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Is Disney Making A Man Out Of You - Exploring Trans and Non-Binary Representation In Disney

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**IS DISNEY MAKING A MAN OUT OF YOU - EXPLORING TRANS AND NON-
BINARY REPRESENTATION IN DISNEY**

A thesis submitted to

Regis College

The Honors Program

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for Graduation with Honors

by

Mandy Colburn

May 2023

Thesis written by

Mandy Colburn

Approved by



Thesis Advisor



Thesis Reader or Co-Advisor

Accepted by



Director, Regis College Honors Program

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ABSTRACT**Name: Mandy Colburn****Major: Psychology****Is Disney Making A Man Out Of You - Exploring Trans and Non-binary Representation in Disney****Advisor's Name: Professor Alyse Knorr****Reader's Name: Dr. Brian Drwecki**

Disney movies are meant to create magic in the lives of young people, but is this really what they are accomplishing? Does leaving trans and nonbinary identities out of children's media impact the way that children understand gender? This thesis seeks to explore and understand how power and privilege impact the desire for minority gender identities to be given space on a large scale media platform such as Disney. The Meaning Maintenance Model as well as Critical Race Theory are used to explain why minority identities could be overshadowed by identities held by the majority and thus how power and privilege is upheld in society. I chose to explore the movies *Mulan*, *Frozen II*, *Out*, and *Luca*, for where a trans narrative could have been shown, had there been the inclination. This thesis concludes that *Mulan*, though it showcased the main character in both traditionally male and traditionally female roles, did not depict gender

diverse identities in a positive or uplifting way. *Frozen II* showcases a mediocre example of gender diverse identities by providing a narrative for what can happen if support is given to a trans person in an abrasive and apprehensive way. *Out* is one of the first examples of purposeful gay representation created by the Disney franchise. Even though *Out* followed two gay men, it was still problematic when it comes to representation as the gay characters were not given screen time as themselves, but their identities were hidden in the body of a dog. This speaks to how LGBTQIA+ individuals are often thought of as less than human, almost even as animals. Finally, *Luca* is an example of what fantastic queer and trans representation can look like. The movie follows the main character as he learns who he really is during his accidental coming out. Overall, there is plenty of room for trans and nonbinary identities to be given space in all media platforms, but specifically children's media. Today, there are phenomenal examples available, but only if you look past the surface level meaning of a movie. The mechanisms that have historically impaired the creation of children's media that has true representation is that of the system of oppression of trans and nonbinary identities that currently persist in our society. One day I hope to see the creation of a Disney movie that proudly showcases LGBTQIA+ identities in a non-performative way, but for right now seeking queer and trans narratives in those stories will have to be enough until there is a normalization of trans and nonbinary characters in children's media in the future.

INTRODUCTION

I came out at 19 years old without seeing a single example of a queer or trans person in my media. I undoubtedly interacted with hundreds, even thousands of trans people based on statistics, nonetheless the media didn't talk about that. This is problematic because it hides the realities of queer and trans people, but the media didn't want to talk about that. The first time I remember being exposed to gay characters was when I saw *Glee* as a freshman in high school. I felt connected, uplifted, represented, that I existed. This is something that I never experienced as a child. One can imagine that at Disney, there are media creators that are trans and nonbinary. This gave me the idea that there could be hidden trans representation in these stories that I grew to love as a child. This is why I chose to write a thesis such as this because I wanted to explore how there could have been hidden trans representation and queer identities in the very Disney movies I grew up with. There are two main reasons why I believe that this thesis is important, the first is that Disney movies were a really crucial part of my childhood, as well as a large majority of children in the US, and the second is that there are still examples of transphobia and hate in our world today. A paper like this is a way to simultaneously combine something I love, Disney,

with something that I believe is truly needed in our world, support and representation of trans identities.

I am a triplet, meaning there are two more of me in the world. My sisters and I are very close, we call or text every single day. My parents had to work hard when raising us as we were quite the handful. Growing up, my mom needed a way to determine who got to choose things. For example, who got to decide which of the 4 local parks we were going to play on that day, or who got to choose which vegetable we'd have for dinner. To answer these questions, my mom came up with the idea of "Princess Days." She had a paper calendar that she hung up in our kitchen, it was bright pink with Disney Princesses on it. She wrote one of the three of our names on each day in the calendar. Because it was a Princess calendar, she called each day "princess days." If my princess day was on Monday, then Caroline's princess day was Tuesday, and finally on Wednesday was Elizabeth's turn. This had two consequences: Mom didn't have to deal with us arguing and we felt special. This experience was so unique and intentional that my mom created it to aid in our ability to learn how to act in the community together. It also meant that we loved Disney princesses, who doesn't? As a college student, I am reflecting on the impact of "Princess Days" on my life and am questioning why princess stories were the ones that I attached myself to? Princess Days were a vital part of my self development, however my academic self is questioning why princess days were attached to my identity. Is this because gender roles were being applied with power to me as a young child? Is this because gender roles are being applied to all children via the media? Is this just because young children find princesses interesting? Stories have a deeper meaning and I will explore these specific stories in this thesis.

When I started at Regis, I had no understanding of the difference between Roman Catholic and Jesuit Catholic. I now understand that Roman Catholicism is more traditional

whereas the Jesuit Catholics are extremely social justice focused and affirming of all people, all identities, and all situations. Regis is a Jesuit school, meaning that Jesuit and Catholic values are often uplifted in different ways throughout the campus. The Jesuits, as a whole, have been vocal about their support of LGBTQIA+ identities, but the same is not true for all of the Catholic church. While writing this, Denver's Catholic Archdiocese released a "guidance to Catholic Schools" which tells all K 12 schools "don't enroll transgender students. Treat gay parents differently" (Hernandez, 2022). The document released by the Archdiocese was called "Guidance for Issues Concerning the Human Person and Sexuality" and consisted of 17 pages of transphobic and homophobic ideas that were as guidance for systemic oppression. This document of oppression begins by saying "Gender ideology... is incompatible with Christian anthropology and can lead to profound confusion" (2022). For example, page 5 states "A Catholic school cannot affirm a student's identity as a transgender, gender nonconforming, non-binary, gender-fluid, gender-queer, or any other term that rejects the reality of the student's given male or female sexual identity; any asserted identity that rejects the reality of biological sex is incompatible with Christian anthropology" (2022). Power matters, and when the Archdiocese released this document it was an attack on me and my fellow Regis students and thus it hit us hard. It hit the allies hard, it hit Regis's LGBTQIA+ community hard. Yet, The Regis community was quick to show care, love, help, and support to students. This love is a bandaid to the oppressive hate of the Denver Catholic Archdiocese. What made this worse was that the oppressive ideology was spread through news and media and is just one cultural touchpoint of oppressive transphobia, queerphobia, homophobia in our world today. There need to be more places of support for LGBTQIA+ youth, students, and people in general, especially in academia. This paper is a direct challenge to the oppression of the Denver Archdiocese.

The exercise of writing is therapeutic (Schwartz., et al, 2016) The art of writing this thesis is an intentional form of therapy that I am actively partaking in. By rewatching Disney movies and relearning their stories, I am taking back my childhood. I am taking back the movies that I at one point thought were perfect, then hated once I came out. I am giving myself the ability to know that my thoughts have value and mean something. My opinions and queer literary commentary on these movies matter not only to myself, but should also matter in the greater scene of academia. I am a queer scholar who, after years of courses in psychology and women & gender studies, has learned of the severe injustice done in the erasure of trans and nonbinary identities in our world from both an intellectual perspective and a care for one's fellow human.

Currently, as of April 2023, I am still trying to come to terms with my gender identity. Gender is such a complex thing to try to grasp. I am trying to give myself the time and space I need to learn who I am. In the world I live in, I don't necessarily feel safe sharing my journey with gender identity. I am hoping that by writing about Disney movies, something most people have seen and know of, I will be able to make trans ideas and transmedia more attainable for people who know nothing about the genderqueer community. On the other hand, I know that if I had read a paper like this one as a younger person, I would have realized how many different places trans identities can and should be present. I will apply my genderqueer lens and commentary to the movies that shaped my early identity and have become a focus point for my own identity exploration. Additionally, I would like to one day turn these ideas into a podcast for youth so these ideas and this lens can be applied to the media that is oppressing us. Had I had something like this thesis, it would have helped me to feel safer to learn about my gender identity at an earlier age. Gender identities that diverge from cisgender don't have to be this scary

daunting thing, they really are natural and should be treated as such. I am so excited to share with you, whoever is reading this, my ideas about trans identities in Disney.

