Deconstructing Current Representations of Queer Masculinity in Media Through

Art-Based Self Study and Interview-Based Research

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Introduction:

This dual art based research and participant interview study centers around the politics of representation. In today's climate, I wanted to see more positive representations of queer men like myself, so I decided to make those representations happen. The work I've done for this project revolves around people who identify in some way as queer men and their self representation as well as representation by other people. The impetus of these works centered around my experience as a queer man navigating social media, and the negative representations of MLM (men loving men) that I began to see emerging in many places online, including in queer circles, which is why I was doubly interested in creating positive representations. Based on my research, I have been able to pinpoint some of these negative ideologies as coming from Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminists, or TERFs. By creating naturalistic representations of queer men that I knew, I was looking to create truthful and positive representations of them. This art project also launched me into my research around the politics of representation in general.

 Research question: How do the representations of queer people in popular media impact the outlooks of queer men around their gender, sexuality, and comfortability in regards to their gender presentation?

Sub question: How are queer men shown and represented in popular media, if they are represented at all? How can creating my own representations of queer men impact that canon?

Sub question: How does queer men seeing themselves represented impact their outlooks on themselves and on queer men in general?

Methodology:

This project evolved as an art based self study and a qualitative research study involving three interviewed participants. I found a small pool of participants through my own social circles to draw portraits of and interview. I realize that using people with whom I had personal connections with might skew the findings of my study, but I also acknowledge that this is in part both a participant and self study, therefore, the findings are only relevant for communities that are similar to my own. As part of the self study, I monitored my own process of artmaking through much photo documentation and some journal entries over a period of 3 months. Studio time was scheduled whenever I could fit it into my own busy work schedule, and so the artmaking tended to happen in fits and starts. Along with my personal reflections, I included myself as one of the participants in the interviews, answering the same questions that I had written to compare them to the answers of my other participants. Given that I was the one who initiated the study, I focused much more heavily on the responses from my three participants than my own opinions. I allowed participants, partially because of the virtual environments I have been working in, to select their own reference photos to send to me so they were in complete control of their own representation in starting the portraits I drew of them. I encouraged full body photos showing their faces, in whatever state of dress (nude or clothed) felt most comfortable to them. Through allowing participants the ability to self determine their modes of representation, they were given agency to appear how they wanted others to see them. However, once I started drawing the portrait, the participants gave me no more direct feedback until the portraits were finished, although they did have access to view the in process photos I took throughout the process.I shared process photos via text to the participants as I took them.

For the art based study, I used 6x8in gray Ampersand Pastelbord and chalk pastel pencils for all portraits. This is a medium I am familiar with and is one that I wanted to use more of in my own work, so it stimulated my studio practice.

For the interviews, I allowed participants to either engage in a text conversation with me, or to respond to the interview questions on a video call which I transcribed. This variation was due to the limited availability of some of my participants, and was also a calculated choice to make sure that participants were answering some of these more personal questions in an environment where they felt most comfortable. Engaging in an active discussion with my participants, be it over a text or a call, also felt important to my study because I wanted to be an active resource for the participants to feel more comfortable and openly elaborate on their answers, instead of responding to something that felt more one-sided and disconnected like a form or email.

Literature Review:

In order to inform this study, I had to research some of the history around queer representation in media, and how masculinity in general is thought of and represented in media. This also requires some prior knowledge about queer theory and current issues facing queer people, which is an exhaustive field and so I chose to only mention what is relevant to this study, and also to rely on some of my own lived experience and expertise as a queer individual. Within my literature, I made sure to pay special attention to the impact social media has been on the way we see queer people. Through reviewing the article on #nohomo, I learned more formally about networks of disavowal that existed on Twitter. Within cisgender heterosexual (cishet) male spaces, any evidence of queerness, emotion, or tenderness is put behind the hashtag #nohomo in

order to make it more acceptable to express these feelings without being explicitly considered gay. The fact that these complicated networks exist adds to the context of my study because of the way social media networks interface with even the idea of queerness. Of course, queer spaces exist on social media, but they are less common that these #nohomo posts. I also looked at the way television and queer studies intersect. Television attempts to create something relatable and "normal," while queerness is anything but. And in turn, innovations in television and adding in queerness to shows can both be considered as trying to normalize queerness or to queer television. Therefore, there is a reciprocal relationship between television and queerness, or truly, anything out of the ordinary, as it continues to evolve. I also attempted to research the underpinnings of masculinity within my research, and some of the ways in which recent queer history has impacted the way communities form. For instance, the difference between bisexuality and pansexuality has been something that has divided the queer community in the last ten years.

