QUEERING MASCULINITY ON TV: THE TRANSFORMATIVE POTENTIAL OF GENRE, EMBODIMENT, AND HOMOSOCIALITY

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ABSTRACT

QUEERING MASCULINITY ON TV: THE TRANSFORMATIVE POTENTIAL OF GENRE, EMBODIMENT, AND HOMOSOCIALITY

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Keywords: masculinity, embodiment, television, queer, genre

Using textual and extratextual analysis of recent TV programs Our Flag Means Death (2022), What We Do in the Shadows (2019-present), and Heartstopper (2022), this thesis explores the interconnections between theories of hegemonic masculinity, homosociality, and gender performativity in the context of modern television. Theories of hegemonic masculinity are not sufficient to account for the wide variety of masculinities on TV because of the differential way that local, regional, and global contexts interact to influence how viewers think about gender and its embodiment. Mixing normative genres, tropes, and mediums on television creates space for queer embodiments of masculinity and femininity. Flexibility in gender presentation is impacted by homosocial environments and whether in-group gender membership is determined by official institutions or unofficial groupings. To address gender diversity in representation, the concept of belonging to homosocial groups should be altered to reflect a shared desire for the same gender configuration instead of resorting to the gender binary. While manifestations of masculinity have evolved in recent TV programs, changes to gender presentation often occur on the symbolic level, obscuring the unchanged status quo of gender hegemony. However, certain narrative styles such as mockumentaries and the inclusion of characters with diverse embodiments of gender have the potential to effectively queer TV and influence viewers' common-sense understandings of gender to be more inclusive of queerness.

ÖZET

TV'DE QUERING ERKEKLIK: TÜR, SOMUTLAŞMA VE HOMOSOSYALIYETIN DÖNÜŞÜM POTANSİYELİ

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Anahtar Kelimeler: erkeklik, somutlaşma, televizyon, kuir, tür

Bu tez, yakın zamanda TV yayınlanmış olan Our Flag Means Death (2022), What We Do in the Shadows (2019-günümüz) ve Heartstopper (2022) programlarının metinsel ve metin dışı analizini yaparak modern televizyon bağlamında hegemonik erkeklik, eşcinsellik ve toplumsal cinsiyet performatifliği teorileri arasındaki bağlantıları araştırıyor. Hegemonik erkeklik teorileri, yerel, bölgesel ve küresel bağlamların izleyicilerin toplumsal cinsiyet ve somutlaşması hakkında nasıl düşündüklerini etkilemek için farklı şekillerde etkileşime girmesi nedeniyle televizyondaki farklı erkeklik temsillerini* açıklamak için yeterli değildir. Normatif türleri, mecazları ve medyumları televizyonda karıştırmak, erkeklik ve kadınlığın queer somutlaşmış örnekleri içinde alan yaratır. Cinsiyet sunumundaki esneklik, homososyal ortamlardan ve grup içi cinsiyet üyeliğinin resmi kurumlar veya resmi olmayan gruplar tarafından belirlenip belirlenmediğinden etkilenir. Temsilde cinsiyet çeşitliliğini ele almak için, homososyal gruplara ait olma kavramı, cinsiyet ikiliğine başvurmak yerine aynı cinsiyet konfigürasyonuna yönelik ortak bir arzuyu yansıtacak şekilde değiştirilmelidir. Son TV programlarında erkekliğin tezahürleri gelişirken, cinsiyet sunumundaki değişiklikler genellikle sembolik düzeyde meydana gelir ve cinsiyet hegemonyasının değişmeyen statükosunu gizler. Bununla birlikte, sahte belgeseller gibi belirli anlatı stilleri ve cinsiyetin çeşitli vücut bulmuş hallerine sahip karakterlerin dahil edilmesi, TV'yi etkili bir şekilde queerleştirme ve izleyicilerin cinsiyete ilişkin sağduyulu anlayışlarını queerliği daha kapsayıcı olacak şekilde etkileme potansiyeline sahiptir.

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1. INTRODUCTION

This thesis aims to examine the construction of masculinity and queer embodiment in television representations of "otherness." The primary text I will be analyzing is a television program called Our Flag Means Death (Waititi et al. 2022), but I will also utilize examples from recent shows like Heartstopper (2022) and What We Do in the Shadows (2019) to show how representations of gender construction and relationality is transforming on the small screen. I will approach the texts using the methods suggested by Hall in that I will analyze the content using postmodernist textual analysis informed by seminal works on gender and queer studies (Hall 2003). More specifically, my methodology will be guided by Doty's work on queer television studies (Doty 1993). I argue that TV series that defy genre categories and include homosocial settings and themes of monstrosity among the characters allow for a more flexible understanding of gender, sexuality, and relationships; however, the outward appearance of positive representations of queerness obscure the continuing status quo of gender inequality in real life. Our Flag Means Death and What We Do in the Shadows present alternatives to hegemonic masculinities through narratives that play with binary oppositions such as masculine/feminine, self/other, and monstrous/cute.

Throughout, I will debate whether queerbaiting and homonormative representations of queerness on screen do more harm or good, paying special attention to how on-screen representations of queerness interact with each viewer's individual context. Per Hall, there is an intricate cyclical process of meaning-making that occurs in all modern media. The first takes place when the production itself is coded with meaning and disseminated. Then, when it is consumed by viewers, their particular context interacts with the media in question in such a way that the "intended" meaning changes for each viewer. Next, when viewers consort amongst themselves about the content in question, new collective meanings can be created through the interaction (Hall 2003). Social media interaction has complicated this further because viewers have a direct line of communication with actors, creators, and directors

online. To account for the multilayered meanings disseminated from the program and subsequently absorbed and altered by viewers, it is necessary to define what exactly context means and outline the facets of context that I address in looking at queerness on TV. Context is "the circumstances that form the setting for an event, statement, or idea, and in terms of which it can be fully understood."[1] There are three distinct scales of context that I will consider: local, regional, and global.

Local context, of course, is the smallest in scale but perhaps has the most direct impact on how meaning is made for each individual. Made up of the individual and their surrounding community, local contexts are microcosms of larger swathes of human society, and while each local context is affected by larger regional and global circumstances, each locality has its own particularities. As such, local contexts must be defined by each individual, and even for individuals who share a local context, in all likelihood they will define it slightly differently because of their differing subject positions. I am interested in questions about queerness, gender, and representation; therefore, subjective interpretations of how these issues are treated in individuals' local contexts is highly relevant. While a myriad of factors influence local context, for the purpose of this research, I am interested in the disparity between the degree of visibility of queer people on TV and in real-life local contexts. Additionally, I believe it is relevant to look at how gender queer people are treated in their local context and to examine how influential wider political decisions regarding queer rights are on different individuals based on their individual contexts.

Regional context refers to a larger geographical area and includes official institutions. Generally, regional contexts are equated to nation-states, but it can also refer to regions within nation-states. Oftentimes, certain (official) streaming services are only available in particular regional contexts, which limits viewers based on geographical location. Of course, there are ways around these limitations what with VPNs[2] and digital pirating, but for the less tech-savvy or people with less economic resources, these geographical limitations persist as finding pirated content can be tough and VPNs can be costly. Regional context affects local contexts through top-down power because official institutions are generally run by regional governing bodies, but the degree of adherence or resistance to these top-down policies varies from one local context to another. Media is a big industry in the US, and while these productions become aspatial global spaces through media, they also reflect the regional context in which they were made. Some streaming services, like Hulu, are only available in the US, and so a lot of the content included there is made for and only (officially)

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[1] Definition from the Oxford English Dictionary.

[2] VPN stands for virtual private network. VPNs allows users to configure their computers' IP addresses to any geographical location and thus access online content reserved for people in that particular country.

available to US viewers.

To illustrate what I mean by context, I will describe my own. I am a white middle-class cisgender queer woman from a suburban American city, and I am currently living in Kadıköy, Istanbul. There are at least three local contexts that are relevant to me at this moment: the first is Istanbul, where I am physically located; the second is my community in Minneapolis, MN, where I have lived and worked in the past and to which I am returning in the near future; the third is the community in which I grew up and in which much of my family is located, a suburb near Madison, WI. While I have three local contexts affecting me, other individuals may have more or less. In all of my local contexts, I am integrated in queer and trans* communities, so questions of which spaces are safe for all gender expressions, which geographies are not, and degrees of queer visibility within the wider local neighborhood or city are highly relevant to my communities. For each local context, the answer to these questions will differ, but there are some overlaps on the types of spaces or considerations by queer community members across all geographies. Two of the local contexts I mentioned are part of the Midwest in the US, so they share a regional context because they are in the same country, but the regional context is nonetheless slightly different because they are located in different states. Minnesota tends to be more liberal and has taken action to become a sanctuary state for trans* and queer people whose rights are being attacked in other states, and Wisconsin is one of those states that is attempting to attack trans* people's rights.

So, what can we learn from the dichotomy between increasing positive visibility of queer characters on TV and the worsening sociopolitical conditions for trans* and queer people in the US context? Many of the efforts to repeal trans* and queer people's rights on the state level have been aimed at rendering these individuals invisible in public; the inclusion of queer and trans* individuals on TV is seen as an affront to these homophobic and trans*phobic movements. Even when these characters' gender and sexuality are not framed as issues or focused on as plot points, their visibility on screen has made such shows targets for anti-trans* vitriol online. Including queer and trans* characters on TV programs that also defy normative genres and narrative styles, such as comedic fantasy shows or mockumentaries, has the most potential to reimagine how queer people can become beyond the limitations of older stereotypes of queer people in media. Certain elements of queer TV programs affect their efficacy in transforming viewers' common-sense understandings of gender as different from their local or regional setting, which may be more heteronormative and less flexible.

The policing of gendered behavior in homosocial settings and the ways in which

such settings are defined differ based on whether the group is connected to an official institution or not. Whereas the determination of the homosocial depends more heavily on gender essentialism within official institutions, as can be seen in Heartstopper (2022), unofficial groupings like the pirate crew in Our Flag Means Death allow for more in-group gender flexibility and the connection between characters is not as strongly dependent on their mutual connection to women because they are far removed from "normal" social context. Rather, their relationships are formed by their shared shared pirate lifestyle, not shared origins or relationships with women. Furthermore, the trope of the same-gender double is a useful analytical tool for textual analysis to see how relationally constructed gender manifests on an individual, interpersonal level, and I will examine how this trope plays out in What We Do in the Shadows. Feasey and Sedgwick's theories are useful starting points for conceptualizing normative representations of masculinity on TV. Analyzing homosocial relationships on TV supports the notion that the continuum between the homosocial and the homoerotic is unbroken but disrupted due to the pressure of hegemonic and dominant masculinities imposed on men (Sedgwick and Koestenbaum 2016).

For my study on masculinity and homosocial/homoerotic relationships on television, I have chosen to focus primarily on Our Flag Means Death, a representation of pirates, because while they are real and still exist today, they are shrouded in mysticism due to the nature of their lifestyle, which differs greatly from heteronormative lifestyles today and in the past. First, pirate kinship structure is not based on the nuclear family; instead, it is predicated on belonging to a certain crew. Some pirates may have families, but when at sea, crew allegiance often supersedes family ties because of the life-or-death scenarios they face together. Second, pirate ships are largely homosocial environments, which provides a glimpse into the performance of masculinity for the benefit of other men. Of course, not all pirate crews are made up exclusively of men, but many of the documented historical exceptions include women who dressed as men to join the pirate crew, which provides an interesting case of the tension between biological sex and gender performance. I will discuss this tension using Halberstam's theory of female masculinity. Instead of undermining the homosocial environment, non-men pirates who practice masculinity deepen my analysis on gender performativity and undo the essentialist assumption that masculinity equates to maleness. Finally, modern stories of historical piracy are situated at the nexus of violence, monstrosity, masculinity, and class, all of which factor into my analysis. As Dawdy and Bonni argue, "piracy, because of its moral ambiguity, lends itself to quite different material fantasies, and quite different political interpretations" which extends to different imaginings of gender and sexuality (Dawdy and Bonni 2012).

To give some context, creator David Jenkins got the idea for Our Flag from stories of real-life pirates Stede "The Gentleman Pirate" Bonnet and Blackbeard, who sailed together during the Golden Age of Caribbean piracy (c. 1650-1730). In the show, Stede is an aristocrat and has left his wife and children to become a pirate, while Blackbeard/Ed is a notoriously violent, well-known pirate. Blackbeard/Ed and Stede combine crews, and Stede agrees to teach Blackbeard/Ed to be a gentleman, and in exchange, Blackbeard/Ed will teach Stede to be a pirate. Secretly, Blackbeard/Ed and Izzy Hands, his right-hand man, have devised a plan to get close to Stede, kill him, and have Blackbeard/Ed assume his identity so he can retire from his exhausting pirate life. With every episode, Blackbeard/Ed and Stede get closer and deepen their homoerotic relationship, causing a moral dilemma in Blackbeard/Ed as he realizes that he does not want to kill Stede. Meanwhile, the British navy is searching for Stede because he killed a British naval captain and took two hostages. In the penultimate episode of the first season, the British navy raids Stede's ship and are going to kill him, but then Blackbeard/Ed stops the execution by agreeing to work for the Crown along with Stede. Finally, they proclaim their feelings for one another and kiss, but on the night they are supposed to meet and run away together, Stede fails to show up at the agreed meeting place. Instead, he returns to his wife and children, who had believed him to be dead; once there, he realizes he misses Blackbeard/Ed and his seafaring life terribly. He fakes his own death and returns to sea, but by this point Blackbeard/Ed is so dejected by Stede's rejection that he reverts to a more toxic, violent, and monstrous form of masculinity and maroons many of Stede's crew members on a deserted island. The season ends with Stede rescuing his crew members from this deserted island, and the question of his future relationship with Blackbeard/Ed looms over the characters.

While Our Flag's creators had a general framework for these historical figures, they took significant creative license when filling in the gaps for the characters' motivations, personalities, and relationships ("Our Flag Means Death" Stars Talk Pirate Facial Hair and Sword Fighting 2022). This created space to construct complex interpersonal relationships among the captains and crew that read as relatable to modern audiences. Emphasizing the human aspect of the pirate life on screen is also a novel approach to the genre, which presented challenges but ultimately transformed the show into a playful space in between genres. This in-betweenness goes beyond genre and also pertains to relationships and characters. First, Stede Bonnet is an aristocrat-turned-pirate, but does not fit fully in either moniker. Second, Stede and Blackbeard's relationship hovers somewhere in between friends, enemies, and lovers for the majority of the first season, prompting both fears of queerbaiting and

praise of "hoyay" (homoerotic, yay!) among the exceptionally active online fandom.[3] Emphasizing the humanity of semi-mystical figures like pirates also relates to the modern phenomenon that deemphasizes the terror of the monstrous "other" and instead reflects fears of weakening privilege. The way that otherness is projected onto the bodies of certain pirates in Our Flag mirrors how differences in race and class have also been historically projected onto representations of vampires.

The next show included in my analysis bravely asks the question, what if vampires were idiots? What We Do in the Shadows (2019) falls under the autership of Taika Waititi. It was originally a movie by the same title starring Waititi (2014) and was adapted into a television series on FX. Shadows has released four seasons and its fifth comes out in July 2023. It is a mockumentary ensemble comedy series with five main characters: three traditional vampires, one "energy vampire," and one human familiar, who is a vampire wannabe but, ironically, is a descendent of an infamous vampire slayer. The five live together in a mansion in modern-day Staten Island, NY. Like Our Flag, many of the characters are queer, polyamorous, and completely clueless about the world. Nandor the Relentless (Kayvan Novak), one of the vampires, and Guillermo de la Cruz (Harvey Guillén), his human familiar, are in a fraught homoerotic relationship that develops throughout the narrative. Themes of masculine embodiment and monstrosity are deeply entangled with desire– desire both for the "other" and to be the "other." Thrust together in the modern US context, the series shows how gender constructions are historically dependent, for each character comes from a distinct geography and time period. The overlapping temporalities and vastly different manifestations of gender exaggerate the way that encounters between the gendered self and the gendered "other" are both historically constituted and constituting gender ideals.

This show functions differently than the homosocial setting of the pirate ship like Our Flag Means Death because it is a mixed-gender household, but by virtue of being vampires, they also function on queer time as beings who are only awake in the nighttime. The men's close proximity to at least one woman, Nadja (Natasia Demitriou) does not undermine my analysis of how gender is embodied in homosocial groups; rather, it brings temporality, and sociopolitical context into stark focus when considering how the embodiment of gender is represented. Looking at the relationship between homoeroticism and homosociality, same-gender duos in Shadows will be examined in depth to see how interpersonal (and interspecies) relationships are the basis for gender formations.

[3] Although social media content analysis is not part of my methodology, I know from anecdotal experience and extratextual interviews that the online fandom for Our Flag has been quite active in picking up more covert symbolism, suggesting themes and plotlines they would like to see happen, and communicating with creators and actors.

The way we watch television has changed from networks to cable to streaming services, and this change also affects how television is made and received. Social media and streaming services have become ubiquitous, which has generated new ways of viewing, discussing, and connecting with others who have also watched the show. With social media, TV fandoms have a direct line of communication with other fans, creators, actors, and stakeholders in the television show, transforming them from fans and consumers of media into "prosumers," or producers and consumers. Through social media, fans can influence creative decisions and narrative arcs via online engagement (Waggoner 2018). While social media content analysis is not part of the scope of my methodology, it is important to conceptualize how different streaming platforms and release schedules affect reception. Our Flag Means Death is a one-season HBO Max serial, and it was released in batches of two or three 25–35-minute episodes over the course of a month in spring 2022. What We Do in the Shadows airs on FX, a cable channel, and each episode is available the day after its first airing via a US-only streaming site, Hulu. Heartstopper is a Netflix original with eight 30-minute episodes which were released all at once in 2022. The second season of Heartstopper is being filmed at the time of my writing. Although the content of Heartstopper differs significantly from the other two primary texts, all three include heavy homoeroticism and ended with cliffhangers. Furthermore, all three have forthcoming seasons in the works, so there is an element of the unknown in what's to come. I have chosen to analyze shows that are still being produced and have not yet released their forthcoming seasons because their unfinished aspect leaves space to play with the unknown and still-becoming, which echoes trans*feminist methodologies (Halberstam 2018).

The complex and volatile interaction between viewers and televisual content has been theorized extensively by Hall and is important to keep in mind throughout this analysis (Hall 2003).[4] Television is a form of entertainment that typically resides in the domestic sphere, and as such, the interpellation between a show's content and its viewers' reception is paradoxical because the meanings gleaned are both deeply personal due to individual viewer's contexts, but also collective because TV is part of interconnected global media spaces (Avila-Saavedra 2009). Social media has facilitated discussions of meaning on TV significantly. Because I am primarily focusing on how gender and sexuality are represented on certain television programs, it is important to distinguish between the type of deep, theoretical analysis that I aim to perform on the TV programs in question versus the experience of the typical viewer who watches for pleasure. My analysis pays attention to how narrative strategies

[4] Per Hall, the meaning in narratives are coded by the producers, then decoded by consumers upon viewing. Next, such meanings are disseminated in public and then subsequent TV programs are recoded with these new decoded meanings influencing the recoding of later TV broadcasts or streaming (2003).

and symbolism play into subliminal messaging about gender and sexuality and questions the efficacy of these strategies to portray meanings, for many audiences are just watching at a surface level and absorbing the content without critical thought. I myself am guilty of this and at times find myself influenced by "common-sense" meanings taken from media about which I have not thought critically, so I recognize the insidious impact that media has on viewers. It will be important to distinguish between the more obvious meanings and the meanings that take more excavation to uncover and analyze, which may not be accessible to typical viewers.

My methodology involves "queering" media studies; therefore, even though I make claims about how gender and sexuality are constructed in my primary sources, I am aware that my analyses are fundamentally impacted by my own personal context as a white queer woman from the US. I hope to avoid making broad claims about the intentions of the shows' creators or audiences while also leaving space for multiple, sometimes conflicting, interpretations to coexist because ways of meaning-making differ with each viewer's particular context. I find Chitra's methodology useful to look at how messages about gender and sexuality are coded in television; however, I believe that their analysis is fundamentally flawed, for they assume an intelligent viewership who look beyond the surface-level content of jokes at the expense of queer or gender non-conforming characters. Most casual viewers are not performing deep analysis to realize that the homophobic jokes are intended as irony or parody, and as such can be read as a critique of modern gender and sexuality norms rather than their reification (Chitra 2023). Thorough content analysis of television and fan response on social media reveals that while representation of LGBTQ+ characters has grown, problematic tropes persist, which can negatively affect identity formation for young queer viewers in particular (Fouts and Inch 2005; Waggoner 2018). Thus, even though the creators' intention may be to subvert homophobia or heteronormativity through narrative devices such as humor, irony, or parody, it is not always successful because it reifies negative stereotypes about queer people and unconsciously informs how heterosexual people conceptualize queer.

My argument will be informed by a wide body of literature on media studies, gendered embodiment, masculinity, homosociality, homoeroticism, and monstrosity. I will adopt a queer approach to media studies to analyze my primary sources, Our Flag Means Death (2022), What We Do in the Shadows (2019), and Heartstopper (2022) and related extratextual materials for the ways that gender and sexuality are represented. Narrative analysis is key to this project, but I will also incorporate extratextual and paratextual sources into my argument. This thesis will be divided into three main chapters: "queering" genre and character types on TV; masculinities, embodiment, and performance; and homosocial groupings and homo-

erotic desire. To conclude, I will synthesize my argument to determine how effective utilizing or subverting popular tropes of masculinity and queerness on television is in undoing representations of gender hegemony in popular media. I will also address the limitations of this study because of the lack of social media analysis and suggest ways to move forward at the intersection of media studies, masculinity studies, and queer studies.

The first chapter will situate formations of masculinity and queerness on the small screen, discussing some of the ways that these concepts have evolved over time. Additionally, I will lay out some of the integral theories for "queering"[5] media analysis. Doty's book is an essential intervention into how we can "queer" media studies without reinforcing heterosexism as the center and queer readings as alternative (Doty 1993). Because of the societal tendency to center heterosexual narratives, viewing media queerly always involves some degree of reading against the grain to move beyond the heterosexist narratives internalized in both text and viewer. A queer approach to media studies unsettles accepted ideas of what counts as primary source material for the media in question, so in addition to analyzing my primary sources, I also consider the interactions, contradictions, and tensions between the program itself and related extratextual material like interviews. I consider such an approach "queer" because it is an oppositional practice to conventional modes of narrative analysis, which tend to stay firmly rooted in the text itself. More, by looking outside of the text itself, there is more room to analyze the role that viewers' perception plays in determining if a text is queer. Doty explores what makes a text queer– is it queer characters, queer actors, queer directors, or queer viewers (1993)? There is no universal or simple answer, but I argue that the primary texts I consider should be considered queer not only because they include queer characters and relationships, but also because of the overlaps and tensions between diverse genres and popular character types, blurring salient boundaries and resisting straightforward classification.

In this chapter, I will look at how gendered tropes are used to distinguish between genres and examine how these are destabilized or "queered" in my primary sources. Generic analysis within television studies is tricky because genre categories are discursive, volatile, and must be constituted of multiple texts. More, the features of a text that are used to categorize it into certain genres is variable—while location is a genre identifier for certain texts, such as Westerns, other markers like music or overall tone are used to identify other genres. Mittell suggests seeing genre as

[5] Doty defines "queer" as "a militant sense of difference that views the erotically 'marginal' as both (in bell hook's words) as a consciously chosen 'site of resistance' and a 'location of radical openness and possibility'" (Doty 1993: 4).

discursive because a single text cannot be generically categorized without comparing it to other texts or considering audience reception in addition to the text itself (2001). Genre-as-discourse presents an analytical challenge because of the shifting nature of discourse and the imperative to compare the text in question against other texts in order to see where they diverge and whether these divergences result in differential genre categorization. For this reason, I have included more than one modern TV show in my analysis. Feasey's work on masculinity in different television genres is essential to situating my primary sources within genre categories because it provides information on how gender, and particularly masculinity, is represented differently based on genre categorization (2008). My primary sources align with different generic conventions from sitcoms, fantasy, romance, and gothic horror, so I posit that they "queer" genre because each requires a certain degree of comfort with multiple interpretations and meanings in terms of gender and genre.

In the second chapter, I will transition from a broader discussion of how genre can be queered to an in-depth analysis of constructions of masculinity and its embodiment on modern popular television series. Examining gendered embodiment on Our Flag, Shadows, and Heartstopper will reveal that gender is relationally and contextually constructed and highlight its performativity by virtue of its layered performance as fictional audiovisual works, which necessitate an embodied performance of characters' gender and sexuality by the actors. The confluence of queerness, high-brow masculinity, and pirate masculinity in Our Flag provides rich ground for analyzing how the characters navigate the resonances and contradictions between their various masculinities. I will also tie this to a discussion of monstrosity and class as it relates to representations of vampire, especially queer ones like Shadows, which includes some of the same producers as Our Flag. We see queer, female, and monstrous masculinities in Shadows, and this show in particular highlights the impact that context and temporality have on constructions of gender. Finally, I will incorporate a discussion of what it means to "become" a gendered body through the transition from childhood to adolescence. I argue that while Heartstopper does not include discussions of monsters or fantastical beings like pirates, it nonetheless touches on themes of what it means to become oneself and explores the possibility of becoming "other." The juxtaposition of these texts will show how standards of masculinity change depending on context and are highly relational. Becoming is essential to the queer experience, and I aim to explore the potential for embracing one's own otherness or monstrosity as a space of play for nonnormative representations of gender and sexuality.

