Our Flag is Queer:

an analysis of queer representation in the HBO series *Our Flag Means Death*

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Abstract

This thesis examines how the HBO Max TV series *Our Flag Means Death* works as an example of queer representation in modern media. Rather than just looking at how the show presents its numerous queer characters, this thesis is going to view them through the lens of Parsemain's idea of TV as pedagogy. Queerness as more than sexuality and gender identity is explored, and the Revenge, the pirate ship where most of the show takes place, is conceptualized as Muñoz idea of a queer utopia. How the show both presents and challenges a dominant idea of masculinity is analyzed, and questions of identity alignment are examined. Why queer representation is done with a period piece rather than a show is discussed, and the impact that the queer representation of a show such as *Our Flag Means Death* can have on real people is explored. Finally, the question of whether a piece of representation can truly be perfect is considered in regard to the show. The show is found to be an excellent piece of queer representation media, that although not perfect in its own right, as that is near impossible to achieve, it can function as part of a collection of works that together encompass proper queer representation. The queer characters are free of stereotypes and live happily together aboard the Revenge in a near perfect queer utopia, each expressing their individual queerness as they see fit. The show teachers its viewers to approach others with acceptance and without prejudice, not only regarding queer sexuality, but also when people simply behave in unexpected ways. This is done by showing that judgmental and inappropriate behavior creates tension and unpleasant situation, while treating others with kindness and openness results in pleasant situations. In relation to this, the series shows its viewers that if and when someone is coming out, what they tell you is up to them and there is no need to ask questions unless they are wanted by the person that is coming out. The non-binary character Jim in the show is played by a non-binary actor and has been written by a team that includes non-binary writers', while the main character Stede, a gay man, is portrayed by a straight man. This indicates that the team behind *Our Flag Means Death* seems to have considered when identity alignment was necessary, and when it was better to forgo in favor of identity juxtaposition. Stede's general incompetence also highlights why even though it is the norm in queer media, gay white men should not always be in charge.

Keywords: queerness, queer representation, masculinity, queer utopia, TV as pedagogy, pirates, queer history

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Introduction: Pirates and queerness

Life at sea in the golden age of piracy at the end of the 17th and beginning of the 18th century was tough (Turley 10-27). Sickness was rampant, and it was not unusual for a large part of a crew to die during voyages at sea (14). This was in part due to the general lack of hygiene exhibited by people at the time, but even more prominent was scurvy, a malnutrition related disease. Because ships were at sea for months at a time, food that stayed edible for long was necessary, and concerns of a balanced diet were simply not able to be taken into account, and thus malnutrition was common for pirates and other sailors alike (15).

Life at sea was also queer at this time (3). Being a sailor was a male-only occupation which meant that ships were all-male communities that were completely isolated from the rest of society and any other communities. They only had each other to interact with for months at a time, and they also shared the same home. At best some of them had private quarters if they ever wanted to retreat from the community that is the ship. The life of a sailor was thus very different from the lives of ordinary people, isolated as they were from the rest of the world in their small, local, all-male communities.

In this context, queer is not being used as a descriptive word for sexual orientation other than heterosexual, but rather as a term that describes challenging the status quo by living lives outside the norm (Kizer & Hunter) – though the assumption that there were homosexual men aboard ships is not unreasonable, considering the closely knit all-male communities that they were. Pirates took the queerness already present on ships and amplified it by creating their own rules and living not only apart from, but also in opposition to society. disrupting the economy of society and the lives of regular sailors through their attacks on merchant ships, and the norms of society with their transgressive lifestyles in general (Turley 55). Despite this, or perhaps because of this, pirates have always occupied a precarious position in the public eye. Even in the golden age of piracy, where one would assume that pirates would be feared and reviled because of both the economic threat and the threat to sailors' lives that they posed, the average person still could not help but be somewhat fascinated by the adventurous buccaneers and their exploits (50). Pirates were glorified and romanticized, and thus occupied a position as strange antiheroes who were both masculine in a great way yet queer in a dangerous way (2).

Despite the inherent queerness of pirates in relation to social norms, and the all-male community that a typical pirate ship is, pirates have rarely been portrayed as sexually queer, or explicitly sexual at all for that matter (2). Perhaps it is precisely because of their queerness in other respects that this is the case, as they are already so transgressive in general that them being sexually

transgressive as well would simply be too much for anyone to acknowledge (2) – especially if they were to be portrayed positively at all, which they have been ever since the golden age of piracy itself (3). For example, Daniel Defoe in his book *A General History of the Pyrates*, which was written in 1724, refers not to pirates as criminals or outlaws but rather as 'bold adventurers' (49). He then goes on to describe Captain Avery, a famous pirate from the golden age of piracy, as a "Person of great Consequence […] one that had raised himself to the Dignity of a King" (49). Even in a book about the history of pirates that one would think should strive to be objective, they are glorified as the best of men.

This is not to say that pirates have never been viewed negatively or that there has been a total lack connection or association between queer sexuality and pirates. In 1999, Hans Turley wrote *Rum, Sodomy, and the Lash*, a book that examines the connection between the pirates of the late 17th and early 18th century and the gay men or 'sodomites' of the same time. While they were not directly connected, they did share the status of being condemned (4). The reason for pirates being seen as the enemy of everyone is rather obvious. They were disrupting maritime trade when they attacked English vessels, which was one of the most important economic foundations of the British empire. These attacks also had the potential of harming international relations when they attacked other nation's ships from English vessels in times of peace, and thus they were directly hurting the society that they interacted with politically and economically (37 and 51-52). The 'sodomites' were not hurting anyone directly, but they were being socially transgressive by acting out behavior that was not socially acceptable, especially if done in public (52). While it may seem that the pirates are objectively worse since they actually hurt others, in the eyes of society, gay men were widely condemned and seen as having no redeeming features. Pirates, though they were of course still criminals and could even be executed without trial at some points in history (48), were fascinating to the public.

Stories of the exploits of pirates have been around for as long as pirates have, and they were so prevalent that pirate historians have had much trouble separating the myths and legends of pirates from the real people that they also were (1). Even trial records of the time are unreliable sources as they were so embellished that what actually happened and what crimes the pirates were on trial for, other than vaguely defined 'piracy', is hard to make out from them (44-61). Thus, pirates have been seen as mysterious, exciting, and adventurous for as long as they have existed and have been presented as such in countless pieces of fiction. Movies, series and books about pirates are still being created to this day, and one of the newest pirate shows on HBO, *Our Flag Means*

Death, has finally fully bridged the gap between queer sexuality and pirates, as most of the characters in the show are sexually queer in one way or another, something that has not been done before. The show follows Stede Bonnet, a Barbadian aristocrat who runs away from his family to become a pirate. He and his hired crew are incompetent at being pirates, but are supportive and accepting of each other's queerness and generally pleasant to each other, in contrast to the roughness that is typically associated with pirates. As mentioned, pirates have always been socially queer, and in some pirate fiction such as *Pirates of the Caribbean* pirates have also been queer-coded[1] (Karremann), but openly presenting a pirate crew with numerous homosexual men, a nonbinary person and more queer people has never been seen before.

Strangely, pirate fiction in the 20th century has entirely ignored the queer aspects of pirate life and instead only cared about the hyper-masculine aspects of piracy (68), despite earlier literature that embraced the queerer sides of being a pirate, sexually and otherwise (Sedgwick 91-130). In many ways, pirate literature has taken several steps backwards before changing course and arriving at where we are today, with the open queerness of Stede and his companions on the Revenge. Considering how much mystery pirates are surrounded by and how little of the information we have access to that can be verified, it is rather strange that this has not occurred before, since the conditions for taking creative liberties without much legitimate possibility for backlash seem optimal.

What can likely explain the lack of queer content is the perception of pirates as hyper-masculine that has permeated our culture until recent years (Karremann 68), as well as the perception that queerness is feminine at its core. Masculinity, femininity, and all related questions of gender identity are and have always been highly contested arenas, but certain views dominate at certain times, and lately queer challenges to 'traditional' ideas of the binary view of genders are becoming more and more prominent not just in academic circles, but also in pop culture and for lay people. The number of fictional shows, books and movies with queer characters that are not just stereotypes has risen significantly lately, more queer main characters are appearing, and even in nonfiction, many more queer people are being shown on screen and in writing (Parsemain 31-32).

Purpose of the paper

This project seeks to examine how *Our Flag Means Death* uses pirates to represent queer identities, how it uses said queer identities to teach its audience about queerness, and how the show

[1] Coding is "a set of signals that protect the creator from the consequences of openly expressing particular messages" – in the case of queer coding it means signaling that a character is queer without directly saying it (Greenhill 111-112).

addresses current issues in queer representation. While queer pirates may seem like an obvious combination, the trope also comes with an inherent set of problems. As in any other representation, stereotypes, both of pirates and queer men, are an easy pitfall and, as is evident from the above sentence as well as the rest of the information on pirates presented here, pirates are typically *men*. Late 17th and early 18th century pirate ships were not just male dominated or mostly male, they are so strictly perceived as a place where only men exist that the very existence of the few female pirates that are present in recorded history is questioned, and at least some of them are widely considered fictional. For example, Spanish Jackie, the only female pirate present in the show, is based on Jacquotte Delahaye, which is most likely not a real person (Duncombe). This naturally presents an issue in regard to the broadness of the queer representation that is possible in a show about pirates. If the show seeks to be perceived as historically accurate, this would mean discarding the possibility of portraying queer women, except for those that expressed their queerness through cross-dressing and hiding their femininity. Another issue that arises is how the notions of liberty and equality that pirates are associated with clash with the all-male nature of pirate society, because liberty and equality are rather worthless if they are only for a select group of people (Aljoe et al).

