet been acknowledged in popular discourse (Jagose, 1996). Its ability and goal to escape definition in a sprint towards future-facing utopian ideals is what makes queer theory *queer* (Halperin, 2003). It must always in essence seek to deconstruct and reconstruct reality in a way that has more room for difference and exploration of potentialities. It seeks to give voice to the voiceless and offer community to those outside of socially accepted categories (Nicholas & Clark, 2020). Once an intellectual haven for the discussion of gay, lesbian, and bisexual experiences of desire, queer theory today allows for the interrogation of societal structures which seek to funnel people into predetermined lives. Like other critical theories, queer theory takes knowledge not traditionally valued in academia—the knowledge of personal lived experience—and translates it directly into theoretical meaning (hooks, 1994). In this way, queer theory challenges norms and accepted facts to expand the ways we think and communicate. Its purpose is to open our eyes and ears to the experiences of those outside of our own lived reality and to imagine *more* than what we currently see or hear.

Some recent points of interest for queer theory revolve around the socialization of gender and sex through cultural interactions. Scholars have found that upcoming generations, more than ever before, use technology and media as a tool in negotiating the meanings of their individual identities (McInroy & Craig, 2015; Siebler, 2012). As queer sexualities become accepted, they become more widely discussed and represented through media channels. Young audiences can now learn what it is to be gay, lesbian, bisexual, or otherwise queer in their desires, through

television and other forms of digital media (Joyrich, 2014). Research shows these media consumers learn about these identities, and in turn, may internalize or reconsider their own sexualities as a result. This process is of interest to queer theory as it provides an avenue of research that considers the role of media in the socialization of normative binary gender, sex, and sexuality. Modern studies show an overrepresentation of (white, middle class) gay men deployed by media creators as a strategy to claim progress while maintaining a normalized conception of what it is to be queer in an acceptable way (Avila-Saavedra, 2009; Booth, 2011). This brings us to a key issue of queer theory today: media representation of queer characters and queer narratives has pared back queerness to a mainstream and minute difference in embodiment.

Television, Culture, & Queerness

The period of the coronavirus pandemic heralded in a newfound reliance on media for those quarantined at home (GLAAD, 2021b). Unable to meet with the usual crowds of coworkers, family, and friends, many turned to television and movies for virtual comforting company. At this same time, representation for queer people saw a notable drop on broadcast scripted prime television from 10.2 percent in 2019-20 to 9.1 percent in 2020-21. GLAAD, whose *Where We Are On TV* report annually assesses the quantity and quality of queer characters, notes that this is the first decrease in the proportion of queer characters on television since the 2013-14 season (2021c). The social implications for the representation of queer people on television are numerous.

Academics from a wide array of disciplines—education (Craig, McInroy, McCready, & Alaggia, 2015), sociology (Dines, 1995), communication (Abdi & Calafell, 2017; Walsh & Leaper, 2020), film studies (Birthisel, 2014; Joyrich, 2014; Owens, 2019), political sciences (Harrison & Michelson, 2017), and psychology (Stevens Aubrey & Harrison, 2004), to name a

few—have asserted the importance of studying media texts for their role of socialization and establishing discursive norms to their audiences. Hours could be spent perusing the academic writings surrounding culture and media. A more specific scope on media positions the present study with a focus on television, and a focus on television cartoons in particular. Television as a medium and cartoons as a genre therein both have the potential to reach people through their use of humor and widespread availability (Dines, 1995). In a time when television is more readily available and varied than ever before, it is of integral importance that researchers discuss whose identities are being represented (or not) on the small screen. With the continued prevalence of television in its many forms, it remains necessary that studies continue to critically analyze the role television plays in impacting power imbalances (Dhaenens, 2014). The multitude of content available from television and streaming provides infinite potential for both celebration and confrontation of the heteronormative. With the popularity today of streaming platforms, the possibilities for television are seemingly limitless—rich in “individualized viewing practices and self-scheduling of TV” which makes it easier to watch exactly what you want, when you want it (Jenner, 2016).

The popularity of television as a medium has been evolving and growing since its initial invention in 1927 (Eschner, 2017). The affordances of television make it a particularly appealing medium that can draw an audience in through its screen full of vivid images and hypnotic movements alongside the sounds of the story. Its channels, which multiplied in both variety and availability, offered a wide selection of serialized entertainment, informational media, and movies. As television sets became more streamlined and compact, households in the Western world became more tuned in. Nearly every household in America has a television of some sort (Lynch, 2018), if not multiple televisions, and this number is open to interpretation now that any

device with internet access and a screen can become a miniature television. These devices allow for the viewership of modern serialized entertainment and the like, but without the bulk and predetermined location of a traditional television. Whereas families once gathered around the household television set, the ability to fragment the television audience has more potential now than ever. Rather than sharing the screen and compromising on entertainment based on availability, we now have seemingly infinite options. The exponential growth of available channels grew from a select few of cable, antennae, and satellite, to the endless choices of streaming channels today. The streaming affordances of television series now expand across multiple platforms and multiple mediums to the extent that any one series could be consumed any number of ways by any number of audiences. With the content editing capabilities of users, in addition to screen-recording capabilities and bootleg websites, series reach can extend even beyond the intended platforms to social media, YouTube, and fan sites.

From lesser-known indie television to big names in serialized storytelling like Netflix, television has a variety of uses as a medium, along with the important role of giving a stage to minority storytellers. I use the term “indie television” here in reference to television series which are not shown on major television channels via cable or streaming, nor are they showcased in the libraries of streaming services (Christian, 2019). The television series may instead be put in the public eye through less popular means, thus virtually guaranteeing a minimal following unless the series are elevated to popularity through one of the aforementioned media platforms. As the platform through which most series eventually get discovered, indie television continues to provide a space for intersectional representation of diverse creators and stories. But, in terms of popularity, indie television cannot approach the widespread nature of television as streamed today through platforms like Netflix and Hulu.

The popularity of streaming services positions these platforms as a unique category of media hosting akin to television. Despite their on-demand nature, streaming services hold similarities to their media counterparts of DVR (for their archival nature) and subscription cable channels (Jenner, 2016). Streaming platforms allow new viewing practices wherein the viewer is in control, along with maintaining availability of content for far longer than series which in the past would air a few times and possibly never air again. Favorite series could be purchased as VHS, DVD, or Blu-ray, but these options could never match the compilation of content available in Netflix, Hulu, or Amazon Prime Video. In the greater media landscape, streaming occupies a unique point in the evolution of media which continues to expand and diversify, while largely serving similar purposes to its predecessors. However, streaming platforms and the diversification of media platforms have also provided a new opportunity for queer stories to flourish. In turn, discussions of queerness on television can benefit from considering the wider environment of media available under the umbrella category of television (Joyrich, 2014). The minimal presence of queer characters in past television series is slowly being replaced with more representation, both in terms of quality and quantity. For audiences hoping to connect to these stories, the wide array of media provides more opportunities for exposure to queer narratives than ever before. The combination of more content available through streaming services and more queer characters does not seem coincidental—on the contrary, these two factors allow for a larger collection of queer stories in a condensed virtual space.

The early 21st century showed a televised boom in queer characters. Today, streaming services Amazon, Hulu, and Netflix offer a greater selection of queer characters than broadcast scripted primetime television. In 2020-21, there were 141 queer characters in streaming series, 40 more than the 141 queer characters on primetime (GLAAD, 2021a). However, analyses of

these characters and their respective series showed narratives which continued to reify hegemonic masculinity over nonhegemonic masculinity or queerness (Avila-Saavedra, 2009). In other words, the series including queer characters simultaneously featured narratives which reinforced normative thinking, arguably for a net gain of zero progress. Even in cases where queer characters are lauded as progressive, as in the case of bisexual characters on *Grey's Anatomy* and *Game of Thrones*, their queerness is reduced to a normativity that fails to challenge binary understandings of gender and identity (Del Castillo, 2015). These characters run the risk of strengthening simplified understandings of bisexuality, gender, and queerness. One study found that, despite an increase in gay and lesbian characters on television in the early 2000s, these same characters were more likely than their heterosexual counterparts to be shown in sexual situations (Netzley, 2010). While it is important to demystify the concept of queer sex and queer bodies, this fact can be read as a commodification of the queer body as an object of voyeurism for straight audiences. By including queer sex scenes, creators reinforce a fetishized ideal of queer people as sexy and exotic objects of cisgender and heterosexual fascination. They are posited as a curious freakshow that supposedly normal viewers can guiltily enjoy before those same viewers return to their lives ruled by strict heteronormativity. As any minority audience member knows, viewers must always be wary of commodification of minority identities for the sake of a diversity ploy; creators in power have demonstrated on multiple occasions that they will put minimal effort into including a token (Black, brown, queer, disabled, etc.) character to receive media attention, praise, and economic gain (Ono & Buescher, 2001). However, in hope for increased representation of higher value, it is imperative to understand the positives of these representations. And it is important to keep in mind that any representation is a step in the right direction.

Media largely perpetuate the societal ideal that queer people are “just like us,” in that queerness simply means gay sexuality alongside a cisgender and normatively sexed embodiment. In fact, the sexual aspect of this representation is often largely overlooked, as gay characters rarely receive the attention and screen time associated with viewer’s favorite heterosexual relationships. Again, queer characters are most often embodied in conventionally attractive, white, cisgender actors (GLAAD, 2021c). While past pushes of queer activism reduced the number of gay characters being played by heterosexual actors, we remain at a media norm which accepts queerness only insofar as that it does not threaten ideals of attractiveness or binary ways of seeing gender and sex. When TGNC characters are largely invisible in media (Avila-Saavedra, 2009), and when they are present, they are mainly used on narratives of struggle and transition to fit into the drama of the series (Capuzza & Spencer, 2017). Siebler argues that increased presence of transgender people on television “does not necessarily equate to advancement,” as stereotyped individuals will already know from experience (p. 90, 2012). In this way, TGNC identities remain underrepresented and misrepresented in the media. Their existences are usually featured for shock value, like the freakshows of olden days which positioned bearded ladies as a marvel and a monstrosity against the natural order of things. Through queer theory, this issue can be illuminated and challenged in an imaginative and productive way. These representations receive critical analysis from scholars but may in fact be useful to queer viewers in the audiences.

Considering the allowances of today’s audience, the role of the viewer has become increasingly interesting. Whereas all media hold the cultural potential to disseminate and influence societal norms, television holds a unique place between the mystical authority of the movie on the big screen and the videos of social media. As a medium in constant flux—of time,

place, and context—television holds the unique, variable appeal of messages in its legacy and future potential. The context of viewers is so varied and so widespread that the content of television has a reach unlike other media (Hall, 1974). Its messages can capture the attention of the singular viewer seeking escape from reality, or it can breeze harmlessly past the senses of a group running their television for background noise. It can become a habit of comfort for serial re-watchers, and it can be a teacher of etiquette to an enticed audience of children learning what it means to be a human being (Freeman, 2005). Some television viewers may have very little stake in the discursive messages being transmitted through the screen, while some are more likely to be susceptible to the lessons therein.

Taken from an audience perspective, queer characters on television can provide a sort of coping mechanism for LGB youth who may otherwise be lacking a proper support network or queer community on which to build their identity (Dhaenens, 2013). Audiences must find these queer characters in order to receive this benefit, though, as more frequent exposure to mainstream television reduced queer youths' sense of self-complexity (Bond & Miller, 2017). So, television viewing in general was not correlated to improved self-esteem of queer youth, but television viewing including queer characters was correlated to improved self-esteem. The same study found that a reduced exposure to queer television characters also reduced self-complexity. Because of this, it is possible that queer youth who lack notable consumption of queer narratives and characters have a harder time developing a complex sense of who they are. Alternatively, increased exposure to queer television has the potential to boost queer peoples' self-complexity, which is correlated to better well-being. Now, by focusing on the sex/gender aspect of the self in television representation, one can disentangle the interweaving societal expectations surrounding sex, gender, and sexuality which stem from an essentialist binary belief system. Critical thinkers

can apply the liberatory intention of feminism and gender theory, the destruction of binaries as suggested by queer theory, and the embodied experiences of sex/gender as understood by trans* theory (Keegan, 2018).

There has been an upswing in the inclusion of transgender characters, specifically, in U.S. scripted television, accompanied by a welcome shift away from previous transgender discourses surrounding the belief that TGNC people were born in “the wrong body,” (Capuzza & Spencer, 2017). The evolution of transgender narratives on television seems promising in the context of previous trans characters which were positioned as oddities or villains. However, there is room for improvement in the fact that this study found few transman characters or gender nonconforming people in the same series. Across all types of television platforms, GLAAD counted only 29 regular and recurring transgender characters, including two who are nonbinary (2021a). The presence of TGNC people on television holds the possibility to challenge audiences’ understanding of stable identity. The presence of a transgender person on *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, for example, offered a chance for the gay protagonists to reconsider their own perspectives on cisgender identification and the sexuality that so often follows from gender (Booth, 2011). This episode, along with other shows which include TGNC people, necessarily complicate the discussion around sex, gender, sexuality, and queerness. By showing the permeability of gender and sex barriers through the acts of transitioning or identifying with a queer gender, these representations push the conversation further than merely positing gays or lesbians as an opposite pole to straights. These transgender representations instead posit a claim that may seem foreign to many: sex is not gender, and neither sex nor gender dictate sexuality.

However, if done clumsily, the inclusion of transgender characters can cause more harm than intended. In one notable case of this complication, the introduction of a transgender

character to the ongoing *All My Children* drew negative reactions from LGB viewers (Morrison, 2010). The inclusion of this character was purposefully set up to complicate the narrative of the series. Despite the increased support for transgender people exhibited in the queer population over the non-queer population, the way the writers included transgender representation in this series set up the audience to dislike the character in question. In another case, queer characters added to one television drama sought to serve the role of diversity, but ultimately their discourse “function[ed] to serve the very heteronormative structures they seek to resist,” (Dunn, p. 133, 2015). Regardless of past shortcomings in TGNC representation on television, I hope to move the knowledge of the phenomenon further through the present analysis. As discussed in the introduction, this study adds knowledge to the ongoing discussion surrounding queerness and television. Additionally, I want to understand the evolution of TGNC characters on the small screen from the days of invisibility to the days of negativity to today.

As previously discussed, the complicated relationship of gender and sex is clearly apparent in the lived existence of TGNC people (Muñoz, 2019). When theorizing about embodiment and symbolic representation of TGNC identities, queer theory faces the complicated task of parsing sex and gender binaries in a way that simultaneously deconstructs and validates. For example, an overzealous queer theorist may push for a societal disregard of binaries existing or ever being present in the first place (LeMaster & Johnson, 2019). While this is appealing on some level, other queer theorists will insist that the existence of the binary remains an important touchstone in the human history of culture surrounding gender, sex, and sexuality. With the binary systems are far from ideal, they hold a specific place in the conceptualization of queerness, and by extension, queer theory, that cannot be erased. In the cultural construction and normalization of these binary categories, the possibility for resistance was created (Foucault,

1972). It is this (de)constructive potential that queer theory thrives on today (Jagose, 1996). Its reliance as a discipline on prying apart the border walls of categories and norms finds its purchase in the initial construction of norms. Its usefulness and purpose are most glaringly apparent upon encountering ways of thinking which claim essentialism. The binary sex and gender system is one such essentialist ideology that queer theory utilized in its development.

By scaling, deconstructing, and reconstructing the discourses around male/female sex and man/woman gender assumptions, queer theory has provided queer people today with the language and potential to articulate their experiences and queerly gendered and sexed individuals. One can understand the inextricable link between sex and gender, and between the body and culture, because those divides were socially introduced to quash the presence of queerness outside of those borders (Perry, 2018). It is this very tension which stands at the center of major debates within queer theory today. The tension between sex, gender, sexuality, and binaries/spectrums of identity allows us to understand the directions queer theory could be heading as a discipline and humans overall as a society. All things considered, the inclusion of intersectionality alongside queer theory is a necessary complement for research purposes. Scholars should not assume that any one category of experience is universal; the way our multitude of identifications and socializations interacts is far more complex than any one monolithic concept of social science can hope to capture. To fully understand what it means to embody an intersectional identity, researchers must be willing to reach beyond the philosophical limits of what they know to be true (Lorde, 2015). Through interdisciplinary communication and theorizations, the conversation of social science and human communication will continue to develop in new and exciting directions, starting from this intersection.

In analyzing TGNC characters, both academics and the general audience can see what it means to disidentify with the many television characters who are often some combination of straight, cisgender, white, young, attractive, thin, able-bodied, and affluent. This moves away from default categories of identity provides a space for queer viewers to consider the space between their own experiences and dominant cultural experiences (Eguchi & Asante, 2016). By seeing differences between identities, viewers can understand more about the “others” they may encounter each day (Oliver, 2001; Padva, 2008). In the case of this intercultural phenomenon, the more empathetic the depiction of TGNC experience, the better. Across different cultures and different media, queerness understood through a subjective experience, rather than as an object, is a valuable piece of knowledge for resistance to dominant oppressive discourses (Yep, 2013). Queer stories told from a place of truth, rather than a place of voyeurism or shock-value, are far more likely to draw feelings of connection from their audience. These insights further demonstrate the importance of television, and media overall, in the grand scheme of culture.

From small-scale intrapersonal identity work to large-scale social influence, media provides an important piece of the culture puzzle. Culture determines who we are and how we interact with the world. The way we interact with our culture, cultural artifacts, and gender directly impacts the way we live our lives, both in the gendered sense and the most basic sense of the day-to-day (Butler, 2009). The salience of gender and sex identities in our Western culture makes any piece of media subject to a consideration of its gender and sex representations. Often unintentionally, gender and sex play a large role in the creation of media. Our sense of gender and sex as certain identifiable characteristic and symbolisms makes it impossible to avoid gendered messages in media. Creators must make the conscious choice to include queerness in their art, lest they default to normative forms of sex, gender, and sexuality which are largely

posited as the natural state of human beings: male or female, man or woman, straight or gay (Zornado, 2008). These pieces of identity are overall irrelevant to whether a general audience feels a connection to the media they consume. Regardless of whether there is queer representation in a piece of media, audiences are likely to identify with human nature and power struggles present in a story. On-screen media has the unique potential to invoke certain moods or feelings in their viewers (Mulvey, 1999). Queer characters or not, television will have an impact. As it stands, previous television trends created an impact on audiences in that they simply followed expectations to reinforce dominant heteronormative ideologies. Now, the fact that TGNC characters are more common means that there is more potential for audiences to react and interact with the idea of gender outside of the normative binary. People continue to watch television but are given more chances to understand queerness through the choices of creators improving the trends in queer representation. It can be fascinating and even liberating to see a celebrity acting out a queer story on television. In the case of cartoons, though, media affordances make the space of exploration even more vast.

Queer Representation on Children's Television

Children, namely, are a highly susceptible audience of the media. They are more likely than adults to learn behaviors from media, as demonstrated by countless audience studies which hope to understand the connection between media consumption and related consequences in the real world (Bandura, 1977; Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Gerbner, Gross, Jackson-Beeck, Jeffries-Fox, & Signorielli, 1978). Since children are the upcoming generation which will make major societal decisions, it is important to understand the discursive nature of the content they are habitually consuming (Keys, 2016). If children are being socialized to believe the aforementioned dominant discourses, they are learning to value the identities of heterosexual,

cisgender, able-bodied, white lives more than those of anyone who may deviate from those normative identities (Oliver, 2001). Thus, the perpetuation of dominant discourses would ensure its hold on our societal belief systems in the exact way predicted by critical thinkers of the past. The theory of those with means controlling societal power would duplicate itself in the control of mediated messages by a select few wealthy people who have the final say in what messages are broadcast and which are foregone (Storey, 2015). Through consumption of this content, audiences would learn to surveil their peers for deviant behavior which they could punish through judgement and ostracism (Foucault, 1975).