After I had that history dealt with, I dove into research around TERFs. TERF ideology centers around the idea of using radical feminist ideology to discriminate against men, and also, everything having to do with penises. In this way Trans-Exclusionary specifically refers to the exclusion of trans women from feminist circles, because based on the ideology, because trans women are born with penises, TERFs view them as biologically men and therefore invading womens' spaces as predators. (Obviously, this is not the case.) However, the reaches of this ideology are much further and more insidious than this. TERF ideology also manifests itself through lesbians believing that bisexual women are disgusting or lesser because they have sex with people who have penises, and creates a narrative of a "pure" or "golden" lesbian who is better because she has not touched a penis. This leads to alienation of bisexual women and biphobia in general. In this same way, the idea of lesbian relationships being more "pure" than

gay relationships has also permeated queer communities, to the point that there has been hate speech against queer men online within queer circles. These ideologies are extremely harmful, and pin the blame of patriarchy on a specific biology rather than a system of oppression. These were some of the ideas I was grappling with as I completed this study.

Data Collection:

The data I collected included a few reflections on my art practice, and interviews with my participants. The interviews happened both over the phone and via text/email. They revolved around four main questions, with elaboration where necessary, as follows:

- In this study I'm using the words "queer" and "'man. " Are there other relevant words you use to describe your identity?
  - For more obscure terms, I followed up with asking participants to define those terms in their own words.
- Where do you find the most representations of your identity in popular media?
  - This was often followed by discussion of appropriate and inappropriate representation of queer men and queer people in media.
- How do representations of your identity, and queer men who look like you, impact you or make you feel?
- How does the drawing I made make you feel about yourself?

Terms that participants used to describe their identities:

- Queer
- Man

- Non binary

- Gay

- Genderpunk

- Gendervoid

- Man-adjacent

- Genderfluid

Areas in media that were discussed in this study:

- Television (Elliot Page (Actor), Chaz Bono (Actor), Voltron: Legendary Defender (2016), Yuri on Ice (2016), The L Word (2004))

- Movies (Marvel Cinematic Universe)

- Youtube (Miles McKenna)

- Books (Fun Home, Prose Edda, Rick Riordan Novels (Percy Jackson & the Olympians, Magnus Chase and the Gods of Asgard, The Heroes of Olympus))

- Comics (Loki: Agents of Asgard, Dykes to Watch Out For)

- Video games (Pokemon)

- Musicals (Fun Home)

- Instagram

- Fanfiction

Participant A cited actors Elliot Page and Chaz Bono as positive representations of trans male identity, and also mentioned Youtube influencer Miles McKenna, and expressed discomfort with the representation of trans men in The L Word (2004). Participant B cited the Prose Edda,

Loki: Agents of Asgard, and Magnus Chase and the Gods of Asgard, and also cited Pokemon as an important source of representation they could project their identity onto without feeling the pressure of human gender norms. Participant C cited Yuri on Ice (2016), and works by Alison Bechdel, including Fun Home, both in the form of the book and musical, and the comic Dykes to Watch Out For. They also discussed the Marvel Cinematic Universe, several Rick Riordan novels, and also brought up the medium of Fanfiction. I brought up Voltron: Legendary Defender (2016), and Instagram and social media through the course of the interviews.

Data Analysis:

Building Community and Relational Knowledge

Through the course of this study I encountered many forms of media representation that I had never considered before. Through interviewing my participants, we shared media between each other and introduced each other to new media and people in adjacent communities. These conversations were profound and frequent enough to be mentioned in this study. In my first discussion with Participant A, they had trouble citing any queer representations in media that they thought fit their identity. I shared a social media influencer, Julian Gavino, that I thought they might identify with, and they told me they had never heard of them. After a little while to contemplate, Participant A came up with the actor Chaz Bono, an actor who I did not know. While we were both part of the same community of queer trans men, there was little overlap in our knowledge of sources, and this led to an active sharing of media between participants, which happened in each interview I held. There were little to no recurring media sources between participants, and each participant had different media sources that they felt affected them most. Participant A mostly cited actors and TV as sources that they found representation in. Participant

B mostly cited books and video games. Participant C cited mostly movies, TV, and musicals. I was surprised to find that all participants expressed that they had trouble finding representations of their identities in any media and often had difficulty identifying and recalling specific sources that they felt represented their identities completely.