Gender formations, and hegemonic masculinity more specifically, must always be contextualized on a local, regional, and global level, keeping in mind the complex

interactions between these levels of context (Messerschmidt and Messner 2018). The hegemonic masculine person cannot be embodied by any one individual, for hegemony refers to dominant discourse and meaning-making, a process that is rife with internal contradictions and context-specific considerations (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). To address the tensions and resonances between the different configurations of masculinity and femininity in the shows, I rely on the Bourdieusian concept of fields of masculinity rather than conceptualizing it as a strict hierarchy (Coles 2009). This way, other identity factors like race, class, and nationality figure into each character's gender while still paying attention to their interactions. In the programs I analyze, there is a lack of consensus on what amounts to "hegemonic masculinity" which is facilitated by their genre-queerness. Furthermore, as a relational concept, a comprehensive analysis of masculine embodiment necessitates a close reading of femininity as well, which I plan to incorporate in the section on alternative constructions of masculinity. Maddison's work on effeminacy among gay men will inform some of the alternative constructions of masculinity I refer to in this section (2015). In addition, the self-aware performance of characters' genders in fictional representations adds another layer of nuance to my discussion about how gender is formed and represented. To avoid gender essentialist discourse that links masculinity with possessing a phallus, I will include analyses on the ways that the genderqueer and woman characters in the show "do" gender and explore the potential of monstrosity in undoing assumptions about gender in representation (Nirta 2021; Halberstam 1995; Brzozowska-Brywczyeska 2007). Finally, I will complicate earlier theories of hegemonic masculinity, paying special attention to how symbolic changes in masculinity function to obscure the continuation of gender inequality between genders and among same gender groups (Bridges and Pascoe 2018).

The third section will address the tension between the homosocial and the homoerotic in Our Flag, Shadows, and Heartstopper. Sedgwick, Hammaren and Johanssen's theories on male homosocial relationships make up the theoretical foundations for this chapter (1985; 2014). Sedgwick theorizes that connecting homosociality and homoerotic desire "is to hypothesize the potential unbrokennes of a continuum between homosocial and homosexual–a continuum whose visibility, for men, in our society, is radically disrupted" (Sedgwick 1985). This chapter will include a close examination of the perception of gendered bodies in the text, entering into a discussion of how non-normative genders– that is, people who do not identify with their sexed gender at birth– affect the "homosocial environment." I question the usefulness of theories of the "homosocial" and their broader applicability to gender queerness. This question is complicated further when considering the different levels of masculinity and femininity expressed within each individual, regardless of their

biological sex. I suggest an alternative way to define the "homosocial" as a shared desire to belong within a certain arrangement of gender. With this framing, we are able to deconstruct the taken-for-granted ways that individuals are grouped together for the sake of analysis and alter it to include various queer gender identities and embodiments.

Because this section deals with the murky boundary between the homosocial and the homoerotic, I also examine how queerbaiting and actualization of desire play into perceptions of relationship boundaries. Embodied physical intimacy is usually the benchmark separating the homosocial from the homoerotic, but what about other types of intimacy that transgress normative gender relations? The similarities and differences between the heterosexual and homosexual relationships of the main character of Our Flag, Stede Bonnet, highlight this tension. I will also look at same-gender duos made up of two men or two women in Heartstopper (2022) and What We Do in the Shadows (2019) to show how gender is formed relationally and changes based on who else is around and their mutual relationships with other people. I hypothesize that the pressures of different forms of hegemonic masculinity exaggerate the differences between Our Flag's Stede Bonnet's relationships because of the constraints that it places on each type of relationship. There are also a number of other queer relationships in the other programs I am analyzing which will serve as grounds for further analysis on hegemonic masculinity's disruptive effect on homosociality and homoeroticism.

The role of embodiment in defining masculinity and monstrosity will be explored in depth throughout because of its queer potential to undo viewers' assumptions about the gender binary. Halberstam claims that modern representations of monstrosity tend to exhibit markers of deviant gender and sexuality as proof of their monstrosity, and even though multiple "otherness" may be intended in the body of the monster, it is subsumed by so-called "deviant" gender and sexuality. His work traces the development of the modern monster from gothic literature and addresses the crucial role that medium plays in representations of monstrosity. On screen, there are much stricter limits to how a monster can be represented than in writing because of the confines imposed by visual embodiment (Halberstam 1995). The tension between the imagined monster and its embodiment is clear in Our Flag when we see the stark difference between the imagined Blackbeard/Ed and the real one. Additionally, the embodiment of vampirism in What We Do in the Shadows stands in stark contrast to audience expectations of both gender and preconceived notions of vampires as scary, violent, and cunning. To perform a comprehensive analysis of the delineation between man and monster and the role of desire in this relationship, I turn to Brzozowska-Brywczynska's article, which juxtaposes the concepts of

monstrosity and cuteness. They define "cute" as an ambivalent term characterized by an emotional response to an entity with pathetic, juvenile, or pitiable traits. Importantly, the perception of cuteness has more to do with the emotional response evoked than with surface aesthetics. Meanwhile, "monstrous" is characterized by an unusual body with too many or too few parts, often from an unknown realm or an unfamiliar life form (Brzozowska-Brywczyeska 2007). When the audience sympathizes with or pities a character with monstrous traits, the "monster" loses their monstrosity, rendering them cute or anti-cute. Monsters are embodied "others" onto which the audience can project fears of the unknown or otherness, but when a monster is perceived as cute, the dichotomy between us/them (human/monster) breaks down (ibid.). What happens when a body becomes monstrous? What does it mean to desire a "monstrous" body? And how do we define monsters in terms of gender and sexuality? And how have monsters changed in modern representations on screen?

I aim to demonstrate that comedic representations of monstrosity resist binary categories like monstrous/cute, us/them, and masculine/feminine through their relationships with other humans and other monsters. Utilizing the narrative structure of mockumentaries and the aesthetic style of camp both have a lot of potential to queer TV because they resist normative ways of knowing and defy expected aesthetic conventions in favor of excess, parody, and irony. The mockumentary forces viewers to question what is true and what is false within the context of the show, but this query can be extrapolated into the realm of what viewers deem true about the gender binary and assumptions of heteronormativity both in representation and in their lives. In Our Flag, where Blackbeard is monstrous and masculine, Stede Bonnet is cute and feminine. However, their coupling queers these dichotomies and reframes Blackbeard/Ed's embodiment of monstrosity as a site of queer desire and resistance to other monstrous forces such as toxic masculinity. The vampires in Shadows hyperbolize the changes in the monstrous body and its relation to human society, leaving monsters as embodiments of fears of weakening privilege among the powerful rather than embodied fears of the "other" (Limpar 2018). While Nirta likens trans embodiment to monstrosity because of the "wrong body" narrative present in both discourses, I would like to extrapolate their argument to queer embodiment in general. For trans* people, the body becomes a site of desire and inner affirmation through external differentiation, which may not align with normative prescriptions of gender (Halberstam 2018). For queer people, even if not genderqueer, the embodiment of their desire is also non-normative, thus bringing it into the domain of "monstrous" (Nirta 2021). Using Nirta's argument, I suggest that a transformation has occurred in certain televisual representations away from seeing the monstrous

"other" as marked by nonnormative gender and sexuality. The embodiment of hegemonic masculinity in my primary sources more closely resembles monstrosity than the embodiment of queer genders and sexualities, but I also aim to show that the reclamation of monstrosity or otherness by queer characters has a transformative potential in how we think about otherness in terms of gender and sexuality. Toxic representations of hegemonic masculinity are challenged through the interplay between the cute and the monstrous, and I will analyze the significance of violence to the construction of masculinity within this framework.

Making television queer means opening a space to explore alternative constructions of masculinity, queerness, and monstrosity, especially in a homosocial environment. Throughout, I aim to explore how the aspects of subordinated or nonhegemonic embodiments of gender are coopted by hegemonic fields of gender, using these symbols of otherness and marginality as a method to obscure the status-quo of the gender binary and gender hegemony. Is there hope for queer TV to be transformative without co-opting queer culture and becoming part of rainbow capitalism? The answer to this question has everything to do with context. If a certain local and regional context has less accessible queerness in public life and the only queer representations available are found online, then in that case, some queer representation may be better than none, even if problematic. Of course, there are queer networks in every corner of the world, so I do not want to undermine the importance of local community. However, if a young, queer audience member has not been able to integrate themselves into queer networks or does not know how to do so, perhaps rainbow capitalism has made some of these TV programs available in a variety of places. I am also not trying to excuse rainbow capitalism—quite the opposite. The appropriation of queer culture, especially POC queer culture, has become a money-making strategy which takes away production capital from the people that actually belong to these communities.

That being said, I do believe that queer representation on TV has come a long way, and in the shows I examine, there are a number of queer creators, actors, and producers involved. Furthermore, while dominant masculinities are very much still part of modern TV representations, the interaction between characters with nonnormative embodiments with regards to gender, sexuality, or monstrosity results in a playful space, inviting the audience to explore queer points of view. The essential role that viewers have in confirming who is monstrous or which bodies fail in their monstrosity reflects more about current fears or desire for "otherness" than the body of the monster itself, indicating a shift in how we represent otherness and the hegemonic gendered "self" in media. Perhaps queering media studies and examining alternative formations of masculinity and homosocial relationships presents the pos-

sibility of reformulating binaries like masculine/feminine in favor of a more inclusive, queerer, and less violent way of being for men and non-men alike. In the chapter that follows, I will delve into what I mean by "queering" media studies and how defying normative genre conventions occasions a playful space to explore relationships with less strict, hegemonically imposed boundaries between the homosocial and the homoerotic.

2. QUEERING GENRE AND CHARACTER TYPES ON TV

2.1 Introduction

The imperative to "queer" media studies has grown in the past decade due to the proliferation of online streaming services that make TV accessible whenever and wherever. What does it mean to "queer" television studies? Articulating queer discourse within hegemonic media is not finding a secret meaning; the queer meaning has always been there, it may just not be as readily visible because of audiences' priming to privilege the heterosexual (Doty 1993). Queer readings involve finding contradictions and tensions between and within the text and extratextual content. In addition, the silences, pauses, and paratextual content should be considered sources of information with as much value as the dialogue, even though these silences present some analytical challenges. "Queering" television studies means holding the presence of contradictions between different interpretations without rectifying them into one coherent meaning. Media and television studies have not delved into representations of masculinity and men's queerness to the same degree as femininity and womanhood on TV, so I will be considering how the multiplicity of masculinities in *Our Flag*, *Shadows*, and *Heartstopper* queer, or do not queer, the small screen (Feasey 2008). To this end, I will examine both textual and extratextual sources. There is debate among scholars on this point, but I believe that extratextual material like interviews should also be included in queer analyses of media. In fact, considering extratextual sources in the analysis is itself a queer approach because it represents an oppositional practice to conventional modes of narrative analysis, which tend to stay firmly rooted in the text (Doty 1993). This chapter aims to locate queer (or decidedly "unqueer") moments from my primary sources and put them in conversation with existing scholarship from the fields of media, gender, and sexuality studies.

One way to queer media studies is to examine how television programs fit into and

defy normative genre categories. Genre is a way to separate different types of narratives into easily recognizable categories, giving viewers an idea of what to expect (Mittell 2001). Each genre has its own set of popular character types, but many pertain to multiple genres and while representing them distinctly. Different genres facilitate queer identification to different degrees, and even within each genre, there is a great amount of variation in the treatment and inclusion of queerness[6]. This leads me to question the usefulness of genre as a conceptual framework, especially because "queering" media studies necessitates the deconstruction of existing normative categories. First, I will examine ways that *Our Flag Means Death* falls into more than one genre, focusing on how the overlap of multi-genre tropes like the masculine hero and the monster can create a unique configuration of masculinity and femininity, effectively queering genre. Then, I will also examine the queer potential for coming-of-age and mockumentary-style productions in *Heartstopper* and *What We Do in the Shadows*. In all three of my primary sources, the theme of becoming is omnipresent, which lends itself well to queering genre.

2.2 Pirate Narratives: *Our Flag Means Death*

The pilot of *Our Flag* begins with pirate crewmember Frenchie (Joel Fry) singing a light-hearted song about the short, violent life of pirates as the camera pans over other crew members doing ship upkeep. Then, we hear other crew members complaining about the recent lack of typical pirating activities, which, according to Frenchie's song, include smashing, gouging, stabbing, poking, and choking. Shortly after, Stede dictates his guiding philosophy for being a pirate captain to Lucius (Nathan Foad), emphasizing how he plans to captain differently than other pirates. He pays the crew weekly salaries, which is a departure from the typical economic organization of pirate ships, where crew members often practiced binge consumption following a successful raid (Dawdy and Bonni 2012). Stede provides the crew with economic security and predictability, which is new for them, causing boredom and idleness as the crew goes weeks without violent action. The mismatch between Stede's bumbling, silly execution of being a pirate captain and the audience and crew's expectations of pirates as brash, brawny, and violent presents a lighthearted, nontraditional narrative of piracy which invites the viewers to identify with the characters in this playful workplace at sea.

[6] Queerness" here refers to nonnormative gender and sexuality formations that do not align with heteronormative or gender essentialist discourses.

The entanglement of genre in *Our Flag* effects a queer synthesis because of the overlaps and tensions among different genres. I want to emphasize that 'queer' is not a genre and just means non-normative in this context. *Our Flag* is an exemplar of queer media for the most part when defining queer content by the inclusion of queer characters. However, there are some moments where hegemonic norms of gender and sexuality are reified rather than resisted, which can be attributed to the use of normative genre tropes. The show's creator, David Jenkins, alludes to the flexibility afforded him while writing the screenplay for *Our Flag*, for pirate narratives can be made pertinent to a wide range of local, regional, and global contexts. Pirate narratives, by virtue of their contextual detachment from land, have the potential to transcend established genre categories. The intersections of genres in *Our Flag*, including but not limited to comedy, horror, sci-fi/fantasy, and romance, are made possible precisely because of the literal and figurative setting of the pirate ship (Darby and Waititi 2022). In fact, the ship and pirate narratives more broadly are part of what Dawdy and Bonni call a "pirate heterotopia," which provides a framework to analyze how different idealized notions are projected onto pirate narratives (2012). Due to their detachment from social contexts on land and the societal mysticism around life at sea, ships are the perfect heterotopia. Foucault defines heterotopias as follows:

> real places- places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society-which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality (Foucault 1986: 24).

The story of the pirates in *Our Flag* is an example of a heterotopia because modern issues are projected onto this imagined "golden age" pirate crew. While I will be focusing primarily on how gender and sexuality are imagined, distorted, and projected onto the crew, themes of class, camaraderie, race, and national origin are also explored in the microcosm of the ship. These issues will not be ignored but will figure into my analysis, as analyzing masculinities, an inherently relational concept, necessitates a close look at how other societal markers of privilege figure into the construction and maintenance of gender order (Messerschmidt and Messner 2018). Representations of pirates like this one are usually set in a fantastical reality that is far enough removed from our current context that idealistic, radical imaginings of alternative social formations among pirates are not overtly threatening to the

audiences' perceptions of social order today. Contrary to more typical representations of piracy, which tend towards taciturn, grungy men on a ship, Jenkins sought to create a portrait of daily life aboard an exceptional pirate ship. While writing the screenplay, Jenkins tried to consider what a regular weekday would be like on The Revenge, which adds to the heterotopic nature of *Our Flag* because it runs parallel to "normal" life by presenting an idealized mirror image of society (Darby and Waititi 2022). The juxtaposition of piracy, which approaches the sci-fi/fantasy genre, with the familiar cadence of a workplace sitcom and some elements of horror and romance support my claim that the show queers genre. But does queering genre equate to queering gender and sexuality?

Analyzing *Our Flag Means Death* from a myriad of different genres and examining the ways in which certain tropes from different genres are included, rejected, or played with is a queer approach. David Jenkins, the show's creator, hints at the ways that telling a story through a pirate narrative can incorporate many established categories including comedy, romance, sci-fi/fantasy, gothic horror (Jenkins, Darby, and Basch 2022). There are moments of graphic violence sandwiched between ridiculous comedic scenes and heart-wrenching romantic scenes, creating a unique juxtaposition of life-and-death with silliness and sincerity. The violent parts of the show create a thread of suspense throughout narrative arc, because while the crew goes about their daily life on the ship, there is always an undercurrent of murder plots, hostages, political persecution, and revenge that follows the characters wherever they go. Aboard The Revenge, Stede's pirate ship, the characters of *Our Flag* are under perpetual threat of attack and bodily harm, establishing an environment in which they operate on queer time, for there is very little predictability in their daily lives (Halberstam 2005). This also means that they are not subject to the pressures of heteronormative time, which centers the family as the most important relational unit, thus removing them from the strict roles and expectations of "normal" family life on land and freeing up space for the characters to embody new roles and configurations of gender and relationships through the juxtaposition of several character types and genres in the show.

2.3 Vampire Narratives: *What We Do in the Shadows*

We all know (and love) stories about vampires and otherworldliness. While vampires have been a feature of popular storytelling for centuries, the narratives have shifted from fear of the vampires' otherness to a desire for it. Stephanie Meyer's *Twilight*

series and the subsequent movies have revitalized the genre in a completely new way: instead of the focus on the fateful bite that transforms human to vampire, there is a distinct focus on the vampires' resisting the urge to bite and attempting to integrate into human society without doing humans a great amount of harm (Limpar 2018; Hardwicke 2008). Rather than reflecting fear of the "other," the bodies of vampires have instead come to represent a societal preoccupation over the weakening privilege and power over the "other." *Twilight* has been theorized about ad nauseum, so I will not spend any more time on it, but it bears mentioning because of the intertextuality between the *Twilight* series and other vampire narratives that are more overtly homoerotic, such as Interview with a Vampire (1994). *What We Do in the Shadows* (2014; 2019) was originally a mockumentary-style film released in 2014 that centered around a clueless house of vampires, and then in 2019 FX aired a spin-off television series by the same name and with some of the same producers.

The mockumentary feature of the series is essential in understanding how it queers gender and sexuality because it blurs the line between reality and fiction, legitimating the vampire characters' existence through their television interviews and addressing the audience directly instead of telling a story that the audience is witnessing rather than being addressed. This mockumentary includes speaking heads where the characters give private asides as if directly addressing the show's viewers. These mini interviews are interspersed with pivotal moments to break the tension and provide comedic relief. Indeed, the mockumentary pokes fun at the serious investment that audiences have made in other popular vampire narratives like *Twilight* and reframes the vampire as it exists in modern society not as something fear-provoking, but rather laughter-inducing. Instead of just making fun of dumb vampires, though, *Shadows* also shines a light on modern society's complete reliance on technology and modern "necessities" in order to identify oneself in terms of gender, sexuality, and personhood (or vampiredom). Like the heterotopic nature of the pirate ship in *Our Flag*, the bodies of the vampires become heterotopic spaces because they exist parallel to, but not integrated in, human society. While the broader context of *Shadows* is not necessarily heterotopic because it takes place in modern-day Staten Island, NY, the vampires' home is a queer heterotopia because of the mix of temporalities, human and more-than-human beings, and nonnormative relations with the outside world. Furthermore, the world in *Shadows* is full of both vampires and other supernatural creatures like werewolves, ghosts, and wraiths. The existence of other supernatural communities is well-known to the main characters in the show, and the fact that there are indeed communities of supernatural beings further supports my claim that the story in *Shadows* is also a heterotopia because ideas about other ways of being outside of normative human society are embodied

in the supernatural characters even though they remain constricted by the same sociopolitical context as humans in the modern-day US.

2.4 Sitcoms

"Sitcom," one of the major genres under which my primary sources fall, stands for situational comedy, and is characterized by representations of interpersonal relationships within the home, work, and community (Feasey 2008). In this genre, viewers develop a sense of intimacy with the characters because of its tendency to focus on quotidian scenes that resonate with the lived realities of the audience. In this way, characters on beloved sitcoms become part of the viewers' lives because of their intricate emotional investment in the on-screen narrative (Chitra 2023). First, *Our Flag* is presented as a workplace sitcom run by a quirky, incompetent boss, which is the basis for other popular US workplace sitcoms such as The Office (2005) and Parks and Rec (2009). An incompetent boss like Stede is an essential part of workplace sitcoms, and watching the crew indulge his whims is an indispensable part of the series' comedic relief. The employees in workplace comedies get their work done despite their boss's antics rather than because of their leadership, which is certainly the case for Stede Bonnet and his crew in *Our Flag*. Over the course of the first season, *Our Flag* traces the ways in which Stede's self-proclaimed "people-positive management style" departs from stereotypical approaches to piracy (*Our Flag Means Death*, 10:15 'Act of Grace'). While the ship is primarily presented as a workplace in the first episode, it is also a home and a community for the crew. Relationships within these three settings are the pillars of the sitcom, so *Our Flag* should be primarily categorized as such (Feasey 2008).

We see the typical workplace sitcom trope of the fumbling boss in action in the first episode of *Our Flag*. Stede prepares his crew for a perilous and potentially violent raid, leading the crew and audience to believe that they will be raiding a large vessel with an armed crew. However, they end up raiding a tiny fishing boat with nothing more than two elderly fishermen, their daily catch, and a small plant in a tin can. Stede struggles to descend the rope ladder to board the vessel, unsteadily swinging about until the fishermen assist him. In this scene, he is wearing a teal gentleman's outfit with frills, buttons, tights, ribbons, and buckles. He looks nothing like a pirate. Introducing himself to the fishermen, he says, "my name's Stede. I'll be your robber here today," and then proceeds to steal the small plant from the fishermen, proudly claiming it as the "spoils" of battle (*Our Flag Means Death*, 2:50 'Pilot'). Yet again,

Stede struggles up the rope ladder to get back onto the ship, and his crew members gently lift him over the railing as he flails about. A voiceover plays while Stede clumsily ascends the ladder in which he continues dictating his pirating philosophy to the ship's scribe, saying, "some men are born to be pirate captains, others learn on the job. Me? Well, I'm a pretty solid mix of both" (*Our Flag Means Death*, 3:05 'Pilot'). Stede's clear visual ineptitude coupled with his overly self-confident narration exposes his need to overcompensate in the written account of his life as a pirate captain. He is hyperaware that both pirates and aristocrats alike consider synthesizing these two lifestyles impossible or illogical, and he wants badly to prove them wrong by claiming that pirating comes naturally, when this is clearly untrue.

Shadows can also be considered a sitcom but differs slightly because it is a mockumentary which directly addresses its audience. Both *Shadows* and *Our Flag* are concerned with documenting life in some way—in *Shadows*, the main characters' lives are documented by a film crew whose presence is acknowledged by the characters and with whom they interact throughout. In *Our Flag*, Stede has hired a scribe to follow him around and document his life as an aristocrat-turned-pirate captain, but unlike the mockumentary style, Stede has control over what his scribe documents about their journey and can censor or embellish as he pleases. The vampires in *Shadows*, though, are clueless about technology and it seems as though they do not fully understand the purpose of having a documentary crew following their lives. Why is this distinction important for discussing how both of these series queer genre? First, it affects the degree to which the viewers' role is self-consciously highlighted during the act of watching. The documentary genre, for the most part, is informative and rooted in reality. The mockumentary genre, though, mocks viewers' constant need to know and understand unknown phenomena. This dichotomy between "real" documentaries as legitimate sources of information and mockumentaries as solely entertainment begs the question of whose reality is being represented and even what reality is. Is a mockumentary about vampires any less constructed and heavily framed than a "real" documentary about the deep sea, for example, or are we just desperately trying to understand the unknown or the "other" in both?

The mockumentary is more aptly categorized as a narrative strategy rather than a genre, and as such is utilized across many genres. Mockumentaries are inherently queer because they are nonnormative versions of the more typical documentary and can easily be combined with other genres to self-consciously subvert the kinds of emotional reactions typical to that genre. While traditional documentaries rely on narrative strategies that underscore authenticity, reality, and truth-telling, mockumentaries rely on humor, ridiculousness, and anti-reality in order to undermine our preconceived notions about what is true. After all, truths are contextually con-

structed and packaged using specific narrative techniques that lend them credibility. Many of these "truth" strategies tie back to adherence to generic and archetypal categories, and this is especially true for a genre like documentaries which purport to teach the audience about something. The Scary Movie film series (2000-2013), for example, recreates well-known horror films and retells them comedically, subverting audiences' assumptions about the "truth" of ghosts or hauntings as scary; instead, the ghosts are sometimes petty, sometimes erotic, but never only terrifying. *Cunk on Earth* (2022), a recent Netflix mockumentary series, parodies historical documentaries and challenges audiences' presumptions that certain facts are deemed more legitimate ways of knowing than other more "trivial" facts. The mockumentary's host, Philomena Cunk (Diane Morgan), interviews real field experts on the history of the world and asks ridiculous, factually inaccurate questions (Watt 2022). Unlike normative mockumentaries, though, *Cunk on Earth* more closely resembles the documentary-style of Borat (2006) because of its mixing of fictional elements, i.e., the fictional character of Philomena Cunk, and real-life experts who are only functioning in the single world of their lives (MacLeod 2011). The mixing of fiction and non-fiction styles in mockumentary and documentary-style TV programs and films subvert the normative purpose of the documentary genre, which primarily is a way to disseminate information about various topics and asks why we demand knowing some things but not others. This ambiguous balancing act between truth and fiction is especially impactful in inviting viewers to examine their positionality and how it is different from the representations they are seeing on screen.