On a more specific level, audiences would clearly see which identities are favored as worthy of media attention and which are unworthy. Research consistently shows mediated messages in children's television series, particularly, which show a clear favoring of dominant discursive beliefs. Female characters, for example, are far less present in children's cartoons, to the extent that one study noticed similar absence of girls and women on television in two separate studies done 20 years apart (Thompson & Zerbinos, 1995). Another study noted this disparity, along with the traits of all characters favoring masculine aspects over feminine aspects (Stevens Aubrey & Harrison, 2004). Even in the presence of female characters, they noted, these girls were more likely to portray masculine motivations, which were in turn favored by the young audiences who regularly consume these programs. The deployment of male characters with feminine characteristics was rare, and when it did occur, often embodied a humorous or negative tone (Dennis, 2009; Kelso, 2015). In television meant for audiences of a wider age range, the presence of explicitly LGB-Q characters—the T being discussed in more detail below—is few and far between (Avila-Saavedra, 2009; Joyrich, 2014). In fact, even in the presence of queer characters, researchers see a consistent depiction of homonormativity: A

heterosexual-esque normativity so pervasive that it could be seen directly echoed in the narratives of queer characters (Booth, 2011). This symbolism can be discouraging for queer audiences hoping to find some semblance of support or identification in their media escape (Bond & Miller, 2017; Dhaenens, 2013), or even result in a complete lack of registering the presence of queer symbolism amidst the heteronormative onslaught (Dhaenens & Van Bowel, 2012). For example, in one study, the author concluded that even queer-focused television had “nothing queer about [it],” (Avila-Saavedra, p. 5, 2009). While characters may be explicitly gay in some cases, they often reinforce the dominance of hegemonic masculinities and heterosexual practice.

Some research, however, has pointed to a potential hopeful upward trend in gender inclusion when it comes to children’s television, specifically. Here lies the “T” which was lacking in the previous section: Gender norms are being questioned in youth television series to the extent that there are now several examples of characters which embody a queer gendered identity. *Adventure Time* (2010-2018), a popular animated series amongst both children and adults, had several queer-coded characters with which audiences could identify (Jane, 2015; Olson & Reinhard, 2017). In addition, Cartoon Network offered other series which challenged stereotypes and norms. *Steven Universe* (2013-2019), another series with a large and diverse audience, had several queer romances and dozens of characters whose gendered performance pushed the normative limits of the binary (Valentín, 2019; Vogt, 2019). While TGNC representation onscreen is far from flawless (Capuzza & Spencer, 2017), it seems that some networks are beginning to understand the value of intersectional identity inclusion in their programming—whether that value is a moral one or an economic one (Christian, 2019). From these characters, children are learning the potential to exist outside of the rigid gender binary of

normative society (Brassel & Anderson, 2020). In doing so, they are resisting decades of oppression and injustice which plague our society presently (Craig et al., 2015). Children are given the potential to be something other than the expected mix of identity categories, a queer potentiality unlike we have seen in societies following colonial takeover. Additionally, in the media presence of queer symbolism and nonnormative discourses, even straight audiences are given a concept of the possibility of TGNC people (Marwick, Gray, & Ananny, 2014).

Both series mentioned above, *Adventure Time* (2010-2018) and *Steven Universe* (2013-2019), occupy the genre position of a fantasy cartoon, which holds the unique position of being historically complementary to queerness (Dhaenens, 2014). Cartoons, like fantasy, have the artistic affordances which allow for realities beyond physical lived humanity. They occupy a creative space for the building of new narratives and new worlds. Cartoons—their narratives, characters, and fictions—are spaces to explore, imagine, and enact gender and identity. They (re)present embodiment of the human experience outside of reality, a space which exists outside of literal time and location. The affordances of television and other media which host these texts therefore become simultaneously outside of embodiment and pre-embodiment, as places where lived experiences can be retold, and new experiences can be absorbed by those spectating. Cartoons likewise exist outside of straight time, in a sort of queer time which does not rely on the linear progress of child to adult, adult to couple, and couple to family (Needham, 2008). Cartoon imagination and fiction are a space of rejecting the polar, linear reason of culturally constructed reality; time and space are at once imploded and exploded in a supernova of simultaneous nothingness and totality.

The queer potential of fantasy in the face of an exploding digital age also holds negative possibilities, too, wherein transgender people who sought their identities amongst the binary may

feel lost: “The Digital Age has obliterated the transqueers who embrace the borderlands of gender fluidity and replaced it with ‘gender as consumption,’” (Siebler, p. 96, 2012). In this digital age, it is possible that gender as a consumer object can take subjectivity away from experience. In cartoons, we may see the queerly gendered character become a neutered object. Animated, fictional characters embody a neutral way of being queer, wherein nakedness is not only rare, but discouraged by virtue of television laws and ethics. Similarly, the “biological sex” of a cartoon character is nonexistent. However, it remains that genuine queer characterization is possible in these cartoon worlds which seek to educate and entertain young viewers, as opposed to cartoons aimed at older audiences, which may fall back on media norms of ridicule when it comes to queer representation. Removing the possibility of overt sexualization allows TGNC characters to exist in a discourse which does not pander to voyeuristic cis het tendencies that may otherwise inquire about the “biological sex” of the TGNC person in question. Fictional cartoons provide visual affordances that can circumnavigate our human tendencies to categorize humans based on appearance (De Lauretis, 1987), which gives the possibility to (re)present things beyond reality. While we may categorize a person on the street based on the perceived presence of gendered markers like breasts, body hair, or height (Dozier, 2005), cartoons are another step removed from face-to-face or face-to-actor experiences of everyday or live-action media. The use of visuals and art are the primary means with which to relate to the human viewer, with characters becoming relatable through their representative nature. In the deployment of unique characters, creators are challenging the past myth of the blank slate “every man” protagonist. Instead of another young, white, male protagonist to appeal to young, white, males in the audience (Schmuckler, 2006), series are offering validation and possibility to the existence different intersectional identities.

The importance of these images and their accompanying words cannot be overlooked. In fact, the act of looking holds a powerful place in the history of critical studies (hooks, 2003). Cartoons which rely on created images build a queer space of looking where audiences can at once challenge dominant discourses and dare to define themselves outside of boundaries. Visuals give us an understanding of things beyond our immediate reality (Rose, 2012), and words hold a powerful cornerstone in the construction of reality, too (Fairclough, 2003). By looking at ourselves and others, we build an identity and understanding of the meaning of humanity. When others look at us, we see the possibility for human connection and human judgement, as well (Foucault, 1972). The representation of reality on the small screen creates identity building-blocks that audiences can integrate into their experiences to round out how they understand themselves. In this way, identity can be created “not outside but within representation,” (Hall, 1997). It is inside representation of ourselves and of others that power holds immediate sway. The act of looking can be taken as a judgement or a punishment, as a sort of action which asserts the looker’s power over the one being looked at (Mulvey, 1999). As so succinctly put by the late groundbreaking Black feminist thinker, bell hooks: “There is power in looking.” (p. 115, 1992).

The current analysis defines *cartoons* as an animated televised medium which relies on artistic depictions of narrative and character created using drawing, computer images, and more, all outside of the bounds of recording a series using a live cast (Beckerman, 2003). Simply put, the resulting images are not humans, but art of some kind. Because of its evolving place in culture, the unique nature of animated television series can be understood as a complex combination of media evolution, art history, and cultural interaction (Mittel, 2004). Their genre, discursive norms, and conventions are all impacted by their historic appeal to a wide audience. They are an art form which purposely appeals to viewers of all ages: children can enjoy the

combination of dynamic images and engaging music, while older viewers can follow the narratives and the humor of the scenes. Though initially introduced in the context of theaters, cartoons are now vastly popular as a television medium of the home. Cartoons are meant to be an accessible form of entertainment that viewers can enjoy in comfort. The representative nature of the objects and characters on-screen provide a buffer between the viewer and humanity, as they place drawings (or computer imaging, among other forms) as the subject of the narrative. This removal from human actors provides a space where producers are afforded greater creativity, and viewers are granted greater imagination. As such, television cartoons allow us to think and exist outside of our usual mindset. This makes them a rich venue for creation and consideration in relation to queerness, which exists outside of the normative ways of being that the so-called “normal” people of the world inhabit through their own daily lives. Cartoons exist in the world of the blank page wherein any feat, independent of norms and laws, is possible.

In some cases, cartoons wield a wide appeal to all kinds of audiences due to their humorous nature and simple animation style. Others take more intentional approaches to the target audience. Such animated series intended for adult audiences like *Family Guy* or *The Simpsons* have embraced satirical commentary on social issues like queer rights. The multilayered nature of approaching serious political topics from a humorous standpoint gives potential for viewers to read the representations in multiple ways (Dhaenens & Van Bowel, 2012). So, while some audiences may see the jokes as criticism of queer people and their social struggles, others may read the same jokes as cheeky critique of social inequality. In this way, a whimsical medium can quickly become a serious context. At the same time, television and fictional spaces let creators posit possibilities of utopian worlds in which inequalities do not exist or are remedied through themes of social justice (Abdi & Calafell, 2017). The narratives and

characters of animated series can escape their creators' existence in a world of war, suffering, and inequality. Regardless of the intention, these pieces of media communicate more than words or other television mediums can. Cartoons bring the ability to tell artistic stories about everything from simple facts to complicated social issues, whether their stance is explicit, satirical, or more subtle. While art has always been a tool of social interaction, cartoons were not always places that enabled social justice. Specifically, censorship and media regulation prevented creators from focusing on queer rights in explicit ways (Joyrich, 2014). Until very recently, it was not even legal to include queer characters in cartoons.

Queerness in cartoons meant for children or family audiences was severely limited until the 1990s (Fisher, Hill, Grube, & Gruber, 2007), due to a combination of media laws and social norms in the years prior. However, even with the ability of creators to legally include queer characters now, queerness in children's cartoons is still far from commonplace. Despite this absence, scholars know that cartoons play a role in children's understanding of gender, sex, and sexuality (Bond & Miller, 2017; Craig et al., 2015; Dennis, 2009; Stevens Aubrey & Harrison, 2004; Thompson & Zerbinos, 1995). As a popular form of media for young people, cartoons teach their viewers lessons about the world around them. In the case of sex, gender, and sexuality, and the only recent development of social norms toward acceptance of queer identities, it can thus be posited that cartoons have largely served as a socializing agent towards the heteronormative.

Since there are few queer characters on cartoons, children have few opportunities to learn about identities that run counter to dominant discourses. Stevens Aubrey and Harrison (2004) conducted two studies which considered both analyses of television content and audience impact. They found through sampling children's favorite television programs that male characters were

more positively represented in a quantitative and qualitative sense. Male characters were both more common in terms of gender ratios and depicted more positively as being strong, assertive leaders. In their study of the children whose favorite television programs had been sampled, they found that this preference for male characters and masculine traits influenced children's preference for male stereotypical behavior and female counter stereotypical behavior. So, not only was the sampled population more often and positively exposed to male representation, but that fact had an impact on which human traits they showed more positive feelings towards. Another analysis of multiple children's animated series noted that the presence of queer themes in cartoons often appears subtly, to the point that some viewers may overlook their queer nature entirely (Dennis, 2009). However, this analysis did not note any explicitly queer content in the series, which signifies a possibly cautious presence of queerness in cartoons at that time. Perhaps creators in the early 2000s were still wary of the backlash against queer characters from conservative viewers or those who preferred the straight-washed cartoons of the recent past. Fortunately, creators are becoming bolder in their choices of inclusion.

Modern cartoons like *Steven Universe* and *Adventure Time* are progressing from their predecessors in terms of representing race, gender, and disability in positive ways (Valentín, 2019; Vogt, 2019). In *Adventure Time*, specifically, there are several characters whose identities and storylines offer representation of gender possibilities outside of a strict binary (Jane, 2015; Olson & Reinhard, 2017). This shows a somewhat hopeful look to a future where more creators more often dare to put queerness into children's programming. GLAAD (2021a) highlights the untapped potential for further growth in queer representation on programming aimed at children or family audiences. Children and families need to be exposed to more ideas of queerness, both for the sake of visibility and self-understanding. In understanding queerness, exposure to new

possibilities is a powerful way for us to reconsider normativity in human identity (Halperin, 2003). These representations allow viewers to question why normative ideas may exist in the first place. Absorbing TGNC perspectives and representation also allows people to learn about a wider range of identities and experiences (Mayo, 2017).

To some, this mediated contact with the other can reduce stigma, confusion, and prejudice; to others living through similarly gendered/sexed experiences, this contact can feel like support, understanding, and liberation (LeMaster & Johnson, 2019). Queer viewers can feel seen, while straight viewers can learn. Consuming queer narratives can build understanding and acceptance for the self and for others, whether the viewers are queer or not (Marwick, Gray, & Ananny, 2014). It is known that neither sex nor gender are binary experiences, and it is known that this truth can only improve the condition of a normatively binary society (Hyde et al., 2019). Moving away from heteronormativity can improve society for everyone. If people consider the possibility to exist outside of strict categories, they free themselves from stereotypes and gendered expectations that may be unnecessarily complicating their lives on the individual, interpersonal, and societal level (Vogt, 2019). In learning to accept each other's identities beyond norms, and learning to accept our own intricacies, people can only change for the better.

So, queer people in Western society are being accepted more widely by the general population. At the same time, TGNC still face disproportionate levels of discomfort, misunderstanding, and prejudice from their cisgender counterparts. This prejudice can be reduced to exposure of queer identities, which includes the specific case of exposure to TGNC people reducing negative attitudes towards TGNC people. As previously noted, one in six people in Generation Z is queer in some way, meaning that many of us have daily contact with queer people (Schmidt, 2021). However, not all of us have access to relationships or conversations

with queer people, especially in our increasingly mediated world. Thus, our increased exposure to the media means that television is an important socializing agent in this time of isolation from society. To understand what sort of messaging about queerness is being taught to upcoming generations, we must consider the places of queerness that exist outside of binarily-gendered characters. It is from this knowledge that I posit the following guiding questions: *How are the discourses of children's cartoons representing TGNC people? And, how are the visuals of children's cartoons portraying TGNC people?*

METHODS

Because of the unique technological affordances of television, and multifaceted complexity of its appeal, analyses of television are well-served by consideration of its many parts. By combining the discursive and visual nature of television texts, media scholars are given the opportunity to truly inspect the medium for its every detail. Using critical analysis to understand both the discourses and visuals of cartoons, I conduct my research in the richest detail possible. In the following discussion, I will present the method, discussing its theoretical underpinnings, tools, uses, strengths, and weaknesses.

Foucault's concepts of discourse and power allow for the research we are currently discussing (1972). To successfully question the norms of our culture, it must be acknowledged that there are discursive underpinnings to every given meaning. Our every social interaction provides an opportunity to look more closely at what our culture deems normal and ask why these norms exist in the first place. Critical discourse research can be done on the individual and societal level, from the philosophical musings of ancient Greece to the economic interrogations of Marxists (Storey, 2015). It stands to reason, then, that critical discourse analysis is a useful way of researching the cultural artifacts we are so interested in consuming today. Critical discourse analysis gives us the tools needed to question the unquestioned, and to think the unthinkable. It gives us the language to confront seemingly ubiquitous pieces of daily life that would otherwise go unnoticed. Critical work on language and society itself remains one such avenue of research (Fairclough, 2003). One modern way of deploying critical discourse analysis that is especially relevant is the critical analysis of media. In our tech-obsessed culture, it is normal to have more media interactions than human interactions in daily life. From our smartphones waking us up, to the podcast or music we listen to in the car, to the endless

advertisements we try to tune out, the media is our constant companion. Employing the logic of Marx, Foucault, and earlier social critics leads to the realization that media is unquestionably worthy of a closer look to determine its place in cultural meaning-making and power.

As such, critical media theory provides researchers with a wide variety of perspectives and potential to confront the cultural artifacts that people interact with (Rose, 2012; Storey, 2015). Discourse analysis is one useful tool for understanding the social nature of communications alongside their nuances of specific words or phrases (Fairclough, 2003). More specifically, critical discourse analysis takes the social inspection of discourse analysis a step further and demands an interrogation of the cultural powers working behind the scenes of those social messages which are present in media. Critical discourse analyses of media allow us to confront the normalized pieces of our mediated world and ask what their role is in the power structure of society. For Foucault, these pieces of media were the texts of history and academia which showed a unified discourse of power imbalance. These cultural artifacts betrayed the power structures which allowed them to exist, leading to ability of critical research to understand the misuse of power in these contexts. For some researchers, the media they research may be newspapers, photographs, or books. All of these media can be productively considered through the lens of critical discourse analysis (Rose, 2012). This method of research puts texts and artifacts under a microscope and reveals the meanings, connections, and power within their contents. While media may be analyzed closely in terms of form and grammar, critical discourse analysis takes the literal artifact and seeks the figurative social meanings within it (Fairclough, 2003). Critical discourse analysis gives researchers the tools to understand how texts, meanings, and power work together with social norms to create our understanding of the world (Carta,

2019). By extension, critical discourse analysis can lead to social understanding and social change.

Like any other method, critical discourse analysis comes with inherent strengths and weaknesses. It serves as an excellent tool for close readings of texts, questions of social norms, and considerations of power. However, it lacks the generalizability and objective reputation of other research methods. While critical discourse analysis is a valuable tool in social science research, especially for media researchers, it is not an overall solution to all social science problems. Critical discourse analysis has the undeniable advantage of scrutiny. It is a tradition of paranoia and microscopic proportions, always encouraging us to ask more detailed questions of the text at hand (Sedgwick, 1997). In this way, it is unmatched in its use for close reading of human communications. Likewise, it provides a chance to question societal norms which might otherwise go unquestioned. As stated above, Foucault (1972) insisted that the unities of discourse were what made them seemingly impenetrable monoliths of knowledge. Of course, to the critical researcher, this means they are even more worthy of deconstructing. Critical discourse analysis, then, provides the metaphorical wrecking ball (or chisel, depending on the approach) for taking apart the meanings of social structures and their association norms. Along the way, critical discourse analysis also allows for confrontations of power, which are largely invisible in society outside of a critical eye. Due to this advantage in particular, critical perspectives can be a flexible complement to other methods, not just discourse analysis. Any researcher can take their work one step further by taking a critical angle to their questions and asking who is being advantaged or disadvantaged by the normalized messages of a culture.

However useful critical discourse analysis may be, it comes with its weaknesses, too. Perhaps most glaringly is the subjective nature of the method, which allows for questions of

norms and power in the first place. While a subjective standpoint in research provides experience and background for a researcher's critical work (Collins, 1998), it may also provide a weakness which betrays it in the face of more quantitative methods. Objectivity and generalizability are the main places of lack in discourse analysis, which often relies on the interpretations of a single researcher. Quantitative methods, which rely on the "hard" facts of data and numbers, are more widely applicable to the larger population. Likewise, they are more vulnerable to methodological scrutiny from those who want researchers as far removed from the work as possible. So, while critical perspectives can be a useful complement to other methods, they are by no means the only tool for social science research. A multifaceted approach to critical discourse analysis can allow for a more thorough, more data-rich analysis. Namely, the use of critical visual analysis as part of my method can bring my critical discourse analysis a step further in understanding the meanings and social norms of media texts.