General Definitions That This Paper Will Use:

All definitions are from *Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About Trans (But Were Too Afraid to Ask)* by Brynn Tannehill and the presentation “Queerness and Mental Health” by Regis University Queer Student Alliance 2022-2023

*Note -This list of definitions are just a few of the many different terms that LGBTQIA+ people use to describe their identities. If there are things missing from this list, it does not mean that those identities are invalid, it only means that I did not include those identities in this short list of terms as my paper either does not discuss them in length, or their definitions are not needed to understand my paper. These are all general definitions, don't make assumptions about people and it is always best to ask someone about their identities and to not assume.

Gender/Gender Identity - an individual's personal sense of their own gender

Sex - A person's biological anatomy, sex isn't binary; a person can change their hormones and their genitals, and intersex do people exist

Gender Expression - the way someone expresses their gender to themselves and the rest of the world

Gender Dysphoria - psychological, emotional, and any type of distress from feeling a disconnection between the physical body and sense of self

Heterosexuality/Straight - the sexual attraction to the opposite sex

Gay - typically used to describe men sexually attracted to men

Lesbian - typically used to describe non-men or women who are sexually attracted to other non-men or women

Bisexual - a person who is attracted to two or more genders or sexes

Pansexual - attraction to people regardless of their sex or gender along the gender binary

Asexual - someone who doesn't experience sexual attraction

*asexual people may or may not have sex, the distinguishing factor is that they don't experience the sexual attraction

AFAB - an acronym that stands for assigned female at birth

AMAB - an acronym that stands for assigned male at birth

Queer-Coded - when a person/character is written/acts in a way that makes people perceive them as a queer/trans individual. This can happen through the way someone is dressed, the way they talk, and through other ways.

Neurosexism - claimed that there are biological differences between men and women that make women inferior

Gender Essentialism - the assumption that there is "something fundamentally different about women and men"

This list of definitions are just a few of the many different terms that LGBTQIA+ people use to describe their identities. If there are things missing from this list, it does not mean that those

identities are invalid, it only means that I did not include those identities in this short list of terms as my paper either does not discuss them in length, or their definitions are not needed to understand my paper.

The History Of Gender, Power, & Privilege

Power and privilege are at the very core of our society. Our society naturally creates minority and majority group identities, such as the gender binary, in which those who are cis gender hold more power in our society (LeChasseur, Kimberly, 2015). The goal of this section is to highlight some of the ways that the gender binary was created over time and what types of systems could explain its existence.

Gender Essentialism, the idea that there is something fundamentally different about women and men and value women's unique experiences and attributes (Gülgöz, S., et al., 2019 ; Hyde, J.S., 2005). This movement was looking for those differences in the brain. In the 19th century, many philosophers sought to promote the idea of women's inferiority (Vader, 2022 ; S. Gülgöz, et al., 2019). Then in turn, science was used to justify and reinforce stereotypes. In 1903 Scientist Helen Thompson-Woodley found that women and men are more similar than different in most psychological traits, thus introducing the similarities perspective and suggesting that any observed gender differences are due to socialization, not heredity (S. Hatch, & B. Dohrenwend, 2007). While some scholars loved Thomspon-Woodley's similarities perspectives, the views of other scholars align more with the difference perspective. The difference perspective argues that males and females are vastly different psychologically (Hyde, J. S., 2005). In a study, it was found after a review of 46 meta-analyses, that the gender similarity hypothesis was supported. This hypothesis suggests that males and females are similar on most psychological variables, but

not all. The concept of being gender fluid is not a new one and was first mentioned in Kate Bornstein's book *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women, and the Rest of Us* which was published in 1994. With the term being used since at least the 1990s, there have been several variations of its meaning. In 1996 Michael M. Hernandez described the term as "gender identity and/or expression that encompasses both masculine and feminine. Gender fluidity is becoming commonly known as transgenderism: the ability to transcend gender, whether biological, emotional, political or otherwise; truly mixing male and female" (Hernandez, 1996). A radical political movement occurred in the 1970s, where psychology started to separate gender and sex. During this movement studies supported the idea that gender is a social construct (Zosuls, K. M., et al., 2011). During the 1970s, psychologists worked to separate the concepts of sex and gender as a way to push research away from biological essentialism and towards the understanding that gender is a social construct and that the concept of gender is a product of socialization. Gender is cultural. Sex is biological (and more complicated than most people realize) (Zosuls, K. M., et al., 2011). .

The acceptance of the idea that gender is socially constructed also leads to the fact that the gender binary was socially constructed. Gender being a social construct is a white spread idea shared by many national organizations such as The World Health Organization, Planned Parenthood, The National Center for Transgender Equality, and more (Anna Kari, 2022 Planned Parenthood, 2022; National Center for Transgender Equality, 2018). Many national organizations agree with this concept that gender is socially constructed and the gender was forged in the fire of the binary but the binary was also socially constructed. The understanding of gender identity that this paper will use aligns most with activist and scholar Judith Butler's definition. Butler says that gender is socially constructed rather than innate and that

“conventional notions of gender and sexuality serve to perpetuate the traditional domination of women by men and to justify the oppression of homosexuals and transgender persons” (Duignan, B., 2023 ; Thepsourinthone, J., et al, 20200). This suggests that gender is created through one’s behavior, actions, and the way one speaks. To define gender further than that would allow us to begin a more philosophical conversation about things such as how things are socially constructed, how identity gets created, and what identity is. For the sake of this thesis, we will accept the concept of socially constructed gender and move on.

Transgender identities (often called trans identities or referred to as gender diversity in this paper) is a term that describes people whose sense of their own gender does not align with that of the gender they were assigned at birth (Tannehill, 2019). The term “transgender” itself is an umbrella term that covers a wide spectrum of identities. Genderfluid identities also fall under the transgender umbrella. A common understanding of the term says that a gender-fluid person is someone whose gender identity and/or gender expression is not fixed and can shift over time. Many transgender individuals have experienced some degree of what is called gender dysphoria. Gender dysphoria is understood to be an intense sense of discomfort and distress with a person’s assigned gender (Tannehill, 2019). This very experience makes it clear that being trans is not a choice. Respect trans people’s identities. While it is fantastic that gay and lesbian identities are being given more space in our society, it is not ok to still stigmatize trans identities. Some examples of the stigma that still exists today is the massive push of transphobic legislation right now. Things such as anti-trans medical care bills passing the Senate, Florida courts allowing ‘emergency’ custody of kids with trans parents or siblings, national bans on transgender athletes in girls sports, and more (Downard, Whitney, 2023 ; Tangalakis-Lippert, K., 2023 ; Figueroa,

Ariana, 2023). There is little scientific evidence to suggest that gender identity is any more of a “choice” than sexual orientation is (Tannehil, 2019), which in my opinion is not a choice at all.

Trans people don’t owe the world androgyny, masculinity, or femininity. Trans people don’t have to transition medically, but some do. There are many barriers put in place that stop trans people from medically transitioning, such as insurance companies not recognizing trans associated surgeries as medically necessary, the need for an official diagnosis of gender dysphoria (which is transphobic at its core), and the outrageously large cost of medical transition drugs and procedures with and without insurance coverage (Safer, J. D., et al., 2016).. Not transitioning does not make them any less of a trans person. There is beauty in every trans person’s story and the ability to transcend gender, whether biological, emotional, political, or otherwise. There is beauty in a person knowing who they are. There is beauty in being trans, whether the world is ready to acknowledge that or not.

Now that we have a better understanding of the history of gender, we can dive into the ways that specific gender identities have been given more or less power and privilege in our society. Just how are power and privilege created? What makes one group or identity more powerful than another group? Why do cisgender men get more of a say in the world than transgender men or non-binary assigned male at birth (AMAB) people? One way to explain this is by looking into the human tendency to make meaning of this world. When you go out to dinner and order a steak, you’d expect the server to give you a steak when they bring food to your table. If the server doesn’t bring you a steak you’d probably be confused. You were expecting a steak and every time you’ve been to a restaurant and ordered a steak, you have been given a steak. Your mind revolts, this means maintenance in action. We develop expectations of how experiences in the world work. The MMM says that people will expect that certain

experiences will be associated with other experiences. One of the biggest threats to our understanding of meaning is the fact that bad things happen to good people. We expect that bad people will experience harm and good people will not. When this is violated it sets our meaning maintenance processes into chaos and we search for clarification and to make sense of an unjust world. There are many different reactions that one can have to good people being harmed for no reason. They can revise their expectations; for example we live in a world that harms good people. They could reinterpret what they saw and think that maybe the person who was once thought of as good was actually bad, so bad things happened to them. Another example could be that people often expect that good people will have good things happen in life whereas bad people will have bad things happen to them in life. A third response is fluid compensation, which describes when people seek out experiences that do fulfill their expectations by reaffirming alternative representations (Heine, Proulx, & Vohs, 2006). Ultimately the Meaning Maintenance Model (MMM) predicts that people are driven to maintain their expectations and given that this is a paper on transgender identities, the MMM may help us to understand why bad things happen to good transgender people.