Returning to *Shadows*, the mockumentary has been especially prevalent in reworking the horror/thriller genre, indicating a transformation in how representations of otherness are conceptualized by both producers and consumers of media. Does the figure of the modern "other" more accurately reflect fears of otherness in terms of race, class, gender, and sexuality like it did in gothic horror (Halberstam 1995)? Or does the figure of the modern on-screen "other" actually speak more to societal fears over losing power in determining who gets "othered"? The vampire figures in *Shadows* more closely match the latter. As a stereotypically white, aristocratic figure, the figure of the vampire has been a way to critique the privilege granted to certain groups based on class and race, but vampire mockumentaries like *Shadows* express anxiety about the loss of cultural capital experienced by middle- or upper-class white men. Even within the vampiredom represented in *Shadows*, there is a rift between the older, scarier vampires and the younger, more human-looking vampires. The main characters, Nandor (Kayvan Novak), Nadja (Natasia Demitriou), and Lazlo (Matt Barry) express anxiety about how they will be perceived by Baron Afanas, a very old visiting vampire, because they have not succeeded in ruling over

the human world. However, exploring this anxiety in the symbolic realm, which is where fictional media representations lie, actually obscures the fact that very little has changed to undo the hegemony of the heteronormative white man. Again, positive visibility does not equate to political progress (Feasey 2008).

Next, despite the ways that *Our Flag* aligns with features of the sitcom genre, it departs from normative sitcoms in several ways, which, according to the show's creator David Jenkins, was intentional. By creating a workplace comedy on a pirate ship, the aim was to create something that was funny but also incorporated dramatic depth, bouts of violence, and romance ("*Our Flag Means Death*" Stars Talk Pirate Facial Hair and Sword Fighting 2022). The first way that *Our Flag* deviates from normative sitcom structure is that the three main settings of sitcoms— home, work, and community— coalesce in the singular space of the pirate ship. More, when at sea, the ship is detached from normative social contexts. There are settings other than the ship featured in the show, such as the Republic of Pirates, but for the crew of The Revenge, the boundaries between home, work, and community are murky or altogether nonexistent. David Jenkins addresses how the show played with the boundaries between these different relationships, saying that because they are aboard a ship together working together, they become like family. Eventually, though, the boundaries of family relationships are also transgressed because no one on the crew is actually related; this flexibility allows for (queer) leeway in the crew's relationships. There are normative guidelines of expected behavior for each type of relationship between crew members (coworker, friend, roommate, lover), but the overlap between these labels coupled with their shared nonnormative pirate lifestyle present them with an opportunity to explore the potential for in-betweenness in their relationships. The setting of the ship, which Foucault calls "the heterotopia par excellence," significantly contributes to the characters' ability to queer relationships (Jenkins, Darby, and Basch 2022; Foucault 1986: 27). Fryers argues that spending time at sea represents a rite of passage for men; the physical and metaphorical space of the ship facilitates self-discovery that would not be possible on land, which may be related to its homosocial nature, but that will be addressed in a later chapter. The invitation for self-discovery coupled with the breakdown of boundaries between home, work, and community make the ship in *Our Flag* a unique facilitator for queering gender, and sexuality in sitcoms (2018). And what's more queer than fluid boundaries?

2.5 Romance and Queer Love

Queer characters in normative TV genres are consistently desexualized, while storylines about heterosexual romantic relationships receive more attention that focuses on the relationship dynamic rather than their straightness (Feasey 2008; Fouts and Inch 2008)[7]. There are no explicit sex scenes in *Our Flag*, but there are some scenes that show queer couples in various stages of undress after sex, so the audience is meant to understand that sex is an active part of their relationships. While queer sex scenes are not highlighted, neither are straight ones, so I propose that the desexualization of queer characters does not apply as strongly to *Our Flag* as it does to earlier sitcoms like Modern Family (2009). Therefore, perhaps it would be more apt to categorize *Our Flag* as a "queercom," or possibly a "queer romcom," because of the ways it queers genre, relationships, and nonnormative lifestyles.

While *Shadows* includes themes of quite erotic queer sex— far more erotic in nature than *Our Flag*— there is not much queer romance. Maybe the focus on queer sex over queer love or romance is a choice based on the expected audience, but I theorize that the main characters' non-humanness allows for more explicit erotic references to sex and queer sex in particular. In one episode, the main group of vampires have been charged with hosting a vampire orgy, so Nadja leads the camera crew on a tour of their preparations, which include "a sculpture which depicts the moment my parents conceived me... Here we have the traditional animal fur laden with rings. Not for your fingers! *Gestures* Electric chair role play. 'What are your last words? I wanna have sex'" (*What We Do in the Shadows*, 14:52 'The Orgy'). There are a variety of sex toys, protective furniture coverings, role play scenarios, S/M (sadomasochism), and various other erotica for the orgy. Not only is it a mixed-gender orgy, but it is also a mixed-species orgy as we see a Babadook, vampires in their bat forms, and even humans partaking. Why is there more room for eroticism among monsters? For one, vampires have been heavily sexualized in recent media like the *Twilight* film saga (2008-2012). Because of the tendency for queer (human) romances on TV to be desexualized, perhaps by framing eroticism through the lens of monstrosity affords greater leeway in how they can represent sex. Unlike *Twilight*, though, the vampire+ sex in *Shadows* does not align with monogamous heteronormative ideas of sex between a male man and a female woman. More, because they are immortal beings, it seems as though there is less symbolic significance assigned to same-gender sex acts.

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[7] Fouts and Inch performed a content analysis on 22 sitcoms that aired in October 2000. The dated nature of the media content being analyzed is a limitation to this study and its relevance to current sitcoms.

Our Flag queers the love/romance genre for the obvious reason that it centers queer love, not heterosexual romance. There are a number of different romantic relationships in the show, but I say that queer love is centered, not romance, because the boundaries between different kinds of love and affection are often unclear, and thus queer because of the lack of normative relationship boundaries. The humorous nature of the show and the homoeroticism between men in *Our Flag* could lead it to be characterized as a "gaycom," but as I said earlier, I believe that there is no longer a stark divide between the typical sitcom and sitcoms featuring gay characters, or the "gaycom," as there was in the 1990s and 2000s (Feasey 2008). On many TV shows today, though, there is an expectation that queer characters be included, even peripherally, to keep up with changing target audience demographics which tend towards young, urban, educated people for whom queer representation is a must (ibid.; Avila-Saavedra 2009). Nonetheless, it is essential to remember that just because queer characters are included does not mean their representation is unproblematic. For example, earlier sitcoms with gay couples often continue to evince traditional heterosexist values of monogamy, family, and stability transposed to a relationship between two educated, affluent white, gay men (Avila-Saavedra 2009) but benefit from the identity politics of having gays on their show. Even in shows that focus on queer romance or love, there is a tendency to center the love stories of white, cisgender queer men or women while the more marginalized and intersectional identities within the queer community are included as side characters. This is the case in *Our Flag* as the relationship between two cisgender men—one white, upper-class and one Maori, working-class—are the focus of the romance.

Heartstopper (2022) is an example of a series that centers a queer love story between two high-school age white boys while other queer characters with more marginal identities, such as the black trans girl, are side characters. Nonetheless, the show, originally based on the graphic novels by Alice Oseman, takes a look at what it means to find one's own identity in a time when there are terms for everything and "becoming" is something that can be boiled down to a single term like trans* or bisexual. This show unequivocally falls into the queer romance genre, as the plot is driven by the budding romance between these two boys, and as such does not queer genre as much as the other examples I give. However, it queers medium more than the other genres. The show utilizes illustrated animations to indicate when the characters feel nervous, excited, or loved. For example, before they hold hands for the first time, there are sparks between their hands, causing a gay panic for the boy who has not yet come to terms with his queer identity (below).

Figure 2.1 *Heartstopper* 24:53 'Crush'

These illustrations borrow from the original graphic novel. Playing with medium as a creative way to pay tribute to the novels on which it is based and integrating it into audiovisual representation is a reminder that it is just that: representation. Nonetheless, these instances visualize feeling and make it not only legible but visible to viewers. While I do not focus heavily on *Heartstopper* throughout, I have chosen to include it because it touches heavily on themes of becoming and gives some insight into how characters of different generations meet queerness and develop their sense of self, especially the gendered self, in a binary world that is just starting to have more language to describe gender and sexual variance.

The queer relationships in *Our Flag* are mainly between gay men with a few exceptions, but because they live a non-normative lifestyle, traditional values are ultimately shed in favor of realizing truly queer love between individuals (not just men) with various masculinities. *Our Flag* centers queer relationships rather than heteronormative romance, whereas typical sitcoms or even "gaycoms," to use Feasey's term, may include queer characters, but their queerness is framed as an issue or plot point instead of a fact (2008). Stede and Blackbeard/Ed's queer love story is driven by action that is not centered around the trials of their queerness, reorienting the genre of queer love stories away from narratives of trauma, loss, and coming out. Instead, queerness is treated as a thing that just is. While many negative things happen as a result of the pressure to strictly adhere to gendered expectations, which is indicative of internalized heteronormativity, queer love is centered rather than the trials of homophobia that the queer lovers face. There are still a few homophobic or homophobic-coded moments, especially in Stede's flashbacks to childhood, but these instances are treated with seriousness and not joked about, which I believe is

essential to successfully representing queer love in the show. Contrary to Chitra's analysis of homophobic jokes being subversive to homophobia in their content analysis of Family Guy (1999), I believe that including homophobic jokes on television shows can be harmful even if not intended to be, for most viewers are watching casually and therefore not all will understand if homophobia on TV is intended to be subversive (Chitra 2023). Normalizing homophobic humor by assuming analytical or reflective viewership does harm to queer people because the irony is not registering, leading viewers to laugh at the homophobic content rather than noting the intended irony, parody, or metaphor behind the joke.

2.6 Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Masculine Action Heroes

Next, I will examine how my primary sources fit into and differ from normative conventions of the fantasy genre. Sci-fi and fantasy narratives imagine stories in the future or in separate timelines altogether, relieving expectations of normativity in representation. Feasey argues that sci-fi shows are a good place to look at queer constellations of gender and sexuality because they are far removed from normative conventions of reality (2008). I would like to expand this to include the fantasy genre as well, for it lends itself to different imaginings (and fantasies!) of gender and sexuality outside of normal life. Even if normative representations of gender and sexuality are present in sci-fi and fantasy narratives, they require an explanation as to how these formations and power hierarchies came to be and continue to exist in an alternate universe or far in the future (ibid.). Sci-fi and fantasy have fewer tethers to reality than sitcoms, so they often include more radical imaginings of gender and sexuality even though both genres are ultimately make-believe.

While *Our Flag* is not set in a future or in an alternate timeline like most sci-fi/fantasy narratives, it is set in 1717 during the "Golden Age" of piracy[8] (c. 1650-1730), a past distant enough that viewers must imagine the time period instead of comparing it to lived experience. Its spaciotemporal separation and the nonnormative "pirate's life" over 300 years earlier provides enough distance between the reality of most viewers' lives and the narrative of the show that there is ample room for exploring nonnormative relationship and identity formations. To add nuance to this comparison, though, it is important to keep in mind that modern audiences' knowl-

[8]This era was the "Golden Age" of piracy because most pirate crews were comprised of people from the fringes of colonial society; many considered themselves "nationless." During the mercantilist phase of global capitalism, pirates had a major role in disrupting supply chains and being beacons of democracy because of the nonadherence to colonial standards of socioeconomic and racial hierarchies (Dawdy and Bonni 2012).

edge of history influences the way they experience shows set in the past, whereas for narratives in the future or alternate timelines, there is no such historical benchmark against which to compare them. Thus, even though *Our Flag* being set in 1717 allows for some flexibility in representation, it is not completely detached from real historical sociopolitical contexts, especially given that the main characters, Stede "The Gentleman Pirate" Bonnet and Blackbeard/Ed, are based on real historical figures. Stories that fall strictly into fantasy or sci-fi, on the other hand, have more freedom to play with alternate imaginings of social configurations because of their separation from factual human history.

What We Do in the Shadows is fantastical because it centers around vampires, but other elements of the show do not align with features of the fantasy genre. For one, it is set in modern times in a real place, Staten Island, New York. However, the nonnormative temporality that is indicative of the fantasy genre still comes into play here through the characters' past contexts if not the show's overall context. In *Shadows*, human death is not the end of existence, for vampirism makes immortality possible, challenging the possibilities not only for embodiment but also for taken-for-granted human understandings of time and reality. As vampires, they live parallel to human society, but not within it. However, all the characters were humans before their transition to vampires, and they lived in vastly different time periods and geographies. Thus, although they find themselves living together in modern times, each character's understanding of temporality is vastly different and very skewed by their immortality, which results in the vampires being so out of touch with human temporality that both their own understanding of time and normative (human) understanding of time alike become fantasy. The show makes this tension between human time and vampire time very apparent, and drawing the audience's attention to this difference in temporal perception not only provides comic relief, but also queers the genre of fantasy. How? Whereas normative representations of fantasy stay firmly rooted in the alternate timeline of the fantastical, inviting the audience to suspend disbelief, What We Do asks viewers to do the exact opposite. Instead of buying into fantastical constructs, the show transforms the everyday reality of human society itself into a setting for fantastical journeys by mystical beings. Instead of a hero's journey to the shire, it becomes a monster's journey to the municipal meeting.

The sci-fi/fantasy male action hero character type affords a useful theoretical basis to analyze how ideas of heroism impact formations of gender and sexuality. The way that gendered bodies are "done" in sci-fi/fantasy narratives reveals popular conceptions of the masculine hero as brawny and strong on the outside, but sensitive on the inside. Oftentimes, masculine action heroes are portrayed as hard-bodied, muscular,

and clad in tight clothing made of a durable fabric, such as leather. Although *Our Flag* does not align with sci-fi as there is no science nor does it completely fit into the genre of fantasy because it is set in the past, it borrows this common character type. The way that Blackbeard/Ed portrays himself in *Our Flag* aligns with all of the aforementioned features of the masculine hero. By the time he meets Stede, Blackbeard/Ed has tired of his hard-bodied presentation and wants to try something new by embracing the softer side of his masculinity, which did not seem like viable option before meeting Stede, a more effeminate man (Feasey 2008). Instead of being the epitome of hegemonic masculinity, though, Blackbeard/Ed's overt effort to present himself as physically tough ends up undermining his effort to appear perfectly masculine. When the masculine body is so meticulously taken care of in order to highlight one's muscles and make them appear toned, strong, and capable of violence, the effort that it takes to maintain such a brawny body calls attention to its performativity, revealing a preoccupation with being perceived as masculine and strong by other men. In fact, such overtly masculine self-presentation can be read as anxiety over masculinity, or "protest" masculinity,[9] and represents an effort to achieve hegemonic masculinity through the perceived "ideal" body standards for men (Feasey 2008; Connell 1995).

One of the main vampires in *Shadows*, Nandor "the Relentless," is also heavily preoccupied with appearing masculine in a way that shows his capability for violence. During his human life, he was a soldier for the Ottoman empire from the fictional al-Qanadar (modern day Iran). In his chambers, he has portraits of himself atop his horse in full battle greaves and says in an interview, "I was a very ferocious soldier in the Ottoman Empire. Which meant a lot of killing, a lot of pillaging. People would say, 'Please don't pillage me!' And I would say, 'No, I'm pillaging everyone, you included.'" (*What We Do in the Shadows*, 2:41 'Pilot'). He is constantly clad in fancy capes and has long, luscious hair, appearing very regal and tragically out-of-date and place. He sees himself as "ferocious soldier" from the past, which bleeds heavily into his formation of self in the present despite hundreds of years having passed from his time as a soldier. Why is this temporal distinction important? For one, it could indicate that even the trope of the masculine action hero is a thing of the past and introducing it into the present context, like the one that Nandor and his friends live in during the show, is somewhat anachronistic. While masculinity at one point may have been associated with the ability to be violent at one point in Nandor's past context, manifestations of masculinity have changed greatly in both the symbolic and emotional realms. Thus, more overtly violent displays of

[9] "Protest masculinity" is a concept originally introduced by R. Connell and refers to "compensatory hypermasculinities that are formed in reaction to social positions lacking economic and political power" (Messerschmidt and Messner 2018).

masculinity are frowned upon in the current context even though the status quo of patriarchal power and gender hegemony remains intact (Bridges and Pascoe 2016).

2.7 Horror and Monstrosity

Whereas sci-fi and fantasy allow for an in-depth exploration of gender and sexuality through their spaciotemporal distance from normative conventions, horror is a space to explore deviance and crises of gender and sexuality as embodied "otherness." The masculine action hero is entangled with the concept of the monster, which can be found in many genres but is an essential part of the gothic horror genre. Modern media scholars postulate that the genres of (gothic) horror and melodrama encourage the exploration of heterosexuality and gender roles gone wrong, suggesting queer positioning without framing it as such. Instead, these issues are examined through the lens of monstrosity, for markers of difference in the monster's body separate "us" (i.e., the viewer and the "normal" public) from "them" (i.e., the monster, the freak). In the 19th century, monsters reflected a societal discomfort with in-betweenness between strict binaries such as us/them, good/evil, or male/female. Fears of and desire for "otherness" in class, race, nationality, gender, and sexuality were projected onto the body of the monster. The modern monster, which has evolved from the gothic monster, has come to represent so-called "deviant" gender and/or sexuality, and because this trope is utilized in many different genres, it will be an important part of my analysis (Halberstam 1995; Nirta 2021). Halberstam defines gothic as a "rhetorical style and narrative structure designed to produce fear and desire within the [audience]" (1995: 2). Limitless meanings that can be assigned to gothic characters and monsters, so the gothic is characterized by a breakdown of genre facilitated by the inability to narrate and characterize.

Halberstam's definition of gothic is an invitation to explore "monstrous" queer embodiment, which refers to the actualization of queer (i.e., nonnormative) desire within oneself or in one's relationships (Halberstam 1995). There is a great deal of fear entangled with monstrous queer desire because of the possibility of social reprisal that accompanies "becoming" the queer self. On a relational level, when there is homoerotic desire between characters of the same gender, there is also fear over lack of reciprocity or negative consequences if the desire is actualized. Individually, when one's embodiment of "becoming" does not align with normative gender constructions, they are acting on their desire to "become" themselves despite societal expectations. Then, they are faced with fear from others, who in turn may fear

their queer embodiment and consider them monstrous (Nirta 2021). This connects to the queer coming-of-age genre—what if becoming the self entails nonnormative gender and sexuality formation? Is that represented monstrously, and what queer potential does monstrosity hold?

In *Our Flag*, there is one genderqueer character on the crew, Jim Jimenez (Vico Ortiz). For the first few episodes, they wear a fake beard and wax nose, pretending to be mute so that the other crew members think they are a man. The only crew member who knows that Jim is AFAB (assigned female at birth) from the start is Oluwande, and they become a couple later in the show. Early in the first season, Lucius sees Jim bathing in the sea without their disguise, so Jim locks Lucius in a trunk for fear that he will reveal their gender nonconformity to the rest of the crew. He promises not to tell anyone and is eventually released, only to have Jim's disguise ripped off by Spanish Jackie, against whom they have a vendetta, in front of the crew (*Our Flag Means Death*, 24:00, 'A Gentleman Pirate'). In the subsequent episodes, Jim forgoes their fake beard and nose and speaks in front of the crew, but still wears masculine clothing. Shortly after the public revelation that they are AFAB, they are eating a meal with other crew members, and Jim is met with suspicion and accused of being a mermaid because of their gender nonconformity. Although they do not use anachronistic terminology like non-binary or genderqueer to self-identify, they make it clear that their gender configuration has remained consistent from the beginning, even though their appearance has changed slightly because they longer wear a disguise. Huddled around a dining table below deck, crew members say to Jim:

> Wee John: We have a serious question to ask you. Are you a mermaid?
>
> Oluwande: [Giggling] I told you.
>
> Jim: I'm not a mermaid.
>
> Frenchie: Right, okay.
>
> Wee John: No, but the way you said that was definitely kind of mermaidy.
>
> Roach: Yeah, I heard it!
>
> Jim: [Spits] I'm not a fucking mermaid! . . .
>
> Black Pete: Alls I know is women are bad luck on ships. Historically.
>
> Jim: That's a myth.
>
> Frenchie: Well, no, actually, science. Because women have crystals in

> their bodies and the crystals attract demons. And the demons attract misfortune. You know. The French call it—
>
> Jim: [Puts a knife to Frenchie's throat]
>
> Frenchie: Hey, hey hey hey!
>
> Jim: I'm only going to say this once.
>
> Frenchie: Once is fine.
>
> Jim: Mmhmm. So, listen up. I've been on this ship for weeks now and we haven't crashed.
>
> Roach: We were attacked by the Spanish, but. . .
>
> Jim: Ay, bendito (Oh, God). Look, everyone. I'm gonna to keep this very simple. You all know me as Jim, sí (yes)?
>
> Frenchie: Yeah, good old Jim!
>
> Jim: So just, yeah, keep calling me Jim! Hm? Nothing's changed, except I don't have the beard, my nose is different, and I can speak now. Yes. Anyone got a problem with that?
>
> In unison: No.
>
> Frenchie: No, certainly not.
>
> The Swede: It makes sense. Always liked Jim.
>
> Frenchie: Yeah, good guy, you know. (*Our Flag Means Death*, 17:00 'Discomfort in a Married State')

The association of gender queerness and monstrosity is clear from this example and even seems to have been anticipated by Oluwande when he says, "I told you so." There was an expectation that their nonnormative embodiment of gender would be met with suspicion among the crew and cause them to be "othered," so much so that the crew believes that they are a mermaid. Or if not a mermaid, then a woman, which is met with similar suspicion. Black Pete and Frenchie bring up their other preposterous beliefs about women, like their being bad luck on ships and their bodies attracting demons through the crystals inside. What could these crystals symbolize, and why do only women have them? This could be a reference to witchcraft, which was a hot topic during the time in which *Our Flag* takes place.[10]

[10] Witchcraft, historically, has been seen as a feminine entity. Witches could use crystals to cast spells or produce other effects. Additionally, during the 1700s, fears of "otherness" or simple interpersonal animosity were projected onto the bodies of women who stood accused of witchcraft, sentencing them to death or social ostracization. Witch hunts were a way to penalize individuals, especially women, who did not fit into the status quo one way or another.

Thus, in this short exchange between Jim and the other crew members, there are a number of ways in which the crew "others" Jim based solely on their non-male body. Clearly, there is a lot of mysticism associated with non-men and women or anyone else who does fit neatly into the gender binary during this time period. While their context as largely uneducated pirates feeds such superstition and fear of the "other," this exchange could also be read as a reference to modern fears of otherness and the way in which modern society utilizes fearmongering and monster-making myths to continually separate the "us" (i.e., normative genders and sexualities) from the "them" (i.e., the other, the undefinable, the in-between, the neither nor). Jim has to assert themself violently and firmly in order for the crew to continue treating them as Jim, the same person they know from before. It seems like they get the message, but it is hard to tell if the knowledge of their gender queerness changes their perception of Jim internally. Of course, this is a TV show, so asking a question about the characters' inner perceptions may not be relevant, but if a similar scenario of disclosure were to play out in real life, I do believe that perception heavily impacts how one is treated even if the inner perception does not necessarily match outer actions. This scene calls attention to the humorous baselessness of the accusations about Jim being a mythical being just because their gender does not conform to normative expectations. In this scene, there is a backdrop of danger because of Jim's talent for violence and because The Revenge was raided and taken over by Blackbeard/Ed's crew. The dialogue includes humor and references to gothic monstrosity when faced with Jim, an "other" in terms of gender formation, so this example shows how gender queerness and monstrosity can contribute to the overall queerness of genre found in the show.

In *Our Flag*, the main character duo, Stede and Blackbeard/Ed, both struggle with their own perceived monstrosity as the harbingers of violence, which is directly tied to their "right" to lay claim to dominant masculine identities. To Stede and his crew at the beginning of the series, Blackbeard is solely a mythical pirate figure that they have heard about in popular legend, so before he becomes an embodied human person to the crew, he is perceived as a monster. Blackbeard/Ed does not enter the series until the third episode, although prior to that, Stede and his crew discuss perceptions of Blackbeard as a monster with glowing eyes and smoke for a head, which is how he is depicted in one of Stede's books (*Our Flag Means Death*, 1:00 'A Damned Man'). When the real Blackbeard/Ed (Taika Waititi) finally appears on screen, he is not a freakish more-than-human monster as popular legend suggests; instead, we see a man who uses very common human mechanisms like violence and black leather to assert his masculinity. However, when confronted with his own actions, which are so violent that they seem to belong to an "other"

self, Blackbeard/Ed attributes his own violent actions to the kraken, a mythical sea monster. Thus, the projection of the "other" onto the figure of a monster can also be a way to cope with the aspects of an individual's identity that are in contradiction to each other. When evil acts perpetrated by Blackbeard are attributed to the kraken, he is able to preserve his sense of self as Ed (*Our Flag Means Death*, 18:47 'The Art of Fuckery'). However, the boundaries that Blackbeard/Ed has cultivated between his violent pirate persona, Blackbeard, and his sensitive inner self, Ed, begin to crumble when he enters into an intimate relationship with Stede, for he sees that with him, it is safe to be just a vulnerable individual rather than having to fulfill the (gendered) roles that he has been assigned by himself or by his social context. Blackbeard/Ed embodies conflicting tropes of the sci-fi/fantasy hero and the gothic horror monster at different times, which is another reason why *Our Flag* is a heterotopia onto which concerns of real sociopolitical contexts experienced by the audience are imagined.

2.8 Conclusion

Queering genre, tropes, and character types allows for inner transformation and character development because it has the potential to break characters out of their typified roles to become, for better or worse. This freedom to become occurs precisely because of the overlaps, for it leaves room for the in-between, the neither/nor, or the both/and in the characters' identity and behavior. Defying or transforming normative boundaries of genre is queer and allows for queer expressions of gender and sexuality. Living in a heterotopia aboard The Revenge, the pirates in *Our Flag* face crises in many areas, which destabilizes their established notions of genre, gender, and sexuality norms, thus constructing a space to queer television. This and the main characters' alignments with tropes from different genres are the reasons why I hesitate to classify *Our Flag* into just one genre. Blackbeard/Ed is both a hero and a monster at the same time, and this is precisely the type of contradiction that makes the show queer, for it becomes necessary to reckon with how seemingly opposite issues can, and must, coexist within the same person.