When analyzing media, a researcher must remember that linguistic, grammatical, and discursive meanings are not the only pieces worth considering (Fairclough, 2003). In fact, the visual aspect of critical analysis is equally important to the understanding of media, and by extension, societal norms (Ludes, Nöth, & Fahlenbrach, 2014). While words and their meanings certainly hold an important place in our understanding of the world, the things we see are powerful pieces in the construction of our reality. The subjective nature of language seems obvious when confronted by social science research, but the role of vision in socialization may go largely unnoticed (Fleckenstein, 2007). The layers of meaning in what we choose to see, and what media makers decide we will be presented with, are only available to parse when considering the visual aspects of a media artifact. A pervasive belief in cultural research is that literature and foreign cinema, which rely on language above imagery, are superior forms of

media. They are sorted into the category of “high culture,” which implies that popular culture would be considered “low culture.” By this logic, questions of linguistic discursive meaning are the preferred—if not the *only*—method to conduct a close reading of media. But any analysis which confronts an artifact containing imagery would be amiss to ignore the visual aspect of media (Carta, 2019).

Mulvey’s (1999) approach to visual analysis in film studies provides an important example of the theoretical value of visual analysis. In fact, her essay has become a cornerstone piece in the literature of critical media analysis. In discussing the narrative visuals of a collection of Hitchcock films, she used examples of visual framing to argue that the films favor the male perspective and the gaze of male audience members, thus playing into societal norms of misogyny. Through Freud’s methods of psychoanalysis, she criticized these films in a way that confronted the norms of cinema and deconstructed the feelings of pleasure that audiences experience. The appeal of the films, she argued, comes at least partially from the viewer’s feelings of power over the female characters via camera angles and visual messages. In this way, Mulvey demonstrated that an analysis of popular culture which includes visual considerations is especially suited to critical discussion. In fact, from a queer perspective, the symbolism in popular culture can sometimes articulate more about queer experience than high culture can (Halberstam, 2008). Because of the simple fact that high culture, high social status, and normative identity often accompany the others, it makes sense that a traditionally outcast group (both queer people in general and TGNC people in particular) would find a sense of identification with popular culture. Not only does visual analysis fit neatly into the confrontation of popular culture media through cultural studies (Rose, 2012), it also complements critical analysis of popular culture.

Critical visual analysis allows researchers to consider the imagery and use of vision in media texts, which are always necessarily products of the culture from which they arose (Storey, 2015). The addition of considerations of visual analysis in any method of critical analysis adds an angle of discussion which acknowledges the power of images alongside the power of words. Our understanding of social norms does not come from language alone. Rather, it is a combination of language alongside our sense of sight (among others) that forms our mental construction of reality from which we act and think accordingly (Fleckenstein, 2007). Visual analysis lets researchers use this integral piece of the human experience in a way that honors the power of seeing. When researching any sort of visual media, then, visual analysis becomes useful: photographs, art, advertisements, social media, film, and television are a few of the endless possibilities for utilizing visual analysis. As a research tool, visual analysis can be used quite diversely. Any research subject which involves sight and/or images can add the use of visual analysis as a complementary method to enhance their existing analysis methods.

The widespread applicability of visual analysis at once plays into both its strengths and weaknesses. One notable strength of visual analysis is its use as a complementary method, and its diverse applications across both qualitative and quantitative research methods. Like discourse analysis, though, it has the potential to be too subjective a method on its own. Similarly, it is a weak method in the sense that arguing for its generalizability may be a difficult endeavor. Visual analysis holds advantages as a complementary method. In any field, and any research subject, visual analysis can be woven into a discussion seamlessly to add an aside of the visuals and images at play (Carta, 2019). Sociology, literature, anthropology, psychology, communication, and history, among other disciplines, can all be furthered using visual analysis of cultural artifacts. Additionally, visual analysis can be employed either qualitatively or quantitatively as

an empirical method. Using imagery or visuals in a study provides physical evidence to an argument, which supplements the data in a thorough, compelling way. Qualitatively, messages and meanings can be read in visuals (Rose, 2012). Quantitatively, texts can be analyzed both manually and automatically to provide counts of visual themes (Bednarek, 2015). Both approaches enrich the overall argument of the research being conducted.

However, visual analysis can be considered subjective, and therefore unreliable. While quantitative methods may remedy this (for example, a critic would be hard-pressed to refute that there are *X* number of images of *Y* subject in *Z* artifact), qualitative methods may highlight this shortcoming (Bednarek, 2015). The description of meanings and images from a subjective standpoint is always dependent on the subject's cultural and societal context. As such, it may be difficult or even counterproductive to analyze culture from a place of existence within that very culture (Lorde, 2015). Likewise, the generalizability of visual analysis results is virtually nonexistent. While analysis of cultural texts will reveal cultural meanings of the time, the shifting nature of societal norms ensures that what was once true of meaning will unlikely remain true invariably (Mittell, 2004). The meanings of a historical text are unlikely to translate directly to the meanings of a modern text, and the meanings within one genre of visual media are unlikely to translate directly to another genre.

Considering the methods of critical discourse analysis supplemented by visual analysis, it is apparent that both provide unique and valuable contributions to studies of cultural artifacts. As such, their combination is fitting for an analysis of television, which utilizes both language and imagery in its texts. In fact, the combination of words and sights on the television screen, alongside its location in the home, is what made it so appealing and widespread in the first place. Logically, an analysis of television is well-served by considerations of its cultural messages as

related to both visuals and discourse. In analyzing televised popular culture, a visual and critical discourse analysis will allow for more detailed and thorough understanding of the way power and meanings are imbued in a medium which offers audiences a multisensory experience. Because of the enticing nature of viewing television, alongside its pervasive presence in daily life, it is especially useful to consider the role it plays in our society. Children are one particularly receptive audience to the messages of television.

The analysis of television cartoons in the present study is undertaken from a critical discourse analysis perspective which takes multiple series into consideration. Intertextuality of analyzing multiple cartoon series allows for a more expansive look at the larger discursive formation in the genre of television cartoons (Rose, 2012). Television cartoons are also relevant artifacts of cultural studies because of both their widespread appeal and flexibility across genres (Dines, 1995). Children and adults alike invest themselves in animated series, racking up views and popularity year after year. The positionality of animation across genres makes it increasingly interesting to researchers, as children's animated series can deal with seemingly adult themes, fantasy, drama, action, and more, all at once. A visual and critical discourse analysis of cartoons would thus need to consider the genre conventions and cultural messages present in the series. Through visual analysis, a researcher would be able to parse the character design and patterns of motion which portray emotions, relationships, and narratives of the series. Cartoons afford the creators the ability to place characters and audiences in fantastical and hyperbolic situations to the extent that they can illustrate themes impossible to illustrate using the real human body (Dhaenens & Van Bauwel, 2012). The use of character illustration, alongside analysis of movement and scenery, provides a visual analysis with a multitude of messages and themes to consider.

The critical discourse analysis of animated series focusing more on words, then, plays off the analyzed visual imagery in its discussion of language and meaning in the series. Considering the images and messages alongside one another allows me as a researcher to make a convincing and detailed argument about the overarching message and themes present in the series (Bednarek, 2015). Beyond past criticism of cartoons (Mittell, 2004), this critical discourse analysis can provide an understanding of the cultural norms and power structures present in a popular children's animated series (Dines, 1995). Taken altogether, approaching cartoons from a critical perspective on both discursive and visual aspects can be a valuable way to parse cultural messages in detail. By closely reading the messages and meanings in cultural artifacts, we grow our understanding of human norms. When we grow our understanding of human norms, we approach the potential for change, and thus, the potential for a better world. In this case, a sample of series with TGNC characters can provide us with an understanding of where our culture is at in relation to resisting or reinforcing binary gender and sex expectations.

Sample

The present study seeks to understand the words and images present in the representations of TGNC cartoon characters from television. These characters must necessarily be transgender or gender nonconforming in some way to be considered relevant for this study. Additionally, the sample was limited to Western/American cartoons; the idea behind this restriction is that different cultures' ideas of sex, gender, and queerness vary from the cultural theories with which I am approaching this study. For example, Japanese anime holds different norms surrounding the representations of gender and sex (Hoskin, 2016). In hope of encompassing a cultural moment, rather than this exact widespread moment in television, this study will sample from a selection of cartoon series with a TGNC character present. The scope

of this research being a discussion of queer gender identities in cartoons, it seemed most relevant to seek series which guaranteed such representation rather than trying to sample random popular series in hopes of finding TGNC representation. In fact, such an objective approach would be to the disadvantage of the present study and its goals. By locating and focusing on the desired representations, I can be sure that my resources are directed at the intended topics of discussion, rather than authoring another analysis about the absence of true queerness in the media. While these types of analyses are imperative in the goals of queer activism and theory, it is outside of the scope of my current study to pursue such overarching goals. The detailed and symbolic discursive nature of critical analysis exists most productively in subjectively selected samples of texts which hold deep and relevant meaning to the topic of interest. In order to most productively sample for the purposes of this study, existing analyses of television content were taken under consideration.

One such study took a very broad approach to a content analysis of television overall, wherein the researcher narrowed down the entire catalogue of television as a medium by selecting a sample of drama television shows in a given timeframe (Head, 1954). This method is both unapplicable and unwise in the face of modern entertainment services which allow for more deliberate sampling and disallow the use of preexisting program schedules. Given the on-demand nature of many series, there is no need to narrow my scope in relation to airtime or availability based only on series that may or may not currently be on the air to begin with. Many other analyses of television occur from a quantitative and/or content analysis methodology (Fouts, Callan, Piasentin, & Lawson, 2006; Leaper, Breed, Hoffman, & Perlman, 2002; Mastro & Stern, 2003; Winick & Winick, 1968; among others). As such, these studies were largely conducted using a form of random sampling in which themes were coded and analyzed statistically. In

certain studies, this can be a valuable way to ensure validity and reliability, but for the current study, it would surely overlook the rare occurrence of TGNC characters and their respective narratives. The goal of the current research is not to make broad, generalizable claims about television or about the themes therein. Rather, the present study instead seeks to take a detail-oriented look at the small selection of TGNC characters represented in children's cartoons. Thus, purposive sampling was appropriate (Gibbs, 2007).

Still other studies sampled from specific television channels across time (Klein & Shiffman, 2006; Korr, 2008), or based on popularity of television channels and their programs (Gerding & Signorielli, 2014). Again, this method includes a widespread scope which allows for the use of random sampling that guarantees inclusion of the targeted themes. In this and Head's (1954) study of drama television, the genre begins as the unifying factor from which themes of interest can undoubtedly be found. In the case of my own research, though, queerness is unbound by genre. While queerness certainly finds a home in science fiction or fantasy genres quite often, any genre with humanoid characters can potentially host a TGNC character. Another form of sampling comes during a set television schedule, in the selection of random episodes from a pre-determined list of programs. In drawing from four genres of animated programming, Leaper, Breed, Hoffman, and Perlman (2002) chose three episodes from each of 12 different series which were on air at the time of the study (p. 1655). Unlike the present study, there was no need to target the sampling around specific characters for the point of analyzing specific identities. However, this demonstrates a very intentional way of choosing the content of television to analyze based on a specific scope.

Over one week of sampling from prime-time television, researchers Mastro and Stern (2003) had 2,315 characters to analyze for their race, ethnicity, and behavior. This example poses

the precedent of sampling specifically for character traits or identities. In doing so, it opens the present analysis to an approach which explicitly accounts for gender/sex of characters in the television series at hand. So, as will be discussed below, one need only locate characters of a specific desired demographic to utilize a similar sampling method which guarantees rich data on a specific topic. Even more minute is a sampling method which takes a narrower approach of analyzing behaviors exhibited in a given context. Manganello, Franzini, and Jordan (2008) stated that sampling for “behavior-level variables,” which in the case of their study was sexual themes, “a random sample of five episodes of weekly television programs is sufficient, while three episodes may be acceptable if variation is minimal,” (p. 9). They add that seven episodes are needed for character-based analysis. Based on these claims, it is appropriate to conduct an analysis on a sample of episodes preselected for their inclusion of desired characters or character traits.

The guidelines of sampling for behavior-level variables have been used in other studies on television, as well. An analysis of sexual health messaging on television programs selected its sample based on popularity with audiences (Dillman Carpentier et al., 2017). The researchers utilized Nielsen ratings to create a list of 30 television programs popular with 18- to 25-year-old audiences. Then, citing the guidance of Manganello, Franzini, and Jordan (2008), they randomly selected three episodes from each series to accumulate a total of 53.5 hours of television, which they accessed through various streaming platforms. The notoriety—and by extension, availability—of their analyzed series were relevant in the series selection to begin with. Another study demonstrates a narrow scope used in sampling to ensure relevant data and rich insight. In one content analysis of fat stigma on television shows and movies, researchers selected 135 scenes specifically focusing on “commentary and humor” regarding fatness (Himes &

Thompson, 2007). This study shows the relevance of narrowing research down even to the level of the scene, where the researchers may not need to note the entire episode of the television series in order to make a worthwhile observation. In another study, this time of science-based messages in television cartoons, researchers utilized purposive sampling to qualitatively analyze the content and nature of series targeted to children (Aytekin, 2020). They explained that this sampling strategy served brought focus to relevant cases which offered “splendid data in depth,” (p. 1351). Of the purposefully selected series, they randomly selected 10 episodes per series. In total, they sampled 21 cartoons, a total of 210 episodes. So, dependent on the scope of an analysis, a researcher may choose to sample more widely based on television overall, or on a specific timeframe or genre. However, past research also provides precedent for the current study which narrows its scope smaller than a whole series or a whole genre. Using these studies as examples, I chose my episode sample by researching which children's cartoon series (and within the series, which episodes) included a TGNC character.

My strategy is not entirely new. In a methodology-based discussion of research focused on gender, Neuendorf (2011) states that “perhaps no substantive area has been more thoroughly content analyzed across all media than that of the roles of males and females” (p. 276). The discussion goes on to acknowledge that a perfect random sample regarding gendered messages is particularly hard to come by, adding that analyses which cannot rely on pure random sampling should instead choose a relevant population based on the theoretical goals of the specific study. For example, a researcher may do best with a selection of media based on popularity, or with a narrow selection of episodes or scenes containing the characters or themes being studied. As such, I began my sampling process by first identifying which series included TGNC characters via triangulation from multiple internet sources. Several online lists served as my starting point

(Chik & White, 2021; Fisher & Fisher, 2020). Additionally, GLAAD's annual Where We Are on Television report provided mentions of series which provided exceptional representation of TGNC characters across television genres. It is worth noting, though, that GLAAD makes a point of highlighting positive representations of queer people. This phenomenon, though amicable, risks skewing my sample because of its focus on positivity while minimizing discussions of negativity. The nature of the mentions in these reports approaches the problem of polarizing queer representations for audience judgments of purely good or bad (Joyrich, 2014). As such, I took care to consult multiple sources to thoroughly gather a list of series which included *any* TGNC representation, regardless of positive or negative connotations.

The article by Chik and White (2021) is particularly relevant not just for its relation to GLAAD analyses and ideology, but also for its timeliness and insight. This article highlighted the role of queer creators in the push toward increased queer representation on television. They explain that increased diversity among creative teams results in stories “casually ingrained [with] their gender diversity,” (n.p.). The relationship between creator queerness and character queerness became salient in my attempt to verify characters' identities which were never explicitly stated in their series. For example, several characters were hardly given speaking parts or appearances, and no other characters discussed them in a way that would reveal a TGNC identity. As such, insights online became particularly helpful. Interviews, Tweets, and other content coming from creative teams directly provided invaluable verification of these characters queerness. By extension, these insights verified that the characters belonged in my sample. The Insider website, like GLAAD, has compiled its own dataset of representation on queer characters, including a list of series highlighted for having at least one gender minority character in the series. They also categorized the 54 identified trans and nonbinary characters as human

(14), non-human (37), and human-hybrid (3). This is a useful collection of data for the fact that queer characters are often included in series via non-human identification. To be discussed further in the analysis, some queer people find this liberating, as their experiences are not unlike the imagined experience of being an alien or oddity. On the other hand, the exclusion and fear that accompanies such entities makes other queer people feel more negatively about such television representations.

Through reviewing existing research that utilized television sampling methods, I was able to select a character-based sampling method which was guaranteed to bring relevant data and deep insight. In other words, series and episodes were selected specifically due to their inclusion of characters fitting my particular research focus (Manganello, Franzini, and Jordan, 2008), meaning that I decided to base my sample only on those series which included TGNC characters. From there, I had compiled a list of series which included TGNC characters. Finally, using several online wikis, I was able to select which episodes would include the characters I hoped to analyze. Based on this reasoning, I selected episodes from 20 English-language cartoon television series from within the past 10 years which are known to portray a TGNC character in at least one episode of the program (as series older than these took place in time periods which held incredible stigma around queerness, especially when the context involved children). The series are listed here alphabetically, with more detail on each provided in Appendix A:

Adventure Time, City of Ghosts, Craig of the Creek, Danger & Eggs, The Dragon Prince, High Guardian Spice, Kipo and the Age of Wonderbeasts, Loud House, Madagascar: A Little Wild, Middle School Moguls, OK K.O.! Let's Be Heroes, The Owl House, The Proud Family: Louder and Prouder, Ridley Jones, She-Ra and the Princesses of Power, Steven Universe, Steven Universe Future, Summer Camp Island, Too Loud, Transformers: Cyberverse, and Young

Justice. It is worth noting here that several examples of series with TGNC characters exist in other languages, with several originating in Japanese anime series. However, as I only speak English, I would need to view these anime series in a translated version removed from its original context. To view these series in their English translations would risk losing the culture-specific queer symbolism in the translation process (Hoskin, 2016). Additionally, it is also worth mentioning that several of these series, like *She-Ra* (2018-2020), *The Proud Family: Louder and Prouder* (2022-ongoing), and *Transformers* (2018-2021), are reboots, remakes, or spinoffs of previously created series. This fact will become relevant in the analysis and discussion, where I highlight the symbolic value of series being reborn in improved ways.

Of the above series, I selected a minimum of three episodes each, to identify the discursive and visual themes surrounding TGNC representation. In the case that these episodes were repetitive, as many children's shows are, three episodes sufficed for an adequate sample (Manganello, Franzini, & Jordan, 2008). For some characters, their role in the series was not significant enough to warrant inclusion in three episodes. Sometimes, these characters were only briefly included in one episode of the series. As such, several series were limited sampling opportunities by way of necessity, as watching these series further would not yield new insight about TGNC characters. However, some series included TGNC characters in dozens of episodes or more. In these cases, if three episodes did not provide enough data for theoretical saturation of TGNC themes of the series in question, additional episodes were sought for further data (Luker, 2008). I established theoretical saturation based on whether continuing watching episodes was revealing new insights about the character or not. When episodes ceased yielding new messages, I considered the data sufficient. Additionally, as needed, more episodes of a series were viewed if the context of the narrative was not entirely clear through viewing episodes which took place

in the middle of ongoing seasons or arcs. For example, in *Kipo and the Age of Wonderbeasts* (2020), the storylines and character relationships were difficult to parse without viewing some previous episodes as context.