I find Professor Jason P. Martens's interpretation of the MMM for classroom teachers has a way for motivation and affirmation to be particularly fascinating. Martens suggests that he likes to teach students about counterintuitive findings as a way to get students more involved in class and to create more memorable learning experiences through violations of meaning. This is interesting because it shows that violations of one expectation can lead to three different positive results: affirmation, abstraction, and assembly (Martens, 2016). MMM can be and has been used as a classroom strategy that is successful at helping people understand grammar; it's difficult to not think about how this model applies to transgender identities. Unfortunately, people will not

always have positive responses to unfamiliarity. In fact, I argue that one may respond to unfamiliarity with violence. While research in psychology generally overlooks transgender identities (Armstrong, Kim, 2021), a thought question may help us explore this idea. Say, for example, upon seeing a trans-masc non-binary person existing in the world for the first time, Bob is confused. Bob's expected associations with gender are that there are only "understandable gender identities," people who were born women and people who were born men. Bob is confused, Bob expects the binary, people who are born women and people who are born men. Bob's mind cannot put this person into Bob's preferred boxes of man or woman. Bob could choose to revise his expectations of gender to be less binary. Maybe Bob's actions could align more with the ideas of fluid compensation, in that Bob could become combative in the meaning disruption that he just experienced. Bob's combativeness can turn into transphobia. Bob's transphobia can turn into interpersonal acts of intimidation and verbal abuse. Bob's acts of intimidation and verbal abuse can become physical assault, physical attack, physical harm, and as we see in numerous instances of hate crimes, death and murder. When someone believes in a purpose so strongly that they kill for it, this can be dangerous even though sometimes it can be beautiful. Any example of this is the Stonewall Riots and the way that queer people had to fight for their rights and kill for their safety (Pruitt, 2022). If there were more people like Bob, who turn to transphobia when their associated expectations are violated, then trans and gender-diverse people would become even less supported in society. If an identity is not supported in society, then they will have less power. The cycle will continue as long as people with the majority identities and privileged identities don't reinterpret their understanding of associated expectations.

I can't blame Bob. Bob is just a cog in a machine. But I can blame society. If an identity is not represented in society, then they will likely have less power because they are not given any meaning. Without meaning the cycle of violence and fluid compensation and meaning maintenance will likely continue. In my opinion, one of the most important fronts is representation of LGBTQIA+ identities in the media. Understanding MMM is one way to see how transphobia could be the product of power and privilege in place, another way to see this could be by looking at Critical Race Theory (CRT).

CRT is a concept that at its core explains race as a social construct and says that racism is not merely the product of an individual bias or prejudice, but is also something that has been embedded in our very own legal systems and policies (Sawchuk, S., 2021). CRT was organized officially in 1989 at what was called the first annual Workshop on Critical Race Theory (Britannica, 2023), but CRT has its origins as far back as the 1960s and '70s. Scholars argued that CRT was needed because liberalism was not capable of addressing fundamental problems that the American society faced because it emphasized color blindness (Britannica, 2023). In doing so, liberalism was only able to recognize the most overt racist practices and would overlook racist practices that were indirect, subtle, or systemic (Britannica, 2023). There are several basic tenets of CRT, those being that racism is a social construction and is normalized, next is the existence of interest convergence, differential racialization, intersectionality, and the voice of color. These terms discuss the setbacks that people of color (POC) face and how they work to serve the dominant whiter groups (Britannica, 2023). Thus, the creation of the racial hierarchy began, and has been continually reinforced by forces such as the legal system (Britannica, 2023).

Gender oppression is historical and omnipresent in our society, in the same way that racism is. Racism has been used as a way for those who hold the most power in a society, white men, to continue to keep themselves in power. CRT shows how oppression can create identities that are oppressed as a means to uplift those who are in holding power. This connects to how cis men have the most power and oppressive tendencies happen as a means to keep the power - MMM is a way of people not changing their understanding of the meaning of gender

What is Media Representation and Why Should We Care About it?

Discussing Disney movies and their impact on youth cannot be done without understanding the importance of media representation. The definition of media is a type of communication that has the capacity to reach and influence a wide audience of people (Janeau, E., et al, 2022). Some examples include print media, broadcast media, television news, radio news, talk radio, the internet, blogs, and much more. Each type of media serves a different purpose. Print media, the second oldest form of media beyond folklore (Janeau, E., et al, 2022), have an important function of connecting people with their community and the world for generations (Janeau, E., et al, 2022). Radio is an important type of media as it is invisibility broadcastable, meaning there can be 24-hour coverage without physical transmission. Radio reaches everyone, as 92% of Americans listen to AM/FM radio. The radio has diversity in its listeners, unlike a lot of other forms of media (Cariffe, 2022). Media has greatly changed over time. First there was folklore that grabbed our attention. Then there was print media where the media itself was physically handed to each other which connected us to ideas of each other across the world. TV brought images to life, allowing people to discover ideas in vivid detail about topics they

have never before seen. The internet has brought all sorts of media together and impacts our daily lives greatly. There appears to be two functions of media, transmitting information and forming connections (Janeau, E., et al, 2022). The information piece is described as “the first right draft of history” (Loding, 2015). However, given economic and other forces likely impact what the media presents, this right first draft may be nothing more than oppression. However there’s a beautiful side of media, seen in social media, with the ability to connect to others all over the world. During covid, we needed this (Minc, 2020) as people were learning how to connect without physically being together. Media has brought many wonderful things to our world and is a major piece that is deeply embedded in our society and has the means to influence (Deragon, Jay, 2008).

Neuroscience Basic & Neuroplasticity

The point of this thesis is not to try and convince you of things other scholars have already proved, but instead to understand to what extent are examples of genderqueer identities given a place and/or celebrated purposely or not in Disney films and why that representation matters. In terms of developmental neuroscience, we know that the brains of kids are malleable and plastic. Kids learn the biases of society and if one of society's biggest media conglomerates does not have genderqueer identities then kids will learn that those identities don’t exist. As you might expect, research on neuroplasticity suggests that being exposed to solely the gender binary will make it difficult for one to perceive the gender continuum. For example, we know that when the environment strengthens one synapse, it weakens those that are near it (Orenstein, 2018). It is not that far-fetched to believe that a synapse fires to perceive the gender binary and then is less able to perceive the gender continuum. For example, different structures of our brains work

together to control every thought, feeling, and the majority of our actions (Sukel, 2019). A synaptic strengthening is associated with a complementary weakening (Mateos-Aparicio & Rodríguez-Monreno, 2019). One can only hypothesize that when one strengthens the gender binary, they then weaken the gender continuum. People call this process of strengthening and weakening neuroplasticity as our brain's ability to adapt and learn our environments (Orenstein, 2018). In addition to strengthening and weakening, the brain can reroute using areas that were originally adapted for particular functions for new functions. Our memory is our understanding of the narratives we are told (Bank, 2016). Reinforcement and the repetition of activity eventually lead the mature brain to remember the activity. The younger the brain, the better the chance of neural recovery is. When understanding child development, it is important to look at how learning and brain plasticity allow for changes in the brain and behavior. Studies have found that "through learning, the skills and knowledge that inform an individual's behavior repertoire are acquired and updated on the basis of one's experience. Is accompanied by a lasting change in the developing brain" (Frاندokova & Hartley, 2020, p.X). This means that as a child is exposed to a repetition of one type of environment or stimuli, like the gender binary, the brain structure and neurophysiology can, and will, change. The brain will change the way it works functionally, forming new synaptic connections and eliminating unused ones. There can be modifications in the organization of the brain networks and connections. All of this together will "play a critical role in helping cognitive and behavioral development processes across childhood and beyond" (Frاندokova & Hartley, 2020, p. X).