What We Do in the Shadows illustrates the immense potential of parody and genre-queering to upset viewers' assumptions about what it means to be "other," but also what it means to be human. Without crystal-clear generic guidelines, it examines the mundanity of normative society and the ostracization of existing outside of it. Even as non-humans, though, the vampires build a community among themselves and still find moments of very human-like emotion through their relationships. The fact

that they are living on queer time causes them to assign meaning to queerness or sex acts differently. In spite of this, the almost painfully accurate roommate disputes, nagging between the married couple, and arguments between friends ultimately shows that the "other" is not so different from us viewers after all. And in fact, maybe becoming a monster is liberating because it relieves the pressure to conform to convention—generically, sexually, or temporally.

The mixed-media aspect of *Heartstopper* (2022) does not necessarily queer genre but queers normative expectations for how television can represent characters' inner selves without resorting to more conventional creative choices like disembodied voices. Rather, feelings are visualized and turned into art, which leaves more room for queer interpretation instead of straight-forward statements about what the characters feel. Other TV shows like Broad City (2014-2019) have also utilized a mixture of illustrated animation and live acting to visualize the characters' affective experience in a certain state of mind. Using diverse art mediums to express affective, embodied feelings reminds the audience of the impossibility of representing a version of reality that will directly relate to the wide-ranging lived experiences of the audiences' immensely different contexts. Using obviously constructed visual art, then, to express embodied affect on TV, a medium that has many tools to obscure the constructivity of the art form, urges the viewers to interpret the art and the feeling that comes with it subjectively. Furthermore, representing affect with visual art on TV indicates a lack of closure on what the characters are feeling, as the interspersed animated illustrations are superimposed on screen at times of affective emotional responses. *Heartstopper* is about the queer possibility of becoming oneself through interpersonal relationships, and while it fits with the generic conventions of a coming-of-age narrative, the genre of coming-of-age itself resists generic closure precisely because of the possibilities of becoming. What can the self become? And how is it gendered in representation? I will address these questions and more in the next section.

Certain narrative styles are more suitable for queering TV than others, but there is potential for queer exploration within each genre. Mockumentary narratives in particular pose an opportunity to suspend disbelief in the show's elements that are not considered "true" in the lived daily contexts of the viewers. In lived contexts that heavily police categories of gender, sexuality, and ways of being, seeing a synthesis of known elements that exist in viewers' lived experiences and a fantastical, alternate reality in which new ways of being, like vampirism, are taken as truth. By addressing them directly, mockumentaries treat the viewers as the intended audience as if they, too, were part of the alternate world of the show. Some scholars may disagree with this claim because mockumentaries' "stance is always fictional, and

both the film's participants and its implied viewers unproblematically recognize it as such" (MacLeod 2011: 115), but I believe that when actors gaze into the camera, directly addressing the viewer, these mockumentary interviews create an affective and more intimate interaction between text and audience. *Shadows* in particular is a mockumentary style show that mirrors the procedural style of "reality" TV, but it replaces the "real life" people with human actors pretending to be vampires, then acting as though their more-than-human world is a reality shared with other characters and viewers alike. More, the fictionality of previous narrative mediums (written literature, paintings, etc.) was made obvious precisely by the medium, but audiovisual mediums like film and TV "[have] concealed with increasing effectiveness the constructivity of picture-making" (Schmidt 1996 as cited in Macleod 2011: 117). Mixing genre, reality, and unreality in mockumentary-style TV programs may still reside in the fictional realm for viewers, but it nonetheless invites the viewers into the reality on screen, which in turn invites the audience to consider the reality and unreality of what they take as truth in their lived experiences, especially when considering their embodiment of gender and sexuality within their lived contexts.

3. MASCULINITIES, EMBODIMENT, AND PERFORMANCE

3.1 Theoretical Framework

Connell and Messerschmidt define hegemonic masculinity as “the pattern of practice (i.e., things done, not just a set of role expectations or an identity) that allow[s] men’s dominance over women to continue” (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005: 832). The concept of multiple masculinities is essential to understanding hegemonic masculinity because hierarchies of masculinity are continually imagined and reimagined based on local, regional, and global ideals. The embodiment of masculinity is a key part of gender hegemony, and one that is often overlooked. After all, there is no experience outside of the body. To gain a more holistic understanding of hegemonic masculinity, it is necessary to examine the ways in which bodies are both objects and agents of social practice. Paying attention to masculine embodiment addresses a major gap in masculinity studies by examining how individuals are impacted by systems of hegemonic masculinity. Looking at how bodies are “done” is a fruitful perspective to conceptualize the degree of agency that individuals have in inhabiting their gender arrangement and how it changes when one’s own gender clashes with diverse embodiments of masculinity and femininity. Theories of hegemonic masculinity must be able to hold contradictions and layered masculinities and femininities, which change significantly based on spatial and temporal context.

In Connell and Messerschmidt’s theorization, hegemonic masculinity is both constituted of and constituting contextually dependent hierarchies of masculinity and femininity. Full of internal contradictions, each hierarchy is formed in part by the cultural consent of people of all genders, meaning that people in that context contribute (often unconsciously) to the continuation of gender hegemony. Hegemonic masculinity is not simply a mechanism of patriarchy meant to uphold men’s control over women; it is far more complicated than that, but like patriarchy, people of all genders suffer under it (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). There are two types of

hegemonic masculinity: external, which refers to how it operates among people of all genders, and internal, which refers to how it operates among homosocial groups (Ezzell 2016). This chapter will focus more on the external type, while the next chapter, “Homosocial Groupings and Homoerotic Desire,” will delve into internal gender hegemony. Recent scholars have problematized the use of hierarchical structures to visualize hegemonic masculinity because it does not adequately address the multiplicity of masculinities and femininities that exist in each individual. More, the relationship between femininity and masculinity constantly shifts depending on context. Using fields instead hierarchy, we can conceptualize how different circles of masculinity and femininity overlap, interact, and transform over time.

Class, race, religion, sexuality, national origin, and other identity markers are all involved in the formation of hegemonic masculinities, so to account for the interactions between these markers of privilege or marginality as well as their changing nature, Coles suggests utilizing Bourdieu’s concepts of habitus, fields, and capital (Coles 2009). “Habitus” refers to common-sense decision making or utilizing mental shortcuts on how to behave in social situations based on conscious processes and unconscious conditioning from the social environment. “Fields” are delimited but permeable and overlapping concepts that include both institutions and individuals with a focus on the relationships between different entities. “Capital” refers to the amount of power an individual has from their economic, social, cultural, and physical resources (Bourdieu as cited in Coles 2009). Individuals who inhabit positions of privilege, such as wealthy, able-bodied cisheteronormative white men, have the highest amount of capital in all of these categories. Because of the intersectional nature of individual identity, though, people may have more capital in one area than another. This affects their position in the fields to which they belong and influences their daily patterns of practice, or habitus. Marrying gender theories, especially masculinity studies theories, with Bourdieu’s concepts of habitus, fields, and capital helps account for the ways that individuals consciously use their agency to uphold or resist hegemonic masculinity, influenced by the conscious or unconscious constraints of existing social formations (ibid.).

To determine whether the manifestations of masculinity and femininity in *Shadows* and *Our Flag* are indicative of hegemonic masculinity or something else, it is necessary to define the fields of masculinity that inform my analysis. Some fields of masculinity do not have obvious relationships, but in fact, analyzing their overlap and manifestations in people of all genders is a useful tool to interrogate how hegemonic and other masculinities affect all people, not just men. Therefore, in addition to Connell and Messerschmidt’s revision of Connell’s original theory on hegemonic masculinity, I will also discuss Messerschmidt and Messner’s work on new masculini-

ties, Anderson's idea of inclusive masculinity, and hybrid masculinities from Bridges and Pascoe (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Messerschmidt and Messner 2018; Anderson 2016; Bridges and Pascoe 2018). The intersections between these theories help contextualize representations of masculinity in my primary sources and lead me to consider whether the depictions of masculinity in these shows can be considered subversive, or if it actually turns out to be refurbishing mechanisms of hegemonic masculinity using new strategies that make its functioning invisible. First, as aforementioned, hegemonic masculinity is a concept that was introduced by Connell in 1995 and refers to a process of gender dominance that is always in flux—it cannot be embodied by an individual (Connell 1995). Connell also defines four types of nonhegemonic masculinities, which Messerschmidt and Messner summarize as follows:

> Hegemonic masculinity is also constructed in relation to what Connell identifies as four specific nonhegemonic masculinities: first, complicit masculinities do not actually embody hegemonic masculinity yet through practice realize some of the benefits of patriarchal relations; second, subordinate masculinities are constructed as lesser than or aberrant from and deviant to hegemonic masculinity; third, marginalized masculinities are trivialized or discriminated against, or both, because of unequal relations, such as class, race, ethnicity, and age; and finally, protest masculinities are constructed as compensatory hypermasculinities that are formed in reaction to social positions lacking economic and political power (Messerschmidt and Messner 2018: 38).

Second, in addition to these classifications of nonhegemonic masculinities, I wish to include Halberstam's theory of "female masculinity," which seeks to undo the obsolete assumption in gender studies that masculinity is tied to maleness which is what lends it social legitimacy (Halberstam 1998). The elasticity of gender expressions within the categories of men and women actually ends up reinforcing the gender binary, reifying sex/gender essentialism because of the difficulty to escape being categorized in the binary. For people whose gender presentation is not easily identifiable, though, such as butch women, tomboys, or trans* people, there is a great deal of policing by cisgender people who try to force them to fit into one or another category. Halberstam's theory of female masculinity, then, is an inquiry into how masculinity can be embodied in people who are not biologically male (ibid). It attempts to undo the implicit association between masculinity, maleness, power, and privilege as it has been examined in the dominant masculine figure of the middle-class white man (ibid). Messerschmidt and Messner add to Halberstam's theory, claiming that female masculinity can be a disembodied phenomenon

that arises in certain situations, such as sexual ones (Messerschmidt and Messner 2018). This counters what I said earlier about there being no experience outside of the body, but it speaks to the complexity of desire and embodiment in becoming one's own gender. By putting female masculinity in conversation with other fields of masculinity, I attempt to conceptualize masculinity and femininity while forgoing gender essentialist associations of masculinity with maleness and femininity with femaleness.

Messerschmidt and Messner suggest the emergence of a number of "new" masculinities, which include the following: first, dominant masculinities constitute the most celebrated, common, or current form of ideal masculinity in a particular setting and may or may not be explicitly linked to gender hegemony. Second, dominating masculinities refers to masculinities that do not necessarily legitimate unequal power relations between men and women but control particular interactions or exercise power over people and events, effectively transforming their actions into symbols of masculinity or femininity. Third, positive masculinities are patterns of practices that actively work to legitimate egalitarian power relations between men and women, the masculine and feminine, and among homosocial groups of men (Messerschmidt and Messner 2018). There is a lot to unpack in their phenomenal chapter, but the most important takeaway is that as gender changes, we need new vocabulary to name and understand the changes going on around us.

Many groups embody more than one type of masculinity simultaneously because of the intersectional nature of identity. Some marginalized groups, while remaining subordinate to the ideal hegemonic masculinity in their given context, actually mimic the process of hegemonic masculinity on a micro scale within their group. White, cisgender, gay men, for example, may be considered a subordinate masculinity because they are not heterosexual, but the other markers of privilege in this group's identity have created what Duggan terms homonormativity, or "a mode of gay politics... that reinforces and underscores an intensely patriarchal and masculinist set of values, where erotic... economic and political celebration of masculinity are mutually reinforcing" (Duggan as cited in Maddison 2015: 50). In other words, homonormativity is the habitus of complicit masculinities within groups of gay men. They benefit from certain forms of domination even if they are not actively taking part in said domination; at times, they may even be subject to it. This is not to say that all white gay men end up oppressing other gay men with intersectional identities or always uphold the patriarchy, but because of homonormative privilege, these individuals set the standard for that group's gender presentation and consciously or unconsciously police other group members who deviate from homonormative standards. Intentional or not, this is subordinate hegemonic masculinity in

action. Because the lifestyle of the metropolitan gay man has become so enmeshed in capitalism and privilege, white cisgender gay men also benefit from "homonormativity" in cultural representations and real life alike, leading them to participate in "complicit masculinity" consciously or unconsciously (Maddison 2015; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). Citing Demetriou, Avila-Saavedra writes that "the integration of gay male representations in diverse cultural practices can be understood as a gay masculinity that forms part of a contemporary 'hegemonic masculine bloc'" (Avila-Saavedra 2009: 7). Traditional values of monogamy, family, and economic participation in capitalism are still often espoused among gay characters on television, as are stereotypical representations of queer couples comprised of one effeminate partner and one masculine partner.

Although recent developments in masculinities studies have noted a decrease in overt displays of homophobia in the modern US context, especially among youth, they have also demonstrated that homophobia remains essential to the process of hegemonic masculinity. New mechanisms have been adopted to obscure the gender dominance that maintains gender inequality (Anderson 2016; Messerschmidt and Messner 2018). Anderson's theory of "inclusive masculinities" accounts for this shift, theorizing that recent changes in gender configurations permit men and boys to display a greater range of behaviors between men that may have been deemed gay or feminine in the past, such as emotional intimacy or physical touch. Inclusive masculinity restores subordinated masculinities with more agency. It also resists the prejudiced, and perhaps outdated, notion that heterosexual masculinity is entwined with homophobia (Anderson 2016). Nonetheless, inequality between and among genders persists. Why?

Bridges and Pascoe explain that specific mechanisms operate to lead people to believe that that homophobia is less prevalent in the US context while gender inequality persists. Unequal gender relations occur on four interactional levels: symbolic relations, emotional relations, power relations, and production relations. (Connell as cited in Bridges and Pascoe 2018). In recent years, more visible changes in masculinity have been occurring at the emotional and symbolic level while maintaining gender inequality in relations of power and production (Messerschmidt and Messner 2018). As a result, "hybrid masculinities" have emerged: "the selective incorporation of identity elements typically associated with various marginalized and subordinated masculinities or femininities into privileged men's gendered enactments and identities" (Bridges and Pascoe 2018: 270). This occurs in real life as well as on TV. In the next section, I will go through the ways in which these four components of gender relations interact with different fields of masculinity to make it appear as though the impact of hegemonic masculinity is lessening, when in fact, mechanisms of privilege

are hard at work to obscure the new instruments of hegemonic masculinity.

Changes in the symbolic relationship between masculinity and femininity allow for a more flexible physical performance of gender, especially for people in positions of privilege, but can obscure the persistence unequal power relations between different genders and among different groups of men (Bridges and Pascoe 2018). When individuals, especially men, in privileged positions practice "strategic borrowing"[11] (i.e., appropriation) of symbols that belong to marginalized and/or subordinated groups, such changes are outwardly visible. Subsequently, this leads to a general belief that hegemonic or dominant forms of masculinity have evolved, for the way that privileged men look has evolved to include features of femininity and/or subordinated/marginalized masculinities. However, privileged men who adopt symbols from subordinated/marginalized groups can do so without facing the same consequences that men who belong to these subordinated/marginalized groups may face when they display the same symbols. Additionally, if these changes are only symbolic or surface-level, power relations are not disrupted, perpetuating unequal gender orthodoxy (ibid.).

The last work that informs my argument is Halberstam's theory of female masculinity, which covers a wide range of masculine embodiment in a biologically female body. Resisting easy classification, the embodiment of female masculinity problematizes gender essentialist assumptions and critiques existing field scholarship. Just like male masculinity, there is a wide variety of ways that female masculinity can be exhibited:

> Sometimes female masculinity coincides with the excesses of male supremacy, and sometimes it codifies a unique form of social rebellion; often female masculinity is the sign of sexual alterity, but occasionally it marks heterosexual variation; sometimes female masculinity marks the place of pathology, and every now and then it represents the healthful alternative to what are considered the histrionics of conventional femininities. (Halberstam 1998: 9).

Halberstam uses a queer methodology to decouple maleness with masculinity. I have also taken inspiration from Halberstam's methodology, which does not shy away from mixing analyses of art, media representations, and lived experiences to show the different facets of female masculinity. Therefore, in this section, I will

[11] Hybrid masculinities are defined as "hybrid masculine practices of cultural appropriation by which privileged groups claim ownership of cultural symbols associated with subordinated and marginalized social groups" (Bridges and Pascoe 2018: 270).

also take interviews and identity factors of the actors who play the female masculine characters on *Our Flag* and *Shadows* into account to provide a comprehensive account of the interplay between real life and representation in creating representations of female masculinity on the small screen. I aim to show the wide variety of female masculinities and how they are not necessarily subversive but are nonetheless distinct from dominant male masculinities.

All the types of masculinities that I have listed above are heavily dependent on the interactions between their local, regional, and global contexts (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). More specifically, viewers can compare the way that gender is embodied on screen to their local and regional contexts, The global context in particular has become especially influential to these formations because of the ubiquity of access to non-physical spaces of interaction outside of the nation-state, such as social media and television (Avila-Saavedra 2009). This is why I will be looking at masculinities on shows like *Our Flag Means Death* and *What We Do in the Shadows* that also centers queerness but may not be as revolutionary in terms of gender representation as it may seem on first glance. The intersections between these theories will help contextualize representations of masculinity in *Our Flag* and *Shadows*, leading me to discuss whether these representations of gender can be considered subversive or if they actually end up refurbishing mechanisms of hegemonic gender orthodoxy using new strategies.

3.2 Situating Masculinities in Context

Masculinity does not belong to men, but because of the history of the gender binary and its entanglement in power and racial relations, it has become associated with people with penises. The evolution of today's version of gender hegemony is a result of white colonial gender essentialism that purports that one's genitalia at birth "naturally" corresponds to one's gender in a strict binary. This ignores and suppresses the great degree of variation in biological sex. The gender binary was, and is, used as a tool for white supremacy and colonialism by insinuating that greater degrees of perceptible difference between men and women in a given society is a sign of advanced civilization (Halberstam 2018). Thus, because the gender binary has been used to consolidate power in the hands of the privileged, which are historically men, the rhetoric surrounding gender non-conforming people in certain local, regional, and other contexts uses the language of gender essentialism to convince the cisheteronormative portion of the population that their dominance is threatened by

the existence of people outside the gender binary. While the gender binary and the dichotomy of masculine/feminine is socially constructed, its persistence continues to have serious real-life implications for all people.

In television and gender studies literature, there is a gap regarding representations of masculinity, and in particular, how representations of gender on the small screen contribute to or resist the process of forming hegemonic masculinities. Expectations of gendered performance are ingrained through local, regional, and global contexts, and because television is an example of a global space that is not always delimited by the borders of nation-states or international governing bodies, it can inform "common-sense" understandings of gender (Avila-Saavedra 2009). Globalization forges new "spaces" that exist outside of individual nation-states, so television and other media "consist of multinational firms that circulate gendered meanings through film, video, music, and news world-wide" (Messerschmidt and Messner 2018: 46). The shift to a more easily accessible streaming model of television has made it influential in gender formations on the global scale. In turn, it also influences local and regional conceptions of hegemonic masculinity. The ways that a certain show resonates with or challenges viewers' existing understanding of gender order in their specific context is heavily influenced by the global gender order as disseminated in world-wide media (Feasey 2008; Messerschmidt and Messner 2018).

Changes in patterns of dominance between and among different genders are catalyzed by moments of crisis, which can happen on a personal, local, regional, and/or global scale. The time period in which *Our Flag* takes place, the "Golden Age" of piracy (c. 1650-1730), was one of major upheaval in existing gender orders due to the expansion of free-market capitalism and colonialism across the world, which imposed strict gender binaries (Dawdy and Bonni 2012; Sedgwick 1985). During this period, many pirate crews considered themselves "nationless," which allowed more flexibility not only in social organization but also in economic structure. Dawdy and Bonni connect modern-day representations of piracy and digital piracy to a societal desire to imagine alternatives to our current neoliberal capitalist climate (Dawdy and Bonni 2012). Moreover, representations of pirates are set in a fantastical reality that is different enough from our current context that fantastical representations of pirates are not overtly threatening to contemporary social order. However, given the more recent representations of pirates such as *Our Flag Means Death*, I argue that representations of piracy can critique far more than solely economic order, moving into an examination of normative gender and sexuality hierarchies.

There is a clash of masculinities in *Our Flag* and *Shadows*, all of which emerge from vastly different contexts and come together in a complicated web of diverse

national, socioeconomic, and racial contexts. This juxtaposition, along with the uniquely removed context of the pirate ship and the nonnormativity of vampirism, are unusual settings in which to explore representations of what it means to be masculine, especially through relationships with others. There is both tension and resonance between different masculinities and femininities in the shows, which are directly impacted by the diversity of race, class, sexuality, relationship structure, and gender among the show's characters. The interplay between these different identity markers, masculinity, femininity, and privilege has the potential to simultaneously reify and resist the hegemonic gender order being represented in a particular TV program. *Our Flag* takes modern gender crises and projects them onto another historical time period of gender crisis in the 1700s, which complicates the subliminal or "common-sense" messages about gender. *Shadows* takes modern gender constructions and juxtaposes them with centuries-old vampires from around the world who have vastly different understandings and manifestations of what it means to be masculine or feminine. It is crucial to consider how modern ideas about gender are projected onto historical settings rather than the other way around, for the implications of how gender is represented in this modern television series affects viewers' understandings of gender today. *Shadows* (2019-) and *Our Flag* (2022) both aired during a modern, ongoing iteration of "homo-hysteria", or more accurately, "trans*-hysteria" in the US context. Anderson defines "homo-hysteria" as

> (1) a mass cultural awareness that homosexuality exists as a static sexual orientation within a significant portion of the population; (2) a cultural zeitgeist of disapproval toward homosexuality; (3) a cultural disapproval of femininity in men or masculinity in women, as they are associated with homosexuality (Anderson 2016: 180).

Widespread social and institutional panic about the ways that nongender conforming individuals supposedly threaten the existing status-quo of gender inequality are the key characteristics of homo-hysteria. Anderson gives the example of the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s and 1990s as a major trigger for homo-hysteria, even though homophobia was already operating actively (Anderson 2016). I suggest modifying this terminology to "trans*-hysteria" because while homo-hysteria is also operating actively, in the current sociopolitical climate of the US, the human rights of trans* and gender nonconforming individuals in particular are being threatened on an individual and an institutional level. I use "trans*" because it "open[s] the term up to unfolding categories of being organized around but not confined to forms of gender variance. . . The asterisk holds off the certainty of diagnosis. . . it makes trans* people

the authors of their own categorizations" (Halberstam 2018: 4). Trans*-hysteria can look like harassment and violence towards trans* or queer individuals, but it also manifests as individual crises of gender. Greater visibility of trans* and genderqueer people in media and real-life forces cisheteronormative people to confront what it means to be masculine and feminine outside of the gender binary. However, while it is tempting to see positive and varied representations of queer characters on the small screen as a sign of change, "positive visibility is not the same as political progress" (Feasey 2008: 31). Given today's current political climate in the US especially, with a wave of new anti-trans and anti-LGBTQ+ bills, Feasey's warning rings true.

3.3 Male Masculinities

In her book Masculinity and Popular Television, Feasey introduces how gender and television studies have largely focused on representations of women because television is seen as part of the domestic sphere (Feasey 2008). However, there is a large gap in television and gender studies literature regarding representations of masculinity, and in particular, hegemonic masculinity and its representation on the small screen. She begins by defining hegemonic masculinity and complicit masculinity in the same terms that Connell and Messerschmidt use, claiming that it is important to study such representations of masculinity on television not because they are representations of reality, but because they unconsciously inform "common-sense" understandings of masculinity (ibid.). Between 2008 and now, television has changed drastically, as have "common-sense" understandings of masculinity and gender. For this reason, I will attempt to decipher the representations of masculinity in *Our Flag Means Death* (2022) and *What We Do in the Shadows* (2019-present).

Our Flag Means Death is a pirate narrative, and because of that, its characters are not part of normative capitalist society, instead leading them to exist on the margins and be perceived as criminals by normative society. Abstract beliefs about any number of modern sociopolitical issues are projected onto the ship, the sea, and the crew. When compared to other film and television representations of pirates such as *Pirates of the Caribbean* (2003) in which pirates are scary, hypermasculine figures, the characters in *Our Flag* come off as ridiculous, which further contributes to the queerness (as in non-normativity) of the show.

Within different subordinated masculinities, complicit masculinities are still present and are characterized by a pattern of practices which uphold gender inequality

between genders and among other masculinities. Black Pete (Matthew Maher), a crew member in *Our Flag*, is an example of a character whose practices could be considered homonormative, making him complicit in unequal gender relations among the men of the crew even though he belongs to a subordinated masculinity. He is a white, cisgender, queer man who is constantly trying to emulate the ideals of pirate masculinity, as embodied in Blackbeard/Ed and Izzy Hands. Black Pete's (Matthew Maher) markers of privilege (being white and cisgender) are precisely what allow him to "strategically borrow" features of femininity while upholding his version of complicit homonormative masculinity, avoiding the same kind of backlash that may face others with less privilege on the bases of class, race, or cisgender status (Bridges and Pascoe 2018). In the first episode, there is an interaction where the symbolic relations of masculinity/femininity shift, which results in Black Pete "strategically borrowing" a traditionally feminine activity (sewing) and transforming it into something that fits into his version of masculinity. The instance to which I am referring occurs when the crew realizes that they do not have a flag. To solve this problem, Stede dumps a plethora of colorful fabric, buttons, and sewing supplies onto the deck as most of the crew members sit around the pile. He asks them each to sew a flag that will later be voted on and flown. Black Pete, who is already very insecure about his masculinity, stands apart from the rest of the crew. He resists the activity loudly, shouting:

> Black Pete: I'm not fucking sewing, that's women's work!
>
> Stede Bonnet: Oh, Black Pete, come on, now, you know that's not true. How many of you sew? Be honest.
>
> Roach: [Pulls up his sleeve to reveal a large scar on his shoulder] Sewed my shoulder up once, after I'd been stabbed.
>
> Stede Bonnet: Oh! Did you hear that, guys? Roach sewed his own arm up! Sounds to me like sewing can be pretty tough. So, grab a piece of fabric and have at it. Express yourselves. (*Our Flag Means Death*, 6:00 'Pilot').