Othered and Othering

All participants also expressed some form of anger or resentment toward cishet populations. This often took the form of participants stating that they were other from cis men, and did not identify in the same way as a cis man would. Some participants also asserted that they felt they were better than or a better version of a man than cis men. This othering stems from the oppression that comes along with gender normative societal roles, and embodies a natural rebellion from them, along with a general frustration with the gender normative system. Being othered by society naturally creates minority groups. We see, how over time, because of discrimination, that an identifiable LGBTQ+ group has formed around shared trauma and a desire to be treated better. These groups continue to splinter into more insular communities. This is evident, for example, with the rise of the term pansexual (loving and being attracted to anyone regardless of gender) as an alternative to bisexual (loving and being attracted to people of two or more genders). Originally, bisexual was the term used to describe most forms of multigendered attraction, but increasingly, some people in the LGBTQ+ community felt that this term relied too much on the prefix bi- as relying on the gender binary, or implying that transgender identities were not part of the bisexual umbrella, and so pan- (all) was offered as an alternative. The pansexual flag was first created in 2010 and since then, the bisexual population has argued that the term 'bisexual' itself was coopted from medical professionals and therefore despite the usage

of word parts was never central to the idea the term covered itself, that of multigendered attraction. (Zane, 2018) At this point the bi/pan 'discourse' has simmered down to personal preference on which word to use, with many members of the LGBTQ+ community (including myself) being unsure what the 'real' difference is between the two terms. Partrticipant B described how they felt a sense of competition with other queer people when seeing representations of them, and seeing people whose physical or medical gender transitions gave them certain results that they wanted to see in themselves made them envious. They explained that they were aware of the negativity of these responses, but that it still made it harder for them to relate to representations of real queer people in media, and they felt more comfortable identifying with fictional characters. Participant B states, "I describe that competitiveness with cis men as part of it, and if it's a totally fictional character, I don't have to worry about any sort of competition. I don't have to worry about who would win. They're fake. I'm already winning."

The Room Where it Happened (on "Shitty" Representation)

Among several types of representation that were discussed during the course of the interviews, I want to point out the issue of "shitty" representation. Not all representation is positive. Some representation is actively harmful. My discussion of the L Word with Participant A pointed out a stereotype about trans men that came about because of the show. There was one character in a group of women who transitioned to male during the course of the show. The character was played by a cis woman, and once this character, Max, started taking testosterone, the show portrayed him as brash, angry, and generally unhappy, ruining some longstanding relationships with other characters in the show. This portrayal, according to Participant A, has created a long lasting stereotype that trans men become angry and irrational while taking

testosterone, and generally grow to regret their transition. Through my research of the L Word, I learned that no trans men were part of the writing team for the show and no trans men were consulted on how to represent this character. In discussion with Participants B and C, I brought up the issue of gay representation in Voltron: Legendary Defender, where the character Shiro is revealed to have had a boyfriend in the past, and in the same episode this boyfriend is introduced, he dies. This is generally referred to as the "Bury Your Gays" trope, wherein queer characters are often introduced in media only to quickly die or meet a tragic end. Obviously, this trope and others like it have negative consequences. There is an overwhelming amount of tragedy within most media that focuses or includes queer characters, and few stories with positive messages or happy endings. When speaking with Participant B, one thing they pointed out was that in the end, there was a consensus among some fans of Voltron that the portrayal of Shiro was ultimately a positive one, because although his boyfriend was only in one episode and died tragically, Shiro was a main character that made a lot of money in merchandising, so even when they "killed" Shiro off, he would always be brought back, and at the end of the series he was alive and well. Because of this, some fans asserted that having a confirmed gay character still alive at the end of a series where character deaths were common was a uniquely positive outcome, although not the ideal one.

When Specificity Hurts

All participants found that in many cases, they could never find representations of their exact identities. They also reported that they did not feel a need to have exact representations of their identities, but would prefer a wider, vaguer representation of a queer coded character that

they could identify with. In these cases, becoming too specific about the nuances of a character's queer identity might come to a point where that character alienates more members of the community with their specificity than the members that would identify with that character. Participants said that they did not find many exact representations of their identities in media, but instead tended to identify with characters who had broad enough identities that they felt they could easily fit into and project themselves onto.

In discussing a character named Alex from the Rick Riordan series Magnus Chase, who is genderfluid including male, female, and nonbinary identities, while the participant had no relationship with feminine identity whatsoever,

> "Whenever a character that is queer and a man is introduced or shown to be, or revealed more often as such, it either only shares one or two traits or qualities with me that I can actually relate to or it's so overly specific about that one individual's relationship with their gender or sexuality that I just don't relate at all and I can't even apply that character to myself. … I cease to relate at certain points. That's kind of an issue with like representation I guess, because when you get into, like, really nuanced identities it's going to be really hard to find a character that's like "That's me finally!" And I kind of prefer vagueness over intense specifications. I probably would have been excited enough about Alex to actually read Magnus Chase if it had been a little bit less specific and I would have been able to project a little bit more."

This quote highlights an idea that a couple of my participants echoed-- that specificity in representation makes it more difficult to relate to characters in media because the identity they have ceases to be *their* identity.