So, why should you care about neuroplasticity when looking into Disney and children's media? As incredible as a flexible, or "plastic" brain is, there are repercussions. If neurons can forage new and stronger connections, those neurons must compensate by weakening some

synapses (Orenstein, 2018). If one area of the brain is strengthened, like the area for perceiving the gender binary, other areas will be weakened, possibly the area for perceiving the diverse gender spectrum. This can transfer over into the idea that if someone is constantly exposed to traumatic representations of gender nonconforming people and stereotypes about gender nonconforming people, then eventually that is what their brain will automatically go to. If a child is constantly exposed to Disney movies with binary roles and binary teachings, then the child's brain will get used to this understanding of gender and assume it is the norm. One hypothesis I have from my lived experience with the Princess Days is that Disney movies exposed children to the gender binary. If this is the case, then the weakening and strengthening of synapses because of neuroplasticity may make it more difficult for individuals to perceive the reality of the gender spectrum. I strongly believe that we need to change the media and change the narratives so that we can foster perceived respect for the individuality of queer gender identities.

In conclusion, weakening and strengthening the pruning could impact the way a person understands the binary. If someone is constantly exposed to understandings of gender that uplift and empower gender diverse people, then the parts of their brain that understand this to be true will continually be strengthened. Reexposure to positive representation is important, which is why I believe that the media should showcase this.

Disney and Gender Roles

Disney likely harms or is contributing to negative gender stereotypes and self identity formation. Disney movies reinforce the gender binary and gender roles because there is an emphasis seen placed on the passivity of women, as well as the stereotype that all female characters must be nurturing (Mills, Pancake, & Schall, 2010; Baker-Sperry & Grauerholz,

2003). In general, research shows that the portrayal of women in children's media is that they are passive, weak, emotional sex objects and when children are exposed to such images, they develop gender stereotypes. Children experience gender stereotypes and this likely impacts their behavior and explains why they act with prejudice as a result (Wille et al., 2018). This leads children to act out these gender roles and internalize them as their own identities. These portrayals of gender are incredibly harmful to a child. Repeated exposure to the same stereotype can be a mechanism for anyone, but especially children, to learn how a person is "supposed to" act (Wille et al., 2018). Our implicit theories about others' identities are formed and reinforced through repeated exposure to stereotypes. The expectancy-value theory tells us that motivation for any given behavior is determined by how probable that behavior is and how much the individual values the outcome (Studer & Knecht, 2016). If a child is constantly exposed to certain gender roles, then based on the expectancy-value theory, the child could want to act that same way and might internalize the gender roles (Wille et al., 2018). Studies have found that princess play (children playing as Disney princesses) causes little girls to be focused on their loves and beauty, clothing and material accessories; how they should control their bodies; and setting up self-exclusion from boys. Segregation, in any capacity even little girls from little boys, impacts systematic racism. Self-segregation of girls is serious and leads to exclusion of boys and a segregated group means that they can be vulnerable to attack by a powerful body. Would you really allow your children to watch this type of media if you knew? We need better communication (Golden & Wallace Jacoby, 2018). Disney does all of these things from a colloquial perspective, however we do know that Disney specifically reinforces the gender binary and gender roles and that Disney is putting out these harmful gender stereotypes. Thus, Disney is causing a social public health crisis by propagating stereotypes that harm women and

gender minorities given that gender disparities in health, education, and wealth exist. If Disney is harming minoritized genders, what is the exclusion or representation of transgender identities? in Disney films on the formation of stereotypes against trans people? For me, I want to be seen, I want to know that genderqueer identities are not only uplifted by the world I live in but also given a space of pride in the media myself and many children consume. One of the most provocative studies in this area has shown that simply showing kids Disney's Cinderella creates intergroup gender conflict and intergroup gender difference in belief and desire for entertainment (Kunze, 2017). Disney movies are known to make intergroup gender conflict that completely excludes nonbinary and gender diverse people. Reporter Peter Kunze explored how Disney's remake of *Beauty and the Beast* as a live-action movie was Disney trying to correct wrongs they made in the original movie. Kunze says, "casting Emma Watson, including an "exclusively gay moment", and framing *Beauty and the Beast* as an AIDS allegory" were ways that Disney is attempting to be more social justice focused (Kunze, 2017, p. X). As a queer viewer of the movie, I somehow missed this so-called "exclusively gay moment" which is problematic in and of itself.

I must admit Disney is making positive progress in their representation department thanks to the leadership of Vivian Ware (ADD other positionality). Disney is currently looking to fill a role for a character that is a 14 year old transgender who is described as compassionate, funny, and always has your back (Bravo, 2021). They will be hiring a transgender actor. This is representation and a great step toward real systematic positive change. Disney has also made attempts to remove their gendered greetings in their theme parks. Another way the Disney brand is attempting to create inclusivity is by focusing on diverse gendered patrons of their parks. Disney has removed their traditional greeting of "hello boys and girls" to "welcome dreamers of

all ages” (FOX 13, 2022). Employees are now? taught to greet everyone with hello friends or hello everyone rather than using greetings with binary language. Nonetheless, the transgender person is still under attack by conservatives in this nation with highlines criticizing Disney saying “Woke Overtook” and other comments like “these corporations need to stay out of politics” - Rep. Mike Walt, R-Fla (Schultz, Marisa & Murray, Andrew, 2022). It is clear that gender diverse identities, such as my own, are still not wanted to be represented by a large proportion of conservative Americans. While I commend Disney for their attempts, I also must dive into their work and critique it.

What Should Disney Do

Movies can evoke strong emotions. One example of this can be seen after the release of the sci-fi film *The Hunger Games* where students in Thailand used the same three finger salute seen in the Hunger Games movie during their own rebellion from their oppressive government in 2014 (Perrone, 2016). While the future of Disney is unknown, and potentially positive, we must look at their past to understand how they have failed us, how they have harmed us and to demand reparations from them. A little foreshadowing into this paper will tell you that Disney owns transgender people reparations. Reparations in high quality work, reparations in helping to construct a positive image of transgender people, reparations in my own life. Maybe monetary, maybe free movies, maybe schooling, maybe funding a gender studies professor at a film school. They need to act accordingly to the reparations that we, as the gender diverse community, want because my textual analysis of *Mulan*, *Frozen II*, *Luca*, and *Out*, indicates that even the two modern works are harmful to the transgender community.

CHAPTER 1 - MULAN

The first Disney movie to examine how Disney represents transgender individuals is *Mulan*. Many individuals, including many in the trans community, believe that *Mulan* is a great example of trans representation. I believe that statement is overblown. *Mulan* is the first representation that allowed a trans person to imagine themselves in the role of a Disney character in some way, however if we look at the character in depth we see that this character is nothing more than the binary presented through a daughter doing what all daughters do: whatever they need to do care for their ailing father including going to war for them. That is the main plot of the movie. *Mulan's* father was going to die because he's old and cannot fight and she goes out and cares for him. A sacrifice to keep him alive during his last years. *Mulan* does this act of mercy through a masculine action which allowed people who did not fit the gender binary to feel that maybe they could have some fluidity. But this is far from ideal. The *Mulan* franchise is plagued with problematic issues. First, exposing children to violence? is known to make people more violent (Huesmann, et al., 1986). The representation of Chinese culture is nearly a complete stereotype (Minna, 2014) and frankly *Mulan* is whitewashed, literally, in terms of rounded eyes and lighter skin (Minna, 2014). About half of the Asian characters were voiced by white actors, which is telling that *Mulan's* general representation of who people are is not good (Kocan, 2020). There is not a single transgender person in *Mulan*. *Mulan* is not transgender. *Mulan II* has some of the exact

same problems, such as white voices acting out Asian characters and a racist Americanized culture. To add to the ever growing list of problems, the whole point of the movie is how women should be subservient to men and they must pick a strong man to protect them. The only sexual choice is heteronormative. The newly released live-action movie *Mulan* did correct the 20 years of failings of having white voices act out Asian characters. Even though there was fantastic representation seen on screen the movie still had some issues. While a majority of *Mulan* was shot in New Zealand, major portions of the movie were shot in the Xinjiang province, which is known to be an area where Muslims are oppressed and forced to live in concentration camps for their identities (Vanity Fair, 2020). Overall, one can see that the *Mulan* franchise is racist, all three movies perpetuate racism and oppression. All three of the *Mulan* movies do not have a single trans character represented or a single transgender actor. The gender and sexual roles were mostly heteronormative and cisgender. Every single movie had a potential racist bent, with the newest *Mulan* having less. The newest *Mulan* movie shows that over time things are changing for the better. It is hopeful to see how far Disney has come since the release of the first *Mulan* in 1998 to the most recent in 2020. Disney is improving as a result of society improving. People are more educated on what racism is and thus there was better representation in the live action *Mulan*. This can be seen in the way that the movie used people who hold the identities of the characters they were portraying and in the way that *Mulan* was shown in pain when she was binding her chest to appear in public as a man.