The process of viewing and taking notes was a cyclical one which involved watching, noting the discursive and visual symbolism surrounding TGNC characters and themes of queerness, and rewatching. I regularly paused data collection to journal and reflected on the nature and prominence of themes as they emerged. The resulting notes reached about 26 pages in total. Throughout the iterative data collection process, I found notable themes which connect the discursive and visual findings across the series and their TGNC characters. As themes emerged, I made note of them and sought further support amongst the pages of my notes. Those themes which had ample support through rich data are discussed further below. The main theoretical concepts that I drew upon in my analysis were from the salient critical ideas discussed above; mainly, concepts of gender theory, queer theory, and trans* studies. From these ways of thinking, I was able to parse the discourses and imagery used in depicting these characters. From their appearances to their behaviors, much of the symbolism can be explained through the lens of existing theoretical concepts. Alternatively, several instances of departure from the expected appeared. As such, the below analysis features the main themes with subdivisions therein highlighting both exemplars of each concept and outliers of each concept.

ANALYSIS

In analyzing the dataset, five themes came up repeatedly to varying degrees across the sample. This analysis discusses all five themes in relation to the series analyzed, as well as in relation to existing literature surrounding queer characters in television. The first theme surrounds the lack of a queer art of failure (Halberstam, 2011), in which TGNC characters are allowed a (minor) part in their respective series under the condition that they bring exceptional intelligence or talent. The second theme focuses on the background role of these characters. Not only are the characters usually the sole TGNC person in their series, but they also receive very little screentime. Additionally, none of the analyzed characters occupied the role of the main character. The third theme of note is the tendency of these characters to default to masculine presentation as a gender-neutral signifier. Masculinity as a default is a concept well-known in gender studies, and this particular theme gives me the chance to discuss it further. The fourth theme I present offers a look at the rebellious side of the characters, something inherently queer by nature, which exemplifies the historical power behind TGNC identification in the face of a binarily-gendered society. Finally, the fifth and last theme of discussion considers the utopian scenarios that some of these characters find themselves in. Whether through happenstance or their own actions, several of the characters exist in a world that does not criticize or question their TGNC identity. These themes are organized below within Table 1, which gives an overview of characters analyzed, a description of each, which series they are featured in, the rating of that series, and the number of episodes analyzed in which they were featured.

Table 1. Transgender and Gender Nonconforming Characters Analyzed.

Character name	Character description	Series name & years on air	Series rating	Number of episodes analyzed
Acid Storm ^{ii, iii, iv}	An evil, neon green, genderfluid humanoid robot with the ability to reconfigure into an airplane.	<i>Transformers: Cyberverse</i> (2018-2021)	TV-Y7	7
The aliens ^{iii, v}	A race of small, fuzzy aliens with giant eyes who help the campers and love eating sweets	<i>Summer Camp Island</i> (2018-ongoing)	TV-Y7	6
All gems ^{i, iv, v}	A race of nonbinary alien women from the planet Homeworld, each with their own unique appearance and supernatural ability.	<i>Steven Universe</i> (2013-2019)	TV-Y7	8
Angel Jose ^{i, ii, iii}	An intelligent and responsible agender kid who takes care of their friends' younger siblings at Creek Daycare.	<i>Craig of the Creek</i> (2017-ongoing)	TV-Y7	10
Asher ^{i, ii, iii}	A soft-spoken non-binary human teenager with short, brown hair and a slim build.	<i>Kipo and the Age of Wonderbeasts</i> (2020)	TV-Y7	6
BL1P ^{i, ii, iii}	A boxy, brownish-greyish robot covered in colorful lights and buttons.	<i>Danger & Eggs</i> (2017)	TV-G	10
BMO ^{iii, iv, v}	A childish, blue handheld gaming system with arms, legs, and a face on their screen.	<i>Adventure Time</i> (2010-2018)	TV-PG	13
Dana Dufresne ^{ii, iv}	An outgoing middle-aged transwoman with an auburn bob, thick-rimmed glasses, and red lipstick.	<i>The Loud House</i> (2016-ongoing)	TV-Y7	2
Desiree ^{iv}	A fun-loving, blonde trans girl who enjoys playing video games and chatting with her friends.	<i>Too Loud</i> (2017-2019)	TV-Y7	7
Double Trouble ^{i, iv}	A tall, slender, nonbinary shapeshifting alien with green skin, reptilian eyes, and a long tail.	<i>She-Ra and the Princesses of Power</i> (2018-2020)	TV-Y7	9
Fred ^{i, iii, iv, v}	An outspoken baby bison who is repeatedly described as both cute and tough.	<i>Ridley Jones</i> (2021-ongoing)	TV-Y	14
Gregg ^{i, ii, iii, iv, v}	A white, adolescent, humanoid bird who serves as a lackey for the local bad girls.	<i>OK K.O.! Let's Be Heroes</i> (2017-2019)	TV-PG	7
Halo ^{i, iv, v}	A curious, hijab-wearing teenage girl with the power to generate different colored auras with a variety of uses.	<i>Young Justice</i> (2010-ongoing)	TV-14	7
Jewelstar ^{ii, iii, iv}	A trans man with a cybernetic eye who resourcefully escaped a war-torn planet with his two sisters.	<i>She-Ra and the Princesses of Power</i> (2018-2020)	TV-Y7	1

Table 1. Transgender and Gender Nonconforming Characters Analyzed (continued).

Character name	Character description	Series name & years on air	Series rating	Number of episodes analyzed
Kazi ^{i, ii, iii, v}	A brilliant but reserved elf who serves as the translator for the royals of their kingdom.	<i>The Dragon Prince</i> (2018-ongoing)	TV-Y7	3
The Mayor ^{i, v}	A multitalented daredevil in a pantsuit, a Black transwoman, and mayor of the series fictional town.	<i>Danger & Eggs</i> (2017)	TV-G	5
Merkid ^{ii, iii, v}	A nonspeaking, playful kid with a shaved head who hangs out in the creek wearing mermaid-style flippers.	<i>Craig of the Creek</i> (2017-ongoing)	TV-Y7	2
Milo ^{i, ii, iii, v}	A musically talented and sweet agender kid with an afro and a colorful outfit.	<i>Danger & Eggs</i> (2017)	TV-G	2
Odee ^{ii, iii, iv, v}	A young, clumsy okapi with an optimistic outlook on life.	<i>Madagascar: A Little Wild</i> (2020-ongoing)	TV-G	1
Professor Caraway ^{i, ii, iii, v}	A wise and kind young trans man who works as a professor at High Guardian Academy.	<i>High Guardian Spice</i> (2021)	TV-14	6
Pullstring ^{ii, iii, v}	A gangly, pale kid who wears a speaking plush alligator on their face, communicating only through the gator.	<i>Craig of the Creek</i> (2017-ongoing)	TV-Y7	1
Raine Whispers ^{i, iii, iv, v}	A middle-aged, introverted witch who is both the head witch of the Bard Coven and an ex-partner to one of the series protagonists.	<i>The Owl House</i> (2020-ongoing)	TV-Y7	5
Shep ^{ii, iii, v}	A tall, strongly built teenager with tan skin and a relaxed attitude.	<i>Steven Universe Future</i> (2019-2020)	TV-Y7	3
Snapdragon ^{ii, iii, v}	A pale, slim trans girl with short, red hair and a talent for sword fighting.	<i>High Guardian Spice</i> (2021)	TV-14	8
Sweet ^{i, ii, iii, v}	A slim and softspoken non-binary person and one half of the “chill twins,” a pair of people who lead others in yoga classes in the park.	<i>Danger & Eggs</i> (2017)	TV-G	2
Thomas ^{i, iii, iv, v}	A nonbinary kid who loves skateboarding and investigating ghosts with their friends.	<i>City of Ghosts</i> (2021)	TV-Y7	7
Wren ^{ii, iii, v}	An older nonbinary professor of fashion at Mogul Academy.	<i>Middle School Moguls</i> (2019)	TV-Y7	1
Zadie ^{ii, v}	An outgoing trans girl with short, brown hair who performs a song at the local pride celebration.	<i>Danger & Eggs</i> (2017)	TV-G	1

ⁱ Failure avoidance

ⁱⁱ Backgrounded queer

ⁱⁱⁱ Masculine default

^{iv} Queer rebellion

^v Queer utopia

The Queer Art of (Avoiding) Failure

Perhaps the simplest and most apparent of themes was that of TGNC characters avoiding failure at all costs. These depictions fell in line with existing queer characters who exist as harmless and fun best friends to the protagonists in a performance of the aptly named *gay best friend* trope. While some would defend this stereotype as a supposedly positive generalization about people, the truth is that the stereotype causes more harm than good. Its impact can create negative feelings of discomfort and disappointment in members of the group in question. These overgeneralizations can lead to unnecessary and unrealistic expectations for the people affected. The gay male character is often colored by hegemonic masculine ideals; for example, the model minority gay man is fun, feminine, and fabulous in such a way that they are merely mockeries of a “real” man and are completely unthreatening to heterosexuality (Chang, 2016). Alternatively, the validity of transgender people in a similar stereotype is measured by whether they can pass as their gender/sex, and whether they can be deemed appropriately attractive in Western standards (Siebler, 2012). Only then might a trans person be seen as acceptable by their cisgender peers—when they can be seen as “normal.” In the case of the characters studied herein, many embody a resistance to realism insofar as they show remarkable intelligence or exceptional talents. While these characteristics are positive on the surface, they serve to hold TGNC characters (and by extension, TGNC people) to unrealistically high standards. This is especially true given that these characters are often the only TGNC characters in their respective series, meaning that their representations of queerness may be read as the one way to be queer by the viewers of the series. Additionally, I make note of those completely opposite of this finding: TGNC characters whose personalities refuse to fit them into the exemplars of this category by virtue of their differences.

One particularly noteworthy recurrence in this category is the TGNC character of high intelligence. For example, in *The Owl House* (2020-ongoing), a series that takes place in a magical dimension of witches and monsters, a nonbinary character takes on the role of Head Witch of the Bard Coven (“Eda’s Requiem”). In this fictional universe, the Head Witches hold authority second only to the emperor. Raine Whispers, the character in question, has succeeded in life through their incredible intelligence and skills of magical music. In several flashbacks, we see them as a younger witch, practicing their magical talents and outsmarting those around them. As a child in school, Raine demonstrated their aptitude by remaining in a prestigious school through scholarships won for their intelligence and abilities (“Them’s the Breaks, Kid”). Not only were they the smartest kid in their school, but they also excelled in competitions against other schools. However, Raine makes a point to minimize themselves, despite their high status. They are repeatedly shown to be shy and afraid of public speaking. Even in the presence of a small group, Raine blushes profusely when their ex-girlfriend, Eda, teases them a bit. They whimper: “Eda! You’re embarrassing me in front of my group!” Not only is Raine smart and talented beyond belief, but they also humble themselves so as not to be the center of attention. Even though they are in a friendship-turned-romance-turned-friendship with a rebellious witch, they constantly exhibit exceptionalism. They effortlessly avoid failure despite the fact that failure is an integral part of everyone’s life, perhaps even more so in the instance of queer people (Halberstam, 2011). In order to truly undercut societal expectations of normativity, it may first be integral to undercut the very concept of success itself, instead of expecting queer people to embody success.

Similarly, *OK K.O.! Let’s Be Heroes* (2017-2019) is home to Gregg, a nonbinary bird-person who makes a point of hanging out with the delinquents in town. In this cartoon universe,

superheroes are a common sight, as are supervillains, and the battles that inevitably ensue from that mutual existence. By associating themselves with the troublemaking teens, Gregg attempts to create a reputation of toughness (“You’re Everybody’s Sidekick”). However, the main character, K.O., makes it his personal mission to make everyone around him happy, including the alley teens. In an effort to show Gregg that they have something to be proud of, K.O. finds their valedictorian certificate from school and displays it in a custom frame. Despite their attempts to create a cool façade, Gregg’s intelligence is still emphasized. In *The Dragon Prince* (2018-ongoing), another nonbinary character makes their presence known mainly for their brains. Kazi, an elf, is the translator and interpreter for the queen of their kingdom. The only time Kazi has a relevant part in the series is to translate the sign language of another character for a grand total of two episodes (“Ghost”, “Hearts of Cinder”). Like Raine, they are smart and timid, often positioning themselves behind anyone near them to avoid attracting attention. Notably, both Gregg and Kazi embody nonhuman queerness, a creative media strategy that Halberstam (2011) offers as a new way to think of “the human-animal divide to offer a very different political landscape,” (p. 174).

Less afraid of attention is Thomas from *City of Ghosts* (2021). They serve as the artifact expert in their small club of ghost enthusiasts (“The Kind of Japanese Restaurant”). Due to the nature of the series, the club leader often calls on Thomas’ expertise when she finds any strange objects during a paranormal investigation. Although Thomas is undoubtedly intelligent, they also have an affinity for skateboarding, and seem to be quite talented for their young age. They are shown to be passionate about their hobbies and proud to discuss them with others (“Venice”). As such, they demonstrate a different kind of intelligence than one would expect in the model minority myth. In *Craig of the Creek* (2017-ongoing), we see this repeated in the character of

Angel José, an agender kid. Because Angel is 10 years old, they are characterized as exceptionally responsible in comparison to the other, younger children in the series. Angel serves as the caregiver for children's younger siblings in the series titular creek locale ("Creek Daycare"). They are caring, smart, and capable enough that other characters in the series leave their siblings in Angel's care when they go off to play during the day. However, Angel reveals their competitive nature when the kids of the creek have a judged snack-making competition. They rebuff the main character's greetings with a scoff of "I didn't come here to make friends, Craig," ("After School Snack Off"). In this interaction, Angel displays the tough attitude that often comes alongside expectations of high performance. The combination of intelligence, talent, and competitiveness can also be seen in other TGNC cartoon characters.

The reboot series *The Proud Family: Louder and Prouder* (2022-ongoing) brings back the character Michael from the original series. In the original *Proud Family*, Michael was a short boy who was often the butt of homophobic jokes. In the new series, gender-nonconforming Michael is tall and fashionable, included frequently in the main friend group as a recurring character. Their plain outfit of sweater and basketball shorts has been replaced with boots, purple trousers, a layered sweater top, thick-rimmed glasses, and pink-tipped dreadlocks. Michael's appearance reinforces his new role in the modern version of the 2001 series: Michael excels at all artistic things. He has impeccable fashion sense, the ability to effortlessly sew drab clothing into high fashion couture, and the skills to conduct advanced cosmetology procedures in the school lunchroom ("New Kids on the Block"). He is also multitalented in athletics, with a penchant for dance of all forms, along with basketball prowess ("It All Started with an Orange Basketball"). He tiptoes the line of acting as the "sassy gay friend," though, as his knack for sarcasm is as strong as his other abilities. He is quick to compete with the main female characters for the

attention of a cute new boy in school, gloating when they all realize that the new boy might be “not into girls.” With a snarky smile, he tells the girls, “That’s what’s up.” (“New Kids on the Block”). Likewise, he does not hesitate to leave the girls to their devices when their plans no longer benefit him. He scoffs at a friend’s proposal to be a backup singer for her musical group, stating “I don’t follow anybody,” (“Father Figures”). On another episode, he abandons the group’s rideshare app startup after some bad publicity, saying “I have a brand to project!” (“Get In”). Michael’s personality reflects strengths of a different kind; while he is not particularly emphasized as intelligent in terms of scholarly intellect, he is multitalented and unbeatable in terms of arts, athletics, and attitude. Of these recently presented examples, Gregg, Thomas, and Angel also share the similarity of being minors. Even at the young stages these three are depicted in, they are already exhibiting a fear of failure in their respective talents. On one hand, this shows a nurturing of personal interests in a way that queer communities excel at. Supposedly, the three had several failures on their way to mastery of their skills, although these failures were not shown. Alternatively, this offers the commentary that children and teenagers should have things figured out in the sense that they do not make major mistakes in life.

Similar to the overachieving of Michael, The Mayor in *Danger & Eggs* (2017) is shown to be impossibly capable. She is a transgender woman who is skilled in conflict mediation, skydiving, gymnastics, and more (“Pete Peril”). However, her abilities seem to border on satirical, as if she is the perfect superwoman. So, with a note of humor included, the series depicts a woman who cannot possibly exist. The fact that she is transgender is minor in comparison to the many awe-inspiring talents that she displays throughout the series. Her actions speak louder than her identity. In the final episode, she fearlessly defends her park from a rampaging giant robot (“Chosen Family”). When it becomes clear that the robot cannot be

reasoned with, she is quick to change strategies to evacuate the park in a quick and orderly manner. Her leadership skills are yet another ability that make her stand out against the other characters in the series. She challenges the gender/sex binary in both her identity and her exceptional abilities. Instead of the passive woman (Salamon, 2010), she is an active participant in both her own life and the life of the citizens she vowed to serve. While her character is over the top, others are not so loudly displayed.

In contrast, in *Kipo and the Age of Wonderbeasts* (2020), nonbinary teen Asher displays a quiet emotional intelligence. They exercise their intelligence in their affinity for animals of all kinds. They are not physically strong, but they are exceptionally able to calm and train animals encountered in the series (“It’s a Trap”). Like Raine and Gregg, they are reliant on those around them for success. Their identity is thus socially constructed in that they are never seen on their own, but always in a group of two or more. Also of note is that Asher is a twin to Dahlia, a cisgender girl. Because of the twins’ identical nature, viewers may conclude that Asher is also a girl, thus undermining their gender identity through the logic of gender/sex binarism (Perry, 2018). Similar to the above characters who rely on others for their identities, *Ridley Jones*’ (2021-ongoing) nonbinary bison Fred acts as one of many sidekicks to the main character, Ridley. However, the target audience of this series is younger than that of the others mentioned here: the series is rated TV-Y for viewing by children ages zero to six. Because of this, the theme of teamwork in the series is emphasized. As such, each character is depicted as having their own unique skillset that may or may not be appropriate to employ in a given scenario. For example, Fred is good at drumming, dancing, and being the toughest of their friend group (“A Quiet Chase”). They also demonstrate a knack for leadership, as they often offer their friends advice on being true to oneself (“Ready or Not Here I Come”). The fact that each character on the series is

nearly always in the company of the main group means that Fred's existence as a supporting character is less insidious than the minimal role of characters meant for older audiences. While more mature narratives may focus on independence and personal development in solitude, younger children's programming tends to focus more on the socialization required for teamwork and problem solving. In other series, it is clear that TGNC characters may be considered more as tools than friends.

Danger & Eggs (2017) features a nonbinary robot named BL1P. True to their existence as a robot, a majority of their personality surrounds their ability to assist the others in the series. For example, their capabilities of creating convincing holograms allows them to briefly appear in one episode to create decoys of the main characters so that they could escape attack by a subterranean monster ("Check Mates"). In another episode, they are included in a play at the park because of their lighting capabilities ("Pirate Gorgeous"). In a series that centers on character's nuances and interpersonal relationships, BL1P's screentime and character growth are both scarce. Other series are more exploratory in their depiction of TGNC characters who serve a practical function in the narrative.