Non Standard Modes of Representation

Participant B mentioned the liberation of reading the Prose Edda, an ancient text that could not be expected to conform to the same gender roles as modern society. Along with this, given that it is an epic, the stories focused on the deeds of the characters rather than their identities, and this participant found that they could identify with these characters, in a queer way, with more ease given that the priorities of this media were much different than modern media. Participant B also said they projected heavily onto Pokemon because they understood that Pokemon were animals that were not governed by gender roles, and this gave them more of a sense of freedom to interpret these characters into something they related to without feeling as many real world societal pressures. With animals, which are both outside the realms of human gender and human presentation, Participant B said they felt they could project whatever they wanted onto Pokemon as a "blank canvas" of sorts. Participant C described the validation of one of the songs in Fun Home, where a young girl sees a Butch lesbian for the first time and sings about the profound sense of connection and validation she feels seeing this woman. Participant C said that even though they did not identify as a lesbian, this same feeling of profound connection when seeing other queer people presenting openly was something they were very glad to have represented in media, as this same feeling was an important part of their queer experience. The identities of characters are not the only important thing to represent, but also feelings and experiences that are uniquely queer, for queer people to relate to.

Transforming Media

Often, instead of searching for confirmed queer characters in popular media, some participants said they more often interpreted media they liked to include queer characters whether the author intended that in the canon of the work or not. Participant C mentioned that

fanfiction was an important part of the media they consumed that made them feel like their identity was being represented. Participant C specifically mentioned Steve Rogers (Captain America) from the Marvel Cinematic Universe, and that even though there is no representation of this character being trans, they relate to him as a trans man. This is because of some of the experiences that Rogers had in the movies that even though they were not queer coded, Participant C claimed them as something they felt fit into their queer experience. Specifically, the scene where Captain America goes through his transformation with superserum from a scrawny young boy to a fully fleshed out and capable man, is something they felt mirrors how many trans men feel when they start feeling the effects of taking testosterone. We continued to discuss how there are many experiences that characters go through in media, while not intended to be queer coded, that queer people claim as representations that they identify with.

Seeing Yourself

I realized through my personal reflections, that using chalk pastels, a medium I was very comfortable with, allowed me to feel more confident in my ability to faithfully represent my subjects and create a product that the both of us would be happy with. Using this medium was liberating, and allowed me to return some faith, excitement, and joy to my art practice which has recently been languishing. I was also excited to be able to bring some joy into my participants lives by representing them. When drawing myself, I recognized heightened dysphoria around my body, which became better once the portrait became more finished and actually started to feel like me. I did some reflection on what it felt like to push a portrait to the place that it feels finished: "Trying to capture the essence of a person is weird. I know I don't have to be exact, but I can tell when it feels wrong. I can tell the moment it becomes the same person."

In showing my work to my sitters, they expressed a lot of happiness and joy. One participant said they almost cried seeing the finished portrait for the first time. Another participant said they were proud to be part of the project I was embarking on. One participant said the project was heartwarming, and they don't see things like this in the art world, given that most projects similar to mine are centered around trans women, while trans women really did need that representation as well. While these responses were nice to hear, they were less impactful to me than the discussions my participants and I had around issues of representations in media. While I am glad to make my participants happy, and feel good about themselves, this art project will only begin to have wider impacts when I begin to share my portraits in galleries and on social media for a larger audience.

Findings:

Based on my data analysis, my ideas changed as to how queer men should be represented in media. Drawing portraits of my participants made them happy, but there were deeper points of analysis that came from discussions of other media. Through this study, my participants echoed that they felt that there were not enough representations of queer men in media, and that they had trouble pinpointing even one example of a queer man in media they enjoyed. Every participant was able to discuss at least one form of representation of queer men, though, so we know they do exist, even thoiugh they are sparse, and also often negative representations. These negative representations have had lasting repercussions as to how these minorities are viewed. I also found that participants cited multiple sources as something they considered representation that they identified with that wasn't an explicit form of representation. Characters that were queer coded instead of explicitly queer, animals and

aliens, and representations of uniquely queer feelings and experiences were all cited as validating. In relation to this, participants also said that overly specific representation of identities alienated more people than it helped, and that less specific representations, while still being confirmed queer, would be more beneficial.

Conclusion:

My research was conducted in the form of a small case study involving a more insular community, so findings are specific to this group. These findings also may not be representative of all queer people or all men, and should be taken with a grain of salt. However, the ideas behind these findings can be more widely applicable. The benefits of representation in media are clear. This study is mostly trying to puzzle the best form of representation for queer people to benefit from. These are the points which I have come to recognize, and this is what I recommend:

- More queer people should be consulted when representing queer characters in media.

- More explicitly queer characters should exist in media.

- It does not matter which type of media these characters are in, as there are a wide range of interests among queer people.

- Identities of queer characters, while involving character development and backstory, should be less specific in order to apply to more people.

- Some forms of media should be purposefully gender nuetral or gender inclusive, as this can also create spaces for queer people to identify with characters.

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