I personally believe that the 1998 *Mulan* movie is a terrible example of trans representation and only shows the gender binary. To back up this claim, I want to first bring attention to the scene at the Bejing of the movie (4:56 - 9:00) in which Mulan is with her mother and grandmother getting ready to meet the Matchmaker. This is a big deal as getting a good match from the Matchmaker is literally the only job a woman has. Her entire life will then be spent with the man she's matched with. This moment is supposed to decide Mulan's entire future. Mulan's mother, Hua Li, tells Mulan that she, as a single woman, will not bring any honor to her family until she has a good match. To put this into perspective for me, I imagined my own mother telling me that I am a disgrace until I bring home a perfect cis straight man as my husband (lol as if I ever could). The scene continues as Hua Li and Mulan's grandmother sing a song with the lyrics "men want girls with good taste, calm, obedient, who work fast-paced, with good breeding, and a tiny waist, you'll bring honor to us all" (CITE, 1998). This scene enforced the binary in such an aggressive way. Knowing the meaning maintenance model, if a child saw this and learned that they are only worth something if they have a heterosexual partner, imagine the impact if a child realized that they don't sexually align with a cis heterosexual relationship. This could be earth shattering and create a real issue of identity. This scene could be showcasing the sexism that is present in Mulan's society, and the sexism that Mulan is attempting to rebel against.

Further on in the movie (27:30 - 36:26) Mulan is trying to act like a man, with no success. She attempts to change her voice and say "manly" things, such as "I have a sword." I found this to be an interesting interpretation of masking. Masking is commonly

understood in the queer community to be when a person hides parts of their identity, typically the identity they are hiding including a neurodivergent trait, such as ADHD or autism, but could also be understood as masking their trans-ness and attempting to pass (citation). Passing is the idea of a trans person looking so much like a cisgender person that they could “pass” as cis. When Mulan is trying to adjust her voice to sound deeper she is showing what it is like to try to pass. Soon, Mushu makes a grand entrance and in a wall of fire exclaims “...if the army finds out you’re a girl, the penalty is death”. Very comforting. This line was important because it really solidified that Mulan is not trans at all, but is pretending to be a boy. I got confused as I tried to understand what her earlier song about seeing the reflection of who she is inside meant when looking at this. So she knows who she is, which is a loyal family member? And she is finding who she is by pretending to be someone else to try and protect her father? Maybe. Mulan, with Mushu’s help, soon is walking into the camp where she’ll be staying for Army training. She very unsuccessfully tries to walk like a man. She is not convinced that she looks manly, but Mushu is trying to help her and be supportive. I found this uncomfortability to be something queer and trans people feel all the time. When I walk into a room full of, for example, Evangelical Christians who hate me for existing, I have to try to look like I am confident, but really I feel like my legs could give out at any moment. Sometimes the extra support would be helpful. I hope Mulan was feeling that way (though I kind of doubt it).

As the plot continued in *Mulan*, there is a scene where the soldiers marched to the front lines of the battle. As they marched, they sang the song “A Girl Worth Fighting

For" which glorified domesticated and sexist ideas of women, such as being attracted to the men's battle scars or their cooking. One of the lines of the song said "I couldn't care less what she'll wear or what she looks like, it all depends on what she cooks like ". Ew. Then Mulan, still disguised as Ling, was meant to sing her line about what she thinks a girl worth fighting for is. She said "How 'bout a girl who's got a brain and always speaks her mind" to which all the guys said "nah" and gave her a thumbs down and hated that idea. All of the men wanted submissive women, one who loves to cook and look pretty. That is so gross. I hate how heteronormative, cisgender, and misogynistic this song is. Having these concepts present in a children's song cannot possibly be a good thing for a child. The more the child hears the song, the more their brain will attach to the lyrics and internalize these concepts.

What Should Disney Do?

People are entitled to their own opinions. Mine is not the only opinion that is valid and each and every person, including? Each and every trans person will have a different understanding of the way this movie (and all other movies) show representation.

My advice to Disney is to present Mulan's character in a different way. If Disney wanted Mulan to be a trans allegory, then they should have created a narrative where Mulan passed better. They could have shown her putting on the armor and then never not presenting as a man the entire movie. This would show the concept of passing and would better showcase a trans story as it would demonstrate the struggle to be allowed to exist in society in the view of the public. The movie could then still be the exact same as it presently is (even with all of its issues), but have a larger focus on the need to mesh into the community and culture that surrounds

Mulan. *Mulan*, in order to truly be an example of trans representation, needed to be emotionally complex, with her behaviors representing a continuum, not just a binary. Socially transitioning into a man could/should be her plot line rather than just being a man as a tool for the plot.

This is one of the most gendered movies I have ever seen. Maybe I feel this way because I was literally trying to watch the movie using a women and gender studies lens . I think analyzing this movie made me really hate it. I now am filled with so many issues with the movie that I didn't have before. Mulan was supposed to be this movie that aided in the creation of female empowerment, but I felt like it instead taught that creating social disruption is ultimately what is needed. Mulan was the protagonist and seems to exist in order to disturb social norms. She is not submissive nor is she well-behaved and is the hero of this film. I also learned that the only way you can be a woman and also be a leader is if you pretend to be a man so people listen to you, or just go against all societally accepted ways of acting BUT succeed at your goal of saving everyone. If Mulan hadn't saved everyone then she would have just been killed for impersonating a soldier. There was no care for who she really was. And who was she really? A brave woman? Maybe. Is she who little children should look up to? Maybe. She is a murderer, she stole her father's most prized possessions, but she also made her family proud by getting with the same guy who almost killed her and who ignored her time and time again! Isn't that exactly who every little kid should become? A thief and murderer who marries a guy who doesn't truly respect her? Perfect!

I have spent the majority of this chapter only talking about what Disney did wrong with *Mulan*, so what did *Mulan* do right when looking at the movie through a woman and

gender studies lens? I thought that the idea of passing was a concept that *Mulan* brought into a greater conversation. Seeing Mulan's struggle to pass as a man was something I really appreciated. We, as the audience, were able to see her struggles as she learned how to change her voice to make that of a man's and feel her stress when she was trying to take a bath and was interpreted by the other soldiers. Seeing how hard it was for Mulan to mask herself and pass as a soldier can be helpful in talking about passing with younger kids! Passing can sometimes be a difficult concept for cisgender people to understand, especially if they have never had to pass in any way. Seeing Mulan's difficulties and drawing a connection to a trans person's struggles could possibly help people be more empathetic about how difficult it can be to pass in the real world. This also begs the question, how does passing and/or masking for trans folks compare to passing and/or masking for cisgender queer folks who are attempting to pass as straight? What about POC having to code-switch in white-dominated institutions and spaces? How does that impact them and their ability to exist?

Building on this idea of passing, one of the very few good things in the live-action *Mulan* was the scene where Mulan was shown to be binding her breasts. She, in an attempt to pass, hides her breasts and tries to create the illusion of being flat-chested. As the movie went on there would be short scenes where the camera showed Mulan feeling chest and back pain from the constant binding of her chest. I felt like scenes that showed how not only mentally difficult masking yourself can be, but also how it can be physically painful it can be to bind one's chest. Having scenes like this showing chest

binding can be an important gateway into having a conversation about why non-binary and trans people might choose to bind their chests too!

My biggest issue with *Mulan* was that the entire movie worked to further the power divide between men and women. There was a constant power dynamic being enforced in the entire movie. Some of the examples that most stood out to me were when the soldiers talked about the attributes they wanted their future women to have, to be a good cook, to be beautiful, and when Mulan said she wanted a girl who spoke her mind and was strong, all of the men disagreed! I saw patriarchy being emphasized in the way that men would refuse to talk to women. I saw it in the way Mulan's own father told her that she dishonored him and that she needed to learn her place. There are far too many examples of the power of men being far more important than women to count. I was horrified by my findings each time I watched this movie. I hate that this was one of the first movies I saw as a kid because I am sure that I internalized some of those concepts early on. I learned that men are better than women and that a woman should be submissive. I learned that there was only room in the world for cis and straight people, and only hetero relationships would honor one's family. This movie works to further push men forward, to give them more power and more privilege over marginalized identities.