Avila-Saavedra found that in sitcoms, when men do so-called feminine activities on TV, straight men characters, or participants in upholding hegemonic masculinity (which can also be women or queer men) ridicule them, effectively deriding effeminate gay men and trivializing activities that are seen as traditionally "feminine" (2009). In his outrage at being asked to sew, Black Pete does exactly that. He is enacting complicit masculinity, mirroring internalized hegemonic masculinity and delegitimating sewing as an acceptable activity for men because he sees it as effem-

inate. At this point in the series, the audience does not yet know that Black Pete and Lucius, another crew member, are romantically involved, so it appears that he embodies the role of straight white man who polices the activities of the other men, judging if they are masculine enough. At first, Stede responds to Black Pete's outburst calmly by asking the rest of the crew who sews, attempting to verbally assures Black Pete that sewing is not inherently feminine. However, Roach brings the question of how sewing is gendered to an embodied level when he proudly displays a ragged scar that he stitched up himself. Shock and awe sweep through the crew, indicating that they find this use of sewing impressive. Using Roach's arm as an example, Stede reframes sewing as something tough, bloody, and painful. This is enough to convince Black Pete that men sewing does not threaten the existing gender order, so he acquiesces and joins in.

But what about this interaction sustains gender inequality? While at first Stede tries to undo the assumption that sewing is feminine, he ultimately resorts to the language of hegemonic masculinity to transform feminine attributes like sewing into acceptable activities for men, maintaining hegemonic gender orthodoxy. Stede insinuates that when bodily harm or death is not at stake, sewing is feminine, but doing it for the sake of imagined future violence makes it masculine. Coupling a feminine attribute with the more masculine potential for violence associated with piracy legitimates an exception for men to participate in said "feminine" activity. Yet, the assumption that feminine activities are subordinate to masculine ones is not problematized in this interaction. Instead, a new "hybrid masculinity" is being forged because the changes in the conceptualization of sewing occur on a symbolic level, but do not change the overall gender order (Bridges and Pascoe 2018).

This new hybrid masculinity certainly does not apply to all members of the crew, just like it does not belong to either Stede or Black Pete; instead, it is a byproduct of their interaction specific to that context. However, it has larger implications because it shows how features of subordinated/marginalized masculinities or femininities can be exploited, giving men in positions of privilege more leeway in symbolic manifestations of masculinity without threatening their dominance. Only Black Pete requires this reframing of sewing as masculine in order to allow himself to do it, while other crew members are willing to begin with. Stede does not share in Black Pete's reticence to sew, but he clearly understands the rhetoric of toxic masculinity driving it. Thus, Stede invites Black Pete and the other members of the crew who are in earshot to strategically borrow from femininity in order to avoid threatening their constructions of complicit masculinity. This divergence in attitudes towards sewing can be attributed to the myriad of different masculinities that coexist among the crew. Wee John Feeney (Kristian Nairn), another crew member, seems to rather enjoy sewing,

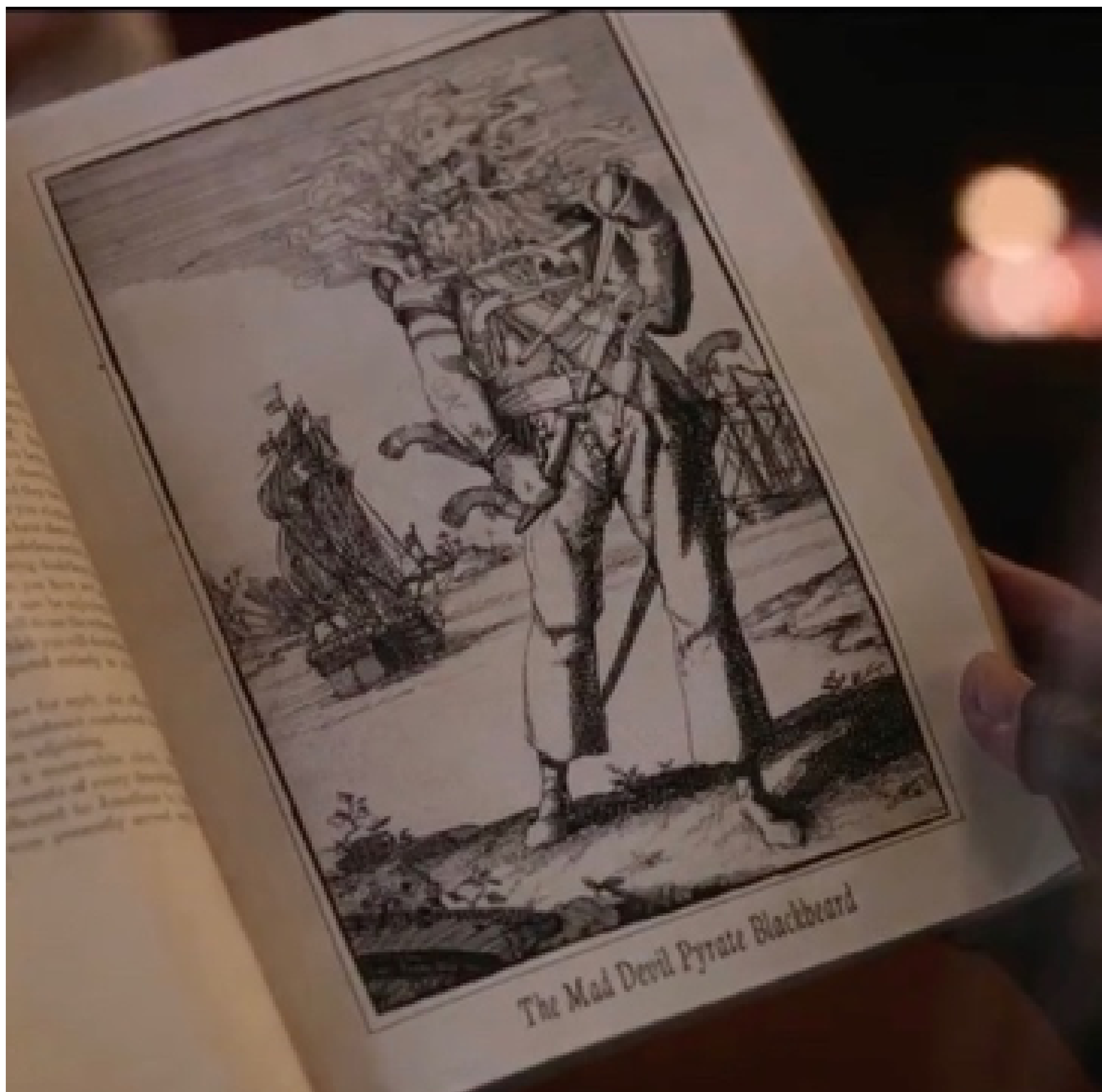
and he talks about how he used to sew dresses with his mother. However, his joy in the activity is expressed much more quietly than Black Pete's outrage, perhaps because of his hesitance to be labeled effeminate for enjoying sewing. This scene highlights the persistence of the gender binary and the unconscious assumption that all things "feminine" are subordinate to the "masculine," even in a group with no women.

In a similar vein, Blackbeard/Ed practices complicit masculinity even though he is also a queer man, but unlike Black Pete, he epitomizes dominant masculinity because he is the most celebrated and sought-after masculine figure within the field of piracy. He has achieved dominant masculinity because he possesses the most social, economic, cultural, and physical capital in his context. Blackbeard/Ed's social capital comes from his status as a famous pirate captain and from stories of his swift and decisive action that repeatedly leads his crew to victory. This repeated victory in piracy equates to the accrual of economic capital from looting the defeated party's valuables (Coles 2009). His cultural capital arises from having been a pirate for a long time, so he is well-versed in the pirate way of life. Lastly, his physical capital comes from his strong, able body, which augments his status as a figure of dominant masculinity through his physical appearance, including his long, unruly beard and hair, tight-fitting leather clothing, and confident gait. However, Blackbeard/Ed's status achievement as a figure of dominant masculinity was not intentional, nor is it fulfilling.

Blackbeard/Ed separates his pirate persona, Blackbeard, from his personal persona, Ed, as a way to cope with the violent things he has done while maintaining a moral sense of self. This separation is more or less unconscious, but he becomes conscious of the difference between these selves when he meets Stede. Stede and Blackbeard first meet in the third episode when Blackbeard/Ed and his crew save Stede and his crew from an attack by the Spanish navy. In the battle, Stede is stabbed through the torso and nearly hanged, but Blackbeard saves his life and is helps nurse him back to health. Feverish and bedbound, Stede is visited by figures that represent his inadequacy as a man as he wavers in and out of consciousness. First, he sees his wife, who calls him pathetic, and then his father joins her in cajoling him, and finally, the monster figure of Blackbeard appears and motions as if to stab him with a spear. Finally, he wakes with a start to see a stranger, which the audience knows to be Blackbeard/Ed, sitting next to his bed. Stede, not knowing who this person is, asks if he works for Blackbeard, and Blackbeard/Ed pauses and sighs before responding, "Never thought about it like that. Yeah, I suppose I do work for Blackbeard. Hmmm. I'm Ed" (*Our Flag Means Death*, 14:17 'Discomfort in a Married State').

The word choice “works for” has a double meaning in this instance. First, it could be read as if he is employed by Blackbeard as a subordinate; with this meaning, Ed works from top-down orders from his other self, Blackbeard. The second way this could be read, though, implies that Ed puts in a lot of work to continue being Blackbeard. The former makes it seem like an unconscious choice, as if he is just following orders to act a certain way from his “higher self,” Blackbeard-as-boss. The latter, though, implies that Ed makes a conscious, agentic decision to put in the labor that goes into embodying the terrifying persona that is Blackbeard.

Figure 3.1 *Our Flag Means Death*, 18:58 'Discomfort in a Married State'



This double meaning is a perfect example of what the process of hegemonic masculinity looks like on an individual level. On the one hand, he is doing what he is supposed to and what is expected of him as the dominant masculine figure of piracy, like completing tasks for a job. However, Blackbeard/Ed is still an agentic being,

and he does at least some of the work of hegemonic masculinity (or at least dominant masculinity) willingly because it affords him power, prestige, and privilege. He only comes to this realization when confronted with Stede's brand of masculinity, in which the arrangement of masculine and feminine is very different because of the vast difference in their past social contexts.

It is clear that Blackbeard/Ed knows he embodies dominant pirate masculinity and has tired of it, yet he cannot break himself from the pattern of practices that has trapped him in this role. His long tenure as pirate captain has contributed to the mysticism around him. It is unclear exactly how long he has been pirating as Blackbeard, but by the time he enters the show, he is middle aged, and his hair, once black, is graying. In a lifestyle like piracy, where the characters live on queer time under the constant threat of death, Blackbeard/Ed is quite old. The unlikeliness of his continued survival and his continual victory over other pirate crews create a shroud of mystery around him, giving him an almost immortal, legendary quality. Furthermore, because of how long he has been a pirate, he has interacted with a wide variety of other pirates, who swap tales and legends among themselves, and with each iteration, Blackbeard becomes less of a person and more of a myth. Finally, although all pirates acting outside of the purview of nation-states are seen as adversaries, Blackbeard/Ed has become an enemy of particular interest to various nation-states due to his status. All of these factors coalesce in his demonization as a monster, which is then solidified in popular renderings of him like the one that appears in a book in Stede's library (above). Stede grabs this book and opens it to this illustration of Blackbeard as a monster with smoke for a head and glowing eyes. He shows it to Blackbeard/Ed, thinking he will be happy to see how scary and tough he looks, but his reaction is quite the opposite:

> Stede: Ooo! Here's one you might appreciate! Where is it? Here! [Opens book]
>
> Blackbeard/Ed: God. Is this what they think I look like? Hm? Fucking Viking vampire clown with… Look at that! There's one, two… [counts] nine guns all over him? Nine guns?
>
> Stede: That's… too many.
>
> Blackbeard/Ed: I have one gun, I have one knife. Just like everyone else.
>
> Stede: I didn't mean to upset you.
>
> Blackbeard/Ed: No, it's not you, it's [sighs] it's just fucking hard sometimes, you know? You ever feel trapped, like you're just treading water, waiting to drown?
>
> Stede: Yes. I very much have felt that way.
>
> Blackbeard/Ed: Blackbeard always wins. That's the thing. He can't fail. It's not even a challenge anymore. People just see the flag and they freak out, "Blackbeard!" And they basically just give up, they surrender.

> What's the point? I don't even need to be on the boat. I'm a ghost. There's no chaos, there's no drama, there's no fucking life!
>
> Stede: Look. I can't believe I'm saying this, but, have you ever considered retirement?
>
> Blackbeard/Ed: The fuck is that?
>
> Stede: Oh. Well it's when you stop working by choice to pursue a life of leisure.
>
> Blackbeard/Ed: That's a thing?
>
> Stede: Mmhm!
>
> Blackbeard/Ed: Retirement. You got it all sussed out, don't ya? You know how hard it is to find someone doing something original out here? It's impossible, man! And here you come with your library, your fancy quarters, your secret little closet full of frilly shirts and summer linens. Fuck. Look at, there's two chandeliers! That's overkill. A-an open fire, on a wooden vessel, surrounded by bits of paper! You're a fucking lunatic, and I like it. (*Our Flag Means Death*, 19:00 'Discomfort in a Married State').

Blackbeard describes how his reputation as the dominant masculine pirate precedes him wherever he goes, creating a cycle that he is bored of and cannot escape. He feels so trapped in his persona as Blackbeard that he feels as though he is treading water, waiting to drown. This pattern of pirating practices in which Blackbeard/Ed is stuck is the habitus of his specific form of dominant masculinity, but it is important to note that he is not in complete control. It took him meeting Stede, who embodies a very different masculinity, for Blackbeard to realize that perhaps there are alternative ways to exist just as an individual instead of a man who is acting out of habit and societal expectation.

This example shows how dominant masculinities may be celebrated in one context, like among pirates, while simultaneously demonized in others, like the literate population, which generally equates to white aristocrats like Stede during the time period in which the show is set. In this case, although his actions have contributed to his representation as a monster, Blackbeard/Ed has little control of how he is represented and is dismayed when Stede shows him the illustration. The caption under the illustration, which reads "The Mad Devil P[i]rate Blackbeard," further dehumanizes him by implying that he lacks the capacity for human reason (mad), is evil and immoral (devil) and is not a member of normative society (pirate). Stede, though, comes from a privileged background as a wealthy white man who was in a heterosexual marriage, and as such has never been seen as anything less than hu-

man, especially because he embodies the markers of dominant masculinity in colonial aristocratic society. From Stede's perspective as someone who has had to prove his masculinity, but never his humanity, he believes that Blackbeard will be pleased when he sees this illustration.

To Stede, the illustration represents features of dominant pirate masculinity that he wants to "strategically borrow" to augment his status as a pirate captain without absorbing the negative dehumanizing effect that such a rendering has on Blackbeard/Ed, who does not benefit from the same markers of privilege as Stede, for he is not white and comes from a working-class family. As such, he does not benefit from the inherent assumption of shared humanity like Stede does, so he immediately compares the illustration of him to other descriptors that imply more-than or less-than humanness ("fucking Viking vampire clown"). Blackbeard/Ed interprets the illustration of him as dehumanizing, and his exclamation on seeing it demonstrates a duality in which he is both monstrous and ridiculous, but not human. Vikings, like pirates, are another group whose existence was unquestionably real, but is still shrouded in mysticism because of the nonnormative nature of their lifestyles. Vampires, a popular monster trope, are characterized by their close proximity to humans but are imbued with parasitic qualities and never quite fully belong (Halberstam 1995; Hudson 2013). Finally, clowns are humans in performative outfits, and can lend themselves just as easily to fun and ridicule as to horror in representation (think *IT* (2017)). Later in the dialogue, it seems that Blackbeard/Ed also conceptualizes himself as something other than human, first indicated by his use of the third person when talking about himself and then when he calls himself a ghost.

Let's return to vampires for a moment. This quote from Blackbeard/Ed could be an intertextual reference to some of his other work, which is centered around vampires, *What We Do in the Shadows* (2014; 2019). In *Shadows*, there is a strict separation between the vampires' current sense of self as vampires and their dead human selves. The three main vampires are confronted with this divide when they summon the ghosts of their dead human selves, all of whom appear before them exactly as they were at the moment of their deaths. Each vampire has a ghost because they all had unfinished business at the time they died. Nandor, in particular, is the eldest of these three vampires and has become so different from his human self during his time as a vampire that he has completely forgotten how to speak his native tongue, so he cannot communicate with his ghost. Unlike the ghost of his past self, who goes around grunting and yelling, Nandor in his current vampire form has evolved into a somewhat softer masculinity, both in terms of appearance and mannerisms. In the present, as a vampire, he wears a long velvet cape embroidered on the edges. In his ghost form, he wears traditional soldiers' greaves and a hard metal helmet.

Figure 3.2 *What We Do in the Shadows*, 9:33 'Ghosts'

The vampires on the show, unlike the illustrated representation of Blackbeard I discussed, do not rely on external material weapons to exert violence unto others. Vampires kill humans and drink their blood in order to survive, and in *What We Do in the Shadows*, the way they do so is very stereotypical—they bite down on their human victim's neck with their fangs and suck their blood. They are quite literally penetrating a vulnerable area of human flesh with their own body parts, fangs which develop through their transition from human to vampire. Hard, pointed fangs penetrating the soft, vulnerable flesh of the neck lends itself to associations with sex. Unlike the degree of removal that enacting violence with phallic weaponry provides, though, the way that vampires kill their victims is a direct result of their bodies and the blame cannot be put on an object outside of the dwelling of the body. So how do we treat the transition from a human body holding a weapon to a monstrous body itself becoming a weapon? I would like to suggest that the transformation from human to monster also involves a temporal transition from normative to queer time and a redefinition of the boundaries between self and other as a new monstrous identity forms. The transformation from human to monster involves violence and strife in the representations that I am examining, but I question where the violence is coming from and who is subjected to it. I am taking a cue from Nirta and examining the queer possibilities of monstrous embodiment, which can exist outside of normative conceptions of gender and rejects fixity, opting instead for a form that is constantly becoming (Nirta 2021).

In representations of masculinity, weaponry functions as an extension of the masculine self, especially when the weapons are phallic, like swords, knives, or guns

(Sedgwick 1985). According to Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, "the phallus becomes a signifier: the Signifier of desire" (Guéguen 2010). Thus, it is insufficient to consider the phallus as synonymous with male sex organs because it represents a desire for the "other" and also becomes a way to attract the "other" through embodying the desired phallus. And if we take guns to represent phalluses due to their penis-like shape and their association with masculinity, then it follows that Blackbeard/Ed is accurate in his assessment that the illustration of him with nine guns is indeed excessive.[12] This excess becomes monstrous precisely because of the excessive phallic symbolism, for modern markers of monstrosity, which use deviant sexuality and gender expression as signifiers of monstrosity, are represented on the monster's body as having too many or too few parts (Halberstam 1995). But what does this excessive phallic symbolism say about desire? To answer this question, it is necessary to ponder the difference between the audience that Stede's book was meant for–literate, wealthy people like Stede–and the "other" being represented, or the oversexualized, dangerous, and excessively masculine pirate like Blackbeard. Stede is excited to show Blackbeard/Ed this rendering because it has been the object of his desire, desire to be this excessive pirate masculine figure and desire for him. This desire is not self-evidently homoerotic because desiring a phallic symbol is not equivalent to desiring a penis, leaving space for man to desire man without threatening implicit heterosexual norms. If Blackbeard/Ed were represented with only one knife and one gun, "just like everybody else," he would be in too close proximity to normative masculine embodiment. His perceived masculine excess is also related to the oversexualization and perceived excess of masculinity that is practiced among men of color, especially Black men. As a man of color, Blackbeard/Ed shows some awareness and disdain at this excess in representation which Stede does not pick up on.

Unlike Blackbeard/Ed, Stede is certainly not an exemplar of dominant pirate masculinity, but he still benefits from complicit masculinity because of his privilege. Stede comes from an aristocratic, land-owning family in colonized Barbados. He is part of the wealthy white colonial elite, and for this reason, his father, with whom he has a strained relationship, arranges for him to marry Mary, the daughter of another aristocratic family in the community. Through flashbacks, the audience learns about the expectations of hegemonic colonial elite masculinity and how Stede fails to meet them. In the first episode, Stede has a flashback to a childhood memory in which his father slaughters a duck with an axe while Stede watches. Blood splatters onto his face and clothing and he cowers at the axe's blow, covering his eyes. His father berates him for his perceived cowardice, chastising,

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[12] See p. 51 for reference photo (*Our Flag Means Death*, 18:58 'Discomfort in a Married State').

> Father Bonnet: Open your eyes, child. This is what a man's work looks like. Come, come with me! Come on! [They walk through a meadow] One day, all this will be yours. Not 'cuz you deserve it. Not 'cuz you've earned it, Lord knows you haven't done that. Because you lucked into it. What do you suppose that makes you?
>
> Stede Bonnet, as a child: Fortunate?
>
> Father Bonnet: Fortunate? [cackles] Oh no. A weak-hearted, soft-handed, lily-livered little rich boy. That's all you'll ever be, Stede Bonnet.
>
> Stede to himself, as pirate captain: That's all I'll ever be. All I'll ever be. (*Our Flag Means Death*, 13:40 'Pilot')

During his childhood, Stede's father instilled him with a belief that he would never be an adequate man when held up to the impossible standards of hegemonic masculinity, his anxious relationship to manhood staying with him well into adulthood. In this flashback, his father implies that a successful "man's work" is synonymous with the ability to exert violence against other living beings without being troubled by it, or, at the very least, without cowering. While rebuking him, his father does not only insult his actions but also insinuates that his failure of masculinity is so deeply entwined with his being that it resides within his life-sustaining organs, and as such is inescapable. Therefore, even though Stede has changed the way in which he presents himself to the world by becoming a pirate, his father has inculcated him with a sense of embodied inferiority and insecure masculinity from very early on. Despite fulfilling his "masculine" duties of getting married, having children, and monetarily providing for the family (with the inheritance that his father does not feel he has earned, might I add) he still feels inadequate. In his middle age, which is when the show takes place, the pressures of compulsive heterosexuality and masculinity cause Stede to undergo an acute crisis of masculinity, so much so that he abandons his family, relinquishes a large portion of his fortune and status as an aristocrat, and becomes a pirate.

During the show's timeline, the pressures of two main types of hegemonic masculinity are affecting Stede and driving his decisions. First, there is English colonial masculinity, which stipulates a certain esoteric knowledge of social comportment and way of dressing that includes frills, lace, buttons, ribbons, and bright fabrics. Stede is well aware of how to fulfill this type of masculinity and quite enjoys the fashion aspect of it, as is made obvious by his two extensive wardrobes on his ship—one main, and one secret backup. While aesthetics are an important part of English colonial masculinity, too much interest in it was unacceptable and treated as a sign of effeminacy and homosexuality (Maddison 2015). Other boys and men in his life

discouraged him from freely expressing his fondness for aesthetics in the past, so he made a literal space for his hidden desires, i.e., his second wardrobe, where in his life on land, he had no outlet.

His wealth and status as an aristocrat is what gives him access into the other sphere of masculinity that he entered of his own volition: piracy. Whereas most of his crew members became pirates because they had no other options or were running from something, Stede became a pirate because he had a plethora of options from which to choose, but none were satisfactory because they all entailed compulsive heterosexuality and participation in "society," which he abhorred. So, in the depths of a mid-life crisis of masculinity, he decides to follow his lifelong dream of becoming a pirate. Stede gained his position as captain precisely because of his inherited wealth and his ability to fund the construction of a pirate ship and afford weekly salaries for an entire crew of pirates. Evidence of his exorbitant wealth is everywhere, from his double wardrobe to his library. The emotional turmoil that Stede experiences because of the difference between what is expected of the aristocratic masculinity that he was born into and the type of masculinity he tries to inhabit as a pirate captain is indicative of the persevering expectations of masculine performance for the benefit of other men. Aware of the expectations of pirate masculinity placed on him as a captain, Stede nonetheless chooses to do things differently because he feels uncomfortable with violence and experiences a full range of emotions, leading him to exhibit so-called feminine displays of emotion like crying. Nonetheless, the crew members encourage him to at least pretend to embody pirate masculinity by claiming acts of violence as purported rather than accidental.

For instance, in the first episode, when they approach another vessel and see that it is a British naval ship, Stede invites a few members of the royal British navy aboard the ship to dine because he knows the captain, Nigel Badminton, from childhood. In fact, Captain Badminton ruthlessly bullied Stede because of his preference for more feminine activities like flower picking. In front of Stede's crew, Badminton recounts the ways in which he bullied and humiliated Stede as a child, then proceeds to ask for a tour of the ship, which he calls small. Once he and Stede are in the library, Badminton says,

> Nigel Badminton: To think of the ridiculous rumor going around about you.
>
> Stede Bonnet: Oh? What's that rumor?
>
> Nigel: So silly. So outlandish. [Chuckles]

Stede: Go on.