Though this thesis is based on the TV-show *Our Flag Means Death*, which uses the names and likeness of historical pirate figures intermingled with original characters and a healthy dose of creative liberties regarding individual characteristics and the events that unfold, the core issue is one of queer representation and the impact it can have on queer people. Queer representation takes center stage in this thesis and will therefore be what this literature review focuses on. Because representation is based in real people's real identities, works regarding questions of queer identity and the challenges they face from surrounding society, including even other queer people, will also be relevant in this context. Representation in other respects, such as regarding race, disabilities, social classes and other factors is not necessarily irrelevant for *Our Flag Means Death* nor in general but is beyond the scope of this project. Additionally, academic texts that directly concern themselves with *Our Flag Means Death* have yet to emerge as the show, as of early 2023, is new, so academic literature on the show itself is scarce.

Current issues in the field

In general, literature on representation, like this thesis, focuses on close readings of individual works and their representation, whether that is a book, a tv series or a movie. Exactly how this is done varies quite a bit. Some articles, such as Reed's *From Anne Lister to Gentleman Jack to Anne Lister* and Belle's *A Cross Cultural Approach to Brokeback Mountain*, focus almost

exclusively on impact in the form of audience responses, while others focus on stereotypes, general perceptions in society and exactly how characters are portrayed (Soto-Sanfiel & Sánches-Soriano). General discussions of queer representation across time, around the world, and in multiple media are not that common. It seems that when queerness and queer representation is brought up in broad terms, it is often focused on a specific location such as a nation (Cover), a specific community such as an internet forum (Bailey), or a specific medium such as TV (Parsemain), often with the narrowness of multiple of these combined.

Works regarding queer identity and the issues that queer people face show that issues of minority stress and discrimination from the heterodominant culture are still very present and constitute an issue for LGBTQ+ individuals (Elmer et al and Schmitz & Tyler). Additionally, studies show that certain identities dominate within LGBTQ+ communities and those who do not adhere to these identities are marginalized. Specifically white gay cisgender men are the most prominent and normalized group of LGBTQ+ individuals, and the further an individual is from this description, the more likely they are to be discriminated against in their community (Parmenter et al). Plurisexual and gender diverse individuals, as well as women, are subject to mistreatment based on sexuality and gender respectively, while those of other ethnicities than white are subject to racism in LGBTQ+ communities (Parmenter & Galliher). Not all queer communities have all of these issues, but certain minorities within the minority group that is queer individuals are more exposed to negative treatment from their peers than others. A similar sort of cultural dominance can be seen in media which, especially historically, favors white cisgender gay men (Parsemain and Cover).

Another topic that keeps surfacing in queer academic literature is that of separating sexual identities and gender diverse identities (Sedgwick). Although acronyms like *LGBTQ+* and terms like ‘queer’ group these together, and they can be connected in some cases, claiming that sexual identity minorities and gender identity minorities face the same issues is reductive at best. In many cases, separating the two groups is more sensible than conflating them (Cover). On a conceptual level, sexual identity is more about attraction and gender identity is more introspective. Also, and perhaps more importantly, even though sexual identities have become more normalized and accepted, the tolerance of those with diverse gender identities lags noticeably behind, as is also evident from the ingroup discrimination that they face (Cover, Parmenter & Galliher and Bailey).

Representation

Ava Laure Parsemain's book *The Pedagogy of Queer TV* centers on an approach to TV that moves away from the question of "how was a consumer impacted by entertainment?" (v) and wants to ask "what did she learn from it?" (v) instead. Before examining several modern TV series through this lens, the book provides an overview of queer representation in American TV through history. Parsemain argues that before the 1990's, queers were 'symbolically annihilated' in TV (25), which means that they were only featured in negative stereotypes. Since then, representation has slowly but surely improved, starting from a point of very homogenous, stereotypic but at least positive depictions of queerness, to increasingly varied, complex portrayals of queer characters in all the shapes they can take (25-32).

Although representation has improved in the last three decades, so much so that the 2010's and onwards are sometimes referred to as "the golden age of queer representation" (31), Parsemain argues that many of the shows that do have appropriate queer representation are not without issues, whether they are fiction or reality TV (32). However, as Jono Van Belle asks in her article *A Cross-Cultural Approach to Brokeback Mountain*, is there a "correct representation of gay men and […] gay love?" (4). She uses Brokeback Mountain as an example of both good and bad tropes in gay representation. The gay characters are different from "typical gay characters in Hollywood films" (4), but they are still tragic characters, which is a typical "conservative portrayal" (4). Oftentimes, the question of whether or not a work consists of good or bad representation does not have a simple yes or no answer, but a nuanced, complex one, as is also the case with Parsemain's reading of *Glee*. It will be examined here as the use of 'queering the audience' that Parsemain analyzes is also a tool employed by *Our Flag Means Death*.

TV as education

'Queering the audience' is one of the main ways in which *Glee* educates (50). Queering the audience is a specific subset of *narrative empathy*, which is "the sharing of feeling and perspective-taking induced by reading, viewing, hearing or imagining narratives of another's situation and condition" (Keen). Queering the audience is when a piece of media presents a queer person as they are and invites the audience to identify with their queerness without judgment, generating empathy and showing a queer experience that the audience might not otherwise have (50-51). The reason this particular way of portraying queer characters is highlighted by Parsemain is that it is in contrast to what is often done in more heteronormative media that includes queer characters. In this type of media presenting a queer Other in contrast to a 'heterosexual self' or stressing the similarities between the queer Other and nonqueers is common (30). These ways of presenting queers either

positions them as outside heteronormative society in a bad way or as trying to conform to heteronormativity, both of which are things queers would object to embodying in many cases.

Parsemain is mostly positive towards *Glee* and its representation of queers but sees certain aspects such as the way the parents of queer characters are presented as problematic. She argues that "*Glee* reinforces heteronormative and cisnormative views through likeable adult characters who fail to challenge the status quo" (44-45). The way these characters react to their kids' queer sexual and gender identities, coupled with the kids' resignation to only being tolerated and not loved for who they are, reinforces the idea that LGBT people cannot expect acceptance, only tolerance from their families and teachers (44-45). This tolerance of intolerant behavior is damaging to the LGBT community and wider society's acceptance of it. This is but one of the problems that can arise in relation to representation.

Identity alignment

Rob Cover's article *Straight and cisgender actors playing queer and trans characters: the views of Australian screen stakeholders* centers on the concept of 'identity alignment', another potentially problematic part of representation. Since the 2010's the question of who portrays a character, what Cover refers to as 'identity alignment' (58), has become ever more important. Movies and tv series have been criticized for casting actors with normative gender and sexual identities to portray characters that are not cisgender and/or straight, respectively. Even though it is common practice to group sexual minorities and those with diverse gender identities together, both in lay public discourse as well as academic writing on the subject, "queer cultural theory has long argued that sexual diversity and gender diversity are not necessarily coextensive (e.g. Sedgwick, 1990: 27)" (Cover 60). Cover further argues that straight actors playing queer characters is not equivalent to cisgender actors playing gender diverse characters, and that the two topics cannot be "discussed meaningfully together at all times" (60). This is because while acceptance of sexual diversity has in general increased in large scale, the same cannot be said of the acceptance of gender diverse people, who are still largely viewed more negatively than other queers. Even certain queer and related groups, such as TERFs[2], look down upon them despite their surface level alignment (60).

Criticism of identity misalignment or 'gayface' as it has also been called, is not as widely agreed upon as the condemnation of blackface and yellowface in neither public nor academic

[2] TERF is an acronym for *trans-exclusionary radical feminist,* a subset of radical feminists that do not view transgender women as women because of their biology and therefore seek to exclude transgender them from the lesbian feminist movement (Williams)

discourse, and to many it is viewed more as an industry constraint than an important issue (60-62). Cover quotes Ahmed as saying that identity alignment constitutes "diversity work" that is simply a gesture and does not actually make progress toward "inclusive social change" (Cover 62). The 'callout culture' that is at play to denounce identity misalignment tends to oversimplify complex issues and demand utopian perfection from an industry that is based on making imperfect representations (61-62). Questions of cultural appropriation and wanting actors that have lived experience with the conditions of the characters they portray are valid. Having cisgender actors playing trans characters can for example appropriate and erase the lived experiences of transgender people (64). However, wanting actors to play only roles that their sexual and gender identity aligns with in all instances is reductive for several reasons. For one, this assumes that all LGBTQ+ people have shared experience, without taking into account neither the differences in these people's lives, nor what other aspects of a character might be more salient such as class or race (65-66). Additionally, it undermines the fact that the whole point of acting is pretending to be someone else. As Cate Blanchett said in response to criticism for playing a queer character while not being queer herself; "well, God, I hope that all my career I'm playing roles I'm not!" (Cover 66). Playing only characters that one is aligned with also removes the possibility of challenging the way identity is perceived through juxtaposition of identities (67). Straight, cisgender actors embodying or 'becoming' queer roles shows to other normative people that queerness is not dangerous and that experimenting with identities is normal (67).