In *Steven Universe* (2013-2019) and the subsequent epilogue series *Steven Universe Future* (2019-2020), half-human half-alien tween Steven learns life lessons alongside his alien caretakers known as the Crystal Gems. These aliens are from a larger species known as gems who originate from the planet Homeworld. Their bodies are constructed of light, with their true bodies enclosed in a large gemstone imbedded somewhere in their body. Every gem character in the series, apart from Steven, is a nonbinary woman. They are created by the all-powerful diamond rulers of Homeworld with specific purposes laid out for them from the day they enter the world. For example, common quartz-based gems are made to be soldiers, while the

aforementioned diamonds are exceptionally rare and made to be rulers (“Crack the Whip”). Similarly, two or more gems are able to morph together in an act called “fusion,” which results in a living combination that embodies the strengths of all gems involved (“Alone Together”). However, on Homeworld, it is only acceptable that two gems of the same kind fuse together. So, while it would be acceptable for two quartzes to fuse, it would be unacceptable for a quartz and a pearl to fuse together. On Earth, the Crystal Gems exercise their freedom from the laws of Homeworld, fusing across gem types as they see fit. They exist within a borderland between Earth and Homeworld (Anzaldúa, 1987), alien protectors of a planet that holds them in a position of awe and fear. To the Homeworld gems seeking to defeat them, this act is atrocious. “It’s always fusion!” complains Jasper, a Homeworld soldier sent to capture the Crystal Gems (“Crack the Whip”). In another episode, Crystal Gem Pearl reveals some lasting tendencies to defer to Homeworld logic. When Steven and his best human friend Connie fuse together, Pearl demands they unfuse immediately, stating that it is “inappropriate” for a human and a gem to fuse together (“Alone Together”). When gems (or gems and humans) fuse, it is usually for a distinct purpose that demands fusion to overcome an obstacle. In the case of Steven and Connie fusing, it is sometimes an emotional bond between the two with no particular goal in mind (“Mindful Education”). However, at other times, the two instrumentally form the nonbinary “Stevonnie” to defeat challenges.

Fusions like Stevonnie are seen as a type of secret weapon for overcoming obstacles. This viewpoint is shared by Steven and Connie, who choose to fuse into Stevonnie in the face of difficult enemies (“Crack the Whip”), special training (“Mindful Education”), or survival situations (“Jungle Moon”). Many fusions are formed throughout the series with the express purpose of using them as a tool before the gems in question unfuse. The purely practical nature

of these fusions is somewhat problematic, as it shows TGNC characters existing only for their usefulness. However, because gems are in themselves TGNC characters choosing consciously to fuse, this fact is less harmful. Through fusion, two beings who challenge sex/gender binaries are able to challenge the very boundary of independent existence, embodying a queer interpersonal bond the likes of which human bodies cannot express on their own. They create their own third space (Soja, 1998) somewhere outside of the binaries of male/female and human/alien. Stevonnie represents the trust and care of Steven and Connie's friendship. They assert their independence as a sentient queer being when popular human guy Kevin attempts to flirt with them at a local dance party, calling them "baby" and trying to engage them in a dance against their will. "It's Stevonnie," they assert. "I am not your baby." ("Alone Together"). Stevonnie is not alone in their independence as a fusion. One main character, Garnet, is a permanent fusion made of Ruby and Sapphire, whose pure love for one another makes it unbearable for them to be separated. Their two halves are complementary to each other in a way that forms an exceptionally strong and intelligent being who can see both sides of any situation ("Mindful Education"). When she encounters Stevonnie for the first time, she is overcome with joy, encouraging them to explore their newfound embodiment: "Stevonnie, you are not two people. And you are not one person. You are an experience," ("Alone Together"). Garnet is repeatedly proven as the strongest, smartest, and most charismatic of the Crystal Gems. Finally, the teenaged Shep occupies the sole nonbinary human role in *Steven Universe Future* (2019-2020). They appear only briefly in the presence of a supporting human character, Sadie. The two appear to be dating, but their relationship is only lightly featured in the series. Regardless, the presence of countless TGNC characters on the two series more than makes up for the scant screentime afforded to Shep.

While the nonhuman nature of these characters is explored later in this essay, I want to discuss the darker intellect of two more TGNC characters in the sample.

Outliers of the Theme

In *Infinity Train*, the main characters find themselves suddenly onboard an endless train roaming forever through a wasteland, as the series title partially implies. In this science fiction series, each train car holds within its walls a separate reality that involves a goal required to reach the exit. After sufficiently succeeding within the cars of the train, passengers are allowed to return to their “real” world lives, which are more in line with the reality that viewers experience. Aboard this train, a teenaged girl named Tulip enters a car filled entirely with reflective, chrome objects (“The Chrome Car”). She discovers that she must enter a “mirror world” to allow her and her companions to exit the reflective car and continue their journey. In doing so, Tulip releases her reflection-self, who has a will and personality of her own. By virtue of being trapped as a reflection, this Mirror Tulip (later referred to as M. T. for short) harbors resentment towards Tulip, whom she calls her “Prime”. By breaking from the mirror world, M. T. has committed an unforgivable crime in the eyes of the mirror law enforcement. They law enforcement agents explain to Tulip that “she exists to reflect your existence. And, if she isn’t serving that purpose, we’ll make sure she doesn’t exist at all.” Much like cross-gem fusions on Homeworld, M. T. is breaking social rules in her own act of freedom. She spends the episode, and subsequent narratives, running from the mirror agents and outsmarting them. Her resourcefulness and tenacity prove more than simple personality traits. Eventually making amends with Tulip, M. T. spends her portion of the series seeking her own independence in a world that once treated her as a lesser, unimportant double to another person. This journey shows the subjective nature of rules and social norms experienced by TGNC people. In creating her

own appearance, identity, and reality, M. T. symbolically reflects the transitions that queer people often undergo in the face of both familial and societal disapproval.

Another symbolic character whose narrative surrounds transition is *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power*'s (2018-2020) Double Trouble, a shape-shifting alien whose allegiances are easily swayed. They use their sharp wit, changeling powers, and immaculate acting skills to cause chaos for the enemy of whoever is paying them the best price. When the main antagonist, Catra, first encounters them, they explain their motivations: "We all wear costumes. I just happen to be able to wear other people as costumes...for a price." ("Stranded"). In the same scene, after being questioned about their ability to change, they clarify: "I prefer 'transform.'" Regardless of whose side they are on, good or bad, they have an uncanny ability to hinder their opponents. In an interesting reversal of roles, Double Trouble is a nonbinary character fascinated by the mannerisms and personalities of others, studying the moves of those around them to convincingly copy their looks and confuse those around them.

Finally, it is worth noting that there were several analyzed characters whose abilities were far less than perfect. These characters, by no choice of their own, were unable to live up to expectations that others had for them. While this scenario appeared in other series, as well, it is worth noting that the characters discussed here do not purposefully rebel against the rules. Rather, they just happen to be bad at the things they attempt. The first, Odee the okapi, demonstrates the inability to fit into the habitats and behaviors of the other animals at the zoo in *Madagascar: A Little Wild* (2020-ongoing). They cannot reach leaves from the tops of trees like giraffes, nor can they swing around on a playground like a chimpanzee ("Whatever Floats Your Float"). At the end of their trials, they are so poor at these skills that they leave a row of broken habitats in their wake. They do not purposefully cause destruction, but have such an excitable

personality, that they cannot help but be clumsy. Their excitable nature complements their lack of reliance on labels; At first, they do not even know they are an okapi. The others ask them what kind of animal they are, to which they respond “I don’t know what kind of animal I am... Oh wait, yes, I do. I’m a party animal!” The optimistic dance they then share is the very same type of movement they later enact in their accidental destruction of the other zoo habitats.

Altogether, many of the TGNC characters featured in the sample series hold a place in their respective universes as exceptional. While some of these are more nuanced roles, like the gems and fusions of *Steven Universe* (2013-2019), others are clearly multidimensional in their presence as practical characters. Overall, though, there was a trend for these characters to lean away from any sort of failure, and to lean into impossible perfection. In the next section, I elaborate on the scarcity of episodes centering on these characters. Despite the cultural move towards further acceptance of queer identities, creators are still shying away from heavily featuring TGNC characters in their stories.

The Backgrounded Queer

In this section, I emphasize the minimal featuring of TGNC characters in their series. These characters are never the main characters of their series, and often, they are only present in a handful of episodes. The closest to being main characters in these series can be seen in two series which allot several-episode arcs to TGNC characters and their storylines. The first, *Infinity Train*, is the most amicable; the series is divided into four seasons, with each season centering around the journeys of different characters. M.T.’s narrative emphasizes the theme of individuality and breaking from expectations, which she learns alongside her newfound jock friend, Jesse, and a deer denizen of the train which Jesse has named Alan Dracula (“The Black-Market Car”). While it can be argued that M.T.’s journey heavily revolves around Jesse and his

journey to escape the train, it is also notable that M.T. spends a great deal of time on introspection. As she teaches Jesse to value his independence and identity as an individual, she is simultaneously reaffirming her capabilities as a person who no longer lives as a literal reflection of another person (“The Toad Car”). Aside from this story arc, one other series nearly creates a mini-series around two nonbinary characters and their romance.

Summer Camp Island (2018-ongoing) features a three-episode run centered on the honeymoon story of two aliens, one named Puddle, and the other the ruler of the alien planet who is only referred to as The King (“Feeling Spacey”). These episodes show moments of the story which heavily feature the newly wedded life of Puddle and The King on their interplanetary honeymoon (“Puddle and the King Chapter 1: Honey Moondog”). However, unlike *Infinity Train*, these episodes are a smaller proportion of the series in comparison to the many other episodes which do not feature the couple. Similarly, although all aliens in the series are nonbinary, they are rarely seen in the sample. Aside from the specific episodes focused on them, aliens appear quickly and minimally to assist the other characters of the summer camp. Often, these appearances are nonspeaking parts, a problematic pattern echoed across other episodes in my larger sample.

Craig of the Creek (2017-ongoing) offers three distinct TGNC characters in the series, but only Angel is recurring. The other two, Pullstring and Merkid, are only featured for one episode each, both in nonspeaking roles. Pullstring is a member of the “plush kids” group, who perpetually have a stuffed animal companion at their side (“Plush Kingdom”). However, unlike the other plush kids, Pullstring’s animal is tied to their face and used as a makeshift voice box. Their plush, Ask-a-Gator, can only say, “why?” Thus, not only is Pullstring silent, but their only communication is reduced to a single syllable. Merkid, on the other hand, has no means of verbal

communication with the other characters in the series. In fact, they exist in a distant section of the creek, far away from the dozens of other children that usually spend their time in the creek area. Merkid acts even more shy than Pullstring, swimming around under the main characters' raft to explore the newcomers to their area of the creek ("Beyond the Rapids"). After revealing themselves, their only means of communication is in their facial expressions: A blank stare of curiosity, and a smile of approval when the main characters return a shoe to them that they had found in the creek. Additionally, Gregg of *OK K.O.! Let's Be Heroes* (2017-2019) can only communicate in nonsensical birdlike squawks ("You're Everybody's Sidekick"). As mentioned above, there are also a number of TGNC characters in the sample who *can* speak but have personalities that make speech undesirable.

Raine of *The Owl House* (2020-ongoing) is terrified of public speaking, despite their position as Head Witch of the Bard Coven ("Eda's Requiem"). Likewise, in *The Dragon Prince* (2018-ongoing), Kazi is the interpreter to the queen and her guards, a prestigious role that requires them to exist in the shadow of others as a walking dictionary. When action does arise, they are told to stay behind while others charge forward as heroes for the kingdom ("Hearts of Cinder"). In *Kipo and the Age of Wonderbeasts* (2020), Asher is always with their twin, Dahlia, which seems to be more relevant to their role as a twin than their role as a TGNC person. However, neither Dahlia nor Asher are given extensive screen time. They are both supporting characters to the main cast, and neither twin is shown participating in fights like the main characters. Thus, both twins are backgrounded in comparison to the main characters. In the case of *Steven Universe* (2013-2019), though, one TGNC character is partially made of the main character, thus increasing their importance.

As a fusion, Stevonnie is necessarily a temporarily featured character. They are the combination of the main character, Steven, and his best friend, Connie. Steven and Connie fuse accidentally in their first-time fusing (“Alone Together”), and later fuse as second nature in the face of challenges in the latter portion of the series (“Beach City Drift”). Stevonnie cannot exist without Steven and Connie, and Steven and Connie cannot exist independently while Stevonnie exists. Whether voluntarily or not, Stevonnie must always separate; And they literally fall apart in the face of unmanaged stress or panic (“Mindful Education”). Altogether this seems like a negative phenomenon for a TGNC character to experience. The fact that their queer existence is inextricably tied to loss and disappearance is unfortunate, as it is reminiscent of narratives which treat queer identities as a fad. Additionally, queer peoples’ disappearance has an even more insidious and dark tone in the face of a history of violence and murder perpetuated against the queer community. However, this fact is less harsh when one considers that most fusions in the series are temporarily used for the characters to overcome a difficult obstacle. In this way, the queerness of fusion is associated with a higher power and transcendence, as fusions are rare, awe-inspiring beings who appear in times of great need before disappearing again.

Along a similar vein, *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power* (2018-2020) play into the theme of the mystical disappearing queer. Double Trouble becomes more prevalent in later episodes, but often after “getting into character” by appearing in a different form (“Flutterina”). They are most emphasized for their ability to shapeshift and deceive others, something that is uncomfortably reminiscent of arguments which deem TGNC people as “faking” their gender (for a fad, or for more negative purposes like harming others). Their powers simultaneously reinforce and challenge the stereotypical “wrong body” discourse that often surrounds transgender characters (Capuzza & Spencer, 2017). Of course, taken in another way, Double Trouble very

much represents a part of the TGNC experience of wanting to blend into the crowd to avoid detection or harassment. They offer the dream scenario of being able to transform one's body and voice on a whim, without the need for extensive surgery, training, or money. Unlike some of the other characters in this sample, Double Trouble is quite outspoken. As such, they are backgrounded only by their own choice, and cannot resist taking center stage when the opportunity presents itself. Likewise, there are several characters who resist fading to the background.

Outliers of the Theme

Michael of *The Proud Family: Louder and Prouder* (2022-ongoing) is an exception to the quiet queer of TGNC representation, too. He is loud in both his fashion sense and sarcastic criticism of those around him. While there are episodes where he is not featured, he is brought to the forefront on several occasions to demonstrate his capabilities in the arts. He turned army fatigues into cute outfits for Penny, and groomed LaCienaga back to beauty from an overgrowth of facial hair ("New Kids on the Block"). Not only does he assert his existence through his appearance, but through his impact on the appearances of others. It is notable, though, that both instances demonstrate a personal editing of characters to fit a more hegemonic ideal of feminine beauty. But these characters are ultimately teenage girls who want to fit into the crowd of their high school rather than be bullied for their different appearances. In this way, the relationship between Michael and the others demonstrates a negotiation between queerness and normativity, in which Michael enables his friends to participate in their social worlds seamlessly. Additionally, his queerness is brought front and center when he and Penny attempt to comfort the new kids in school after others target them for their gay "Double Daddies" ("Father Figures").

Unlike the above characters, both Odee and Fred fit into their respective series differently due to their characters being animals.

Odee the okapi is only featured in one episode of *Madagascar: A Little Wild* (“Whatever Floats Your Float”, 2020-ongoing). Odee symbolically refuses to fit into existing categories. They do not fit into the exhibits of other animals, nor do they match the appearance of any animal the main characters have ever seen. Additionally, they take pride in their uniqueness when they explain: “I don’t know what kind of animal I am... I’m the only me I know.” The others do not hesitate to embrace him, as Melman the giraffe gladly says, “whatever you are, you’re one of us now.” Ultimately, they teach the other animals to take pride in their uniqueness. Marty the zebra ultimately celebrates Odee by proclaiming to the others during the zoo pride parade: “This year, I met someone special. And they really know the meaning of pride!” So, Odee is both backgrounded due to their one-episode appearance, but also brought front and center for their outspoken queer identity. Similarly, in *Ridley Jones* (2021-ongoing), Fred comes out of the background when they are able to help the team through the use of their talents, but shares screentime equally with the many other recurring characters of the series.

In summary, the many characters of the sample may seem to represent a significant number of TGNC identities within television cartoons. However, with a closer look, it is clear that many of these characters hold very minor roles in their series. While a couple of the characters are afforded several episodes with which to develop their characters, many of them are allowed only a handful of minutes to appear. When they do appear, as the next section will discuss, they often do so in a way that reinforces masculinity as a default of gender expression.

Queer Masculinity as Default

In the present sample, I noticed a large number of TGNC characters who expressed their gender identities in a largely masculine way. These characterizations resist gendering the characters in a feminine way, which would denote a distinct binary gender. In other words, in binarily-gendered norms, men are assumed to be the default majority, while women exist as a distinct other. Being queer offers the unique opportunity to express oneself freely beyond binary standards. Instead, as these characters often show, masculinity is assumed to be the default gendered nature of any undifferentiated person. Unlike feminine appearances, a masculine appearance allows for these characters to be read as neutrally gendered, thus reinforcing masculinity as default despite their queer identities. I offer the caveat, though, that it is not an immediate dismissal of real-life TGNC people who choose to present as masculine. On the contrary, I wish to highlight a media reliance on this appearance as problematic due to the expectations and limits it places on both those who embody masculinity and those who embody queerness differently.

Several characters portray a masculine appearance that may not inherently signify TGNC identity. In *OK K.O.! Let's Be Heroes* (2017-2019), Gregg wears a suit to the prom-themed episode of the series. This, along with the fact that they are a humanoid bird, codes them as male. Similarly, animal characters of any gender have a history of defaulting to masculinity. Gonzo, Gregg, Odee, Puddle, The King and Fred are all TGNC and masculine characters presented as non-human. Gonzo holds another lay of disidentification in his characterization when compared to the others in *Muppet Babies*. He seems to be an alien species, as opposed to his friends of recognizable origin ("Planet Gonzo"). For example, Kermit is clearly a frog, Miss Piggy is a pig, and so forth. Their caretaker, Miss Nanny, appears to be a normal human woman. So, not only is

he a member of the Muppets who are all already one tier away from humanity, he is also further separated by virtue of his being an alien Muppet. He still expresses masculine gender, despite all this, with his usual outfit made up of a tee shirt and overalls. However, one distinct occurrence separates Gonzo from the other nonhuman TGNC characters of the sample.

Gonzo wears a dress in one episode (“Gonzorella”). After seeing a princess in Miss Piggy’s storybook, he exclaims: “Get a load of that dress! I would love to wear a dress like that to the royal ball.” When the group of friends decide to throw a ball, Gonzo is distressed that his friends expect him to be dressed as a knight. Instead, he is given a magical makeover. In his resulting dress and matching masquerade mask, he is unrecognizable to his friends at the ball. Later, when he dashes from the party a la Cinderella, his friends find him back in his usual outfit and say, “we met the most amazing princess, but they ran away!” He eventually reveals that he was the princess in the mask and dress, saying “I want to be me,” a boy who likes wearing dresses. His friends are quick to assure him that they love him, and ultimately, the group works together to literally rewrite the rules of what a royal ball looks like. Despite the group defaulting on the assumption that Gonzo would want to dress as a knight due to his daily masculine expression, he exercises his gender nonconforming nature and dresses how he truly wants to.

In another instance of royal TGNC characters, Puddle and The King of *Summer Camp Island* (2018-ongoing) look nearly identical to the other aliens on their planet, with the exception of some accessories and different patterns on their white and brown fur. Additionally, The King is referred to as a king, rather than some other ruling title. The title of king denotes a masculine gender. Like Gonzo, though, their alien nature allows them more flexibility in the way they express gender. They wear no clothing that would distinguish them as male or female and have cute high-pitched voices standard to their species. However, the fact that nonhuman characters

default to be read as masculine means that the aliens of the series may mistakenly be read as males, despite their inherent queerness (Birthisel, 2014). Similar to the gems in *Steven Universe* (2013-2019), nonbinary women who present across and apart from the male-female binary (Vogt, 2017), audiences may default to reading characters based on their preconceived notions of male and female embodiment in a strictly categorical way.