Nigel: The rumor is that you left your wife and children, upended your entire comfortable life, to become a pirate.

Stede Bonnet: [Chuckles politely] Oh. I mean, it's true.

Nigel: [Bursts out laughing] You can't. Oh, baby Bonnet, you do tickle me. . . [Cuts away to the other crew members being ridiculed by Captain Badminton's men, and then returns to the library to indicate that time has passed and Nigel is still laughing at Stede]

Badminton: Ohho, I'm crying, hahahaha. I'm sorry.

Stede: It's not that ridiculous.

Nigel: Oh, it is. Oh, it is. Baby Bonnet became a big, bad pirate. [Cackles raucously] But you were so fat. And soft. And weak.

Stede: I thought I was slender.

Nigel: No, no, no, no. No, I recall you were a plumper. And you cried all the time. And liked to pick flowers.

Stede: [Sighs] A little bit.

Nigel: [Loud thump from outside the library] Did you hear that? [Unsheathes sword]

Stede: Uh, no, I didn't hear anything.

Nigel: We're under attack.

Stede: Just wait, it might blow over.

Nigel: Still a coward. Pathetic.

Disembodied voice of Stede's father: Pathetic. Pathetic. Pathetic. Pathetic. Pathetic. (*Our Flag Means Death*, 22:27 'Pilot').

In this example it is clear that there is a misalignment between Captain Badminton's schema of how he imagines a "big, bad pirate" and Stede's embodiment of the role. He infantilizes Stede and berates him for his body as a child, insinuating an immutability of childhood characteristics into adulthood. This indicates that even as children, young boys are taught that a successful embodiment of masculinity equates to being lithe, hard, and strong. Not only do these traits pertain to the physical body, but they also indicate that for successful masculinity, it is necessary to adopt a mindset that is equally as hard and strong so that affective displays of emotion remain hidden beneath the façade of toughness. Like the way that his father associates his more feminine traits like showing emotion with his vital organs, Nigel Badminton juxtaposes Stede's physical softness as a child with his tendency to cry

and pick flowers, which again are more feminine traits. Femininity among men is strongly associated with homosexuality, so making fun of his femininity and perceived failure to embody the right kind of masculinity is barely veiled homophobia. Unlike the homophobia and transphobia in Family Guy, though, which depend on deeper readings that bring the irony and parody of such comments to light, we see these instances of homophobia from Stede's perspective as something deeply troubling and humiliating. It does not take a deeper level of analysis to surmise the discomfort and harm that memories of homophobia or at least anti-femininity have on Stede's state of mind.

After Badminton calls him a coward, Stede hits him in the head with a paperweight, causing Badminton to fall forward onto his sword, which pierces his eye and penetrates his brain, killing him. Stede is distraught and consults with a couple of members of his crew as to what to do, and they advise him to take credit for this gruesome accidental stabbing in order to gain the other pirates' respect and foster a reputation as a dangerous enemy of the British navy. When he emerges in front of the crew and the remaining members of the British navy aboard the ship (who have become hostages), Stede makes a big performance pretending to have murdered Badminton, leaving his crew in shock and awe. He gains their respect, and they decide not to mutiny.

The sword is a phallic symbol of desire for male hegemonic masculinity throughout the show, starting with this symbolic accident that occurs in the first episode. Stede does not actually attack Captain Badminton with a phallic object like a sword, but instead uses a whale-shaped paperweight, and the blow causes Badminton to kill himself by his own sword, entering through his eye and piercing his brain. The phallic weapon becomes an extension of the beholder's body and is a gendered object due to its phallic shape and symbolism. It represents a view of hegemonic masculinity that is associated with the violence, conquering, and penetration. This way to die is almost Oedipal in nature because of Captain Badminton's ignorance of the truth of how tenuous his identity as a masculine male actually is, and how much he relies on objects and constructs outside the bounds of his body, like his sword, in order to embody that masculine state.

Other than this instance, the symbol of the sword between the two main characters is plainly suggestive of the homoeroticism in their relationship. First, they meet precisely because Stede has been stabbed with a sword and while he is recovering, Blackbeard/Ed and his crew have boarded The Revenge. Second, in agreeing to teach how Stede to be a pirate, Blackbeard/Ed teaches him sword fighting, and at a certain point, Blackbeard/Ed determines that it is time to teach Stede how to be

"run through" with a sword without it being fatal. He instructs Stede to pierce him with his sword, and when Stede is reluctant to do so, Blackbeard/Ed points his gun at Stede and threatens him, saying he will shoot if he doesn't. Stede runs at him with the sword and stabs Blackbeard/Ed through the torso with a grunt. Then, the sword has to be removed, so Stede pulls it out while Blackbeard/Ed exclaims repeatedly in pain. Izzy Hands, who is standing on another part of the deck and cannot see what they are doing, assumes from the noises that they are having sex. In this case, though Stede and Blackbeard/Ed are not having sex, they are nonetheless piercing each other's bodies or threatening to do so with their phallic weapons, which are like extensions of their bodies. This way, they are able to enact the desire for the other's phallus that both are experiencing but neither are willing to act on because of heteronormativity.

This scene in particular makes the association between phallic weapons and sex between men blatantly obvious, even to the least analytical viewers. While there are a plethora of problems with Freudian and Lacanian modes of sexual psychoanalysis, their theorization of the phallus as a signifier for desire is useful here to explain this homosexual actualization by proxy of phallic weapons. In fact, representing homoerotic/homosexual actualization through objects instead of actual embodied physical intimacy resembles what Bridges and Pascoe term discursive distancing,[13] but instead of distancing themselves from their markers of privilege to appear more socially aware and obscure the status-quo of gender orthodoxy, this time they are distancing themselves from embodied homoerotic desire and projecting it onto the phallic swords with which they penetrate each other (Bridges and Pascoe 2018). So, even though the only fleshly intimacy that Blackbeard/Ed and Stede share during the first season is a kiss, in a way, they have symbolically practiced sexual intimacy by proxy of weapons. An interesting thing to notice in the next section is the difference in weaponry between the male masculine figures and the female masculine figures. Whereas the male masculine figures in *Our Flag* are most often represented with guns and swords, the non-male pirates, whom I will discuss below, favor knives. What does this say about embodiment of masculinity in non-males?

[13]Discursive distancing is defined as "hybrid masculine practices that create symbolic space between privileged groups of men and hegemonic masculinity, enabling some men to frame themselves as outside of existing systems of privilege and inequality" (Bridges and Pascoe 2018: 270).

3.4 Female and Non-Male Masculinities

It is important to note that embodying masculinity does not depend on possessing a body with a penis; female masculinity is an alternative gendering of a female body that transforms the concept of masculinity into its own entity, with a history and manifestation that is separate from male masculinity (Halberstam 1998; Gardiner 2013). It is not a rejection of femininity, but a departure from the assumption that female biological sex is "naturally" more feminine than masculinity. There are many different arrangements of female masculinity, and the main thing that groups them together is the fact that they are embodied by a person who was assigned female (or at least not male, in the case of intersex people) at birth. For this reason, I have designated this section as female and non-male masculinities.

In the context of *Our Flag*, there are a few characters who display different types of female masculinity. First, I will address the non-male pirates and discuss how they embody masculinity with attention to their relationships with men who practice male masculinity. A "successful" pirate masculinity (not man) entails the ability to wield violence and win conflicts with shows of strength rather than cunning. More, it is characterized by a lack of emotional displays or an inability to exhibit vulnerable emotions other than anger, rendering the individuals who demonstrate this type of masculinity taciturn. It is crucial to acknowledge that this reticence to openly show so-called vulnerable (read: feminine) emotions such as sadness or unbridled joy is not due to their absence; rather, these emotions are repressed, resulting in their manifestation as anger or disassociation. When pirate masculinity is displayed by a person with a female or non-male body, it is not as simple as adopting the features of pirate masculinity like it would be for people with male bodies. Rather, it also entails a divergence from normative gender formation by their choice to embrace and embody masculinity over femininity. Unlike male masculinity, female masculinity is an act of becoming oneself outside of the bounds of gender essentialism, which collapses the diversity among biological sexes into the male/female binary, dictating that people with vaginas be feminine and people with penises be masculine.

Critics of masculinity studies have noted that especially in the US context, there is a perceived excess of masculinity among Black men, arguing that considering certain masculinities "in excess" on the basis of race upholds the notion of the white middle-class cisgender male as the norm of masculinity, which is a problematic way to conceptualize the multifaceted impacts of race on masculine embodiment (Messerschmidt and Messner 2018). At the same time, because whiteness is integral to hegemonic ideals of both masculinity and femininity and is the basis for the

gender binary, Black women have historically been accused of being too masculine and/or not feminine enough when measured up to white hegemonic standards of gender (Halberstam 2018). Furthermore, the naming of trans* people among communities of color does not necessarily fit neatly into the Therefore, it is necessary to contextualize both Blackness and femininity in the period being represented and proceed with caution when discussing female masculinity here in order to avoid reifying hegemonic gender beliefs that conflate "good" femininity with white cisgender womanhood and "bad" femininity with female masculinity, especially among Black individuals. I aim to avoid moralizing gender manifestations altogether because assigning moral value to gender presentation is how we got into the mess of the gender binary in the first place.

As I discussed earlier, it is true that within any subgroup, such as Black masculinities, there are members that reify hegemonic masculine ideals through practices that subordinate other in-group masculinities that do not meet these ideals. Black female masculinity, then, lies at the intersection of race, gender, and gender embodiment and it is influenced by the hegemonic ideals of all three categories. Female masculinity, though, decidedly subverts hegemonic expectations of gender and embodiment, which is what makes it a distinct entity from existing formations of hegemonic or dominant masculinity. Black female masculinity, then, should be treated as a distinct subsect of the larger conversation around female masculinity because of the inalienability of race and gender.

Representations of female masculinity in *Our Flag* at times undoes expectations of hegemonic masculinity by epitomizing pirate masculinity in the character of Spanish Jackie (Leslie Jones), who is a Black woman pirate with 20 husbands. Her identity as a Black woman also distances her from hegemonic masculine ideals because white middle-class male masculinity continues to be the norm against which other masculinities are measured in forming contextually dependent hegemonic masculinities (Halberstam 1998, 2018). She owns a bar in the Republic of Pirates and is fearsome character who keeps a jar of her enemies' noses that she has cut off on display in her bar. Talking about her character, Leslie Jones says in an interview,

> I got to be an all-around badass... I've always wanted to play a girl who is tough as a dude. I got to smoke cigars, to intimidate dudes. People have to be scared of me. I love that. I've always wanted to play a woman like that. A swashbuckling woman on the bad side? A thief, who gets to run stuff, and men fear her, and then she's still charming enough to have 20 husbands? And she gets to look good, too? I love it! I love that she isn't some dirty pirate woman. She's like 'Oh, nah, nah. Y'all can

look good? So can I. (Robinson 2022).

Like the earlier example I gave of Black Pete calling sewing women's work and then Stede reframing it as a "tough" and thus masculine activity, the way that Leslie Jones conceptualizes her character, Spanish Jackie, also incorporates toughness and being able to elicit fear as key parts of her character's female masculinity.

Figure 3.3 *Our Flag Means Death*, 17:03 'A Gentleman Pirate'

Unlike the earlier example, though, the incorporation of toughness and scariness into Spanish Jackie's version of female masculinity does not end up reifying hegemonic masculinity precisely because of her nonnormative embodiment. Jones uses "dude" as a synonym for man, but the connotation for the "dude" is cool, smooth, and is associated with a certain type of masculinity, whereas "man" is more general. Thus, not only is she saying she got to be as tough as a man, but she is also saying that she got to be as tough as a certain type of man, one who can be called a "dude," which more specifically relates to a man who displays dominant masculinity. Jones also includes Spanish Jackie's criminality as an important part of the character, which is related to the reigning dominant masculinity in Spanish Jackie's context, pirate masculinity.

Spanish Jackie's form of "female masculinity" comes more from her personality and reputation than from her appearance, which aligns with how Leslie Jones imagines the role. She juxtaposes her criminality with her overt sexual and romantic charm and then relates both to her classy, intimidating appearance in the show. Rather than portraying Spanish Jackie as "some dirty pirate woman," she instead imagines

her as someone who elicits fear from men and women alike while maintaining a sense of style and poise. Clad in a luxurious red velvet suit and thigh-high pirate boots, she looks classy and intimidating. Her demeanor is cool, collected, and menacing, and she has the capacity for casual violence. In his book, Halberstam focuses a lot on appearance in what he terms "female masculinity"—that is, AFAB people dressing in a way that could be described as butch or tomboyish. I would not describe Spanish Jackie's look as boyish—it actually has a lot in common with how Stede dresses, which could be considered more effeminate—but when contextualized in the time period, Spanish Jackie's position of power and the fact that she is wearing pants at all does point to a unique female masculinity within the context of piracy.

Ironically, when it comes to her marriages, it seems like she is also "wearing the pants" metaphorically. The fact that she has 20 husbands and splits her time among them is quite the opposite of what Halberstam talks about as the female husband. According to Halberstam, the female husband is a masculine woman who provides comfort for other married women who feel neglected by their husbands (Halberstam 1998). Spanish Jackie, though, could be said to embody the neglectful, emotionally unavailable husband rather than the masculine woman with which the other spouse seeks comfort. To add to this, Spanish Jackie, a woman, is causing men to feel inferior or neglected, whereas in Halberstam's theorization, the gender roles are flipped, and it is the man causing the woman to feel inferior or neglected (ibid.). Nonetheless, I would still call Spanish Jackie a female husband because of the way she embodies the role of a rather inattentive husband but embodies it in a female body. While not explicitly queer in the sense of desire, I would argue that Spanish Jackie's character queers both gender and marriage. Furthermore, she is not framed as promiscuous for having so many husbands but is instead treated with reverence and subservience by her husbands and others around her. Having 20 husbands imbues her character with a kind of virility that would otherwise be associated with a man spreading his seed, but she is not doing that as an AFAB person. So, does her pleasure from all 20 men become the main goal from sex while reproduction is rendered irrelevant and even undesirable? And is having a penis necessary to assert dominance over other men? Everything about Spanish Jackie in *Our Flag* says no.

Spanish Jackie's nonnormative relationship to desire and gender is accentuated even more when we examine how she interacts with one of her husbands, Geraldo (Fred Armisen). He speaks to her in a tone that is meek and nervous, and she responds condescendingly. Clearly, she is the authority figure in this couple, which is compounded by the fact that he is her employee at the bar. Later in the series, she ends up shooting Geraldo in order to end her feud with Jim, and after he dies, she casually mentions that he was one of her favorite husbands, seeming more annoyed than

bereaved at his demise. When Stede and his crew bring the British naval hostages to the Republic of Pirates in an attempt to sell them, they enter Spanish Jackie's bar and, in a scuffle, Stede accidentally knocks over a large jar that is sitting on the bar and is full of human noses that Spanish Jackie has cut off of her enemies' faces. Hearing the glass shatter, she rushes out to the bar and approaches Stede with her knife drawn:

> Spanish Jackie: Fuck is you supposed to be?
>
> Stede Bonnet: Hi, I'm Stede.
>
> Lucius: He's the Gentleman Pirate.
>
> Spanish Jackie: Well, I got bad news for you, genital pirate. I'm about to start a whole new nose jar.
>
> Geraldo: Uh, baby?
>
> Spanish Jackie: Don't say that. Don't call me that.
>
> Geraldo: Well, I just figured since we're married, and—
>
> Spanish Jackie: None of my other husbands have a problem with it. Do not call me that in here.
>
> Geraldo: Ok, well, Izzy Hands was in here asking about him for his boss.
>
> Spanish Jackie: Blackbeard? Motherfucking Blackbeard want to talk to this guy? [releases Stede from knifepoint]
>
> Stede: Thank you so much.
>
> Spanish Jackie: Shut up. You're an idiot. And you're banished. Do not darken my doorstep again. (*Our Flag Means Death*, 17:03 'A Gentleman Pirate')

Spanish Jackie dresses in red velvet and proves her ability to use violence easily and indiscriminately. She sells a drink that is steeped in the amputated noses of her enemies or people who have offended her over the years. The tone of this interaction with Stede is quite confrontational and negative because he broke her nose jar, which was a public symbol of her status as a violent and scary pirate. Why noses? Perhaps it could be a class critique, cutting off the noses of those who look down their noses at her; this seems likely because Stede, the person who broke the nose jar, is an aristocrat. Alternatively, the disembodied noses could be a phallic symbol according to Lacanian and Freudian psychoanalysis (Guéguen 2010). Prominently displaying this collection of her enemies' noses in her bar suggests that she symboli-

cally castrates her opponents by cutting off their noses, a protruding phallic symbol. The association between amputated noses and genital castration is further solidified when she calls Stede a "genital pirate" and threatens to start a new nose jar with Stede's nose. However, in a departure from traditional psychoanalytic theory, which arguably upholds gender essentialism, Spanish Jackie does not "turn[] herself into a symptom for a man as she incarnates for the man the phallus that the mother lacks and which for the man denies maternal castration" (ibid.). Rather, she is the active agent who performs the symbolic castration that men so fear by cutting off and collecting their noses. Spanish Jackie's character forges a new relationship to masculinity and femininity by adopting an agentic position, defying psychoanalytic theories that claim that binary sex characteristics are determinants of how individuals express and embody desire. She undoes assumptions about how womanhood looks according to class, race, and marital status.

In *Our Flag*, Jim Jimenez (né Bonifacia) is a genderqueer[14] character who we are to assume was assigned female at birth, but they no longer use their dead name, going by Jim and using they/them pronouns. They prove themself to be a masculine pirate because they possess the core attributes masculinity in this context, which equates mainly to violence. However, their embodiment of masculinity in their non-male body precludes them from fully participating in or benefiting from the privileges of dominant masculinities which participate in gender essentialism, coupling maleness with ideal masculinity (Halberstam 1998). Examining the character of Jim illuminates the performativity of masculinity as an embodied act, which can occur consciously or unconsciously. The actor who plays Jim, Vico Ortiz, is themself a non-binary drag king (Vico Suave), which I believe is important to point out because their role as Jim could be seen as an extension of their drag. As an art form, drag calls attention to the exaggerated performativity of masculinity and femininity, imagining what the embodiment of these can look like in a variety of genders or biological sexes. At first, Jim wears a fake nose and a beard in order to pass as a man, which is like a drag costume for the character. After they are discovered to be AFAB, though, the beard and nose come off, but their style of dress and quiet mannerisms remain the same. This makes it clear that the external performative aspect of their appearance was for the benefit of the other men aboard the ship, not for them. The lack of change in their clothing, though, indicates a continuity in masculine clothing preference from when they were trying to pass as a man through when their gender queerness becomes known to the people around them.

[14]The character of Jim Jimenez (Vico Ortiz) never declares themselves to be "genderqueer" or "nonbinary", but their queer bodily presentation and self-naming indicate trans*ness. While I am aware that using words like "genderqueer" or "nonbinary" to describe someone from the 1700s is anachronistic, I use them here because of the modern context in which *Our Flag Means Death* was created (2022) and because the actor who plays Jim is themselves nonbinary.

Both Jim and Spanish Jackie are masculine pirates in non-male bodies, and in violent situations, both favor knives over guns and swords. Jim has been taught by their Nana to throw knives with deadly accuracy, and Spanish Jackie uses her knife to cut off her enemies' noses. Why knives? Perhaps with female individuals displaying masculinity, there is an association between the clitoris being like a small penis. In the past, the clitorises of individuals who embodied masculinity in non-male bodies (i.e., people with intersex or female genitalia) were believed to be capable of penetration during sex precisely because of the person's outward masculine appearance (Halberstam 1998). While this may be the case for some non-male genitalia, it certainly does not ring true for all people who exhibit female masculinity. Nonetheless, it follows that with female masculinity, clitoris is to penis what knife is to sword: a phallic symbol on a smaller scale (a clitoral symbol?). In an episode where Spanish Jackie and Jim interact, there is a lot of talk of these two non-male characters having balls to an even greater extent than people who actually have bodies with testicles. This indicates that masculinity and masculine qualities like fearmongering and violence are still associated with possessing a penis and testicles. However, even though talk of balls brings up the image of male genitalia, its symbolic meaning has been extended beyond the body to connote the embodiment of dominant masculinity, even among people with non-male genitalia.

3.5 Monstrosity, Sex, and Gendered Embodiment of the "Other"

In the 19th century, monsters represented an uncomfortable balancing act between strict binaries such as us/them or male/female and issues from many different social phenomena could be projected onto the body of the monster, including but not limited to class, race, nationality, gender, and sexuality (Halberstam 1995). This is partly due to the hegemonic success of sexual psychoanalysis, which reduces repressed emotions to sexual fixations and makes them legible by embodied otherness. But how do we determine who/what is a monster? Representing monstrosity on screen is far more limited than in literature, limited by the visual appearance of the monster. By confining a monster to a visual form, the personalized interaction between how a viewer imagines a monster based on literary description disappears, forcing the viewer to accept the monster's form as it appears before them on screen. Of course, there is still a complex interaction happening between the viewer and their interpretation of the visual information in front of them, but the limits of flesh and its inflexibility in visual representations is exacerbated by the body of the monster.

One way that monsters are designated as such is determining where the being in question falls on a continuum between monstrosity and cuteness. Monstrosity and cuteness exist on a continuum because neither is about surface aesthetics alone, but both involve emotional resonance. While cuteness "marks its presence by oozing positive feelings... of warmth, safety, innocence, and sweetness," (Brzozowska-Brywczyeska 2007: 218) monstrosity is "immoral, wrong, unusually large, and ugly" (214). When a monstrous being like a vampire is represented in a cute way, it renders them less monstrous and more pathetic, complicating the notion that separates the monstrous being from humans as inherently "other." In order to see something as cute, there must be some degree of empathy and identification between the "us" (i.e., the human audience), and the "them" (i.e., the cute monster). How do we bridge the gap between monstrous/cute, self/other, fear/desire? Looking at how bodies are "done" with regards to sex in representations of monsters sheds light on how these tensions are negotiated and ultimately consummated.

A "freak" is the embodiment of monstrosity, but colloquially can also refer to someone who practices kinky sex. This double meaning may give some clues on how modern representations deal with discomfort between self and "other" with varying results as to whether the sex represents a conquering of the "other" into the realm of the heteronormative "us" or a new, queer arrangement of relationality between fleshy boundaries. Modern gothic monsters, like our favorite vampires and werewolves on screen, are marked by their proximity to humans and are largely "otherized" through a lens of sexuality or gender deviance. Parasitism serves as a useful way to conceptualize gothic monsters because parasites are foreign, non-reproducing bodies feeding off the body of the "normal" human, which echoes the way that queerness is demonized in violent homophobic rhetoric. Thus, within the paradigm of monster-as-parasite, gothic horror creators can neatly package both fear of and desire for the racial, sexual, and gendered "other" in one uncanny body–the monster. Vampires are a perfect example of how otherness and parasitism are transposed onto human-looking bodies because they quite literally feed off of human blood to survive while living adjacent to "normal" human society. The way that vampires have sex gets a lot of attention in recent media representations like the *Twilight* series (2008-2012) and *What We Do in the Shadows* (2019) and its nonnormativity if not outright queerness is emphasized.

Now, I would like to turn to a character from *What We Do in the Shadows* to show how fear of the monstrous body as a "freak" turns into desire for this same body. Who is the monster and who is the self that both fears and desires the monster? How is each party gendered? In the first season of *Shadows*, we are introduced to Baron Afanas (Doug Jones), who is a very old and powerful vampire. Baron Afanas

comes to visit the vampires in Staten Island to check on their progress taking over the human world, which they have not done whatsoever. Before he emerges from his coffin, there are separate asides with each Nadja and Lazlo, the married vampire couple. Both confide to the camera that they had intense sexual affairs with the Baron and talk about how wonderful a lover he was because of his lack of genitals. With the way they speak about him, we as the audience expect to see some kind of conventional attractiveness in the Baron, but when he emerges from his coffin, he is naked and his body is decrepit, wrinkled, and dusty, yet both Nadja and Lazlo fawn over him. Here, it is not normative human laws of attraction that make him sexually desirable, but rather his queer corporeal arrangement lacking genitals. Why is his lack of genitals so enticing to them? It could point to fetishization of the body of the "other." Or perhaps his lack of normative genitalia provides both a literal and figurative space onto which to project their own sexual desires, which may be limited by their own gendered and sexed corporeal forms.

As vampires, they live parallel to human society, but not within it. However, all were humans who lived in vastly different time periods and geographies before becoming vampires, so they have experience as such, albeit in a limited capacity within the modern context in which they find themselves. This limits their interaction with normative society, especially because they are confined to the indoors during the day and can only move about freely at night. More, his status as Baron could influence their attraction to his class and status, but he reveals that his status is a farce. Rather than coming from nobility as the others believed, he was nicknamed "barren" because of his lack of genitals, but he rearticulated this insult about his masculinity (or lack thereof) back into the realm of the desirable by transposing what started as an insult about his particular arrangement of biological sex into a status marker. This may point to the potential for double meaning in calling monsters "freaks." Not only can a "freak" connote a feared, monstrous "other," but it can also connote a highly desirable and satisfactory partner in a sexual context.