How could *Mulan* have been written in a way that would showcase trans identities? Well, *Mulan* could have come out as a transman and then joined the army. People accepting her as a man could have been a way of Disney saying that transmen are, in fact, men. Later, when people found out that Mulan has breasts when Mulan was

injured and they discover that Mulan was assigned female at birth, this could be a way of showing that trans people cannot always pass in the real world. Then the movie could have shown all of the soldiers still accepting Mulan as a man and further solidifying that transmen are men. In reality, Mulan is far from a trans icon. Being trans is not the same as pretending to be a man situationally, as Mulan is doing. Being trans is an experience of finding your authentic self and being true to that. Being trans is not situational, it is one's life. Mulan is a terrible representation of what it is like to be a trans person. The entire movie would have to be changed in order for there to be any sort of trans identities uplifted. While changing the movie in that way could create a reality where trans identities are more uplifted, it is important to remember that Mulan is a hero from Chinese Mythology and changing the movie could have cultural implications. That puts us in a sticky situation in that how does one choose between respecting a culture and its traditional stories versus creating a story that allows for other traditionally oppressed identities to be present.

CHAPTER 2 - FROZEN II

In Disney's *Frozen II*, the movie follows sisters Anna and Elsa as they work together to discover who Elsa is. The movie takes place in a beautiful mountain town with a castle right next to the water. The town, Arendelle, is ruled by Queen Elsa. In this movie, Elsa, no matter how happy she is, finds herself unsettled as she hears a strange voice calling out to her. She chooses to follow that voice and it leads her into the enchanted forest and to the seas far away from her kingdom. The adventure turns into a story of self discovery and ends with Elsa and her sister, Princess Anna, better understanding each other and living in the places that fulfill their hearts.

The two *Frozen* movies (2013 & 2019) are more recent examples of the type of media that Disney is currently creating. The first *Frozen* movie is one of the highest-grossing movies of all time (Konnikova, 2014). The movie impacted an outrageous amount of people, including everyone from young kids to older adults (Konnikova, 2014). *Frozen* had all of the typical Disney movie parts such as the dead parents, the castle and pretty dresses, the quest for true love, and the comic-relief character (Olaf), but the movie included one other key aspect that many other Disney movies left out, strong representation of female leads, Princesses that think and act for themselves (Konnikova, 2014). With that being said, I chose to look at *Frozen II* because it is one of Disney's first movies that does not focus solely on a straight/hetero-normative love story. Is there a straight couple? Of course, but their love is not the main part of the story! This is not

typical of Disney Princess movies, as seen in *Snow White*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *Beauty and the Beast*, and even the first *Frozen* movie. The main focus of *Frozen II* is Elsa's journey into new and unknown places as she tries to uncover truths about the past (Disney+, 2022). *Frozen II*, in contrast to the first *Frozen*, had a more present focus of Anna's love life instead of allowing the sole focus of the movie to be that of a search for identity.

The original *Frozen* can be seen as an allegory for coming out, and the two *Frozen* movies together could be showing two different experiences of coming out. *Frozen*, in my opinion, was the attempt of a person to come out alone, whereas *Frozen II*, could have been showing what coming out can look like when you are somewhat supported. *Frozen* showed Elsa as she could have been metaphorically coming out with no support system, no chosen family. The movie followed Elsa as she fled away from her hometown where she had been hiding her magic, hiding her identity, for years. Where Elsa tried to find herself alone after getting outed then fleeing because she fears for the way she will be treated. *Frozen II* could be showing Elsa coming out again, but this time she sort of has help, finds a chosen family of sorts, and kind of leans on her support system.

In *Frozen II*, I was able to see fairly easily what could be understood to be an allegory for trans identities in the way Elsa acted. One of the first things that happened in the movie was Elsa hearing a voice (7:50 - 17:22). This was not just any voice but it was something that felt equally alarming, irregular, and urgent to Elsa. She is shown in the movie to be deep in thought as she tried to understand where the voice was coming from and what it could be asking her to understand. This longing to understand an inner voice could be representative of the feeling of dysphoria that trans people often feel because of the intensity and need to understand the voice right away. There seemed to be a feeling that something more and something was missing from

Elsa's present reality. Soon, Elsa realizes that just hearing the voice isn't enough, she must find where it is coming from. She was awoken from her sleep by the sound of the voice. She needed to know who the voice was coming from and what it was saying. The movie shows Elsa breaking into song and singing lyrics such as "how do I follow you into the unknown?". She wants to be with the voice, she wants to follow it wherever it takes her, regardless of what that will mean for others. Elsa's actions show that she knows she needs to be with the voice and she cannot wait for others to understand, she must act now and must know now. I felt like this could connect to a trans person's desire to know who they are.

The voice seemed to be wanting to lead her away from her home and possibly to be in the forest? The questions then became "what is the voice?" "Who could be calling me?" "Should I listen?". I saw the voice to be the idea of a person who didn't other members of her queer community? But people who aren't queer don't feel the same call? Sprinkled throughout the movie, Olaf being scared of change. There are a couple musical moments of Olaf talking about change. This could be an allegory for people outside the queer community who are unsure/uncertain about supporting their queer friend/relative?

The voice that Elsa was hearing could be thought of as her inner voice, the one who knows that there is something missing from her identity. It could be the call to the queer community and/or the need to be somewhere else or someone else, that interrupts her ability to enjoy herself and be in social situations. There were moments where Elsa's fear of messing things up and clearly holding back when Anna asks what's wrong. Throughout the movie Elsa continues to hear the voice! She knows she can hear the sound and she wants to ignore the voice calling her to the forest - trying to deny hearing the voice! Saying that "Everyone I've ever loved is inside these walls" as in all of her family is in one place, mentally. Like they are all not queer?

She eventually began giving in and going “into the unknown” Maybe this was her listening to who she is and who she wants to be but she isn’t sure why. She clearly feels comfortable with the voice and wants to be there, she feels somehow at home. She left everything she knew - everything familiar. The repercussions that her choice to go, to find herself, has on other people can be seen through the seemingly tearing apart of society, which shifted the way people interact, followed by people literally running and hiding.

Eventually, Elsa began to start telling Anna about the voice. I thought that this would be great, but Anna ended up getting upset that Elsa didn’t tell her sooner. Could that be representative of the way that cis het people get upset at queer people for not coming out sooner? Elsa realized something about herself and didn’t immediately share it with Anna and Anna is now upset? Elsa said that she can feel that the voice is good... but no one else can hear it, yet it has impacted everyone. This shows how the picture is bigger than just Elsa. The whole town is in trouble. The troll said that he cannot see the future, meaning that there is no future and that Elsa needs to do whatever is the next right thing. Troll said “We always worried that Elsa’s powers were too much for this world. We must not pray that they are enough.” This made me think of the questions such as “Are you queer enough” or “Are you straight enough” or “What are you?”; the idea that you, as a trans/queer person owe people an explanation. This also made me think of the concept that your identities are impacting people in ways you can’t imagine. I heard this concept a lot when I was still heavily involved with a super religious organization. I started to understand my identity as a queer person and they would say that my sin is hurting their faith and talk about how me being gay and admitting it will cause the faith of others to be in jeopardy. Queer and trans people don’t need to hear that and their identities should just be respected. No one has the right to question who you are and what identities you align with.

As Elsa took more time to understand her identity and listen to the voice, it affected the entire town. It seemed like she chose to stop suppressing her identity and tried to understand her authentic self and that was what caused the entire town to show down. This can be seen when the village people had to flee to the mountains, when the forest caught on fire, when the tornado picked the group up, and more. Finding herself should not have impacted that many people and I hated that all of the people of the town were so scared at first and later were super happy and proud of Elsa for finding who she was. It was like they didn't care until she was successful and then they claimed that they loved her the whole time. It felt performative to me. In the same way that family members of trans people might be super against them transitioning but then when the trans person gets to a point in their transition where they easily pass, the transphobic people are like "Yes! I have loved you the entire time". It isn't actually supportive. Elsewhere in the movie, it felt like any time Elsa was trying to listen to the voice, listen to the call to understand her identity, she was interrupted by Anna. This drove a wedge between the two because Anna could not hear the voice, but Elsa could. The movie then started separating Elsa from everyone else. Why? Maybe because she feels isolated? Maybe she is fighting her identity and feels like no one understands her? Trans people who face a lot of backlash as they take the time to understand their identities can often feel isolated because people don't understand what they are going through or sometimes people's support is misguided and transphobic. As Elsa learned about herself throughout she was simultaneously learning the truth about others and the truth is that not everyone will be supportive or try to understand. I saw this in the way that the soldiers who were stuck in the fog were so sure that the Northdundra people were the bad guys. The Northdundra were different from the soldiers, but that doesn't make them bad. The soldiers were shocked when they understood the truth. Realizing that the queen, Elsa and Anna's mother, was

Northuldra and that she saved the king, their father was a shock and surprise to both the Northdutra and the Arendellian soldiers. Why didn't the mother tell anyone? Why was that hidden? Why did their mother hide this part of her identity? Was it not safe to be her true self? Was it specifically for this moment where it seemed like everyone was finding out truths about themselves together? Everyone in the moment learned that things that they once assumed were fact are not necessarily entirely true.