Similarly, robot TGNC characters may default to male readings due to character expectations. Robots and machine may traditionally be thought of as inherently masculine things, such that robot characters in popular culture are often male-coded, while female robots are given distinct markings to differentiate them. For example, in the Disney animated film *Cars*, a majority of the personified automobile characters are male. When a car is female, she must be distinguished through exemplary features like a curvier (auto)body, feminine paint colors, and eyelashes. Because of the tendency of creators to default to male nonhumans, robots like BL1P from *Danger & Eggs* (2017), Acid Storm from *Transformers: Cyberverse* (2018-2021), and BMO from *Adventure Time* (2010-2018) can easily be read as male. All share the common appearance of blocky robotic bodies in neutral-to-cool tones, which are again used frequently with male characters. BMO is grey and blue, Acid Storm is mainly neon green, and BL1P is a muted greyish beige.

In *Ridley Jones* (2021-ongoing), Fred expresses their preference for masculine gender expression on multiple occasions. Firstly, they are always wearing their hair in a “perfectly styled pair of fake horns,” (“Unfit for a Queen”) in addition to their insistence on being “the toughest” of the group (“Peaches Beyond the Infinite”). In the museum prom episode, Fred also resolved some of their discomfort by switching out of a ball gown into a sparkling tuxedo, implying that they feel more comfortable presenting themselves as masculine than feminine

(“Bison Ball”). This again points to an understanding of the feminine as a distinctly gendered other in comparison to masculinity, as read from a polar binary perspective. However, Fred’s many talents and traits defer from this binarism, as they are equally likely to be described as “cute” and “tough,” denoting a balance of both masculine and feminine attributes within a gender nonconforming character. In the more humanoid characters, there is still a tendency towards the masculine.

Craig of the Creek’s (2017-ongoing) Angel wears their hair short along with an oversized polo-style shirt and thick-rimmed glasses. The fact that they are ten years old adds a positive layer of gender neutrality: without culturally significant gender markers like secondary sex characters, distinctly gendered voice, or clear romantic orientation, Angel is more able to come across as neutral. Like Angel, the young character Thomas of *City of Ghosts* (2021) sports a short hairdo and oversized tee alongside tennis shoes and khaki pants. They are similarly able to be read as gender neutral due to the fact that they are too young to have gone through puberty, thus saving them from binary sex categorization. Teenagers Michael of *The Proud Family: Louder and Prouder* (2022-ongoing) and Asher of *Kipo and the Age of Wonderbeasts* (2020) are in similar situations, both being TGNC characters who embody a slender appearance topped with a short hairstyle. While Asher wears a simple tee shirt and folded-down coveralls, Michael’s fashion sense is much more intricate, as discussed above. Michael wears a range of clothing from his basketball uniform (“It All Started with an Orange Basketball”) and a short hairdo to a flowery updo worn with a frilly pink suit for his friend’s Quinceanera (“Raging Bully”). In the latter case, he had planned to wear his mother’s wedding dress for the sake of affordability and convenience. However, when LaCienaga realized that none of her friends had proper outfits for

her party, the whole group underwent a makeover of their hair, makeup, and outfits to match the theme.

Michael is emboldened to dress as feminine as he pleases due to his relational identity as a gay boy. This speaks to the assumption that, by being an identical twin to Dahlia, Asher must “really” be a girl. Thus, their appearance tends to be more masculine to deter assumptions of femininity. Michael, a gay, gender nonconforming boy, similarly ventures to more feminine styles than would be expected of a cisgender or straight boy of his age. Lastly, Raine of *The Owl House* (2020-ongoing) exercises masculine neutrality in their appearance and voice. Their voice exists in the mid-range tones between the binaries of male or female, deterring assumptions based on vocals alone. Their hair is short, and the clothes of their fictional universe fit right in. In the universe of this series, witches and monsters wear a variety of clothing items with little distinction between genders. Most wear outfits made up of a variety of tunics, leggings, robes, and boots. As such, gender distinction in the series is rendered a moot point, leaving Raine’s appearance perfectly acceptable and perfectly queer in the sense that it cannot be categorized.

In another case of masculinity as the polar opposite or default in comparison to femininity comes in *Infinity Train*. M. T. makes a point of purposefully looking as different from Tulip as possible, so that she may distance herself from her past duties as a mirror reflection. She trades her long hair and skirt for a shaved head and worn, punk-like attire. Explaining her break from the mirror world by saying, “I wanted to live my own life,” she actively forms an identity against the default expectations of those around her (“The Toad Car”). She is also quick to defend others from stereotypical judgement or labelling, scolding one character for naming a deer without its input: “You can’t go around deciding names for people without asking! It’s their

choice.” (“The Black-Market Car”). In other characters, the purposeful employment of feminine characteristics serves to build a distinct TGNC identity that does not rely on a binary culture.

Outliers of the Theme

Young Justice (2010-present) includes a teenage girl superhero named Violet, who goes by “Halo” during hero missions. Violet uses she/her pronouns and wears a hijab. Similarly, she is referred to as “princess,” “she-thing,” and “Ms. Halo” by other characters. She is distinctly feminine in both appearance and identity. However, the fact that she once describes herself as “not exactly a woman” signifies an identification beyond that of a cisgender woman (“Nautical Twilight”). In fact, she complicates the “wrong body” trope by virtue of living as a being who has occupied the vacant body of a dead woman. Violet’s identity is thus distinct from other teenage girls in several ways. She is literally using the female body as a vehicle for her separate existence, and in doing so, she enables the body to create superhuman auras. By fighting villains with literal light, Violet is an example of feminine TGNC identification that celebrates queerness outside of the standard default male appearance.

Like *Young Justice* (2010-present), *She-Ra* (2018-2020) features plenty of nonhuman characters who push the limits of human gender expectations. In particular, Double Trouble wears their hair long with their outfit including a leotard and high-heeled boots. This appearance is their standard form when they are not transformed into the appearance of someone else. In one episode, Double Trouble plays into the feminine side of their acting abilities to transform into Flutterina, a pink fairy-like humanoid with huge eyes and a huge tutu (“Flutterina”). They are aware of the social implications surrounding binary gender and connotations of innocent femininity, and they use that to their advantage. Thus, they take a step towards the meta by not only defying the gender binary, but by manipulating assumptions surrounding femininity for

their own personal gain. Other TGNC aliens demonstrate the vast possibilities of gender expression and embodiment beyond human standards. In *Steven Universe* (2013-2019), all gems are nonbinary women. They present with varying combinations of femininity and masculinity, accurately depicting the diversity of TGNC people. These characters provide viewers with the true possibility of expressing gender in a way that does not conform to binary societal expectations. Stevonnie has a voice between masculine and feminine, with visible body hair and long, curly hair atop their head. They wear a combination of whatever Steven and Connie wore at the time of their fusion, resulting in an outfit that literally blends male and female fashion.

Though not outside the boundaries of humanity in the way that true aliens might be, Merkid and Pullstring on *Craig of the Creek* (2017-ongoing) display neutral appearances that balance between binaries. Merkid has a shaved head, but noticeably long eyelashes, and wears a mermaid tail. Instead of the stereotypical seashell top that one might expect on a mermaid, they wear a sleeveless top that resembles either a one-piece swimsuit or a binder. Considering the latter allows TGNC viewers a further chance to relate to a character that may wear specific clothing items like a binder to make their body less distinctly fitting of one gender. Pullstring also evades categories, with a nondescript outfit of shorts and a teeshirt along with their mid-length hair. In *The Dragon Prince* (2018-ongoing), Kazi is similarly gendered, with a stylish yet short haircut and a soft (but rarely used) voice. However, it is important to note that the feminine nature of their voice complicates their nonbinary identity by challenging the tendency of creators to default to maleness as a baseline gender.

It is a different consideration regarding transgender men and the discussion of default masculinity. Often, these men seek to express masculinity in a way that echoes social binaries. While the personal reason for this choice is varied, transgender men may feel more comfortable

presenting as masculine in public in order to validate their experience as men in the eyes of their cisgender peers. It remains a fact that most of the participants in Western culture still see gender/sex as binary categories. Because of this, trans men may receive a level of comfort and gender euphoria from presenting as exclusively masculine (Salamon, 2010). In the case of *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power* (2018-2020), there is Jewelstar, a transgender man, whose appearance is distinctly masculine. He has short hair, broad shoulders, and facial hair, all characteristics one would expect from a man. He “passes” in the sense that a casual viewer may easily overlook his transgender status. In *High Guardian Spice* (2021), Professor Caraway is a transgender man who looks like any other young professor, albeit a young professor in a world of magic and heroes. He has a masculine body type, wears blue robes with a bowtie, and sports short, dark hair. The series even addresses the fact that he is transgender when the main character sees old photos of him with long hair and a skirt (“Transformations”). He explains that he now takes a potion once a month to maintain his appearance as his “true self.” This character is notably bold in its sincerity and its direct explanation of what a transgender person may experience socially after their transition.

Finally, regarding the few transgender women in the sample, there was still a tendency to default to masculinity. In *Too Loud!* (2017-2019), main character Jeffrey explains that “as a girl, I feel like myself.” Shyly, he adds, “Is that weird?” (“Slumber Party Sneak-In”). His sister is quick to affirm and validate his existence as Desiree, a girl who loves spending time with other girls her age. However, in subsequent episodes, Desiree appears to have disappeared. In her place remains Jeffrey, the stereotypical male child with short hair, jeans, and a tee shirt. None of this critique is to invalidate TGNC individuals who feel most comfortable presenting as masculine; certainly, in a culture that defaults to masculinity, it makes sense that neutrality may

equal maleness. However, in the case of these characters, creators have the fictional affordances of building characters and worlds that do not need to exist within the binaries the viewers exist in. They have the option to explore possible genders and expressions of those genders outside of expectations. So, when Desiree disappears and reverts to Jeffrey, this could be an acceptable change. However, by not addressing this change through the narrative in any way, the creators failed to invoke a lasting transgender identity that could have had real impact.

In contrast to this is another character from *High Guardian Spice* (2021), Snapdragon, who is a young transgender girl. She receives help transitioning from Professor Caraway who, as mentioned above, knows the magical nature of gender transition in the series fantasy world. Her appearance is slender and straight-lined, with short hair. However, this somewhat masculine appearance does not invalidate her position as a transgender woman. On the contrary, as a character who also happens to be a lesbian, a short hairstyle is not unusual. The fact that she is both a child and a swordswoman also complement her waifish body type, making her skinny profile considerably less problematic in comparison with other characters whose body shapes range from stout to hourglass silhouettes. Finally, in *The Loud House* (2016-ongoing), minor character Dana Dufresne shows up twice: presenting as masculine pre-transition (“Toads and Tiaras”) and presenting as feminine post-transition (“Gown and Out”). Perhaps even more so than Snapdragon, she is a distinctly feminine woman, wearing a dress which accentuates her noticeable breasts. The normalization of her physical and social transition is worthy of recognition, but underdeveloped, much like that of Desiree.

The tendency to portray TGNC in a masculine appearance as their default gender presentation is a complicated topic. While the overall trend towards masculinity or maleness in the sample is troubling in that it calls back to hegemonic gender norms, I cannot overlook the

more nuanced pieces of these representations. In a culture where masculinity is treated as the assumed gender category, with femininity being a marked other, I cannot fault design choices of TGNC characters which approach gender neutrality via maleness. However, I likewise cannot forget to discuss those TGNC people whose gender expression includes femininity. Because of this, I applaud series like *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power* (2018-2020), *Young Justice* (2010-present), and *The Dragon Prince* (2018-ongoing), whose TGNC characters push the expectations of what it means to be nonbinary or gender nonconforming. Further, these series present the very real possibility to be a feminine man, a masculine woman, or someone completely different than people can currently imagine (Halperin, 2003). In the coming section, I will discuss the theme of TGNC characters who exist in their series as rebels, whether that be through their own actions or through their identities.

The Rebellion of Queerness

In keeping with the queer tradition of rebellion, many TGNC characters in the sample enacted narratives of resistance to the status quo. Whether in minor ways like associating with a local group of “bad kids,” or major ways like rioting against an oppressive government, these characters pushed back against the heteronormativity of their respective fictions. Regardless of if these acts were ultimately for good or evil, the simple fact of pushback against expectations is queer in and of itself (LeMaster & Johnson, 2019). It speaks to the LGBTQ traditions of daring to exist in a space where queerness is often unexpected and unwelcome. As such, I present the following examples as hopeful glances toward the power of TGNC characters in children’s cartoons.

Perhaps the character in charge of the most carnage, *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power*’s (2018-2020) Double Trouble rebels very literally against whomever they make their

target. They stand out as the only character in the series with the unique biological ability to shapeshift. In practicing this ability, they defy the laws of stagnant identity and embodiment. Additionally, they maintain their independent attitude throughout each episode, considering themselves smarter than most of the other characters. They use their intelligence to fool their enemies and allies alike, switching sides in ongoing conflicts several times, depending on who is winning or who has a bigger paycheck (“The Valley of the Lost”). Regardless of their alliance at any given time, they thrive in an environment of chaos. “This is supposed to be fun!” they say, referencing their success on an espionage mission (“Pulse”). Because of this, they can also be read as pushing back against universal assumptions of ethics surrounding loyalty to one’s allies. In a war-torn world, their only allegiance is to themselves, and they do not hesitate to inconvenience others along the way (“Destiny”).

In another fantasy alien conflict, the characters of *Steven Universe* (2013-2019) and *Steven Universe Future* (2019-2020) embody resistance to expectations. Stevonnie, and all fusion characters of the series, are in and of themselves a walking rebellion against the established worldly norms of the series. By virtue of being aliens, all gems, fusion or otherwise, are unique to the human species they encounter on Earth. As such, their existence is an act of defiance to the natural order of Earth. In one episode, the act of fusing and unfusing leaves the human bully, Kevin, distraught. After challenging Kevin to a race, Steven and Connie show up to the starting line as Stevonnie. Their disdain is misread as infatuation by Kevin, who accuses them of being “two kids in a beautiful trench coat” trying to get his attention by racing him (“Beach City Drift”). When Stevonnie finishes the race without caring who won, Kevin screams at them, asserting that they raced only to spend time with him, saying “you’re obsessed with me!” Stevonnie ignores his accusations, smiling and enjoying their drive away from the

racetrack, defying human expectations of competition and romance. Alternatively, the very act of fusion itself is a rebellion against Homeworld, where it is socially unacceptable to fuse with a gem of a different kind, and cross-gem fusing is punishable by shattering—essentially, death (“The Answer”). Regardless, the Crystal Gems do not hesitate to fuse when they want to, whether for practical or social purposes. Garnet, in particular, spends the majority of her existence as a permanent fusion, uncaring that Homeworld gems find her existence repulsive (“Crack the Whip”). The relational identity of gems as fusions is inherently rebellious.

In *Infinity Train*, there is a similar occurrence of identity as rebellion. As previously mentioned, M. T.’s narrative revolves around her attempt to understand who she is as a unique individual outside of the mirrors she has occupied her entire life. Her rebellious nature reveals the oppressive tactics of not only the mirror law enforcement hunting her down, but the train’s conductor, who may have previously been read as good or neutral. The conductor refuses to allow M. T. to exit from the train, despite her wishes for a life in the real world. Her very existence is repeatedly questioned by others: The mirror police explain to her prime human, Tulip, that M. T. will be ground down into “a pile of nothing” for breaking from her intended role (“The Chrome Car”). Ultimately, she defeats these fantasy policemen and the train conductor through her own resourcefulness and grit. When she leaves the train for the “real world”, she has gone against the laws of numerous rulers in order to reach her own goals. Looking at her own reflection in a mountain lake, relieved at her escape from the prison of the train, she names herself Lake (“The Number Car”). This last act of defiance signifies the weight and weightlessness of a TGNC person choosing their own name, simultaneously shouldered with the mass of their entire future, yet free from the constraints of their gendered past (Salamon, 2010).

Like Lake, Raine resists the powers that be in the world of *The Owl House* (2020-ongoing). Raine leads a group called “Bards Against the Throne” (B.A.T.), which is a rebel activist group seeking to liberate the fictional civilization from the unnecessary categorization imposed by mandatory coven membership (“Eda’s Requiem”). In the series, all witches are expected to conform to the demands of society, which have them pledge their allegiance to one of nine covens. In this way, the powers of citizens are specified and limited in a way that organizes people under labels that are convenient to the emperor and his small group of ruling witches. Despite the fact that Raine is the highest-ranking witch of the Bard Coven, they fight back against the unnecessarily strict rules imposed by the government. They are later captured by the emperor’s guards and magically brainwashed into complacency. However, with the series ongoing, it seems likely that Raine will not only escape their imprisonment but will also work with the main characters to defeat the evil emperor (“Them’s the Brakes Kid”). Their strong magical powers and their stronger will mark them as a formidable opponent to those in power.

In *Young Justice* (2010-present), Violet/Halo exists in a similarly powerful position of defiance. She is already a one-of-a-kind being, due to her existence as a being occupying the body of another person. Her ability to live in the world of the series is defiant by nature, or put more accurately, against nature. Though Halo’s abilities are used for good, and she is a hero, she is a rebel, as well. She joins a group of other heroes affiliated with the Justice League in order to provide vigilante justice and protection for victims of evildoers. Public opinion about this group is divided, with some saying that they are needlessly putting people in danger (“Elder Wisdom”). Thus, despite her fighting for the forces of good, her efforts can be categorized as rebellious, as well.

Less politically divisive is the simple rebellion of Gregg in *OK K.O.! Let's Be Heroes* (2017-2019). Gregg can be read as rebellious due to their membership in a local group of ne'er-do-wells who hold a questionable reputation amongst the characters in the series ("You're Everybody's Sidekick"). The group is the typical trio of delinquents who think of themselves as superior to the other superhero kids and teens in their town. They spend their time lurking in the alleyways, teasing kids, and causing general trouble. However, Gregg is essentially a lacky to the other two, who are both taller and stronger. They frequently defer to the group leader, Red Action, for decisions and opinions alike. Offering the occasional squawk of agreement with Red Action, Gregg's rebellion is quieter than those of the characters discussed above.

Similar teenage rebellion can be seen in *The Proud Family: Louder and Prouder* (2022-ongoing). Michael thrives off of going against his father's wishes ("New Kids on the Block"). Assumedly, his father would rather Michael be straight and cisgender-presenting. Thus, the way Michael dresses and acts brings him extra joy due to the fact that his father disapproves ("Father Figures"). He refuses to go with the demands of others, even in the case of his friends—when his clique finds themselves on the verge of a fistfight, he is not afraid to walk away with a "sorry, boo," as Penny begs him to stand up to the bullies threatening them ("Father Figures"). In another episode, as mentioned above, he ditches the group's new rideshare app efforts after bad publicity ruins their image. He matter-of-factly says, "I have a brand to project," before leaving the group's treehouse-turned-business-headquarters. In a fashion similar to *Double Trouble*, Michael is not afraid to protect his own interests. While he certainly values his friends, he has an indestructible confidence in the face of criticism. When his friends are booed offstage by an audience for their poor song and dance performance, Michael quips, "That was tragic. But at least my outfits and choreography were on point." ("SnackLand"). Likewise, when the main

character Penny gives an unagreeable political speech to their school, Michael excitedly assists her through providing an accompanying ribbon dance in sweatbands, a leotard, and tights (“Home School”). His unabashed image as a Black, gay, gender nonconforming is a defiance in the face of a cartoon landscape which defaults to images of straight, white, masculine characters. Perhaps less powerful, but still worth discussing, are the TGNC characters whose rebellion is more minor and possibly even accidental.