3.6 Gender as Embodied Fictive Performance

At this point, I would like to talk about the performativity of masculinity and femininity, focusing on the pivotal role that physical appearance plays legitimating or condemning gender expressions. In *Our Flag* Blackbeard/Ed embodies a kind of hard masculinity that Stede has always wanted to achieve, while Stede embodies a kind of effeminate masculinity that Blackbeard/Ed realizes he might want but has

never explored. Both are men trying to embody hegemonic masculinity in their own contexts, but even when they get close to the standards set for them by their class, race, and social environment, neither are happy. The Gramscian term "hegemony" in refers to a system (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). As such, an individual cannot embody hegemonic masculinity because it is constituted of, and simultaneously constituting, collective social processes like gender. Thus, hegemonic masculinity is an ideal that cannot be successfully embodied by any individual, rendering it unachievable but forever chaseable (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). Directly after the aforementioned scene in the library where Stede shows Blackbeard/Ed his rendering in a book, Blackbeard/Ed compliments Stede's originality and Stede responds,

> Stede: I know it all seems great, but really, if I could just be like Blackbeard, even just for a moment, honestly I would give all of this away.
>
> Blackbeard/Ed: Hey. Do you want to do something weird? (*Our Flag Means Death*, 19:00 'Discomfort in a Married State').

In the next scene, Stede and Blackbeard/Ed have switched outfits, pretending to be one another. They are metaphorically entering the other's persona and letting the other enter themself. Homoerotic, much? The scene opens with Blackbeard/Ed making elegant, sweeping motions with his arms while wearing a billowy, ruffled white top and orange cropped pants, all from Stede's wardrobe. He gets the crew's attention, who gaze at him incredulously, and introduces them to their captain "Blackbeard–" AKA Stede wearing Blackbeard/Ed's black leather outfit. This scene exaggerates Butler's theory of gender performativity, which postulates that gender is a universal daily performance of masculinity and femininity executed through clothing, mannerisms, and adopting a certain way of being in the world (Butler 1999). Physical appearance, personality, and behavior all work together to leave the impression of belonging to certain forms of masculinity and/or femininity. Through this clothing switch, they symbolically embody the other, thus experiencing what it would be like to inhabit a different self with a different gender performance.

There are two layers of self-conscious gender performativity happening in this scene: one happens on a micro level within the show, and the second occurs on a macro level between the show's actors and its viewership. These layers interact with each other to highlight the performativity of embodying gender. Within the world of the show, Stede and Blackbeard/Ed consciously switch appearance-based and behavior-based gender performances in front of the crew. Taking a step back, another public

performance of gender happens on a larger scale when the actors, Taika Waititi (Blackbeard/Ed) and Rhys Darby (Stede), set aside their real-life gender personas to embody their characters. Both the self-conscious "weirdness" of Stede and Blackbeard/Ed switching roles and the taken-for-granted performance of the actors embodying their characters' gender configuration require an audience. Gender cannot happen in isolation—it needs to be witnessed to exist. Blackbeard/Ed and Stede's gender performances only take on meaning in relation to their audience's gender performances—and here I mean both the in-show audience of crew members and the meta-audience of television viewers. The (mis)alignment of the characters' gender expression with that of the audiences determines whether their performance is either legitimated or condemned. This scene where the characters switch clothes calls attention to all the layers of performance that go into "doing" gender. The self-conscious gender tomfoolery in the show blurs the line between fictive gender performance and real-life gender performance, which begs the question of whether a "real" performance of gender is even possible, or if gender itself is an inherently fictive performance.

Figure 3.4 *Our Flag Means Death*, 30:53 'Discomfort in a Married State'

These two layers of gender performance differ not only in scale but also in length of time. The longer an individual embodies a certain gender performance, the more normalized it becomes. Within the show, the temporary nature of the characters' clothing switch upsets the status-quo of their respective gender performances, resulting in shock, confusion, and eventually amusement from the crew. At the same time, the actors' embodiment of their characters for the entirety of the show illustrates the way that gender performances become normalized through collective habituation over a longer length of time. Gender is performed and witnessed both

in the audience's real life and in the fictive gender performances on TV or other media. Viewing television is considered a pleasure which lulls viewers into conforming with the gender constructions presented, so it follows that fictive gender performances influence "common-sense" understandings of gender in real-life (Doty 1993; Feasey 2008). Viewers' tendency to emotionally resonate with fictional characters, especially in sitcoms, makes it easy to forget the profound impact that fictive gender performance has on real-life understandings of gender. Just think of how people compare others to TV characters and then are pleased or take offense to the comparison.

In their own outfits, both Stede and Blackbeard/Ed's personalities seem to align with their physical presentations. Stede is soft-spoken, violence-averse, polite, and kind. He enjoys art and has an interest in high-brow aesthetics, which is reflected in how he dresses. He has a variety of fine, soft garments like silk and cashmere, which come in many colors for all seasons. Blackbeard/Ed's wardrobe, on the other hand, is constituted of darker garments that are made out of more durable materials like leather. His clothes are also cut in such a way that highlights his muscular physique and allows easy access to his weapons at all times. Blackbeard/Ed has a commanding presence, and his personality is carelessly cool while also intense. In his own outfit, it is hard to tell whether Blackbeard/Ed's imposing presence is because of his demeanor, his appearance, or his reputation. When they switch places, though, Blackbeard/Ed still has an aura of authority despite his fancy clothes. Likewise, when Stede is wearing Blackbeard/Ed's outfit, he is still rather meek. It may seem obvious that their personalities stay the same despite the different clothes, but the fact that they feel entitled to act differently just because they have different clothes on is indicative of the power of physical presentation in gender performance. Even though they go back to their own wardrobes after this incidence, as they spend more time together throughout the season, both of their appearances change to incorporate more of the other's style.

A significant symbolic change occurs in Blackbeard/Ed's physical appearance over the course of the season because his relationship with Stede, a far more effeminate man, has made him feel more comfortable incorporating more feminine elements into his appearance. He begins to wear less black and incorporates softer textures into his wardrobe. Throughout the first season, creator David Jenkins noted that the choice to gradually incorporate more purple into Blackbeard/Ed's costumes was because they wanted to associate him symbolically with Prince, the famously genderqueer musical artist (Codega 2022). This is an example of how symbols from different contexts can be appropriated and transposed into representations of masculinity in order to leave the overall impression that masculinity has changed. According to

Anderson's theory of "inclusive masculinity," the expectations of hegemonic masculinity on physical appearance have changed, so now, men are permitted to present themselves as more feminine without being considered gay (2016). Thus, such visible changes in Blackbeard/Ed's is him "strategically borrowing" features of Stede's queer masculinity symbolically through clothing. It is tempting to see this outward change as progress away from the more toxic features of his form of dominant masculinity, but ultimately, he only borrows these features perhaps as a way to resonate with Stede's crew, who are used to a softer management style, which ultimately reifies his position as captain.

The effect that Stede has had on Blackbeard/Ed is epitomized by his behavior and appearance on returning to the ship after being rejected. He wears Stede's soft, floral dressing gowns, cries, sings, and asks that everyone call him Ed rather than Blackbeard. He is holed up in Stede's old quarters wallowing, crying, and composing sad love songs about losing Stede. Izzy Hands is ashamed of him, so he does not allow any of the crew members see him in such a state save Lucius, who is forced to swear on punishment of death that he will not speak of Blackbeard/Ed's state to the rest of the crew. It is interesting to note that Izzy's shame and embarrassment for Blackbeard/Ed is not necessarily due to homophobia because the relationship that Blackbeard/Ed is grieving was a homosexual one. Rather, the shameful thing to him is Blackbeard/Ed's adoption of feminine traits. He also hates Stede for the same reasons, so although not explicitly homophobic, it is still problematic because femininity is an essential facet of some queer men's identities, and by exhibiting prejudice against male femininity, he is also exhibiting prejudice against one of the main communities that practices male femininity, namely the gay community.

In the depths of his despair, Blackbeard/Ed symbolically lets go of Stede and the new ways of being that he has learned from him by releasing his scrap of red silk to the wind, representing his heart and his capacity for softness and love. He pushes Lucius overboard and returns to his all-black leather clothing, smears kohl on his eyes, and starts using a more gravelly, menacing voice when addressing the crew. Looking at his reflection in the blade of his knife, he calls himself the kraken (*Our Flag Means Death*, 'Wherever You Go, There You Are'). He also becomes violent and menacing, and to symbolize his return, he goes to Izzy Hands' room while he is sleeping, cuts off his pinky toe, and forces him to eat it. After the initial shock of this act, Izzy is deliriously despite his having had his toe cut off and fed to him, for it symbolizes the return of the masculine pirate Blackbeard, who he idolizes, and the departure of the more effeminate Captain Ed, who he loathes because of his proximity to femininity, which is threatening to Izzy's dominant and complicit masculinity (Maddison 2015). Here, it is important to point out that Izzy Hands

did not have an issue with Blackbeard/Ed's queerness until he began adopting more feminine attributes in his appearance and activities. In short, he returns to who he was before he met Stede, which is a person very comfortable with violence and severely emotionally unavailable. Blackbeard/Ed changes his appearance to emulate Stede's, which is epitomized in the last episode when he wears Stede's flowy floral dressing gown and encourages the crew to talk about their feelings. However, this change is temporary and surface level, and is ultimately a façade that works to obscure the ways that he still has ultimate power over the crew members, thus reproducing power inequalities between men and women and asserting dominance over other men (Bridges and Pascoe 2018).

Clearly, there are many variations in the embodiment and manifestation of masculinities depending on the context. When different masculinities interact, it can result in an exchange of features from one individual's masculinity to the other's, but an individual's masculinity only ever exists as a relational entity when interacting with other people. Hegemonic masculinity, as a theory, is not sufficient to account for the great degree of variation between masculinities and using the concept of fields to situate masculinities in relationship to one another is much more fruitful for a textual analysis like this one. While it is tempting to conceptualize masculinities hierarchically, the context for every individual is constantly shifting on a local, regional, and global level to the point that where a hierarchy may have existed at one period of time, it is ultimately elusive and as such not the most useful theoretical framework. Embodiment plays a pivotal role in both the overt and covert messaging about masculinity on television. This chapter has gone into detail about gendered embodiment and masculinity in particular, but it is important to remember that the messaging that most viewers are receiving about gender from TV remains on the surface level, and as such it is important to pay attention to the "obvious" or "taken-for-granted" aspects of the show, which I have attempted to do while also incorporating a deeper analysis and a conversation with existing scholarship on masculinity. In the next chapter, I will examine the setting in greater detail and question how homosocial settings can encourage or discourage divergence from contextual norms of gendered embodiment.

4. HOMOSOCIAL GROUPINGS AND HOMOEROTIC DESIRE

4.1 Theoretical Framework

Sedgwick's seminal theory on relationships between men argues that there is a continuum between the realm of the homosocial and the homoerotic which has been broken among men. Societal mechanisms like homophobia, heteronormativity, and capitalism disrupt this continuum for men, but for women, the continuum is, well, continuous. In each chapter of her book, Between Men, Sedgwick explores the ways in which the broken homosocial/homerotic continuum among men is negotiated in literature, theorizing that homophobia is a tool for hegemonic control of men beyond just the sexual realm; indeed, homophobia dictates heterosexual men's actions in the social, economic, and familial realms. As this is the basis for this chapter's theoretical framework, I will outline the basic concepts that Sedgwick covers. First, homosocial relations between men often hinge on their mutual relationships and sexual experiences with women. In this way, men bond over their desired or achieved heterosexual conquests, and women are objectified as tokens for male bonding. Second, the trope of the same-gender double is a useful framework to see precisely how the continuum between the homosocial and the homoerotic is negotiated and disrupted, either by the members of the duo themselves or by external forces. Analyzing representations of relationships between two men or two women reveals how differences in family structure, gender construction, social and economic status are defining factors in the (in)flexibility of homosocial/homoerotic relationships. Third, Sedgwick claims that homosexual activity can either develop homosocial bonds or disrupt them depending on the circumstances. For men who subscribe to hegemonic masculinity, it is usually the latter. Violent homophobia is an important part of the mechanism that disrupts the continuum between homosocial and homoerotic desire, so examining depictions of violence between men is a logical starting place to understand the structure and history of homosocial relationships in representation (Sedgwick 1985).

Why is this continuum disrupted among men but not women? In women's relationships, there is less policing of the line between the homosocial and the homosexual (Sedgwick 1985). To grossly oversimplify, emotional intimacy is gendered and thus acceptable only among women and non-men, so when intimacy enters into men's relationships, it threatens the status-quo. Adding nuance, Woledge argues that in representation, emotional intimacy between men is often permitted so long as any references to or suggestions of physical intimacy, even an innocent hand on the shoulder, are left out because they could be interpreted as homosexual (2005). With this in mind, investigating men's relationships using a poststructuralist approach yields a more holistic understanding of the role of individual agency in upholding the discontinuity between the homosocial and the homoerotic in men's relationships. Furthermore, a poststructuralist approach helps conceptualize the constantly changing relationship between hegemonic masculine hierarchies and patriarchy without necessarily reifying it (Hammarén and Johansson 2014). Looking at the role of agency in fictional representations presents some analytical challenges, which I plan to address with a combination of textual and extratextual sources.

Hammaren and Johanssen's more recent article on homosocial relationships makes an essential intervention into Sedgwick's theory, dividing homosocial bonds into two types: hierarchical and horizontal. When men form mutual relationships by "trafficking in women," they are ultimately defending gender hegemony– this type of relationship is a vertical or hierarchical homosocial relationship. On the other hand, in horizontal homosocial relationships, the continuum between the homosocial and the homoerotic remains intact (Hammarén and Johansson 2014). While they agree with Sedgwick's theory that for men, this continuum has been radically disrupted, men's relationships with one another in today's late capitalist society indicate some degree of continuity between the homosocial and the homoerotic. Part of this change is attributed to the new, hybrid, and inclusive masculinities from the previous chapter (Messerschmidt and Messner 2018; Anderson 2016). If heterosexual men use their (often sexual) relationships with women as a means of bonding with other men, how do non-heterosexual men and people of other genders bond differently? In this chapter, I will be examining theories of homosocial relationality and homoeroticism through a mode of textual media analysis, but first it is necessary to outline the limitations of the existing theories and discuss how they can be altered in order to move beyond binary gender essentialism.

First, while Sedgwick hints at the possibility for wider interpretations of maleness and femaleness, she ultimately uses "male" and "man" interchangeably (Sedgwick 1985). Of course, this is most likely due to the radical and Marxist feminist discourses from which she was working when the book was first published in 1985.

Since then, though, there has been greater awareness of the vital importance of treating biological sex as discrete from gender in feminist discourse. Language matters, so I attempt to consciously decouple maleness from manhood and femaleness from womanhood. Second, Sedgwick's book takes homosocial groupings on the basis of gender for granted. While the role of homosexual men in homosocial settings is addressed on the surface level, it does not discuss how genderqueer people figure into homosocial spaces and constructs. What marker of sameness defines a group as homosocial? These theorists would say gender. But what defines shared gender? And can differences in identity markers be so influential that a group of "same gender" individuals can no longer be considered homosocial? Or, in groups of mixed gender, can other gendered markers like the shared embodiment of masculinity serve to bind the group together as "homosocial"? In-group differences in sexuality and gender expression certainly impact the continuum between the homosocial and the homoerotic, so to begin answering these questions, I will first examine the crucial role of setting in determining what is homosocial.

4.2 What Constitutes the Homosocial?

Determining what constitutes a homosocial environment seems straightforward at first glance; in the existing theoretical literature, the homosocial is characterized by a group of people of the same gender (Sedgwick 1985). But looking in from the outside, it is impossible to determine if all group members share the same gender identity without an explicit declaration. Gender, when conceptualized as a daily embodied performance, is neither fixed nor delineated by certain configurations of embodiment (Butler 1999). Thus, homosocial environments are delimited by the interpreter's subjective assumptions about certain physical, behavioral, and aesthetic conventions being associated with certain genders. Through this interpretative process, individuals usually end up getting sorted into the gender binary. Even functioning within the binary gender paradigm, which is grossly insufficient to account for the wide variety of possibilities for human embodiment, there is so much variation within the categories of "women" or "men" that it is nearly impossible to sort out what binds a group together as homosocial. Can homosocial groups be heterogenous? This seems paradoxical, but then so does the gender binary.

Gender essentialism[15] plays a big role in implicit assumptions about who belongs

[15] Gender essentialism is the assumption that binary biological sex aligns with binary gender identity (i.e., females are women and males are men).

to homosocial groups. Gender essentialism assumes that men are masculine people with penises and women are feminine people with vaginas. But what about when male men are feminine? Or when female women are masculine? Or individuals that fall in between or neither? I would like to suggest reframing homosocial gender groups not as unified by possessing the same genitalia, but rather as groups that share the desire to belong to the same configuration of masculinity and/or femininity. The distinction between a shared desire to belong to a certain arrangement of gender rather than a shared manifestation of it is crucial because desire, as a structure rather than a fixed entity, encompasses collective gender ideas that bind the group together, leaving room for variability in each individual's daily performance of gender. Conceptualizing homosocial groupings as a collective desire to belong also connects it to the continuum of the homosocial and the homoerotic. This way, there is space to explore what happens if one's desire to belong transforms into desire for others in the group.

Queering the definition of homosocial/homoerotic groupings is important because it accounts for homosocial groups with queer members. Furthermore, casual gender declarations are rare in real life and representation alike, and while relying on gendered pronouns to assume an individual's gender identity is a common shortcut in English and other languages, it is a gross oversimplification of the infinite complexity of gender, and it removes individual agency. The embodiment gender is a constant process of becoming which may change at any time. Conceptualizing homosocial relations as a desire to belong to a certain gendered configuration allows for a queer analysis of gendered group dynamics without resorting to harmful gender essentialism. However, based on a comparative analysis of different representations of homosocial groupings within official institutions or outside of them, I believe that this alternative way of defining the homosocial is more feasible in unofficial, non-normative groups, whereas official institutions utilize gender essentialism and the gender binary to decide who is allowed to belong to a homosocial group.

4.3 The Role of Setting in Homosocial/Homoerotic Relationships

Certain settings facilitate a greater degree of continuity between the homosocial and the homoerotic because of their sociopolitical contexts or lack thereof. Intimatopias are physical and metaphorical settings that promote intimacy among homosocial groups (Woledge 2005). They function similarly to heterotopias, which are sites that exist parallel to normative lived experiences onto which diverse ideals and

alternative ways of being are projected (Foucault 1986). The metaphorical space of fictional representations on TV and in movies are examples of heterotopias, for regardless of the text's resonance with lived reality, the personalized interaction between the text and the viewer's lived context allows for an unending variety of idealized or alternative projections about gender, power, work, or anything else. How does setting impact what is permissible for gender expression and interaction in homosocial groups? Intimatopias, though, focus more on what elements of a given heterotopia promote emotional and/or physical intimacy, while heterotopias cover a much wider range of issues including but not limited to economic, political, and social issues being projected onto a certain setting. In fictional representations of intimatopias, the continuum between the homosocial and the homoerotic is less disrupted for men than it would be in other normative contexts.

Foucault claims that the perfect example of a heterotopia is the space of a ship on the open waters because of its detachment from normative sociopolitical contexts. I would like to take Foucault's claim a step further to claim that ships can be intimatopias for the in-group (i.e., the crew) precisely because of the privacy afforded by lack of context and lack of habitual involvement with larger sociopolitical processes of hegemony while at sea (Foucault 1986). Representations of pirate ships are particularly well suited for heterotopias because they already exist on the margins of "normative" society and often include a diverse crew who come from vastly different national, ethnic, and social contexts thrown together on the ship. The constant life-or-death atmosphere of the pirate ship makes its inhabitants operate on queer time, which is why it can be classified as an "intimatopia" as well (Woledge 2005). The main primary source I use, *Our Flag Means Death* takes place during the "Golden Age" of Caribbean piracy (c. 1650-1730), and during this time many pirate crews considered themselves "nationless," which allowed more flexibility in both social organization and economic structure (Dawdy and Bonni 2012). My discussion is limited to the ways that the homosocial(?) heterotopic/intimatopic setting of the pirate ship influences gender configurations, but there is ample opportunity for future research on how such settings affect political and economic organization among different genders.

Representations of time spent at sea symbolizes a masculine rite of passage because the space of the ship, untethered to land and removed from society, allows for self-discovery. The sea journey trope is romanticized, but can quickly devolve into a nightmare, represented by the unpredictability of the sea itself. The sea is a symbol for the unknown and unknowable and thus, it symbolizes all human possibility (Fryers 2018). The British seaman in particular is a champion of English national values of conquering nature and carrying out self-exploration. In film and television

representations of sea journeys, images of the ship can either uphold or undo notions of the ship as a space for romantic self-discovery. Each level of the ship has symbolic significance; visuals of the lower levels of the ship appearing dirty and dark have the capacity to undo its romanticization as a space for positive self-discovery, possibly hinting at discovery of the more depraved parts of the self because of the hardships of life at sea (ibid.).

On The Revenge, the main pirate ship setting in *Our Flag*, it is clear from the lighting and tone in each room that this romantic notion of self-discovery at sea persists both above and below deck. In the first episode, Stede talks about the amenities available on his ship, which include a "rec center, state-of-the-art en-suite, non-humans, the ballroom, jam room, and of course, a full library." (*Our Flag Means Death*, 4:16 'Pilot'). When the camera pans over these rooms, the discrepancy between how Stede conceptualizes his ship and how it actually looks is revealed. The "state-of-the-art en-suite" is a cramped room filled with straw that functions as a bathroom, and the "ballroom" is a tiny room that stores cannon balls, not an actual ballroom used for dances. This malignment speaks to how Stede wants Lucius to represent the ship in writing. Although each room may not live up to the grandeur that Stede wants represented, each room is bathed in warm sunlight when shown on camera. This warmth aboard the ship, even below deck, sets the tone for the interactions that take place within each space, indicating that it is a safe place for self-discovery among like-minded individuals, whose relationships fall somewhere between coworkers, friends, lovers, or community members.

4.4 Institutionalized versus Unofficial Homosocial Groupings

Disclosure of gender queerness and subsequent changes in public perception play an important role in the dynamic of a given homosocial environment. Whether the homosocial group in question is part of an official institution or an unofficial grouping greatly impacts both how the homosocial is defined and whether gender queerness will be met with acceptance or exclusion. I will examine how gender queerness is treated in official homosocial institutions in the Netflix series *Heartstopper* (2022) by examining the case of a trans girl character, Elle. For unofficial homosocial groups, I will turn to the case of Jim Jimenez, a nonbinary character on *Our Flag Means Death*.

One important factor that changes the relationship dynamics and gender performances within a homosocial group is whether it is just the in-group present, or

if outsiders are also present. For example, the crew of The Revenge, Stede's ship in *Our Flag Means Death*, practice more intimacy with one another when only in-group members are present; when there are outsiders present, they put on more of a performance of what they consider aligning with ideal gender presentation to whomever they are performing for. The pressure to perform is greater for a masculine homosocial group when that group interacts with outsiders, especially outsiders of the same gender. This can be seen when Stede and his crew invite members of the British Navy to dine with them and, before these outsiders climb aboard, Stede has the entire crew change into his gentleman's clothing. At the dining table, only the white crew members sit and eat while the non-white crew members serve them, which is not normal for the crew when they are alone but is expected when interacting with English officials. When the members of the Royal Navy are aboard, the non-white crew members serve the white crew members and the guests while they are subjected to racial belittlement by the guests. The introduction of outsiders breaks down the private atmosphere of The Revenge that prevails when only crew members are present, so there is greater alignment to broader hegemonic standards of comportment along gender and racial lines.

Homosocial environments can be defined in different ways, and normative delineation of these groupings often follows the gender binary if not explicitly following gender essentialism. Official institutionalized homosocial settings tend to follow the gender binary and/or gender essentialism to decide who is allowed to belong in that particular homosocial group. This is because official institutions like schools play an important role in maintaining gender hegemony, and binary gender essentialism is part and parcel of maintaining the status quo of power relations, especially in a Western context. Unofficial or nonnormative groupings of people are less rigidly confined to the hegemonic gender system because they are less integral to the way that official, requisite institutions both constitute and are constituted by the prevalent gender order. Furthermore, enrollment in official institutions is often required, especially when considering institutions like boys' or girls' schools, whereas unofficial groupings like belonging to a pirate crew are voluntary. Where does this leave genderqueer people? Can they choose where to get grouped in, or do outside mechanisms trump individual desire to belong to certain homosocial groups?

Heartstopper, a coming-of-age queer romance, follows the lives of a high school friend group in modern-day England (Lyn 2022). The main characters go to two different schools in their community, one of which is all-boys and the other is all-girls. One member of the friend group is a trans girl, and she switches from the boys' school to the girls' school after she comes out. The show starts after her transfer to the girls' school, but there is discussion among their friend group about the merciless bullying

that she faced as a trans girl while still enrolled in the boys' school. The fact that she wasn't made to immediately transfer indicates a degree of gender essentialism at play in the definition of what counts as a homosocial environment, at least in the boys' school. For the boys' school, her status as AMAB (assigned male at birth) superseded her declared gender identity and as such was sufficient to justify her continued enrollment in the boys' school. She chose to switch to the girls' school and was allowed in because the standards for girlhood in this all-girls institution counted her gender declaration as sufficient reason, not taking her status as AMAB into consideration as a way to disenfranchise her identity as a trans girl. Once at the girls' school, she was isolated at first, but overall faced less overt bullying on the basis of her gender identity than she did at the boys' school. The institutional response must be distinguished from her peers' response to her gender transition because while the institution was not an active agent in her bullying, it acted as a facilitator because she was not made to switch schools immediately.