Identity alignment is not just an issue of the actor's identity as many people are involved in character portrayals in movies and TV shows, and the ones that can cause the most problems are those in power on production sets. If they have ingrained ideas of what diversity is that does not align with the lived experiences of those they are in charge of representing, the representation in the media they create will suffer (69-70). Another related issue is that of queer actors being given supporting roles, while straight cis actors get lead roles, even if the role is queer (69). This positions queers as subordinate to non queers and is counterproductive to promoting acceptance of queer people.

The power of representation

A text where queers certainly are not subordinate to non queers is Jennifer Reed's article *From Anne Lister to Gentleman Jack to Anne Lister* that describes audience reactions to *Gentleman Jack* and thus illustrates the impact that media can have on people in the real world, favoring the approach that Parsemain moved away from. Anne Lister is credited as "the first modern Lesbian"

(154). Both because of her refusal to conform to gender norms and her extremely comprehensive diary, she is fascinating to historians and queer academics alike (154). The show about her life has amassed a community of dedicated fans, mostly lesbians, with one going as far as to say "*Gentleman Jack* upended my life" (Reed 155) and another stated that she had "never seen television or women represented like this before" (156) These quotes speak volumes to the power of proper representation, as it is capable of radically altering the lives of even those who have already lived so much and those who are members of the communities that are represented. While the show might not have the broadest appeal, the fact that it affects a certain subsection of the population so much makes it important. For example, the most common reason for the lesbians who were 'hardcore fans' of the show was that they "felt seen in popular culture for the first time" (156). This feeling is something that everyone deserves, as not feeling seen in popular culture can be damaging. Another aspect of the show's relevance is Reed's claim that "there is no straightforward account of queer history" (155). Because of the "historical isolation of queers" (155) and the "damaged quality of the historical archive" (155), it is important for queer communities to have not only contemporary queer representation, but also queer representation that is rooted in history. This helps remind us that queer history does exist despite its lack of visibility, creating 'queer memory' (155).

Queer shame and pride

One of the main reasons that the show and the character become as popular as they did is the refusal of shame that Anne Lister embodies in *Gentleman Jack*. Many queer texts center around sadness, loneliness, shame and not fitting in, but Anne Lister embodies confidence and pride in who she is, something that contemporary queers want to embody as well instead of the shame that is still ever-present in both media and real queer people's lives (157). One such text that shows queer shame is *Brokeback Mountain*, where both the main characters are tragic as both they and their surroundings fail to accept their queerness.

Jono Van Belle analyzed *Brokeback Mountain*, both the movie and the short story. Van Belle's analysis argues that *Brokeback Mountain* is about "unconventional, yet masculine men" (4). It challenged notions of masculinity since being gay has been in direct opposition to traditional masculinity, but there is no doubt that the main characters are both gay and masculine, expanding the possibilities of what masculinity can encompass. Masculinity is an important topic in queer literature as many queer identities are shaped by some sort of relation to masculinity. Jack Halberstam in his book *Female Masculinity* from 1998 argues that "masculinity is not the social and

cultural and indeed political expression of maleness" (1). He also argues that despite the difficulty we have defining it, "as a society we have little trouble in recognizing it" (1), and society works hard to support the types of masculinity that are deemed enjoyable (1). As the name of the book suggests, many different types of masculinity exist, and according to Halberstam, the ones that dominate are entirely dependent on the subordination of alternative masculinities (1).

Queerness as concept

Kizer & Hunter 's article *They're just like us only fictional: an analysis on the materiality of LGBTQI+ representation* centers on their own experiences with trying to fit in despite their queerness. Queerness, according to Kizer & Hunter, is "always in flux" and constantly "redefining itself" because at its core, queerness is not about being, acting or looking a certain way, but rather about resisting and challenge normativity, so if whatever is currently considered queer becomes normative, queerness should evolve to challenge that (62-63). José Esteban Muñoz has a different conceptualization of queerness. In *Cruising Utopia* he argues that "[q]ueerness is an ideality" (1) and that "[t]he future is queerness's domain" (1). He does not settle for being in opposition to normativity as Kizer & Hunter do, but rather looks at a 1971 manifesto written by a group called Third World Gay Revolution for inspiration (19). The manifesto states that: "We want a new society – a revolutionary socialist society […] We want a society where the needs of the people come first. We believe that all people should share the labor and products of society, according to one's needs and abilities, regardless of race, sex, age or sexual preferences" (19). Instead of simply seeking inclusion for queers in what he calls "a corrupt and bankrupt social order" (20), he believes society should be radically altered. One of the places to look for inspirations for such radical alterations of society is media.

How queers use media

For queer youth, which is a group that often lacks mentors and resources, consuming media can function as a survival technique, and is often one of the only ways to find people with similar identities to mirror and build upon (Kizer & Hunter 62). Research has also shown that media can influence "societal attitudes toward the LGBTQI+ (Van Meer and Pollmann), that negative characterizations of the LGBTQI+ experience can promote and sustain violence toward this community (Caprioglio), and that certain LGBTQI+ characters in media may lead us toward more positive perceptions of the community (Schiappa, Gregg, and Hewes)" (Kizer & Hunter 62). The article examines how queer audiences embody not only characters in media, but also the performers that perform said characters, focusing on their similarities in an examination of identity alignment

(63). It does so by studying the relationship between LGBTQI+ characters in media and "how Queer youth learn to perform their gender and sexuality identities" (63). In doing so, the article argues that because media affects real people and their bodies in a material way, media has "real-life consequences and implications that make it material" (63).

The authors focused on their own experiences and reflections on their queer experiences and realize that since they are both white, able-bodied and cisgender, they are likely to have certain biases and privileges that make their experiences radically different from non-white, disable and/or non-cisgender people (65-66). This does not invalidate their lived experiences, but it also does not, nor does it attempt to, encompass the entirety of possible queer experience (65-66). Rather, this is an example of autoethnography[3]. When the authors shared their stories, they also found that those who listened to their stories felt encouraged to share their own, and though it was not originally the point, creating a collective 'queer memory' of stories become another goal of their work (66). Because queer people do not conform to heteronormative standards by virtue of their sexuality, trying to fit in is often a process of disciplining one's own body to look and act like a heteronormative person, harmfully reshaping oneself to meet the demands of society (67). This is what the two authors experienced on their own bodies.

Internal queer issues

Aimee Bailey's article *'Go home to the second wave!': Discourses of trans inclusion and exclusion in a queer women's online community* examines how trans women are attacked by other queer women in LBQ communities, but also how it seems that it is only a vocal minority that does this while the majority support and wish to include their trans community members, at least on the online platform in question, Autostraddle.

The article shows division in the LGBTQ community, but also argues that it is because of a particular "sex/gender system" that it hopes to change for the better, similar to Muños vision of a queer utopian future (7). The debate centers on questions of identity and how much one's body, in particular genitalia, are tied to one's identity. Some, typically conservative lesbian groups, see bodies that have a penis as at odds with lesbian identity, since a woman cannot have a penis and a person with a penis can therefore neither be the object or the subject of lesbian desire (1). These groups often refer to themselves as 'gender critical', but as different scholars have pointed out, 'gender conservative' is a more fitting description (2). Others both disagree with this notion of

[3] "autoethnographic stories – are stories of/about the self told through the lens of culture" (Adams et al. 1). In other words, autoethnography is when one or more members of a certain group relate their own life experiences to that of their wider community, as Kizer & Hunter do here.

genitalia being strongly tied to gender identity, and see both gender and sexuality as more fluid, thus not problematizing lesbian desire of or from someone with a penis (2). Trans people are the subject of a moral panic, and one of the most contested spaces in this debate is women's toilets. It is constructed as a safe space for cisgender women from men, and trans women are seen as transgressing here because of their potential genitalia, and the fear of penises and "unwanted heterosexuality" that some lesbian women harbor (3). While the cultural image of the penis as a weapon of patriarchal power is strong (2), invoking it in the context of a women's toilet is ridiculous, as showing your genitals to others in a toilet is already inappropriate and abnormal behavior, regardless of gender or biology. This is a case of 'hyperembodiment', where trans women are reduced to their penises, which is both objectifying and takes away agency from them to decide their own identities (3).

An important point in the article is that "identity construction is always relational" (3) – identities are never constructed in a vacuum, they are made either in opposition to or affiliation with something or someone else. Additionally, it shows how group identity labels such as 'lesbian' evolve over time. Once, it might have meant someone without a penis who is attracted to others without penises, but that definition does not work anymore (4).