I will next explore the idea of Elsa ditching Anna, Kristoff, Seven, Olaf, and her entire support system. As the movie went on, Elsa was trying to do everything alone. She would get upset at people for trying to help her, but she would continually lean on the fire, wind, and eventually water spirits, as they could all hear the same voice she heard. This, to me, was showing how Elsa could not get the support she needed from the people who have in the past been her support system. Elsa did as a lot of LGBTQIA+ people do, she found her chosen family. The concept of a chosen family is a very common one in any part of the queer and gender queer community (citation) (for ease I will just be using the term queer community, but in this context I mean for it to be all encompassing of trans identities). Sometimes people who are a part of the queer community will understand issues that face the community on a deeper level than people who don't hold any sort of queer identity (citation). This means that queer people might choose to get support from other queer people as they typically are able to offer support in different ways than non queer people. When Elsa understood that the other spirits also hear the voice too, saw this as Elsa finding other queer people. She knew they heard their voice too, she knew they shared some part of her identity with her. They shared parts of her identity they Anna, Olaf, Seven, and Kristoff could not share. This made Elsa trust them and flock to them more than the others. While having a chosen family can be great, it seemed to also be problematic in this

movie because of the way that Elsa was treating people who were not in her chosen family. She was constantly pushing them away, sometimes even literally pushing them. I appreciated that there were some examples of Elsa having support from the other spirits, but I felt like showing kids that it is fine to push away people and try to do everything alone isn't the best idea for a movie meant for children's entertainment.

One of the most important quotes from the movie is when Elsa is watching a memory of her grandfather and learns the truth. That her own grandfather hated magic and turned against the Northudra people. Elsa says this is says to the ghost of him that "Fear is what can't be trusted" upon hearing her grandfather wanted to bring Arendela's full guard to the meeting with the Northudra people, to which his other soldier says "but they have given us no reason not to trust the" and the grandfather, who is king at the time, says "the Northudra people follow magic. Which means we can never trust them. Magic makes people feel too powerful. Too entitled. It makes them think they can defy the will of a king". I felt that this fits into the concept of power and privilege that has been explored through this thesis. The king doesn't like the idea that people don't need him and can be self-sufficient. He wants to destroy people before they can destroy him.

This movie is interesting when looking into its power and privilege aspects. To start, the movie is centered around white people who live in a beautiful castle. That is super privileged. It was discovered that Anna and Elsa's mother was Northdutra, who were what I assume was supported to be the indigenous people of the area as they lived outside and worked to preserve the land, animals, and observed more spirit practices than the townspeople. I can't tell if Disney wanted Northudtra to be indigenous because all of them are white passing characters and their identities are not explored fully. All that is truly known is that the Northudra people have

powers and have a much stronger respect for all living creatures than the townspeople. There was an immediate red flag to me when the Arendellian soldiers who were stuck in the fog just assumed that their men couldn't have possibly started the fighting and that it had to be the Northudtra people. The soldiers had a superiority complex that was scary. It felt super military and aggressive compared to the calm and respectful that the Northdutra were. The soldiers were constantly trying to be more powerful than the Northudtra which felt very colonialism and white supremacy to me. I found that there was a power issue in that. I also felt like it was problematic to create a storyline that follows two royal party members without allowing their possible indigenous identities to be respected. Everything was pretty white washed which contributes to concepts of white supremacy.

In conclusion, there were issues of power and privilege present in the way that the entire movie had sprinkles of a heterosexual relationship in it that interrupted the main storyline of Elsa's search for her identity. Disney is notorious for always having the princess be saved by the prince, or a submissive and helpless woman needing a strong man to save her. *Frozen II*, while slightly different from those examples, still had a focus on Anna and Kristoff. About every 25 minutes Kristoff tried to propose to Anna. While I understand that this was supposed to be sweet and comical, it felt interruptive to me. The continual proposals normalized that men have to be the one to ask a woman to marry them. Anna was also shown to be overly emotional all the time. This worked to showcase the narrative of the overly emotional woman. By repeatedly showing Anna in wildly shifting moods and larger than life reactions, Disney was normalizing men being emotionless and women being irrational and driven only by shifting moods. These are problematic rhetoric in that it feeds into the toxic masculinity concepts that men are emotionally stronger than women and women need a level headed man to tell them how to act. I also felt like

the repetition of Anna and Kristoff's relationship showed power and privilege because it emphasizes the need for there to always be a straight couple highlighted. The movie could not exist without a love story, even though the movie is for little kids. The love story had to be of a cis het couple and those are the two majority identities that hold the most power in modern society. Constantly being exposed to cis het relationships, especially as children, can cause kids to think that that is the only way you can be in a relationship. It will further suppress LGBTQIA+ relationships by keeping cis het ones in mainstream media and keeping queer ones out.

Disney has announced that they have plans to create a third film in the *Frozen* franchise (Thomas, 2023). Knowing this, I am excited to see what Disney does with the movie, as they have been getting more and more affirming of queer and trans identities as time goes on. My hope is that a third *Frozen* will continue in this trend that Disney has shown of forward movement and continual slow, but important, examples of trans and queer people in their movies.

Chapter 3 - Out

Out, released in 2020, is considered to be one of the first examples of purposeful gay representation created by the Disney franchise. The short film itself was loosely based on a true story. The film's writer and director, Steven Clay Hunter, said that "It's somewhat based on my coming-out story and yet it's nothing like my coming-out story. I was trying to make a film for my 17-year-old queer self, the guy who needed to see something of himself in a film" (Wakefield, 2020). Hunter revealed that he grew up in a small town near Ontario, Canada where there was little to no representation of LGBTQIA+ people and due to that "Part of me just buried it [being queer]" (Wakefield, 2020). Currently Hunter is helping to develop a new project for Disney and said that he is excited to include more queer and trans stories.

Out follows the story of two men in love, Greg and Manuel. The two are packing up Greg's house before they move into the city in an apartment together. Manuel finds a picture of the two of them in one of Greg's drawers and asks why it's being hidden, to which Greg explains that once they live together in a city he will proudly hang it in public. I liked this because he was talking about how he didn't feel able to show his queerness yet as the space he was in was not safe to do so. Greg knew that one day, maybe when they moved in together, he would feel safe enough to be himself.

Soon, Greg's parents arrived for a surprise visit and to help Greg pack. Greg quickly kicked Manuel out of the house because Greg wasn't yet out to his parents. Manuel, clearly hurt, left and said that Greg needed to tell his parents about him. At this moment, I really felt for both

of them. I felt for Greg because coming out is not something that can be rushed. It needs to happen when a person is ready and in that person's time. On the other hand, I felt for Manuel because being in a relationship that must be hidden doesn't feel good. If you are in love, you want to be in love publicly. Hiding in the closet doesn't create an environment that is empowering of the relationship, unless both (or all) parties are wanting to hide the relationship.

Out shows two men who are on different pages with what they want their relationship to be. Greg is not ready to be out yet whereas Manuel is ready for their relationship to be public. This is a deeply intimate challenge that is all too common in the queer community. The issue of publicity of relationships is one that is central to the queer experience and queer dating.

As the short film continues, we, as the viewers, meet the couple's dog, Jim. It is interesting to note that Jim is, in fact, a female dog. I love the idea that names don't have to have a gender but it is weird for Disney to make the choice to use a traditionally male name for a female dog. I have not seen Disney do any other examples of using traditional male names for females or traditionally female names for males other than this. What does it mean that Disney chose to do this for the first time with a dog? Maybe it is just a coincidence that the breaking of binary names occurs in this dog. I was unable to find other examples of Disney doing this, but maybe there are some!

Greg, after Manuel left and Greg's parents were in the house, was understandably stressed. Greg sat in his room and talked to his dog, Jim. This was imagery that I could really get behind. I often process things out loud while talking with my dog. At one point Greg says to Jim "I wish we could trade places" then magically the two do. Greg is trapped in Jim's dog body and Jim is trapped in Greg's human body. This creates issues because Greg's parents assume Greg is Greg and try to interact with him as such.