Characters in lower stakes series tend to enact smaller rebellions. For example, Gonzo’s rebelliousness is more subtle due to the genre and rating of *Muppet Babies*, which is intended especially for young audiences. He is a troublemaker, committing morally questionable acts like cheating at games (“Gonzo’s Coop Dream”), losing library books (“Gonzonocchio”), and convincing others to do his chores for him (“Gonzo’s Clean Sweep”). In the grand scheme of this analysis, his mischief is hardly offensive; on the contrary, it provides a characterization that is realistic to viewers. Children often misbehave, and instead of being punished, they are allowed to see Gonzo learning from his mistakes. While the other characters exasperatedly sigh “Gonzo!” on multiple occasions, they do so lovingly, reaffirming that TGNC characters are allowed to go astray while retaining the love of their friends. In fact, Gonzo himself worries about whether his unique traits make him less likable, as he illustrates by asking his friends: “You guys still like me even though I’m different, right?” (“Planet Gonzo”). They offer him validation and comfort in their responses, verifying that he does indeed look and act differently from others, but that they all love him because of his uniqueness.

Like Gonzo, Fred’s friends love them because of their difference. The main character of *Ridley Jones* (2021-ongoing), Ridley, explains this sentiment best to Fred after they pick out a bright blue suit for the museum dance: “That’s exactly why we love you, Fred,” she says,

“because you’re different and you’re not afraid to show it.” (“Bison Ball”) Fred embodies a playful rebellion in their love for playing the drums, dancing, leading the herd, and being “a rough and tough beast.” (“The Taming of the Tail”). However, Fred actually stands out in comparison to the other museum bison because they are “small and adorable.” (“Fred Steps Up”). As previously discussed, they often play to their strengths by using their dance moves to evade detection by security lasers (“Art of the Steal”), and to lift heavy objects out of the team’s path (“Peaches Beyond the Infinite”). All their quirks and abilities make them the unique bison who retains the love and respect of their friends despite some missteps along the way. Similarly, *City of Ghost’s* Thomas is only mildly rebellious in that they ask a lot of questions, sometimes interrupting others, and express sarcasm (“Venice”). They are a bit socially rebellious in this way, which is far more subtle than other TGNC characters in the sample. However, these minor communicative acts are hardly troublesome to those around them.

In *Adventure Time* (2010-2018), BMO also acts in a miniature rebellion. They seek friendship and adventure, unlike their robot family constructed in the same factory (“Be More”). Instead of existing for practical or instrumental purposes, BMO exists to be themselves and live their best life alongside the main characters, Finn and Jake. The three live together in a giant treehouse in the mystical Land of Ooo, with BMO often acting silly or childish. As such, their rebellion is against standards of robotic expectations. They are not an unfeeling, ageless machine, but a young and curious being with a passion for life. Similarly, in *Summer Camp Island* (2018-ongoing), Puddle and The King are sometimes quirky in ways that annoy others; for example, they are shown splattering s’mores around a camper’s cabin (“Space Invasion”) or replaying their honeymoon photo slideshow one too many times (“Puddle and the King Chapter 3: All the King’s Slides”). In fact, the charming nature of their rebellion also includes shifting the

natural laws of their planet to accommodate their marriage. After being told that “it’s illegal for incompatible [zodiac] signs to marry,” they spend an episode trying to circumnavigate the law (“We’ll Just Move the Stars”). They fly across the galaxy on a magic “moondog,” pushing and pulling the planets around to alter Puddle’s zodiac sign. When this plan fails, they decide to get married on a different planet, before returning home to resume their life together. Ultimately, their love is so strong that the planet rearranges its natural terrain, from which the lawmakers of the planet determine law. When the power of their love causes the Tree of Love to grow taller than the tree in charge of the zodiac, the wedding officiant has no choice but to allow their marriage. They are finally allowed to wed due to their unfaltering commitment to one another, even in the face of legal pushbacks. This narrative is highly reminiscent of the queer push for marriage equality in the face of outdated laws which oppressed marriages which were not solely heterosexual.

Finally, in a rebellion that only takes place for a single episode, Jeffrey of *Too Loud!* (2017-2019) fights back against the fact that he is not invited to a slumber party with his sister, Sara (“Slumber Part Sneak-In”). In order to attend the party and not be left out, Jeffrey dons drag and shows up to the party as Sara’s cousin named Desiree. Eventually, after struggling to keep his identity a secret, Desiree admits that he is in fact Jeffrey dressed up to be allowed into the party. However, along the way, he realizes that he feels comfortable as a girl, and prefers to keep the Desiree outfit on. Even though Sara’s friends had known it was truly Jeffrey all along, they warmly accepted Jeffrey/Desiree into the party.

All these characters demonstrate, to some extent, the inherently queer nature of rebellion. As TGNC people (or animals, or aliens, or robots) resisting expectations, they continue a legacy of queer power used in the face of unjust normativity, causing gender trouble (Butler, 1990).

Whether that rebellion is as small as failing to return a library book, or as big as turning the tides of a war, these acts illustrate the importance of going against the grain in a queer identity. The following and final section of discussion looks at the way these characters exist in utopian scenarios that are, in some cases, aspirational.

Queer Utopias

These TGNC characters are all largely loved and accepted by those around them. Many do not even feature a narrative of coming out or dealing with the social stigma of discovering one has a TGNC identity. While the coming out stories of queer people are important to both their identity and to a larger sense of community, media focusing only on coming out fails to capture the nuance of queer life. After coming out, or without coming out, there are stories that must be told. These series provide excellent examples of worlds where queer identity is accepted or even unremarkable. Like Muñoz's (2019) queer utopia, gender/sex become intrinsically confounded by the mutual existence of queer people alongside other queer people and straight/cis people alike, all of whom refuse to hold intense convictions to Western colonial gender divides (Perry, 2018). Across the whole sample, there are no microaggressions like misgendering or bullying expressly due to gender identity. At the very least, some of these TGNC characters face genuine curiosity about their genders from those around them, but never in a cruel way.

In fantasy universes of several series in the sample, there are far more remarkable things to worry about than peoples' genders. In the worlds of magic from the series *The Owl House* (2020-ongoing), *Steven Universe* (2013-2019), and *High Guardian Spice* (2021), TGNC people are commonplace and treated as such. There is no huge discussion around their existence or their rights. With the minor exception of the main character asking Professor Caraway about his

transition, the gender identities of Raine, the gems and fusions, and Shep are not even mentioned. They are so well accepted that relationships between TGNC people are likewise not seen as scandalous. For example, Raine has an ongoing romance with Eda, one of the main characters of the series (“Eda’s Requiem”). Several episodes are focused on the narrative surrounding their relationship, along with its ups and downs. Stevonnie is seen as beautiful and charming by the human teenagers in the show, as they are seen repeatedly leaving a trail of blushing, sparkly-eyed admirers in their wake (“Alone Together”). Not only does this show TGNC people as desirable, but it adds to the normalization of them. Regardless of whether characters show attraction to Stevonnie, they effortlessly use the correct pronouns when referring to them. When the young student Snapdragon confides in Professor Caraway that she does not feel like a boy, he comforts her, and says “you are not weird. Do you know anything about transition magic?” (“The Scypith”). In these magical fantasy series, there are monsters, magic, and mysteries galore; As such, gender variance is an accepted and respected part of an unpredictable world. Transformations and deviations from some imagined norm do not even register as strange or negative to the peers of these characters sailor (Hoskin, 2016).

Summer Camp Island (2018-ongoing) is one similar series which builds a layer of magic on top of a familiar reality. The main characters are anthropomorphic animals attending a magical summer camp, which is frequented by monsters, aliens, and witches. Puddle and The King are fuzzy, small aliens from a planet that is described as “adorable” and “cute” on numerous occasions (“Feeling Spacey”). The landscape of their home includes an abundance of rainbows in the sky, cotton candy hills, and chocolate rivers, all adorned in pastel candies and sprinkles. Their inclusion in the lives of the main characters on Earth is due to a pact between The King and the witches of Earth, resulting in aliens having built the summer camp from which

the series took its name (“Puddle and the King Chapter 3: All the King’s Slides”). In this magical universe, all types of creatures are allowed to thrive, sharing their resources and celebrating unions of love regardless of gender. In other series which lean more towards the adventure and science fiction side of the spectrum, TGNC people are likewise accepted.

As discussed about, BMO is adored by the other characters of the *Adventure Time* (2010-2018) world. They are sometimes treated like a child or infant by others, but never in a mean-spirited way. In a sense, BMO is indeed a child, being a small robot built with the capability to play videogames on their screen. Nevertheless, they forego their internal capability for accessing all the information of the internet in favor of discovering things for themselves. In *City of Ghosts* (2021), the adventures of the kids in The Ghost Club take them all around their local neighborhoods. Thomas introduces themselves on one of their video recordings as using they/them pronouns, which receives no reaction other than a continued smile from the main character and leader of the club (“Venice”). In their town, ghosts are real, and can appear in many different shapes and sizes. In one episode, they see a punk-rocker styled ghost named Atomic Nancy (“Bob and Nancy”), and in another, they meet a colorful *alebrije*-like ghost who communicates solely through whistles (“Koreatown”). Taking this all into account, it seems hardly surprising that a child might identify outside of the gender binary. Bird-person Gregg of *OK K.O.! Let’s Be Heroes* (2017-2019) is likewise never criticized or questioned for their gender. The daily life of characters in the series is far more likely to be shaken up by robots or supervillains than a teenager’s nonbinary identity. A humanoid bird person is not seen as strange, and by extension, TGNC identities are not questioned, either. In *Young Justice* (2010-present), which is likewise a superhero-based show, Violet’s identity struggle has more to do with the fact that she inhabits someone else’s body than it does with her gender. Because of this, the theme of self-exploration

and building one's own identity is still there, but not in the way that she feels anguish at the possibility of being TGNC. In other series, magic brings everyday scenarios to another level beyond what an audience experiences in their own lives.

Odee and Fred bring the unique consideration of the gender of animals. Both exist in worlds similar to ours, in which humans are the dominant species of the planet. Given the ability to speak, the animals in both series exhibit human-like personalities, and genders to match. While it would make more sense for no animal to have gender distinction, much less a binary one, Odee and Fred present the possibility for TGNC identification in animals whose genders largely reflect their human counterparts. In the universe of *Ridley Jones* (2021-ongoing), characters show no hesitation in properly referring to Fred and any character of unknown gender with singular "they" pronouns. Additionally, the museum where a majority of episodes take place has a bathroom door unmarked by gender icons; there is one door, and instead of an image of a human, it has a simplified image of a toilet ("Rocket Monkey"). However, it is clear that the characters are still aware of gender binarism, as demonstrated when the main character, Ridley, asks the museum monkey, Peaches: "Is Fred a she or a he?" When Peaches says that she does not know, and that "they're just Fred," Ridley smiles and simply says "cool." ("Ready or Not Here I Come"). So, while most characters ascribe to a gender binary, they are aware and welcoming to the fact of gender fluidity and gender neutrality. In the fictional worlds created by artists, the nature of reality can be decided independently of cultural norms.

Middle School Moguls (2019) is one series which has an unremarkable premise in comparison to the aforementioned fantasy series. It follows four tween girls on their educational journey to succeed in the business world. They happen to have a nonbinary teacher named Wren who runs the school fashion department, but this fact is taken as second nature by those around

Wren (“Mo’gul Money, Mo Problems”). This normalcy is at once underwhelming and comforting. The fact of an older nonbinary person who exists unquestioned is utopian in the sense that not only have they survived the youth of being a TGNC person despite the high fatality rate they would face in the modern U.S., but they are also embraced as a source of expertise by those around them (Muñoz, 2019). In a series which alters reality a bit more, *Danger & Eggs* (2017) takes place in a city park which just happens to have a hole in the ground leading to a secret underground experiment zone where monsters exist. The supernatural and scientific secrets of the park do not overshadow its human cast, though, as most characters are humans. Like the series discussed above, the existence of TGNC is unquestioned in this series, too. The mayor of the town just happens to be a transgender woman, though this is not explicitly mentioned. She is capable and gorgeous, and as discussed in the first theme, multitalented (“Pennies”). Her interpersonal skills of peaceful negotiation make her an extension of the queer desire to be loved and accepted without discriminatory arguments. She also represents a time of accepted queerness alongside both the natural and human worlds, as she shows an affinity for animals like Asher in *Kipo and the Age of Wonderbeasts* (2020). Similarly, the sweet agender kid Milo is welcomed with open arms to play in a band with the two main characters of the series (“Finding Cheryl”). Later, when Milo must leave town to go home, they spend a whole episode trying to keep them in the park with them for longer (“The Trio”). When it becomes clear that they must return home, the main character D.D. cries, “I miss them already!” Offering several other TGNC characters, *Danger & Eggs* (2017) could arguably be the most progressive of the series in my sample, following the massive representation of nonbinary women in *Steven Universe* (2013-2019). By including at least five characters—two nonbinary, one agender, and two transgender women—participating unbothered in human society, the creators posit a reality

where we simply accept the identities of one another, regardless of if they align with societal expectations. In *Steven Universe* (2013-2019), the gems offer countless representations of nonbinary women. Shep demonstrates the possibility of human TGNC characters alongside the alien gems. Additionally, the acceptance of fusions by the Earth gems demonstrates an evolved social norm system that they have adopted in their years away from their Homeworld. When different gems fuse, it demonstrates a trust and acceptance between two or more nonbinary women willing to create something new from their relationships, “the ultimate connection between gems.” (“We Need to Talk”). It literally allows them to become more than the sum of their parts, in a supernatural round of applause for queer cooperation amongst members of a found family.

Outliers of the Theme

Finally, there were a handful of series which offered a completely opposite finding to utopian ideation. In the cases of *Double Trouble*, *Asher*, and *Lake*, characters still receive respect and recognition for their gender identities despite existing in largely dystopian scenarios. *Double Trouble* repeatedly resides in shady and dangerous areas of the planet, such as the villain-militia-ruled Fright Zone and the aptly named Valley of the Lost. However, heroes and villains alike do not bat an eye at their distinctly alien appearance and use of they/them pronouns. *Asher* exists in a world overrun by “wonderbeasts,” mutated and often dangerous animal species that have driven humans to near extinction. Faced with lumberjack cats, murderous musical monkeys, and giant dogs, other characters are not confused by the presence of a nonbinary kid amongst the surviving humans. *Lake* creates her own identity after escaping the mirror realm onboard the *Infinity Train*, an endless supernatural train that has a distinct universe in each train car. Around the train is an endless desert wasteland occupied by murderous roach-dog mutants. In the face of

these ever-present threats, the passengers and denizens of the train do not question Lake's gender journey. Finally, in *Transformers: Cyberverse* (2018-2021), the world is divided amongst the good-guy Autobots and the evil Decepticons. Acid Storm is a Decepticon with the power to create toxic rainfall to damage their enemies. When the primary focus of the series characters is the threat of war and the accompanying battles, the gender identity of an enemy soldier is hardly worth bringing up.

Many of these characters bring a small slice of utopia into their respective scenarios. They offer looks into a variety of fictional universes wherein TGNC people are accepted as they are, and in the darker cases of dystopias, they are not targets because of their queerness. Regardless of the overall impact of the characters in each series (which is often minimal), the fact that they exist at all is a positive phenomenon in and of itself. I will now move from discussion of specific cases which exemplify my themes of analysis to a more general discussion of the implications of these findings.

IMPLICATIONS, LIMITATIONS, AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

In the following chapter, I outline additional considerations for this research study. The first, implications, discusses how these themes might extend to meaning beyond the screen. Secondly, I will discuss limitations of this study which may be remedied in future studies. Finally, I explore avenues for future research in popular culture and queerness.

Implications

These series show a hopeful look towards a future that is more accepting in both fictional worlds and in the real world. As popular culture serves a variety of functions in society, it is important to understand how the creators, media, and viewers cyclically construct cultural norms. In creating these cartoon series, the creators brought pieces of their own realities to the project. This means that an increase in creators who respect or experience TGNC identities can directly lead to an increase in representation for those very types of characters. The more queer characters are visible on television and other forms of popular culture, the more viewers can understand queerness on a deeper level. Not only does this develop an awareness and empathy for queer people (Brassel & Anderson, 2020), but it also allows for the possibility that viewers may themselves have queer identities which were previously unrealized (Bond & Miller, 2017).

Alternatively, the increase in queer representation will inevitably be received negatively by those whose beliefs lean toward the homophobic, transphobic, and close-minded. In an even more nuanced consideration, not all TGNC people experience the same reality. Aside from the obvious fact that this acronym covers countless possible identities, no two individuals even of the same identity live the same life. For example, my experience as a nonbinary person is very different than the experience of any other nonbinary person I might meet. Because of this, there will always be the criticism that representations of queer people are not sufficiently accurate or

realistic, as well as the pushback against queer representations which can be read as negative. While it is important to avoid obvious clichés like “bury your gays,” in which gay characters are featured only to be killed off shortly later, there will always be someone consuming media who disagrees with the stories told therein. However, the key to excelling in telling queer stories lies in the ability to listen and create in a cyclical way. Creators building fictional worlds including queer characters must enact nuance in the personalities, appearances, and narratives of their queer characters (emphasis on this being multiple characters, rather than a single character). I do not want the takeaway of this to be that there is any one way to create a TGNC and/or queer character. Opposite to that, I wish that the burden of representation would not fall on a select few characters who only exist minutely in the occasional television series. A good character, representing anyone, is a complex character. Complexity and uniqueness alongside other people make us human, and the same traits can bring characters to life.

Other than the simple numerical considerations of increased TGNC visibility, the themes surrounding these characters bring a diverse and interesting array of images, narratives, and discourses. Across the analyzed characters, there were a multitude of different racial representations, ages, and body types. It is worth noting here that cartoons could stand to increase their representation of disabled people, both queer and otherwise. The stories surrounding the TGNC characters in my analysis varied from lighthearted slice-of-life moments to intense scenarios of conflict, portraying a rich collection of narratives akin to those of their cisgender and straight counterparts. The discourses, as discussed above, likewise covered a vast expanse of symbolism.

Firstly, many of these characters embodied an obsession with avoiding failure. They displayed flawless talents and impeccable smarts. While positive representation is preferable to

complete absence or misrepresentation, it can run the risk of painting a one-dimensional character. A purely exceptional TGNC character, whether of awesome intellect or incredible athletic prowess, may set an impossibly high standard for queer viewers. Alternatively, characters with a mix of strengths and weaknesses are not only more believable, but better standards for viewers to learn. As human beings, we are walking contradictions, full of skills and talents, but burdened by flaws. However, the finding of the model queer may be preferable to the next finding of the backgrounded queer.

The fact that many of these characters existed in the background is unfortunate. Whether they were in a single moment of a single episode or a stretch of a couple episodes, none of the characters were the main characters of their respective series. Though several were recurring characters, it would be admirable to see a TGNC character as a star (or even one of a few stars) of a series. Though cisgender characters with queer sexualities still rarely act as the star of their own series, the cultural acceptance for queer people is steadily rising in a reflection of a society ready to see more queer stories. Additionally, some of the recent troubling trends in transphobic attitudes and hate crimes signify a society in sore need of lessons on tolerance. By exposing audiences more to TGNC and queer stories, there is a possibility to build empathy and decrease discrimination. Next, in consideration of cyclical cultural symbolism, the fact of masculinity as the default—or lack of—gender exists in line with hegemonic expectations.