This thesis is going to examine queer representation in *Our Flag Means Death* both in terms of what kinds of queer identities are presented in the show, but also how different people are treated because of their identities. The queer characters and the way they are treated will be analyzed with TV as a pedagogical tool in mind. Instead of simply looking at who the characters are and how their identities function, my goal is to try and determine what the show wants to teach its viewers about queerness and how to treat those with non-normative identities. Because of the male-dominated nature of the show, how it presents masculinity will also be examined, and how masculinity defines the identity construction of characters in the show will be analyzed. The concept of relational identity construction is relevant to *Our Flag Means Death* as the way the characters construct their identities is always in relation to each other and the norms of their surroundings. This analysis of the show's masculinity will be based on Turley's conceptualization of pirate masculinity and Jack Halberstam's concept of female masculinity. Examples of how the show has handled issues of identity alignment will also be examined. The Revenge, the ship that Stede and his fellow pirates travel aboard, will be analyzed using Muñoz' concept of queer utopia, since Stede's pirate ship is a place where queers can be who they are (mostly) without judgment, and is a potential example of the future queer utopia that Muños envisions.

Analysis

All of the timestamps in this paper will refer to *Our Flag Means Death*, so the intext references to the show will consist only of episode and time.

Our Flag Means Death is a period romantic comedy set in the early 18th century. The show centers on the wealthy landowner Stede Bonnet who runs away from his wife and children to pursue a life of piracy (ep1 00:12). He buys a ship, the Revenge, hires a crew and sails off, meeting Blackbeard. The two become romantically involved and show each other the ways of upper-class society (ep5 02:20) and pirate life respectively (ep5 00:00). All sorts of issues regarding identity, fitting in and being able to live life as who you are come up during the show, mostly regarding masculinity, but sexuality and gender identity also come into play. The two main characters seem to be unable to fit in anywhere. Both of them are bored with the communities that they belong to, but they also are unable to truly be part of each other's communities, in part due to stigma and in part due to who they are. Stede ran away from his comfortable, wealthy family life for a reason, and despite his love of sailing and general enthusiasm towards piracy, he cannot handle the violence inherent in pirate life (ep1 14:30), nor is he able to live up to the expectations of masculinity that are put on him, for better and for worse. Blackbeard is bored with piracy in general (ep4 07:45), but when he attends an upper-class party with Stede to see what his life is like, things do not work out. Though it starts well (ep5 11:40), the aristocrats mock him (ep5 18:00) and he ends up getting so angry at them that Stede has to stop him from killing them (ep5 19:57). As should be evident from the examples here, neither of them necessarily do anything wrong, but they still get rejected by their peers because they fail to live up to the expectations of the social situation they are in. Exactly what these expectations are and how they affect the people who need to live up to them will be examined in the following section.

This part of the analysis is going to center on the different communities that are present in the show. The focus will be on how members of communities treat each other, especially in regard to inclusivity and those that fall outside the norms, whether that is sexually queer people or simply people that look and/or behave in an odd way. As will become evident in the following analysis, it is clear that *Our Flag Means Death* does not neutrally present the way individuals treat each other. Rather, the show wants to educate on us both how we should and should not treat each other, in line with Parsemain's ideas of TV as an educational tool. Of course, communities are not entities whose behavior or attitude can be examined as a whole. Instead, the actions of members of certain communities, when they function as members of their community and not just themselves, will be

the basis of the analysis of said communities. As the show is predominantly a comedy, many things are exaggerated for comedic effect, but how characters are perceived and treated can still be useful to examine for the purpose of figuring out what the show wants to teach its viewers and what views of the world the show seeks to promote.

Pirate Masculinity

One of the recurring themes of *Our Flag Means Death* is masculinity. Though there are a number of different communities in the show, all of them, except perhaps the widow's society as that is only for women and they see men mostly as a burden, have a lot in common regarding their views on masculinity. How they perceive masculinity will be examined through their treatment of characters throughout the show, including how peers perceive other members of their community. Once masculinity constructions in communities have been established, how the show portrays these different constructions and what we as viewers are supposed to take away from them will be examined.

In *Our Flag Means Death*, pirates are depicted as a very colorful community that somehow manages to both seem extremely inclusive and exclusive. Before discussing how pirates react to those that do not conform to their norms, first some of their norms have to be established. Being a society of outlaws that literally make their living off of violently raiding ships and taking their cargo, characteristics that might be seen as bad in other communities, such as aggressiveness and cunning are highly valued by pirates. For example, Black Pete mentions how he should have "20 kills by now, at least" (ep1 0:54). Though the phrasing is silly and makes it sound like Pete is referring to a video game or something similar where the deaths of 20 people would not matter, the quote also highlights the inherent violence present in pirate life. Violence and assertiveness are strongly connected with masculinity, or at least the type of masculinity that pirates embody (Turley 78), and pirate community, in history as in the show, is almost exclusively male.

Masculine women

The few women that are present in *Our Flag Means Death* have established respect for themselves in the community exactly through their aggressiveness and willingness to be violent. Spanish Jackie and Jim, though Jim is of course not a woman but a non-binary person (ep4 17:22), which is definitely not a traditional man either, are perfect examples of this. As Halberstam has pointed out, masculinity does not necessarily equate to being a man (1), and Jim and Jackie exemplify this. They might not technically be the gender that is the norm of their community, but they embody the gender norms and expected behavior of the spaces they occupy, perhaps even

more so than the men they are surrounded by since they had to fight harder to establish themselves because they are not men. Jim pretended to be a man (ep3 22:00) and is literally a trained killer (ep7 13:10). Though it is not explicitly explained what Spanish Jackie has done to earn her reputation, other than cut off people's noses and put them in a jar, she is regarded as a person that you do not mess with, both because of her propensity for violence and her skill at manipulating people and getting the drop on her enemies (ep3 21:25). When Stede and the rest of the crew want to go to the republic of pirates, Oluwande wants to avoid it because he and Jim have made an enemy of Jackie (ep3 03:40 & 04:05). Thus, Jim and Jackie can be argued to be two of the most masculine characters in the show despite them not being men. In short, masculinity is defining for pirates, and those who are not inherently masculine have to embrace behavior that proves that they in fact are masculine. As for the learning that can be taken away from this in real life, it shows that even though some communities might initially reject someone because of superficial reasons like gender, if you can prove to them that you are worthy despite this, you can still earn a place. Though it might not be fair, that is the reality of things, and working your way in as in outsider is a good way to potentially start enacting change in insular communities.

Pirate sexuality

Pirate ideals of masculinity in *Our Flag Means Death* do not seem to take sexuality into account. For example, the sexuality of a character like Spanish Jackie, who is polyamorous with 20 husbands, seems to be accepted by the pirate community without hesitation, and only in very few cases does it seem like anyone gets looked down upon for anything related to sexual activity. Even Calico Jack, who seems to have a very narrow definition of what a real pirate is, that being as close to his idea of how Blackbeard is as possible, does not seem to judge the idea of Stede and Blackbeard being a couple (ep8 15:00), though he does judge both of them in many other ways (ep8 15:32). Izzy Hands, the malicious first mate of Blackbeard's crew, does however try to blackmail Lucius into doing his bidding, trying to use the fact that Lucius has been intimate with several crewmembers of the Revenge against him (ep5 20:24). Lucius responds by saying "we don't own each other" (ep5 20:48) implying that none of them are monogamous or exclusive, and that they do not keep secrets from each other. This also takes all of Izzy's power away, as Lucius shows Izzy that he is the only one that perceives this promiscuity as negative. Izzy advocates for a set of norms to be upheld, but those norms are oppressive and he is trying to weaponize them against Lucius. In doing so, he refers to Lucius as a "proper little seductress" (ep5 20:32), implying either that he sees Lucius as feminine, that the act of having sex with multiple men is feminine, or both.

Importantly, Izzy is presented in this scenario as being the bad guy. *Our Flag Means Death* could have simply shown this scene entirely neutrally as a clash between someone who seeks to keep things as they have always been, and someone who seeks to break with the norms and live a queerer life. The fact that the show chose to be on the side of the queer person shows support for the real-life queer community as well as all those who might not be queer per se, but still wish to live their lives the way they want instead of the way tradition and norms dictate. In doing so the series sends a message that we should all live our lives to the fullest in spite of norms and that we should not judge the lifestyle choices of others when they do not impact you, no matter how different their lives might be from yours. Viewers are also encouraged to empathize with the queers instead of judging them for being different. In fact, the one that is shown to be different is Izzy Hands, the man who is the least queer and seeks to uphold the non queer norms. In this case, the audience has been queered so much that the straight cis man has become the Other in a direct reversal of queer representation norms in straight media (Parsemain 30).

Pirates and gender

Gender is a more precarious issue than sexuality when it comes to the pirate community both in and outside *Our Flag Means Death*. Though Jim is relatively quickly accepted for who they are after their false identity is uncovered, to the extent that even someone as unpleasant as Izzy Hands uses the correct pronouns when referring to them (ep10 26:03), women are not as welcome aboard pirate ships or in the Republic of Pirates. As has been mentioned several times, pirate society was almost exclusively male which is reflected in the show. One of the reasons for this is brought up in the show in relation to the revelation that Jim is not a man, when Black Pete says that "Alls I know is women are bad luck on ships. Historically" (ep4 16:52), which Jim counters by arguing that they have been on the ship for several weeks with no freak accidents to show for it (ep4 17:12), thus proving the superstition pointless. Another factor that heavily contributes to the lack of women in the pirate community is the fact that they are forced into domesticated, married life at a young age. Mary Bonnet is a good example of this as she is married away to Stede Bonnet, a man she does not know (ep4 00:00). It is reasonable to argue that pirates lived outside civilized society anyways, which would mean breaking with the societal norm of married life does not at all stand in opposition to becoming a pirate. In fact it seems like a natural next step for a woman who wants to embrace her freedom in the 18th century. While this may be true, societal pressures on women were heavier than on men, and thus breaking free of norms and expectations was no mean feat, especially

because women only had one expected way of life as opposed to the options that were present for men.