Greg, in the dog body, realizes that the picture of him and Manuel is visible to his parents. Because he was not yet ready to be out to them, Greg in the dog body attempts to hide the picture. The plot of the movie then follows as Greg in the dog body attempts to hide the picture at any cost possible, such as biting his own mother and peeing on the floor. While I understand the humor of these scenes, knowing that the dog was the gay person made me sad. I calculated it and found that of the around 8 minutes and 30 seconds of the film that are not showing credits, 2 minutes and 41 seconds show the gay men as themselves, as men in love. In contrast, 4 minutes and 49 seconds show Greg as a dog. What does this say about the experiences and the feelings toward queer people?

The story ends with Greg learning to be proud of this identity and Greg's parents loving him and Manuel. I love how positive and happy the ending is, but it is often not reality. I also wish there was more of an acknowledgment of the coming out. They kind of just skipped past it. There were more minutes of credits than of screen time with Greg and Manuel together.

Out not only presents two gay men, but also includes a lot of interesting identities and dynamics, such as Greg's parents. The dad never said a word and the mom was completely overbearing and forced herself into Greg's world. What does that say about gender roles? That the woman is louder and forces her way into space?

The fact of the matter is that this short film showed a gay man as a dog which is not the kind of representation that the queer community needs. We have far too often been victimized and called animals. We live in a world that thinks gay people are dogs, violent non-human creatures. In an article seeking to understand violence against LGBT people in Honduras, one transwoman was describing her experience being incarcerated. Perla M, a 29-year-old transwoman, said "they were joking, saying that we [herself and other sex workers] don't have

any rights. They put us in a cell with men. We were in a cell for 24 hours. I asked the police for water, and one of them threw water in my face. He said ‘You all shouldn’t exist, we work guarding the community but not animals like you’.” Experiences like this were the catalyst to Perla seeking asylum from Honduras (Human Rights Watch, 2020). In this, queer people were treated like animals. This is one of hundreds of experiences where queer and trans people have been treated like animals for simply existing. Knowing stories like this makes me hesitant to uplift stories such as the one in *Out*. I want to be seen as a person and loved because of who I am, not shown as a dog and treated like a dog.

If the representation of queer identities in children’s media is there, then that’s a step in the right direction. *Out* is a step in the right direction, I just was very sad to see that there were more minutes of screen time of the main character as a dog than of the main character as a gay person existing in the world as himself. Why must queer identities always be hidden? Why is Disney too ashamed of gay people to make even a short film showcasing a gay couple? I, as a member of the queer community, get enough experiences of homophobia from living in our world, I don’t need a show to tell me that much of society pictures me as an animal.

Even though *Out* followed two gay men, it was still problematic when it comes to representation as the gay characters were not given screen time as themselves, but their identities were hidden in the body of a dog. This speaks to how LGBTQIA+ individuals are often thought of as less than human, almost even as animals. This short film is considered one of Disney’s “sparkshorts.” What does it mean for Disney to not allow for there to be a full-length film following trans identities? Why must the screen time of works that showcase these identities be limited to 14 minutes (including credits). This story follows two seemingly cisgender men, both of which hold power and privilege as cisgender men. They have marginalized identities, such as

being gay, and being POC, but that does not negate the fact that they are displayed as cis men.

What is missing in *Out*? Trans people and gender identities that diverge from cisgender. Leaving these identities out continues the harmful rhetoric of forgetting and erasing trans people.

Conclusion

Thus far, we have explored the ways that *Mulan*, *Frozen II*, and *Out* do and don't uplift the identities of gender diverse peoples. Understanding who holds power and privilege in a society is important when looking at whose story gets told. Cis het straight men hold the most power in society and thus their stories are often ones that are shown in movies and media. Exploring the way that trans and nonbinary identities are showcased in Disney movies was a step to take back the power that has often been withheld from those who hold oppressed identities.

Looking at who created the narratives is important in understanding motivations behind the story telling. The person telling the story gets to control how they are (or are not) being portrayed. If there were more trans, genderqueer, and queer staff on Disney movies, then the narratives of movies with trans, genderqueer, and queer characters would be told in a perspective that better respects them. Disney has been better about hiring people who hold many different identities and I am excitedly looking forward to what the future of Disney will bring!

Representation is not always present in films, causing there to be a need for the audience to create allegories. When I was watching these films, I learned a lot about myself and how I am able to see reality when I am purposefully wanting to see trans identities. I was able to attach myself to certain characters at certain points of their stories. I learned that if no representation is present, then its representation can be created and imagined. I found that while seeing oneself in a character is great, having explicit representation is better. As someone who has been and is still struggling with their gender identity, I find immense amounts of joy in the way that Disney is

slowly, but surely, beginning to normalize all types of identities. I cannot wait to see what Disney does next.

The reason I chose these specific films was to show the timeline that Disney has created for itself and how it went from very binary to possible allegories about trans identities. *Mulan* was a film I chose to analyze because many people, when I first tell them the topic of my thesis, say that *Mulan* is a great example of trans identities. People commonly think this because *Mulan* showcases a sort of bending of gender roles. I believe that *Mulan* is a terrible example for trans identities because *Mulan* has someone who identifies as a girl, who is pretending to be someone she isn't. She is not a trans man. She is a woman who is pretending to be a guy. That is not what being trans means. Being trans is so much more than acting like a character. I chose to look into *Frozen II* because the entire movie, to me, was extremely queer coded and had a storyline that did not feature a heterosexual love story as the main topic of the storyline, which is rare for Disney.

This thesis has focused a lot on three examples of Disney media that fall short of successfully representing trans and nonbinary people. Good examples do exist and in the future I hope to explore some of those Disney movies. I would look into *Luca* as well as *Muppet Babies Gonzo-Rella*. I would want to look into *Luca* because I feel like *Luca* could be a great example of attempting to hide one's trans identity, knowing that their identity won't be accepted. I would want to explore *Muppet Babies* episode *Gonzo-Rella* because it showcased the muppets' character, Gonzo, as they realized they did not fit into the binary and wanted to express themselves in a way that diverged from that of their stereotypically assigned clothes as based off their assigned gender identity. Gonzo, who was assigned male at birth, wanted to wear a dress and not a suit to a dance. This is important stuff, especially to show on a show specific to children.

In my opinion, Luca's identity had been hidden from him, until he saw someone else leave the water. Once he finally knew that he was both human and sea creature, he was able to embrace who he truly was. Before he was aware of the possibility of identifying as anything other than what he was assigned at birth, he thought he had to exist in a certain way. By the end of the movie, Luca accepted for who he was, both human and sea creature! Luca is one of the best examples of what any trans person/any member of the LGBTQIA+ community could want their friends and family to react like, to treat them with love and acceptance, regardless of whether or not they were accepting in the first place.

Looking into *Muppet Babies Gonzo-Rella* is important because this show only airs on Disney Junior, which is a channel focused specifically and exclusively for children. Showcasing nonbinary identities in a children's show is important for normalizing the discussion of trans identities. I loved the way that the *Gonzo-Rella* episode was created because there was not any acknowledgement of it, it was just placed in a season of the show. It was not specifically released for pride or for any sort of holiday. This showed, to me, that nonbinary identities were being normalized to the point where it was just included in the natural flow of the show. The producers didn't make a big deal about which, meaning they were not putting a nonbinary character in as a mean to show support in a performative way. They just included a nonbinary character for their sake of showing diversity and acceptance. The storyline showed Gonzo, who was AMAB, as they longed to wear a dress to a dance. Once Gonzo had the dress on, they went to the ball. At the ball, they hide their real identity and didn't tell their friends who they really were, they introduced themselves as a mysterious stranger named Gonzo-Rella. Later in the episode Gonzo told their friends that they were Gonzo-Rella and that it was them in the dress. The friends were confused at first, then accepted and loved Gonzo for who they were. I loved that the show

allowed for the characters to lovingly accept their friends once they understood the situation. I thought that this was a beautiful way of showcasing identities that diverge from that of cis het ones.

I want to acknowledge my own biases in writing this paper. While I did talk about trans and nonbinary identities as well as advocate for all queer identities, I neglected to talk about indigenous people and two-spirit people. It wasn't until after my thesis defense did I realize how I, in my own privileged identity as a white person, completely left out indigenous identities. This is an import thing to talk about, especially after using CRT and MMM to show why trans people have been left out and erased for decades. The exact same thing happened with indigenous identities and it was never my intention to continue that harmful rhetoric in this paper, and for that I deeply apologize. I plan to continue this work and the exploration of Disney movies into future works. With that being said, I hope to also be intentional about including all people, especially those who have historically been oppressed and erased.

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