Why did she face less discrimination on the basis of her status as trans* when in the girls' school? It could have to do with the unbrokenness of the continuum between the homosocial and the homoerotic for women and girls. In the boys' school, homophobic bullying remains strong as evidenced by the name-calling and social exclusion that the main character, an openly gay boy, experiences. In this all-boys homosocial environment, when Elle comes out as a trans girl, it clouds assumptions of homosexual and heterosexual attraction because the other boys in the group previously perceived her as a boy before she came out as trans, but then the boys may experience attraction to her as a girl. This causes a panic in their assumed heterosexuality because of her gender queerness, and so the boys who practice complicit masculinity turn to mechanisms like homophobia and transphobia to ensure that the continuum between the homosocial and the homoerotic remains disrupted. Separating pupils into two schools by gender (obviously) upholds the gender binary; while it ultimately does not end up being a problem for Elle, whose queer gender identity is still legible within the binary, it forces conformity for "other" configurations of gender embodiment that are neither girl nor boy.

I do not intend to give the girls' school in *Heartstopper* a pass or condone it as a better institution solely because there is less outward transphobia toward Elle. Instead, it is the official institutional counterpart to the boy's school and as such also has a role in maintaining gender orthodoxy. There is greater flexibility in how the girls display intimacy among themselves without it being perceived as inherently homoerotic, which is supported by Sedgwick's theory on the difference between the relationships within homosocial groups of men and women (Sedgwick 1985). Public disclosure of queerness is essential in analyzing homosocial behavior both settings.

At the girls' school, there is one lesbian couple whose physically and emotionally intimate behavior was dismissed as close friendship while they were dating in secret. After coming out publicly as a couple, though, they face homophobia from some of their peers, and their behavior together becomes much more closely scrutinized by their peers because of the public awareness that their relationship had transgressed homosocial friendship and turned into an actualized homoerotic relationship.

4.5 Queerbaiting and Actualization of Desire

In recent years, debate over queerbaiting in popular media has given rise to questions of whether something homoerotic is going on or if we, as an audience eager to see positive queer representation, are reading too much into it. Brennan defines queerbaiting as "a fan-conceived term that describes a tactic whereby media producers suggest homoerotic subtext between characters in popular television that is never intended to be actualized on screen" (Brennan 2018: 189). Some scholars in queer media studies argue that homoerotic content without actualization is harmful, as it attracts queer viewers without bringing real minority representation to fruition. Other area scholars like Brennan, though, assert that queerbaiting is not inherently negative. Instead, they suggest employing the concept of 'hoyay,' which stands for 'homoerotic, yay!' to discuss instances where the line between the homosocial and the homoerotic is blurred, resulting in a playful space for audiences to "queer" the media in question (ibid.).

Concerns over queerbaiting in media are closely related to the phenomenon of rainbow capitalism, in which corporations use queer symbolism and performative marketing to attract queer consumers without actually having any stakes in queer activism. In media, this looks like teasing queer moments in promotions or leading audiences to believe that the content in question will include queer characters and/or moments, but these moments do not come to fruition. The moment when fictional media crosses from queerbaiting to queer is typically marked by physical affection between same-gender or genderqueer characters, but this notion is complicated when considering the orientation of the creators and actors playing the queer characters. In a perfect world, if a show includes queer themes in order to attract a queer viewership, they would hire queer actors/producers/directors so that the people that stand to benefit from popular queer representations are themselves queer. However, acting is just that, and as such actors' characters do not necessarily align with actors' lived realities and identities. Oftentimes, queer moments on TV happen in

private settings that we, as viewers, are privy to precisely because of the fictional element of the representation. Therefore, I would like to specify that queerbaiting belongs to the realm of fictional representations and as such should not be extrapolated onto actors' personal lives. Hence, while it is great when actors who play queer characters come out as queer themselves, it is also unfair to expect that every actor playing a queer character is queer and publicly out as such. The inclusion of queerness in representation becomes problematic when the creators/actors/directors are all decidedly cisgender, straight people and as such stand to benefit from queer representations without any stakes in the lived experiences of the queer community. Ambiguity among those involved, though, is more acceptable because of privacy and the danger of identity politics.

There is 'hoyay' in *Our Flag*, but not queerbaiting, as the two main characters eventually act on their homoerotic desire and there are a number of other actualized queer romances among the supporting characters. The show features a slow burn between the main characters, and the homoerotic tension grows continually throughout the season. I have noticed that in shows centered around younger characters, like *Heartstopper*, there is more focus on the act of coming out and fully understanding oneself as a defined member of the queer community. There seems to be more explanation of queer identities in shows geared towards younger audiences. For example, in both *Heartstopper* and *Atypical*, both of which include bisexual main characters, there are explanatory segments that explain what bisexuality is and why it is a valid identity that is often obscured even within the queer community.

Our Flag was released in March 2022 over the course of four weeks, with three episodes being released in the first and second weeks, and two episodes being released in the third and fourth weeks. Therefore, prior to the actualization of Stede and Blackbeard's romantic interest in each other in the form of a kiss in the second-to-last episode of season one, fans voiced concerns over queerbaiting. Before then, Stede "The Gentleman Pirate" Bonnet and Blackbeard share several lingering gazes and intimate moments that indicate their romantic interest in each other. At the end of the fifth episode, Blackbeard and Stede stand on the deck alone, backlit by the full moon, gazing at each other meaningfully. They turn away without kissing and give each other a look of longing while walking away (*Our Flag Means Death*, 25:39 'The Best Revenge is Dressing Well). Instances like this one are what caused fans' concerns of queerbaiting. Fears of queerbaiting also stem from the common "bury your gays" trope in television, where queer characters are killed off the show, especially shortly after actualizing homoerotic tension (Waggoner 2018). While more common with queer women characters, this trope still bears mentioning to demonstrate how the popular media industry has instilled in the queer community

an instinctual mistrust of grandiose claims of positive queer visibility on television. Social media, as a metaphorical "space" where the bounds of local, regional, and global contexts are blurred, is a space for queer audiences to discuss these fears or praise positive queer representation on television or other media.

4.6 The Role of Gendered Duos

Sedgwick proposes an analytical framework which examines how the gendered self is constituted from fictional characters' participation in same-gender duos. As she points out, in these duos oftentimes there is one member doing their gender "right," or fulfilling the behavior and appearance expected of them based on their sex assigned at birth, and one member who might try but ultimately fails to embody their assigned gender "successfully." I agree that looking at homosocial duos is helpful to learn about how gender is constructed representationally, for one character's sense of self is often borne out of the perceived differences between them and the other member of the duo. In short, the gendered self is forged relationally. However, the temptation to moralize different gender presentations is present in this framework, and this pitfall must be avoided at all costs. Vitally, this unconscious moralizing of certain gendered facets does not always happen from a hegemonic point of view but can also be done from a queer point of view. In the context of these duos, consumers of gender hegemony may laud the masculine man and show disdain for the queer, while consumers of queer ideologies may laud a nonbinary character and view their rejection of gender norms as taking the moral high ground against oppressive gender norms. Both perceptions are real and present among viewers, but neither is helpful in examining how the embodiment of gender is both constituted of and constituting relations, settings, and ideologies through fictional representations. Instead, I would like to examine how the self is reflected and changed through interaction with the other, especially when the "other" in question is imbued with monstrous qualities.

There is a significant difference in the interactions between these same-gender duos depending on whether their relationship can be considered of the horizontal or vertical type. In both *Our Flag* and *Shadows*, the duos I will discuss are vertical in a way, but perhaps would better be characterized as mentor-mentee relationships saturated with homoeroticism. The first of these, which I have discussed in detail earlier, is the relationship between Stede and Blackbeard/Ed in which Blackbeard/Ed is teaching Stede to be a pirate while Stede teaches him to be a gentleman. In this duo, Blackbeard/Ed takes on the mentor role more than that of mentee, even though

Stede is teaching him things as well, because the knowledge that Blackbeard/Ed is disseminating to Stede is more relevant to their survival in their current context as pirates. In *Shadows*, there are also a number of examples of homoerotic mentor-mentee duos. The first takes place between two women, an established vampire, Nadja (Natasia Demitriou), and a nerdy college student, Jenna (Beanie Feldstein). In the second episode of the series, Nadja takes an interest in this young woman, Jenna, and decides to turn her into a vampire. They meet in the park and, sitting side by side on a bench, Jenna confides in Nadja about her nonexistent love life and the struggles of finding oneself in college. She says,

> Jenna: Here I am, and this beautiful older woman wants to take me on a sexual journey. And, like, I—are you a junior, you a senior?
>
> Nadja: I am senior.
>
> Jenna: Oh, okay.
>
> Nadja: And you are just a fresh baby shot out of her mother's womb glistening with light.
>
> Jenna: Thank you.
>
> Nadja: You're sure you want to do this?
>
> Jenna: I should be honest with you, I'm a virgin. Maybe we should just start with mouth stuff if that's ok.
>
> Nadja: Mmhmm, yes, just mouth stuff. [She bites Jenna's neck.]
>
> Jenna: Oh, ow. Oh. Wowie Zowie that is incred—
>
> Nadja: [Sucking her blood.] Oh, shush darling, you don't need to talk.
>
> Jenna: Oh, I'm sorry, I always talk too much...
>
> Nadja: Now, my sweet little baby turkey, I'd like you to drink something from this vial. Mm? [Nadja hands Jenna a small vial]
>
> Jenna: Oh. Is it vodka or something?
>
> Nadja: It's like a very strong spirit with a little spicy kick. Um, it is my blood.
>
> Jenna: [Drinks from the vial.] Well, your blood is delicious. Why do they call it blood?
>
> Nadja: Well, it's—it is the blood from my body, so I call it my blood (*What We Do in the Shadows*, 16:28 'City Council').

In subsequent episodes, we see Jenna's transformation to a vampire and Nadja begins teaching her how to hunt and kill human victims, discover her special power of invisibility, and transform into a bat. This interaction between them goes beyond homoeroticism into the homosexual and reveals Jenna's naivete about what's happening. She indicates explicitly that she thinks Nadja is taking her on a sexual journey, which, in a way, Nadja does. The act of being turned into a vampire is erotic in many representations just by virtue of the vampire's fangs piercing the soft flesh of the human's neck. Furthermore, after expressing nervousness and exclaiming slightly in pain at the bite, Jenna gets pleasure out of the bite, which is what she starts to say when Nadja cuts her off, telling her not to talk. Not only is Nadja teaching Jenna how to be a vampire, but she is also schooling her in how to be a woman vampire in a setting like her household which is dominated by men. And oftentimes, what that means for them is that they let the men think they are doing things right or letting the men think they are in charge when, in fact, they run the show.

Let's look at male duos next. Crucially, the main character duos in both *Our Flag* and *Shadows* are also entangled partially within a mentor-mentee relationship, but it goes beyond that. In *Our Flag*, Blackbeard/Ed fulfills the role of Stede's protector more than once. First, he saves him from hanging at the hands of the Spanish navy. Second, he saves him from the firing squad by agreeing to give up piracy and work as a privateer[16] for the crown. However, the intention behind his saving Stede changes drastically between the first and second instance. When they first meet, Blackbeard plans to befriend Stede and eventually kill him, burn his body, and pretend it's his own, and assume Stede's identity as a gentleman so that he can stop pirating as the notorious Blackbeard. When he starts to fall in love with Stede, though, he tries and fails to actually stab him in the back and, weeping, admits his plan to Stede and decides not to carry it out. Stede is surprised but responds kindly. At the end, when Stede is about to be executed by firing squad, Blackbeard/Ed steps in front of him and calls for the Act of Grace, which said that any pirate who agreed to work for the crown would be spared punishment (*Our Flag Means Death*, 'Act of Grace'). This shift from protecting Stede for personal gain to self-sacrifice to protect him because he loves him is quite profound. At the point of the self-sacrifice, their relationship is heavily homoerotic but has not crossed into the homosexual when using physical actualization as a benchmark. While Stede does not physically protect Blackbeard/Ed, he stands up for him emotionally when he is being ridiculed at a high-society party, thus protecting his self-confidence, and

[16] Privateers are "pirates who operate with a legal license from a state government to attack enemy ships and ports during wartime, keeping a contractual share of seized goods" (Dawdy and Bonni 2012: 678).

deriding the people who made him question his worth. Perhaps this protective or paternalistic element in their relationship is what facilitates the transition from homosocial into homoerotic and eventually homosexual.

In *Shadows*, there is a similar but more reciprocal protective relationship between Nandor, the eldest vampire in the household, and his human familiar, Guillermo. Guillermo finds out at the end of the first season that he is a descendant of a renowned vampire slayer and ends up killing numerous vampires who try to harm the vampires in his household. When he admits that he is the vampire killer, no one believes him because for one, he is a human, and for two, he looks very nonthreatening in his cable-knit sweaters, glasses, and effeminate mannerisms. But nonetheless, he acts as the vampires' protector. In the other direction, when Nandor takes Guillermo into all-vampire spaces, Nandor has to protect him from being eaten by the other vampires by continually claiming him as his familiar. Both Guillermo and Nandor are under the threat of death precisely because of their association with the other: Nandor is under threat because he lives with a vampire killer and is being blamed for his murders, and Guillermo because he is surrounded by vampires thirsty for human blood. Like *Our Flag*, there is a threat of life-or-death at all times, so maybe because the stakes on living are so high, it makes the stakes of sliding from a homosocial relationship to a homoerotic or even homosexual one seem more trivial in the grand scheme of things.

4.7 Implications

Queering homosocial settings also entails a redefinition of the concept and a close examination of the underlying assumptions about gender that are made in order to fit theory. I aim not to wrangle primary sources and representations not to make theory work, but to problematize existing theoretical categories that would benefit from a thorough re-examination of where genderqueer people fit in the equation. In this chapter, I showed that homosocial groups are defined differently based on whether the group in question is part of an institution or if it stands alone or in opposition to the institution. Through my analysis, I show how gender queerness is represented in *Heartstopper* and *Our Flag Means Death* with relation to homosocial relationships. I examine the gendered differences between the gay panic that arises when the homosocial crosses into the realm of the homoerotic. For homosocial groups consisting of men, boys, or masculine people, the transgression from homosocial to homoerotic is more heavily policed in both official institutional settings and

unofficial settings. However, instances of homophobia and forcing adherence to the gender binary are more intense in representations of official homosocial institutions than unofficial ones. For women, girls, and feminine people, although there is more flexibility in standards of behavior in a homosocial group because the continuum between the homosocial and the homoerotic is less broken, intimacy between members of the in-group is treated differently and with more homophobic hostility when it is publicly disclosed that they are participating in a queer relationship.

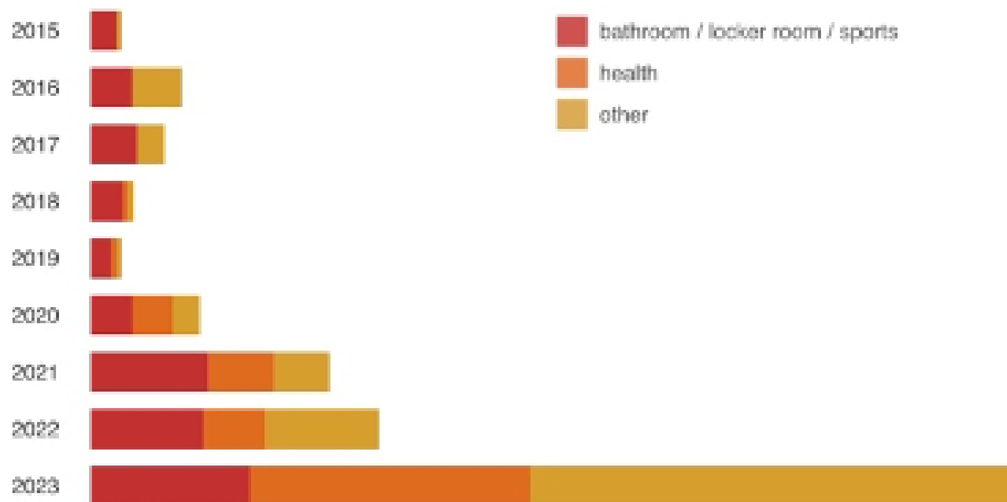
By reframing homosocial groupings in terms of desire, there is more flexibility to become alongside a group with the same arrangement of gendered or embodied desires. Furthermore, because desire is a structure, not a set of rules, there is more flexibility within gender arrangements in the in-group. There is also room for individual agency to decide what that desire looks like aesthetically, behaviorally, and relationally while remaining a group member. Looking at homosocial pairs is useful to see exactly how desire to be the other can transform into desire for the other or vice versa, and as such there is a degree of idealizing and projection involved when a relationship goes from homosocial to homoerotic or homosexual. More work is needed to look at why physical intimacy is the benchmark by which viewers police the line between the homoerotic and the homosexual, and perhaps utilizing hoyay is a helpful way to see homoeroticism as playful and full of potential. After all, to truly queer media, it is necessary to throw out normative conventions of meaning and naming, and maybe looking beyond just physical intimacy on screen will allow queer viewers to explore who decides what the normative boundaries between different types of relationships are and how we can overcome them for more flexible (and messy) queer representation.

5. CONCLUSION

Although queer representation on television does not equal more rights or better conditions for queer people's lived realities, it still matters. Given the atmosphere of trans*-hysteria[17] and general homophobia sweeping the US right now, it is amazing that television with representations of trans*, genderqueer, and other LGBTQIA2S+ people are still being made and popularized. While some queer and trans* representations have made it into mainstream popular media and may have the potential to lead audiences to question gender binaries, queer content on different streaming services often leads to taste circles—if you don't like it, don't watch it (Boisvert 2020). Furthermore, certain representations only serve to reify existing power structures and gender orthodoxy (Avila-Saavedra 2009). To avoid this pitfall in my analysis, I attempted to "queer" genre within queer television to see if representations of queerness (as in nonnormative gender and sexuality) are truly queer (as in nonnormative generally) or if the inclusion of queer characters only serves to attract a wider viewership without doing anything to challenge the status quo.

[17] In 2023, 561 anti-trans legislative bills have been introduced in 49 US states, 79 of which have passed ("2023 Anti-Trans Bills: Trans Legislation Tracker" n.d.).

Figure 5.1 "2023 Anti-Trans Bills: Trans Legislation Tracker"



The issue of queer representation on TV is closely related to trans*phobic and homophobic conservatives' efforts to censor queer visibility and performance in the broader US context. There has been a significant uptick in anti-trans* legislation in recent years on both state and national levels—since 2015, more than 500 anti-trans* bills have been introduced, "a 2,489 percent increase since 2015" (Contreras 2023). Experts have connected this rise to the growing power of fundamentalist Christian nationalist groups, whose political impact was crystallized in 2022 when Roe v. Wade, a supreme court ruling that protected abortion access, was overturned (ibid.). Many anti-trans* movements started with efforts to ban drag performances altogether them or limit their audiences to adults only, an overt attack on visibility of gender non-conformity in public spaces (Rhodes 2023). Trans* and queer representation in the space of global media, while boycotted by these anti-trans* groups, has proven more difficult to attack precisely because of the decentralized yet ubiquitous nature of streaming services.

I believe that representations on TV that transcend normative genre categories have the most potential to "queer" queerness on television. In the second section, I discussed how *Our Flag Means Death* (2022) and *What We Do in the Shadows* fit

into many genre categories, and the tensions between these categorizations are what makes these programs queer in addition to the queer characters and relationships being represented. Another way to queer genre is through the juxtaposition of multiple, often conflicting, character types being placed onto the body of a single character, so that the viewers are forced to hold the contradictions with one another. This defies generic closure and also makes determining closed meanings impossible and implicates the viewer's own lived experiences in interpreting contradictory elements. How a character is embodied is very important in determining whether a show has the potential to queer genre. While many different genres and narrative strategies have queer potential, I believe that TV mockumentaries are one of the most effective and entertaining ways to "queer" TV because there is space to question our ways of knowing and disseminating knowledge. In addition, mockumentary-style TV programs call the viewer's attention to their own positionality as a content consumer, inviting them to question what it is about normative modes of narrativity that they take for granted as objective truth while other narratives remain strictly fictional. Finally, mixing media on TV shows and telling coming-of-age stories leave ample room for audience interpretation, which invite viewers to think about the queer possibilities of becoming at any age.

Gender is always an embodied experience, and it is a daily performance undertaken by all (Butler 1999). Hegemonic masculinity and patriarchy grew together in conjunction with the rise of the binary gender system, and it was forced on large swathes of the earth's (human) population by European colonizers (Halberstam 2018). As a result, hegemonic masculinity arose, which is a process that both constitutes and is constituted by contextually dependent contexts of gender on the local, regional, and global level (Messerschmidt and Messner 2018). Masculinity and femininity are inherently relational concepts, so examining manifestations of each and how they are embodied in television programs gives an idea of the existing global concepts of gender orthodoxy, as media (including film, television, music, etc.) has become an ephemeral space-without-place where global ideas about gender are explored. While gender presentation is relational even within the representation, another interaction between different contexts of gender understandings occurs on a larger level between the program in question and the viewer's own unique understanding of gender based on their local, regional, and global contexts. Therefore, gendered meanings on television abound into infinity, but it is still useful to examine both the televisual text itself and other extratextual media surrounding the program in order to see what influences gender constructions on TV and how we, as viewers, are in turn influenced by what we see. The TV programs I discuss throughout are in English and are widely available in the US, which is the regional context that I am

referring to because of my own positionality. With the current climate of growing anti-trans* sentiment in the US, there is a paradoxical relationship between positive queer and trans* visibility on TV and simultaneous oppression in the lived experiences of trans* and queer people. Legislators are working hard to render trans* and queer people invisible in daily public life starting with drag performances, an art form that exaggerates the performativity of embodying gender. So, for viewers who may live in environments that are lacking live queer performance like drag because of this anti-trans* and queer legislation, television is a space where viewers can find it from wherever they may be.

On the flipside, though, packaged along with queer and trans* characters are more normative representations of dominant or hegemonic masculinities and femininities. One does not exist without the other, just like the overlaps and tensions between diverse gender presentations in real life. Representations of dominant masculinities are quite common on television as in real life and can even persist in queer characters' embodiment of gender. The interaction between different formations of masculinity and femininity calls attention to each characters' implicit assumptions about what it means to be a certain gender, and through exposure to diverse formations of gender, the characters can in turn queer gender and sexuality. The way that gender is embodied on television unconsciously informs viewers' common-sense understandings of gender, so I attempt to show how mechanisms of privilege still function in representations of queerness on TV even though they use mechanisms like strategic borrowing from subordinated gender expressions to obscure the maintenance of gender orthodoxy. I argue that this is common among manifestations of white cisgender dominant masculinity, but such processes of obscuring dominance on a symbolic level conceal the continuity of hegemonic masculinity/gender orthodoxy even within subgroups of subordinated identities.

Queer embodiments of gender arise not because of dominant embodiments of gender, but rather alongside them with their own unique histories and struggles. I examine how nonnormative embodiments of gender are represented and question whether these representations do indeed undo the assumptions of gender essentialism. Female masculinity is one such example, and I argue that such nonnormative gender configurations can be used to mark queerness from normative society but can also serve to promote belonging in certain groups. An important part of queer embodiment on TV is looking at diversity not only within the text, but also within the cast and crew members, because representation of queerness for the sake of attracting queer viewers is not truly queer unless the opportunity to play queer characters, especially genderqueer ones, is given to genderqueer actors. While I believe that priority should be given to queer actors and content creators when representing

queerness on screen, there is also definite value to inviting straight, cisgender actors, directors, and creators to listen to queer narratives and learn about queer embodiment through collaboration and creativity. More, the actors who play queer characters but are not themselves publicly queer subsequently may become symbols of the queer community that their characters belong to, which forces them to reckon with their own positionality as a symbol for, but not member of, larger queer fandoms.

Actualization and queerbaiting are important factors in representations of intimacy among characters within homosocial groups. With representations of queerness in homosocial settings, the validity of the text's queerness often relies on physical actualization of romantic interest. Showing physical and emotional intimacy between characters that belong to the same homosocial group is a way to queer relationships and undo the damage that hegemonic gender orthodoxies have done to the continuum of the homosocial and the homoerotic, especially if that group is made up of men, boys, or masculine people. Public disclosure of queer desire in a relationship is also an important factor in how the other members of the in-group respond to the transgression of the boundary between the homosocial and the homoerotic. Of course, seeing queer desire actualized on the TV screen is gratifying, but the queer moments that do not involve physical intimacy, but rather hint at homoerotic desire, are also important if we are to truly queer television (Brennan 2018).

Finally, I discuss theories of homosocial/homoerotic relationships and explore how the group's proximity to official institutions impacts the definition of what constitutes a homosocial group. Official institutions adhere more strictly to the gender binary and groupings in these contexts are more likely to align with gender essentialist discourses. This may be changing, but nonetheless these problems still exist in representation today. Unofficial homosocial groups are not necessarily defined by a shared gender identity, but rather are bonded through the same collective desire to embody a certain arrangement of masculinity or femininity. Because these unofficial homosocial groups are formed around personal desire rather than top-down rules of gender orthodoxy, the actualized standards for the embodiment of masculinity and femininity are more flexible as long as the collective desire to belong to a certain group, such as pirate masculinity, remains. I examine the gendered differences in collective response when members of the in-group transition from a purely homosocial relationship to a homoerotic one.

In conclusion, the most important part of queering TV is the experience that each and every viewer has when they watch TV. Watching television, especially fictional programs, is considered a ubiquitous form of entertainment, and in recent years it

has become available everywhere. So even if an individual's own context in terms of gender and sexuality inclusivity is limited or oppressive, television is a place we turn to in order to see different, if not better, realities than our own. Regardless of the scholarship that claims that positive queer visibility on television is not a sign of political progress, with which I agree, it should not diminish the very real impact that seeing queer love or alternative embodiments of gender can have on viewers.

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