As mentioned, pirate society was also not welcoming to women, so it did not seem like a good option for women to become pirates. This limitation of women's options is showcased humorously in *Our Flag Means Death* through the widow's society that Mary becomes part of after Stede's departure. Traditionally, widows are thought of as grieving, lonely women who struggle to find meaning in life after the untimely loss of their husbands, but the widow's society of *Our Flag Means Death* is a place where the women blossom and embrace parts of their identity that they could not while they were still married (ep10 00:00). While grieving widows surely exist as well, the widows that are shown in the show are living life to the fullest and seem to be the only women that are free to do as they want (ep10 00:35). The show's not so subtle celebration of widowhood is yet another stab at cultural norms and traditions. It can naturally be interpreted as promoting the early deaths of husbands, but that would be a rather gruesome takeaway. Instead, the real reason to celebrate is the freedom that the women have gained in the absence of their husbands, and what the show seeks to teach us is that women should always have this level of freedom to live as they see fit. They should not have to marry and outlive their husbands to achieve independence or fulfillment, but rather this should inherently be something they have access to. *Our Flag Means Death* does this by showing that the women who are happy with their lives are those who get to make their own decisions, and not those who are forced into arranged marriages. Though a lot has improved for women since the time that the show takes place, it does serve as a reminder to viewers that there is still work to be done and we need to keep fighting for women's right to live the lives they want.

Challenging masculinity

Someone who also feels the constraints of norms though he is neither a woman nor judged for his sexuality is Stede. He is generally looked down upon not only by the pirate community (ep2 09:45), but also by the community of sailors at large (ep1 24:20), because of his mild mannered, peaceful nature (ep1 08:55). Even in flashbacks to his childhood, Stede's father is shown to be disdainful of him, calling him a "weak-hearted… soft-handed… lily livered little rich boy" (ep1 13:30) and telling him that he will never amount to anything. The other boys that Stede went to school with also relentlessly bullied him (ep1 19:30), including captain Badminton who Stede ends up killing by accident (ep1 25:05). Several times, Stede's childhood 'friends' shown to find the idea of him being a pirate ridiculous (ep1 23:40). Even Stede's own crew dislikes him at the start,

planning to mutiny and get rid of him in favor of a new captain (ep1 07:45). His negative image is so all encompassing that Stede is told to pretend that he murdered Badminton intentionally to improve his image as a pirate (ep1 25:40), and though his crew seems to believe him at first (ep1 26:48), other pirates and sailors do not as he is not perceived to be masculine enough to do such a violent act.

However, though they see through his ruse, his crew also realizes that there are many benefits to working under Stede compared to a typical pirate captain. One of the things that they appreciate is the stories he reads for the crew at bedtime (ep1 10:25). Economically, they are all safe because they actually get paid so they do not have to rely on what they can capture on raids to get money, they simply have to be present on the ship (ep1 27:25). This also means that Stede's incompetence at traditional pirate endeavors is less consequential, since if attacking ships is unnecessary, being a bad pirate does not matter – and they do not have to risk their lives to board merchant ships, so their physical health is also better preserved. Additionally, when they are trying to decide who should be captain in place of Stede if they overthrow him, they realize that the only person on the crew who wants to be captain is Black Pete, who none of the others want to work for (ep1 09:35). As Lucius puts it when Pete is first mate at a later time in the show when Stede is absent: "I love that man, but, leadership's not his strength" (ep9 19:26). In short, masculinity in the golden age of piracy is defined as being in opposition to being friendly, kind and in touch with one's emotions, which is why Stede is looked down upon by his peers, subordinates, and even his enemies. Despite Stede being a man, he seems to entirely reject the series dominant ideas of masculinity. Rather than accepting the queer norms of piracy, he tries to redefine pirate masculinity, and just like Halberstam argues that the dominant masculinity of real life does (1), the dominant masculinity in *Our Flag Means Death* subordinates Stede's version of pirate masculinity.

The entire sequence of the crew considering mutiny serves as a lesson in how to properly evaluate someone, especially someone in a position of power with certain expectations attached to it, and how to react to the potential change such a person can bring to something like a workplace. While they at first find him wanting, the show clearly illustrates that this is based on ingrained assumptions that simply do not match the type of pirate captain that Stede is. When they then take a step back and evaluate him in more objective terms without the expectations that they previously had, they come to realize that he is potentially good at his job despite everything, and his changes to the normal way to run a pirate ship are definitely beneficial to them. While the show is of course an over-the-top romantic comedy set in the not very relatable, at least to a western 21st century

audience, context of early 18th century pirate life, and thus it may seem like it has no relevance for such an audience, I would argue that the points are highly relevant for contemporary viewers. Throwing away your expectations and instead looking at what someone actually brings to the table is important in many contexts and can potentially lead to putting said expectations under scrutiny. If said expectations are then found to be outdated or harmful, new, more appropriate ideas can be put in their place, and people who can live out said positive expectations can be found. The show promotes the idea that keeping an open mind, especially in places where strongly established expectations are present, can be helpful and promote positive change.

Blackbeard: the perfect pirate?

Interestingly, the only pirate that seems to accept Stede immediately is Blackbeard (ep3 00:00). This acceptance from the one who is in the most powerful position in the community lends legitimacy to the unaccepted outsider that Stede is, as is evident when Spanish Jackie decides not to take Stede's nose because of Blackbeard's interest (ep3 16:44). However, Stede's poor reputation with the pirates also drags Blackbeard down. His approval of Stede and his fascination with Stede's ideas of changing piracy and promoting an alternative masculinity leads to Blackbeard losing legitimacy despite the fact that he is otherwise seen as the ideal embodiment of pirate masculinity. Especially Blackbeard's first mate Izzy who, despite or perhaps because of his zealous adoration of his idea of Blackbeard, despises the way Blackbeard is influenced by Stede (ep6 00:00). The twin of captain Badminton even blames Stede for the 'fall' of Blackbeard in a strange combination of a show of respect for his enemy Blackbeard and pure disdain for Stede (ep9 21:20). As is evident from the many different communities and people who look down on Stede for who he is, certain ideas of masculinity pervade the world that the series takes place in, and anyone stepping outside of these will be targets for ridicule and harassment. This shows that those who wish to affect change on a community or society at large and their ideals often face strong backlash, and that changing ingrained perceptions takes a lot of time and work. The flak that Blackbeard receives for accepting Stede shows that even well-respected people on the inside of a community can struggle to change ideas, especially if those ideas are perceived as coming from outside the community, since the outside person will be seen as a bad influence who has corrupted the formerly upstanding ingroup person. In short, certain perceptions are strongly engrained in society, and affecting change is a slow, difficult process that can seem futile at times because of the strong resistance that is put up against it.

As mentioned, Blackbeard is perceived as the masculine ideal of a pirate, with everyone in the show admiring him. Several times it is shown that the idealization of him is out of touch with reality, however. Black Pete tells stories of Blackbeard, because Pete pretends that he has been part of Blackbeard's crew before, and in those stories, he is more monster than man, being made at least partially of smoke and speaking in a demonic voice (ep2 00:50). Blackbeard is also depicted in a similar way in a book that Stede shows him, where he looks entirely inhuman and also has an absurd number of weapons on him, which he even complains about himself: "nine guns?! I have one gun, and one knife. Just like everyone else" (ep4 18:10). Another example of the pirates admiring Blackbeard in an over-the-top way is when he makes an 'entrance' on deck, swinging in a rope in a way that to the audience is obviously silly and a little pathetic, yet all of the pirates start clapping after his 'stunt' anyways (ep4 04:09). If any of the other characters had made a similar entrance they would either have been mocked or ignored, but because of Blackbeard's reputation, everything that he does is perceived as being cool. Another, more dramatic implication of this is that anytime a potential enemy of Blackbeard encounters him, they simply run away in fear or surrender before he even has a chance to prove his prowess in combat. Most notably this happens when a crew of Dutch sailors come aboard Stede's ship and he unsuccessfully tries to intimidate them, but as soon as they see Blackbeard they flee despite him actually being frozen in terror (ep6 16:40). This goes to show that though reputation might be an intangible aspect of a person, it can have strong real-world implications, in this case causing Blackbeard's enemies to flee in terror and his peers to admire and respect him though he really has not earned either of these responses from them.