Notably, many of the characters analyzed present in a largely masculine way. Whether human or not, they attempt to project gender neutrality by embodying a male appearance. In a culture that values men over women or any other gender of people, it is not surprising that we assume maleness as the default gender of a person. Against maleness, femininity exists distinctly as imagery of the other, which makes female presentation assumedly more gendered than male

presentation. So, by approaching male standards of appearance, these TGNC characters disassociate themselves from the binarily gendered female. This implies an understanding of real TGNC experience, where nonbinary and gender nonconforming people often favor a masculine appearance as a strategy to appear gender neutral. As such, it could possibly push cultural norms when audiences watch series which feature more feminine TGNC characters. In doing so, viewers can understand that TGNC people may look feminine and/or masculine and/or however they like. Along a similar vein, the very existence of TGNC people and characters signifies a rebellion from traditional gender binaries, which brings me to the implications of my next theme.

The presence of rebellion within the characters analyzed depicts a realistic and powerful piece of the queer experience. In keeping with queer tradition, these characters communicate to viewers that it is alright to push back against gender expectations. Similar to the implications above, the representation of queer rebellion implies that creators understand the significance of TGNC characters going against the grain. By extension, these rebellions teach viewers to fight back against unjust or outdated systems of oppression. From small-scale rebellions to rebellions that move literal planets, these characters can empower others to act out when the need arises. Finally, my analysis provided a look towards a hopeful cultural destination in which queer identity is uncriticized and even commonplace.

Utopian queer scenarios abounded in the sample. Miraculously, there were nearly no narratives surrounding the distress of realizing one's queerness or the subsequent drama of coming out that follows. While the lack of these stories may be due to children as the target audience, and the fact that children may prefer action and human over interpersonal drama, it is not unimportant. In fact, cartoons which offer TGNC characters may be doubly comforting to queer viewers both old and young. The simplicity of an artistically rendered fiction paired with

the ideal scenarios of acceptance and respect create quite a vision of utopia which other media may fail to capture. Coming out stories and journeys of self-discovery are undoubtedly important, and the creation and viewing of those themes can be cathartic to those who have suffered negative cultural consequences because of being queer. But there is something hopeful in a tale which just so happens to include a transgender wizard or a nonbinary robot, either of whom may participate in the adventure without discrimination from their peers.

These themes intersect in an interesting way that suggests an overall trend towards improved representation of TGNC people and queer people, alike. The exception super-queer seems to come as a pendulum swing away from past representations of evil and/or dead queers. Instead, creators are offering positive spins on rarely told tales, or at least those tales which are rarely told in front of such large audiences. These examples seemed to have some overlap with those exemplifying the finding of queer utopias in which queer characters are unquestioned for their gender and loved but those closest to them. Perhaps the former category demonstrates more one-dimensional characters or narratives than the latter, in which characters were quickly displayed as exceptional and never given the relational character growth needed to develop a sense of community with the other characters. This notable shortcoming is further exacerbated by the backgrounded queer trope, which the media research of organizations like GLAAD continues to prove numerically and qualitatively. The masculine default of queer characters likewise illustrates a possible lack of self-awareness or a reliance on social stereotypes of queer people. While many TGNC people may choose to express their gender through masculine appearance, there are as many TGNC people who would rather dress feminine, or who would refuse to follow such strict classifications. The lack of time and space for these characters to change and grow, despite their fictional and artistic affordances of unlimited time and space,

makes them fall short. When creators embrace the space between reality and fiction, they can create representations from within a borderland in which real, lived experiences are transferred and transformed through the potential of artistic creation (Anzaldúa, 1987). From there can arise both the utopia and the rebellion of queerness. The rebellion of queerness in art represents a refusal to adhere to standards which oppress people, norms of capitalism, colonialism, categorical prejudices, and outdated beliefs (Perry, 2018). From the fire of the rebellion, the chance for utopia arises. The destruction or complex erasure of oppressive social structures allows for something beautiful to arise from the ashes. People are given a space to find themselves amid others finding themselves, a utopian scenario with limitless potential (Muñoz, 2019). Queerness is rebellion, and queerness is a beautiful utopian oasis for those who find themselves isolated from the elusive club of dominant power (Yep, 2013).

Altogether, the findings of this study imply another step in the right direction for mediated representation of queer people. That said, there is plenty more to be done if TGNC people are ever to get sufficient airtime. With more and more of upcoming generations identifying as queer, it is imperative that creators stay abreast of a cultural shift towards greater acceptance. Similarly, creators should be prepared to challenge existing cultural norms if they wish to have a positive impact on the overall trends away from homophobic and transphobic societal trends. In the following section, I turn my attention to a discussion of my limitations during this study.

Limitations

One major limitation of this study was the nature of the sampling process, which was both lengthy and convoluted. Without a comparative study on TGNC characters on television cartoons, the standards of choosing my dataset were hard to pin down. Additionally, many of the

characters discussed in this research were only granted canonical TGNC status through out-of-universe communications. Several characters were verified as queer by series frontrunners on social media like Twitter, while others are only very heavily implied as TGNC without true explicit labelling. Ideally, someday, labels will be a relic of a past obsessed with categorizing people by their gender and sexuality. However, in current social norms, the simple naming of queerness can hold incredible power in the face of assumed cisgender heterosexuality.

Another constraint was time and resources. As the sole researcher on this project, I was only able to watch a handful of episodes from any series which featured its TGNC characters more frequently. When the character of interest was only in one episode, this was an irrelevant concern. Given more time and resources, I would gladly continue this work by watching each and every episode featuring TGNC characters, possibly even expanding my sample to include all queer characters, or TGNC characters on live-action series. Alternatively, this is a possibility for myself and future researchers to continue this work: As more queer characters are shown in media, more research can be done on them, further expanding and complicating my conclusions here. Perhaps even more so, the ongoing nature of some of my series sampled means that characters might have the space to grow and develop in the future. Those listed here as one-dimensional or backgrounded may later become recurring or main characters in their respective series. This brings me to the final portion of this chapter, which is a discussion of directions for future research.

Directions for Future Research

As alluded to above, there are many ways I would recommend expanding this research. Firstly, and perhaps most simply, replicative research on TGNC characters in cartoons would inevitably lead to further possible readings of the characters and their series. The subjective

nature of this study makes it especially good for application by different researchers with different perspectives. It would also be interesting to approach the study from a more quantitative perspective. A researcher could simply count the number of TGNC characters in cartoon series, or conduct content analysis which considers things like screentime, number of lines spoken, and proportion of episodes which feature queer characters. Regardless of the specific methods, though, it is important that researchers continue to explore the continued role of popular culture media in the production, transformation, and reflection of cultural norms.

CONCLUSION

From the combination of critical thinking about power and cultural messages, taken with the omnipresent social discourses surrounding gender identity, this analysis considered the presence of TGNC discourses, visuals, and characters in children's cartoons. The seemingly innocent position of cartoon series places them perfectly in the context of my aims as a scholar. The messages of media which we consume for comfort or habit have the familiarity needed to nestle their way into our consciousness. The everyday nature of cartoons fits with my use of theory as an everyday practice. It is my firm belief that theory should have a place of relevance outside of the limited purview of scholars and their academic tomes. I wish to put into practice that “any theory that cannot be shared in everyday conversation cannot be used to educate the public” (hooks, 1991). As such, theorizing which does not make itself accessible to the public, either through practice or outreach, cannot claim itself as useful in the goal of social change. This research is meant to reach public understanding in a way that can provide recommendations and statements towards social progress. Through experiencing my chosen sample of television, I have shared knowledge of the media at hand and built theoretical understanding around the cultural value of these texts. The act of experiencing and the act of knowing go hand in hand with the creation of knowledge between individuals. The healing act of discussing that which we live through is at once a practical and social act which enables us to build from one another's' ideas, the same type of iterative process which legitimizes theory. In short, this study aims to start conversations about the presence of queerness in the seemingly innocuous locale of children's television cartoons.

The process is both a critical one and a reparative one (Sedgwich, 1997). I hope to expose the problematic or stereotypical representations on television which might echo harmful

traditions of the past. Scholars applying critical queer theory to media texts must repeatedly interrogate popular texts to understand the progress being made or forgone in representations (Avila-Saavedra, 2009). Simultaneously, I hope to uplift the positive and nuanced messages of queerness which open future possibilities for the media, audiences, and society. These discussions invite other members of both the casual and academic audiences to offer their own interpretations. Collins (1998) asserts the need for those seeking social change to build coalitions around common causes, which require empathy work to succeed. As such, readers are encouraged to draw their own conclusions from the representations discussed here. Likewise, Keegan (2018) asserts the need for queer theory and women's studies to allow for the border crossing of trans* studies, which requires freedom from disciplinary framing which would categorize it. This is to say that not only communication scholars should join the conversation around discursive representations of queerness in media. This conversation needs *space* to thrive in the minds and words of others, such as ideas do in Soja's Thirdspace as an infinite potential for more. Finally, this conversation must work alongside others in coalition, despite having differences; for example, queer studies may have the need to abolish categories, while trans* studies asserts the need to flex and bend categories to fit more people (Halberstam & Muñoz, 2005). The "new" gender categories and experiences discussed in this analysis are places to "make space in a structure that is not likely to crumble any time soon," (Nicholas & Clark, 2020). Characters fitting into any ideal proposed here offer the nuance and complexity needed to confound and deconstruct existing oppressive discourse norms.

I bring the desire to educate about these past harms which exist in the norms of today's societal organization. It is my sincere hope that education leads to awareness of the problem, which leads to change for the better, which holds the potential for hope and social improvement.

This piece, and the media studied here, are challenging the gender binary as a restrictive and arbitrary colonial construct that limits our potential as human beings and as a society overall. It resists the toxic masculinity and toxic femininity of unquestioning dominant expectations and celebrates the cultures which deviate from the Western colonial Christian gender binary rules. It comes from my own space beyond the binary, alongside theorists who offer the potential for a Thirdspace (Soja, 1998), a borderland (Anzaldúa, 1987), somewhere outside of two opposite options in a future utopia (Muñoz, 2019). It is both and neither at once: masculine and feminine, theoretical and practical, real and imagined. This study utilizes the imagination of cartoons in an analysis of a sample of series which push our understanding of what it means to be normatively male or female, as the fantasy and the fiction of television series allow society to imagine beyond expected realities.

Audiences are ready to jump off the diving board of sex/gender/sexuality binaries into the deep end of exploring human identity. Simply standing in stagnant puddles of just accepting gay people does not suffice anymore, and we are largely ignoring the complexities of sex, gender, sexuality, and other demographics (Halperin, 2003). Appropriately enough, social researchers insist that gender and sexuality are fluid in nature (LeMaster & Johnson, 2019). Seeing and interacting with identities outside of those in our daily lives (our own identity included) makes us more used to, and therefore more accepting of, others (Brassel & Anderson, 2020). It builds empathy and social skills in us. Empathy for others and acceptance for others ultimately leads to positive social change that embraces the unique ways that human beings can exist and express themselves, which in turn creates a richer and more successful society overall.

So, overall, I want to tell creators to keep pushing forward. I am aware that a lot of modern representations of queer characters come directly from queer members of television

creative teams, but they should not be the only ones pushing. They are pushing against those with the final say in production who usually pare back the queerness of the characters and themes in a series. However, the more people who push for more queerness, the faster progress can be made. Queer people and their allies know how important it is to see LGBTQ representations on television, to educate and comfort those who do not know otherwise. Even those reluctant to LGBTQ representation must heed the societal call to acceptance, which will quickly lash back against content creators who fail to meet expectations (Christian, 2019). Creators fearful of misrepresenting these characters should consult experts. By that, I do not mean only academics who study gender. I mean that they should consult those whose lived experience is related to the stories they hope to tell. This adds an authenticity and a truthfulness to characters and stories that are sure to be admired by both casual viewers and critics. Those existing in roles of societal outsiders have an oppositional knowledge relative to social norms that can only be genuinely accessed by someone at the margins (Collins, 1998; hooks, 2003). After the stages of production, these characters should not just be dwelled on by queer and/or TGNC members of the audience. While these representations can be heartening and comforting to this population, it is at least equally important that members of the audience allied to TGNC also think on these characters. Viewers can support positive representations in a multitude of ways, by spreading the word, attempting to send feedback to creators, and amplifying exemplars to their social circles. Caregivers to children who may watch these shows as a family can use these examples as useful points of discussion. Children may ask questions about TGNC characters in the lived context of a world obsessed with the gender/sex binary. Caregivers may choose to engage in the topic with or without prompting. Either way, the visibility of TGNC characters on cartoons in a comfortable way to start a conversation about the differences between

“biological” sex and gender, the stereotypes that come with both, and the validity of living outside of the binary.

So, to return to the questions guiding my research: *How are the discourses of children’s cartoons representing TGNC people? And, how are the visuals of children’s cartoons portraying TGNC people?* While the answer cannot be summed up in as many words, both questions can be answered similarly. The discourses and visuals of TGNC characters on children’s cartoons are evolving towards a more nuanced ideal, but they both have some room to develop. While many examples provided stories and images of queer exceptionalism, rebellion against oppressors, and hope for a utopian world, many of these examples contained messages reminiscent of past media shortcomings. Namely, there is a noticeable lack in quantity of TGNC characters, their time on screen, and their lines spoken. There is also a lack of quality in some cases, where models of perfection overshadowed realistic characterization, or stereotypes of masculine-presenting preference threatened to quash the very real existence of feminine or diverging gender presentations. I take these findings and assert the following: Television can no longer just be by and for straight, cisgender, white men. Thanks to the ever-growing population of humans and media options, the audience gets bigger every day. And thanks to critical academics uncovering the truth of sex and gender fluidity, the proportion of the audience that accepts or identifies as LGBTQ also gets bigger every day. The simple fact is that media creators, not just for television, need to step up their game for diverse representation or get swept away in a wave of progress. It is in their best interest, morally and economically, to join the coming mainstream current of acceptance.

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APPENDIX: LIST OF EPISODES SAMPLED FOR STUDY

Adventure Time (Ward, 2010-2018)

Season 2

“Guardians of Sunshine”

“Video Makers”

Season 3

“What Was Missing”

“The Creeps”

Season 4

“BMO Noire”

Season 5

“BMO Lost”

“Be More”

Season 6

“Ghost Fly”

“Jake the Brick”

Season 7

“The More You Moe, the Moe You Know”

Season 8

“The Invitation”

Season 9

“Orb”

Season 10

“Come Along with Me”

City of Ghosts (Ito, 2021)

Season 1

“The Sort of Japanese Restaurant”

“Venice”

“Leimert Park”

“Tovaangar”

“Bob & Nancy”

“Koreatown”

Craig of the Creek (Burnett & Levin, 2017-ongoing)

Season 1

“Creek Cart Racers”

Season 2

“Craig and the Kids Table”

“Creek Daycare”

“In the Key of the Creek”

“Beyond the Rapids”

Season 3

“Plush Kingdom”

“Afterschool Snackdown”

“Craig World”

“Capture the Flag”

“Creek Talent Extravaganza”

Danger & Eggs (Owens & Petosky, 2017)

Season 1

“Keep Off the Grass”

“Pennies”

“Pete Peril”

“Phillipcon”

“Chill Twins”

“Nightmare”

“Check Mates”

“Pirate Gorgeous”

“Chosen Family”

The Dragon Prince (Ehasz & Richmond, 2018-ongoing)

Season 3

“Ghost”

“Hearts of Cinder”

“The Final Battle”

High Guardian Spice (Rodriguez, 2021)

Season 1

“Disorientation Day”

“Transformations”

“A Lost Cause”

“Crushing Obstacles”

“The Festival of Fall”

“Rainy Day Memories”

“The Scypith”

“Attack on High Guardian Academy”

Kipo and the Age of Wonderbeasts (Sechrist, 2020)

Season 1

“Beyond the Valley of Dogs”

“Paw of the Jaguar”

“Heroes on Fire”

“Don’t You Forget a-Meow Me”

“Song Remix”

“It’s a Trap”

The Loud House (Savino, 2016-ongoing)

Season 1

“Toads and Tiaras”

Season 3

“Gown and Out”

Madagascar: A Little Wild (Stein, 2020-ongoing)

Season 3

“Whatever Floats Your Float”

Middle School Moguls (Heitkamp & Heitkamp, 2019)

Season 1

“Mo’gul Money, Mo Problems”

OK K.O.! Let’s Be Heroes (Jones-Quartey, 2017-2019)

Season 1

“You’re Everybody’s Sidekick”

“Plaza Prom”

“You’re in Control”

Season 2

“Seasons Change”

“Point to the Plaza”

“Dendy’s Power”

Season 3

“Let’s Fight to the End”

“Thank You for Watching the Show”

The Owl House (Terrace, 2020-ongoing)

Season 1

“Hooty’s Moving Hassle”

Season 2

“Hunting Palisman”

“Eda’s Requiem”

“Knock Knock Knockin’ on Hooty’s Door”

“Thems the Brakes, Kid”

Ridley Jones (Nee, 2021-ongoing)

Season 1

“Ready or Not, Here I Come”

“Some Like It Hot”

“Fly Like an Eagle”

“Un-Fit for a Queen”

“The Taming of the Tail”

“Ridley’s Babysitter Club”

“A Knight’s Tale”

Season 2

“Bison Ball”

“Northern Lights”

“Fred Steps Up”

“Compass Eye of the Storm”

“Trailblazers”

Season 3

“Peaches Beyond the Infinite”

“A Quiet Chase”

“Rocket Monkey”

“Art of the Steal”

“The Good, the Bad, and the Chuckwagon”

She-Ra and the Princesses of Power (Stevenson, 2018-2020)

Season 4

“The Valley of the Lost”

“Flutterina”

“Pulse”

“Princess Scorpia”

“Mer-Mysteries”

“Fractures”

“Destiny Part 1”

“Destiny Part 2”

Season 5

“Stranded”

“Perils of Peekablue”

Steven Universe (Sugar, 2013-2019)

Season 1

“Alone Together”

Season 2

“We Need to Talk”

“The Answer”

Season 3

“Beach City Drift”

“Crack the Whip”

Season 4

“Mindful Education”

Season 5

“Lars of the Stars”

“Jungle Moon”

Steven Universe Future (Sugar, 2019-2020)

Season 1

“Little Graduation”

“Growing Pains”

“The Future”

Summer Camp Island (Pott, 2018-ongoing)

Season 1

“Feeling Spacey”

“Space Invasion”

Season 2

“We’ll Just Move the Stars”

Season 3

“Puddle and the King Chapter 1: Honey Moondog”

“Puddle and the King Chapter 2: Royally Bored”

“Puddle and the King Chapter 3: All the King’s Slides”

Too Loud (Colaleo, 2017-2019)

Season 2

“Bad Gurlz”

“Boogie Buds”

“Centennial”

“Checked Out”

“Molly is Missing!”

“Slumber Party”

“Run Sara Run”

Transformers: Cyberverse (Davis, 2018-2021)

Season 1

“Siloed”

“Eruption”

“Terminal Velocity”

Season 2

“Sea of Tranquility”

“Bring Me the Spark of Optimus Prime”

“Dark Birth”

“Spotted”

Young Justice (Vietti & Weisman, 2010-ongoing)

Season 3

“Evolution”

“Triptych”

“Home Fires”

“Exceptional Human Beings”

“Elder Wisdom”

“Terminus”

“Nautical Twilight”