As is evident throughout the show, Blackbeard has grown tired of the life that he is living. He is incredibly fascinated by Stede Bonnet and his eccentric way of being a pirate. This includes but is not limited to the secret passages that Stede has installed aboard his ship (ep4 15:20), the fine clothing that Stede has aboard the Revenge (ep4 14:50) and the fact that there is "open fire on a wooden vessel surrounded by bits of paper" (ep4 19:50). This stems from the fact that somehow, pirate life and its excessive displays of violent masculinity has become humdrum to Blackbeard, who desperately longs for something new to happen (ep4 07:45). At one point he is even seen verbally going through what he has not tried yet, and mentions how dying is something that he has not done yet, so maybe he should try that (ep4 08:04). Although it is said relatively tongue in cheek and it is suggested that will definitely not seek out his own death, there is a dark undertone of depressive, potentially suicidal thoughts present. Blackbeard is currently forced to live in a world of

toxic masculinity that he, despite keeping up appearances, really does not fit into or like being part of. This connects him to closeted and struggling LGBTQ+ people around the world living in communities that do not support them in being who they are, and their struggles with mental health and suicide. It also shows that people who on the surface have amazing lives and positions of power can struggle with mental health just as much as those who are physically and economically worse off, especially if the life they have built for themselves is not based on what they want but rather external expectations.

Another negative side of Blackbeard's reputation is that it also comes with a set of expectations, and those around him, especially those close to him, will judge him for not living up to those expectations and do whatever it takes to make him go back to 'normal'. As Izzy puts it when he has a heated discussion with Blackbeard in the tenth episode of the show: "Blackbeard is my captain. I serve Blackbeard. not Edward" (ep10 16:20). Izzy clearly does not acknowledge Blackbeard's change in presentation, and in fact, Izzy takes so much issue with Blackbeard's relation with Stede and the resulting change in Blackbeard's behavior that he tries to make Blackbeard kill Stede (ep4 30:35). When he then does not go through with it, Izzy tries to do it himself (ep6 20:29), and when this also does not work out, he refuses to give up and let them be, and instead betrays Blackbeard by concocting a plot that involves his old, trusted friend Calico Jack and making a deal with the British navy (ep6 25:45). When the plan is in motion and too late to stop, Calico Jack reveals the subterfuge to Blackbeard and also says that "the old Blackbeard woulda seen me comin a mile away" (ep8 27:35), expressing his disappointment that Blackbeard is not who he used to be. These scenes show how expectations not only apply to communities, but also to certain individuals who have built up reputations. Said expectations can make it hard to make meaningful change in one's life, as if one starts behaving differently, everyone around you will notice and take issue. If one wants to change careers or embrace different parts of life, you either have to accept the status quo and be sad, as Blackbeard does in the final episode of season 1 (32:46), or make the change take effect and work to make those around you accept you, as Blackbeard tries to do throughout the show when he explores new sides of himself with Stede.

Even Stede gets to experience the pressure of the expectations that are put on Blackbeard. For a short period of time the two exchange clothes and assume each other's identities, even swapping names for the duration, (ep4 20:19). Though their crews are hesitant to play along, Blackbeard intimidates them into accepting the roleplay (ep4 21:00), which ultimately results in Stede being in charge of and having to make decisions regarding a number of things he is not

qualified to control (ep4 22:30). This scene, as well as the mirror image where Stede brings Blackbeard along to a high society event in the following episode (ep5 17:57), serve to teach the viewer that though you may want someone else's identity or position in life for the positives, it may not be as good as it seems because there are negative sides and peer pressure that you do not know about.

The Revenge as a queer utopia

Now that masculinity and the pressure it exerts on the pirates of *Our Flag Means Death* has been examined, the following section will examine an example of how life can be in a community that is mostly devoid of these toxic expectations, namely Stede's pirate ship the Revenge.

The Revenge functions as a safe, welcoming queer community in contrast to a society that is otherwise not very welcoming to gay people, especially promiscuous ones. Several times throughout the show, the characters aboard the Revenge are seen interacting in various sexually queer ways, and many of the men have romantic or otherwise intimate relationships with each other. All of them seem to know of each other's intimate relationships, and none of them seem to judge each other (ep5 20:38). The Revenge could even be seen as a found family, seeing as those aboard have either chosen to abandon their biological families in favor of the Revenge, such as Stede and Jim, or do not seem to have any family they are connected to at all. Found families are often important for queer people, especially those who are not supported by their own families and therefore need to find support elsewhere, creating close-knit groups of people like that on the Revenge. One person from the outside that does judge them, however, is Izzy Hands, the first mate from Blackbeard's ship who comes aboard the ship when Blackbeard and Stede meet. He tries to use his knowledge of Lucius promiscuity, which he thinks is a secret, as leverage, but as he finds out the crew of the Revenge is too tightly knit for that to have any impact (ep5 20:24). This failure shows the importance of banding together to combat toxic expectations and the bullying that can result from said expectations. Though Izzy could be seen as a representative of the pirate community at large in contrast to the smaller social group that is the crew of the Revenge, he is apparently the exception in pirate society in general as well, as the other pirates do not seem to mind sexually queer individuals. Spanish Jackie is a well-respected individual in the Republic of Pirates despite her queerness, and the man that tries to buy Stede's "man for sale" (ep3 06:14) is also clearly homosexual and makes no effort to hide it (ep3 06:58). Even someone as stereotypically masculine as Calico Jack admits to having had sexual relations with Blackbeard (ep8 15:14), and despite his dislike of Stede tells him that he will not judge him if he has intimate relations with

Blackbeard (ep8 15:00). The undramatic, unquestioning acceptance of whatever sexual identities are lived out in the pirate community stands as an example to follow in real life for the viewers of the show, who should embrace the same openness and lack of judgment towards their queer peers.

Another important aspect of the openness of the Revenge is that towards people who are not necessarily sexually queer, but simply behave in odd ways or say odd things. Buttons, the first mate aboard the Revenge, is in many ways an extraordinarily strange person. He befriends seagulls and talks to them as if they are people, being particularly close with one he calls Karl (ep4 04:45), and spends some, if not all nights moonbathing with them (ep8 00:45). Moonbathing in Buttons' case means to strip naked and expose his body to the glow of the moon on the deck of the ship. He also is quick to bring up the option of eating other people whenever any sort of resource shortage is discussed. Despite these quirks the rest of the crew do not seem to judge him or question him in any way, and in fact when Calico Jack ends up killing Karl with his whip, the entire crew of the Revenge turns on Jack and Stede ends up sending him away (ep8 19:28). Blackbeard is also fascinated by Buttons, asking Izzy "why don't we have a bird guy?" (ep4 05:10) when he first encounters him and Karl.

Wee John is another example of odd behavior. He is clearly a pyromaniac, using any and all opportunities to ask if someone or something should be lit on fire, but the rest of the crew do not even bat an eye when he does so, simply accepting his statements and moving on. Stede's generally eccentric behavior is, at least after the initial period of discontent, also tolerated by his crew. This openness to those who are not and do not act like most is important for queer communities, where those who are part of the community are often used to not being accepted for who they are. It would of course be best if everyone, and not just those in specific communities could meet each other with respect and acceptance, with the caveat that those who hurt others should not be tolerated, but that seems to be something that will not happen for a long time, if ever. The Revenge shows viewers a glimpse of what such a future could be like. Despite the few instances of the crew being unnecessarily judgmental towards Stede and Jim, as a whole the ship functions as a queer utopia the way that Muños envisioned it, where everyone is welcome and can be who they are, as long as they treat each other well. The cracks in the perfection of this utopia could even be argued to make the representation more realistic, as even the least judgmental real people will likely encounter something or someone that they need to adjust to before accepting.

Queer representation

As has been mentioned, pirate community was predominantly male in the early 18th century, and this has carried over to *Our Flag Means Death* with a predominantly male cast of pirates, many of which are gay. What this means for the representation of the gay man is that it can be deepened, since the many gay men are each depicted as individuals who are not necessarily defined by their sexuality, and express their queerness and identity in very different ways. They are all full-fledged characters who are not reduced to being a gay stereotype. The same can be said for Jim and Spanish Jackie, who though they are the only representatives of their gender and sexual identities respectively, are definitely round characters who are more than just their queerness. In fact, none of the characters in the show are defined by their queerness. In all cases, it is simply a part of who they are and not their whole identity. These nuanced depictions of queer characters give queer people more variety in the options of characters to mirror themselves in and underlines the fact that queerness can be lived and experienced in a multitude of different ways, where none are necessarily better than the other.

While the representation of queer characters in *Our Flag Means Death* is overall good and praiseworthy, it has still fallen into some of the problematic trends of queer representation. As Parsemain and Cover have pointed out, white cis gay men are highly overrepresented in queer media and though not all of them are white, cis gay men definitely take up a lot of space in *Our Flag Means Death*. Additionally, in acting roles as well as in the diegeses of their stories, cis and potentially gay men also tend to take the lead and have other, 'more' queer characters as support (Cover). This is exactly what happens in *Our Flag Means Death*, as Rhys Darby is a straight cisgender white man playing the leading role with a supporting cast that includes numerous queers, and Stede is the gay cisgender white man in charge of the ship, perpetuating an unfortunate Hollywood trope of the cisgender white man being the center of attention both in terms of acting and in the diegesis. However, while Stede is formally in charge of the Revenge, he is shown to be out of place and out of his depth in a multitude of ways, making bad decisions and assuming wildly incorrect things about his crew, such as when he thinks they can all read (ep1 04:20). This could very well be a comedic stab at the trope. Putting the white gay man in center stage position and having him think he knows what is best for his queer 'inferiors', but then making sure to depict him being out of touch to emphasize that he in fact does not know everything there is to know about queer lived experiences, and that he perhaps should not be in charge at all.

This positioning of Stede also shows that the makers of the *Our Flag Means Death* are aware of the issue of identity alignment and who was cast to play which roles. As Rhys Darby's

straightness contrasts the gayness of the character Stede whom he portrays, it serves as an excellent example of juxtaposition of identities. This juxtaposition shows audience members who know the actor that experimenting with identities is we can all do, whether we are queer or straight. Another example of the show handling identity alignment with great care is the character of Jim. Not only is the non-binary pirate portrayed by a non-binary actor, Vico Ortiz there were also several non-binary people in the writers' room (Machado). The awareness of not only the relationship between the actor and their character, but also the writers and their character shows that everyone involved in the process took great care to assure they represented Jim in the best way possible. In short, while *Our Flag Means Death* perpetuates a few unfortunate tropes in problematic representation, overall the show does a good job at representing different queer identities and aligning their characters identities with their actors when necessary, while being aware of and poking fun at said problematic representations.

Another important aspect of both the queer representation as well as the presentation of odd characters in the show is that of queering the audience. Both in cases like Buttons' and Jim's, the characters are not presented as oddities for the viewer to observe at a distance and look at as strange beings. Rather, we as viewers are right there with them, putting us in a position of empathy where we are experiencing their queerness alongside them, experiencing both the positives of living life as you are, as well as the negatives of trying to fit in and being judged for being different – though in *Our Flag Means Death*, the latter is thankfully a rare occurrence. When Jim is first discovered to not be a mute man, the rest of the crew are very curious as to who they actually are in an unpleasant, disrespectful manner (ep4 16:14). However, as soon as Jim has established that they are still Jim, including a bit of a violent threat (ep4 17:04), the crew leaves them alone and goes back to treating them as they were treated prior. Other than this initial incident, no one judges Jim for their gender identity. Similarly, there is only a single instance of Buttons' being judged for his oddities, which is when Calico Jack shows up in the middle of the night, and Jack calls Buttons a pervert (ep8 01:15). All in all, though there are instances of queer characters being mistreated because of their queerness in *Our Flag Means Death*, when this happens the audience are not just onlookers but are encouraged to put themselves in their place and empathize with them.

Reactions to coming out

Perhaps one of the most important lessons in the show is not directly related to representation of a specific type of queerness, but rather the treatment of a particular queer character, Jim. As has been mentioned, when the crew finds out that Jim is not a man, they are

bombarded with silly and ignorant questions such as whether they are a mermaid (ep4 16:14), and it takes Jim threatening them to make the crew stop (ep4 17:05). As is evident from Jim's reaction, this is not the way to respond to someone that has just come out. They are clearly exasperated with having to defend who they are, and even if the questions and comments were rooted more in genuine interest and less in superstition and ignorance, they should not have to explain their identity unless they wanted to themselves. Additionally, even if they wanted to share, since Jim has only just been forced out of their false identity and thus came out against their will, they likely have not figured out exactly what their identity is or how to define and explain it. In stark contrast to the crew's reaction to Jim is Nana's. When Jim returns to Nana who raised Jim she addresses Jim as Bonifacia, their birth name. Jim simply replies by saying "I go by Jim these days" (ep7 7:36), and none of them address the issue again after that. This is a much better way to respond to a change in identity from when you have seen someone last, as it takes all the pressure off the person and simply allows them to do as they see fit, letting them handle whether and how much they wish to come out. While there may be some people who would feel entitled to an explanation in a situation like this, I would argue that Jim does not owe Nana one in these circumstances, mainly because Jim's gender identity has no bearing on their relation. Even if one's gender identity does have relevance to one's relationship with others, that does not necessarily mean that they are entitled to an explanation. Rather, a conversation about what this means for the relationship is likely more productive.

Similarly, Stede returns to Mary, his ex-wife whom he abandoned and finds that she has created a new life for herself that includes a new lover. After Stede realizes that he no longer belongs, he asks Mary how it feels to be in love, and as she describes it, Stede thinks of Blackbeard and Mary says "I hope you find that" (ep10 20:44). When he then says that he has found it, she naturally asks what 'her' name is because as far as she knows, Stede is heterosexual, and even though he replies "[h]is name is Ed" (ep10 20:58), subverting her expectations, there is no judgment. She simply smiles and hugs him (ep10 21:00), happy that he has also found love and accepts him for who he is even though it is not who she thought he was. Despite all that Stede has put her through between being a generally terrible husband when he actually was around, abandoning her and their children to become a pirate and disrupting her new life when he returns, Mary still has enough compassion to accept him for who he is and be happy for him. She did of course also try to murder him (ep10 18:26), so she has certainly given Stede some trouble as well, but the way they end up supporting each other and settling their conflicts is still admirable. In short,

Our Flag Means Death has both great examples of how to react to someone coming out, as well as how not to react. The contrast between the calm and comfortable situations created by appropriate responses and the unease and tension created by inappropriate behavior make both stand out even more.

The pitfall of complacency

Even though Stede is generally an example to follow in regard to inclusivity, openness and support of both his fellow queers and his lover Blackbeard, even he has moments where he puts unrealistic expectations on others and makes them feel inadequate. When Stede and Blackbeard invoke the act of grace and are employed in the king's service, Blackbeard's beard is cut off, and the first time Stede sees this he recoils in horror (ep9 13:22), not recognizing the man he loves and asking "What've they done with your face?!" Though it is of course exaggerated for comedic effect, this kind of reaction from someone that means a lot to you can undoubtedly cause some negative emotions in the recipient. Additionally, Stede immediately goes on to assume that Blackbeard's acceptance of the situation is nothing but a ruse, a part of an elaborate scheme to get them both out of there and back to their pirate lives (ep9 13:56). When he then realizes that there is no ruse and Blackbeard actually is resigned to carry on with the current situation, Stede leaves, disgusted with the change in his demeanor, even though he has been fostering the more calm and emotionally mature side of Blackbeard as well (ep9 14:30). Blackbeard clearly is sad that his close companion is not accepting of his adapting to the situation. This serves as an important reminder for viewers to always be vigilant in our pursuit of acceptance, especially those that are already aware of the importance of openness and inclusivity. Someone doing as well on this as Stede slipping up and not being supportive when Blackbeard shows a side of himself that does not live up to Stede's expectations, shows that it can happen to the best of us, and that we need to stay aware of when expectations and our reaction to them can turn toxic. As mentioned earlier, Stede also is surprised that none of his crew except Lucius can read, and this similarly shows off Stede in a bad light and reminds us to be aware of the different circumstances of those around us. Not everyone has lived lives similar to ours, so what might be natural or self-evident to us is not necessarily the same for everyone else.

Shame, tragedy and pride

Another important aspect of *Our Flag Means Death* is that of the tragic queer, or rather the lack thereof. So many portrayals of queer people, including classics like *Brokeback Mountain*, are inherently tragic, and overexposure to this kind of media could ultimately lead to queer people

expecting their lives to be equally as tragic, as is the case for Native Americans because of their invisibility in mass media (Leavitt et al. 40 & 44). This makes shows like *Our Flag Means Death* even more important. For all of their flaws and the general incompetence of a large number of them, the queer characters in the show are decidedly not tragic. As of the end of season one Blackbeard and Stede have been separated and the fate of Lucius hangs in the balance, but other than these two instances, which are also likely to have a happy ending in later seasons, most of the queer characters in the show are genuinely happy with their lives. Spanish Jackie, despite the loss of a couple of her husbands, is happy with her polyamorous life, although according to her talk with Jim, she has been worn out at a rather young age by her lifestyle (ep8 17:11). Jim and Oluwande both like being part of Stede's crew, and their blossoming relationship looks promising for the future. The same can be said for Pete and Lucius, although Lucius as mentioned is in a dire situation (ep10 21:54). Stede and Blackbeard also were happy with each when they were together, both flourishing with the new things they could show each other and happy with their united lives. Though I naturally do not know how the show will progress or end as there is currently only one season made and another in production, it does not seem like the show will veer towards a tragic conclusion. The one factor that speaks against this is the fact that pirates often face an untimely, tragic end as piracy in the golden age of piracy was punishable by death, and the historical Stede Bonnet was executed for his crimes (Defoe 111), while Blackbeard fell in combat before he could be put to trial (Defoe 86).

Perhaps even more important than the lack of tragedy is the shame that is ever-present in queer fiction, and that many queer people carry with them (Reed 157), but is notably not present in *Our Flag Means Death*. In her article on *Gentleman Jack*, Jennifer Reed notes that one of the main reasons the main character has as much appeal as she does is the total confidence that she carries herself with (157). Without shame or inhibition, she seduces other women at a time when being a lesbian was not accepted, let alone allowed (155).

Similar behavior can be found all over *Our Flag Means Death*. The most obvious example is Lucius' "We don't own each other" (ep5 20:48) line, that speaks to how the entire crew has no secrets from each other. They are not ashamed of who they are and live out all the queerness of their identities together aboard the Revenge, all proudly out to each other and the world. While there are a few instances of people hiding their identity from others, such as Jim's pretending to be a man, they are caused by perceived prejudice from their surroundings, and ultimately prove to be unnecessary as everyone in the show is allowed to be who they are if they so desire, at least aboard the Revenge. Stede and Blackbeard both embrace their homosexuality with confidence and no

judgment from others. Black Pete and Lucius also make no efforts to hide their relationship. Spanish Jackie is polyamorous and no one challenges her for this, and Jim being non-binary is only initially challenged by the ignorance of the rest of the crew. All of these confident, queer people proudly displaying their queerness to the world shows viewers that they too should be able to live their lives proudly out of the closet.

Discussion

Queer history

Though the positive representation on display in *Our Flag Means Death* is great and an example for both queers and others in regard to how to live their lives and treat others, the reality is that tragedy and shame are and always have been big parts of queer lives in the anglophone world (Schmitz & Tyler). Queer people through history have been persecuted for their non-normative sexuality and gender identity, such as during and after World War II in America (Boyd 95), and to this day it is still illegal to be gay or otherwise queer in many countries. While we strive to celebrate queerness through proper representation in shows like *Our Flag Means Death*, the cultural shame, ostracism and danger that queers have faced and continue to face for simply being who they are must never be forgotten. We must continue to fight for queer people's rights in those parts of the world where they are still not free to live as themselves. Neglecting to tell the tragic stories of queers throughout history in the Western world would be as bad, if not worse than never telling stories of happy queer people as it would erase their history. *Our Flag Means Death*, while it does focus on the positives of supportive queer communities, does not entirely neglect to present the pressure to fit in that queers have faced and continue to face. The struggle of being a queer person in a heteronormative society is best shown in the way Stede is treated by his peers and his family, being relentlessly bullied for not being 'manly' enough and forced into a heterosexual marriage. Thus, *Our Flag Means Death* acknowledges the historical struggle of queers but chooses to focus on the possibility of a better life instead of having queer tragedy at the center of its story.

Why use history to represent queers?

As should be evident from the analysis, the show brings up a lot of contemporary issues. Modern ideas of identity are presented and many aspects of masculinity as we understand it today are challenged, even if they are pushed to extremes. Some might ask why these modern topics are brought up in a show that brings early 18th century pirates to life. Should we not instead make a show with queer characters in a modern setting, so that our modern issues do not get mixed up with centuries old characters and settings? I would argue the opposite. Though we have many terms for

non-normative sexuality and gender identities in the 21st century, these identities have existed for a long time, if not as long as humanity itself. *Our Flag Means Death* is of course fiction, so we cannot know if people exactly like the characters in the show existed at the time. Even the characters named after historical people like Stede and Blackbeard were not necessarily the same way in real life as they are in the show.

However, despite the fictionality of the show, the presence of this many queer characters in a 18th century setting serves as a reminder that even though we have a lot of relatively new terms for queerness and queer identities, people with these identities existed before the terms were created. Though issues of discrimination and pathologizing of queer people are by no means gone today, in many parts of Western history, a lot of the people that we refer to as queer today would be treated worse and likely viewed as mentally ill as well, such as the 'sodomites' that Hans Turley describes in pirate times (2).

On the other hand, the depiction of in particular the Revenge also shows that we should not necessarily put ourselves or the current day zeitgeist on a pedestal as always being better than what came before. Again, we cannot know whether a community exactly like that on the Revenge in the show existed, but the possibility reminds us that even 300 years ago, people could be as open and accepting to each other as we strive to be today. Thus, the show helps build queer memory and remind us that as much as we as a society might view LGBT issues and rights as a relatively modern phenomenon, their struggle to be allowed a place in this world without judgment and persecution is one that has been going on for most of history.

Another reason to use the historical setting of the pirate ship as a place for queer people to gather is that ships have always been a liminal space that is neither entirely attached to nor detached from society. This is a perfect place to be if you do not want to actually leave society, but also do not fit in or feel like you will be accepted by society at large. Pirate ships naturally take this to the next level, as they are also legally outside society, so they are even more free to create their own communities than ships tied to any navy. However, even merchant- and warships can create their own isolated communities that are vastly different from the rest of the society that they come from.

A rather famous example of a gay community forming not necessarily on a ship, but rather from the remnants of a navy, is that of San Francisco. San Francisco is often regarded as the gay capital of the world (Bravmann 122), but this is not something that just naturally came about as a bunch of gay people coincidentally gathered in San Francisco to make a community. Rather, it can at least partially be attributed to the impact of World War II. Because of the increased military

presence and the increase in jobs and migration that it brought with them, in particular the number of men that lived in the city increased drastically (Boyd 94). This led to an increase in adult entertainment, including gay and lesbian bars which made queer life "much more accessible to both locals and military personnel" (94). The combination of intimacy, loneliness and incredible intensity of combat heightened the gay culture, and the availability of queer communities meant that it was easier to both figure out one's own identity and find groups to be part of (94). Boyd quotes Bérubé as saying: "By uprooting an entire generation, the war helped to channel urban gay life into a particular path of growth – away from stable private networks and toward public commercial establishments serving the needs of a displaced, transient, and younger clientele" (Boyd 94-95). This is not to say that the queer culture was allowed to flourish without interception from society at large, as especially from 1942 to 1951, gay and lesbian bars were persecuted (95). At first, military personnel was simply banned from particular bars (95), but as time went on several bars would be shut down and threatened with having their license revoked (95-96). In some ways, Stede's leaving his wife to explore a life of piracy mirrors the life of war that those enlisted in the war were thrust into, with the main difference of course being that Stede chose this upheaval and they were forced into it. Stede too is challenged when he lives without adhering to the norms. Like the American queers, Stede's journey also leads to him discovering new sides of himself and finding a new community, showing how despite society's attempts at oppressing gay people, attacking their culture and trying to make them behave normatively, they will find a way to band together and form community.

Can representation ever be perfect?

In this thesis I have taken a closer look at the way that queer people are represented in *Our Flag Means Death*. Overall, I have found that though the show generally does a good job and does not resort to simplistic stereotyping but rather has full-fledged characters that are more than their queerness, but that does not mean that the representations are unproblematic. The question is, what does an unproblematic or perfect representation constitute? And if that can be defined, is it realistic or even possible to have such ideal representation, or should we accept that the representations we can make are problematic, imperfect concepts? As Van Belle asked in her analysis of *Brokeback Mountain*: "Is there a correct representation of gay men and […] gay love?" (4). To me, a perfect representation of a group of people would mean that it includes the entire depth and breadth of what said group encompasses, including any and all experiences that they have had or can come across both on an internal and external level. To anyone reading this that thinks this sounds like an

insurmountable task to accomplish, I wholeheartedly agree. Even if a queer utopia that perfectly encapsulates Muños vision is created in a piece of fiction, it still would not cover everything that a group can be. What can however be achieved is a collective body of works of representation that together, while perhaps not perfect, at least come close to being ideal and properly representing the group that is being depicted. This would of course have to be done for all identity groups to be truly complete, which is a grand undertaking even when taking into account the collective of all the creative human minds that work to create works of representation.

Why queer representation matters

The counterargument to creating this vast library of representation and diversity is that sure, we can make something that is inclusive and encompassing of everyone, but what does it matter if it is all fiction, none of it is real anyways? While fiction can be argued to not be real, there is no denying that fiction very much affects the real world. Fiction shapes reality as much as reality shapes fiction, and who is represented in fiction informs who is visible and accepted in the real world as well. As Kizer & Hunter quote Hall as stating: "mediated images are constitutive representations used to create meaning in culture and are not reflections of reality" (65), emphasizing that they do not merely reflect reality, but are instrumental in constituting it. The collective consciousness of what is currently relevant in popular culture shapes and informs not only what is considered normal, but also what is considered legitimate or real. Especially when it comes to fringe identities that only make up a tiny fraction of the population, if they are not present in and visible in some form of popular culture, they suffer 'relative invisibility' (Leavitt et al. 41).

This can lead to those who embody said identity to doubt their own authenticity and self-worth. In a similar vein, but perhaps even worse is if the collective consciousness only consists of negative depictions of a certain minority. This can of course lead to hate and persecution of said group, legitimizing negative treatment and dehumanizing of them in the real world. Aside from the very real dangers of external negativity, this can also lead to internalized negativity, both in the form of embracing negative stereotypes, but also in feeling that you do not deserve to be here or be treated as a human being because you are part of a 'bad' group of people. As Kizer & Hunter documented, queer people have been negatively impacted by stereotypical representation (67), but a far worse example of this is Native Americans. In addition to being one of the least represented groups in mass media, they are either negatively stereotyped if actually portrayed in a contemporary setting or depicted "as 18th and 19th century figures" (Leavitt et al. 40). This has "led Native American high school and college students to have more negative feelings about their self […] and

community, […] and depressed academic future possibilities" (44). The fact that it damaged feelings across not only sense of self and community, but even these students' ideas of what they could potentially become, shows how important it is to give all groups proper representation to avoid these negative effects. Additionally, proper representation and visibility of minorities in popular culture can make said minorities feel more accepted and affirmed in their identity, and make the general population more positive towards them (Kizer & Hunter 62). This is of course not to say that representation is the only factor in preventing or combating discrimination and negative stereotypes, but it is an important factor that can shift people's views on minorities and help the minorities live out their full potential and be happy with themselves.

Conclusion

In conclusion, *Our Flag Means Death* does a great job at representing queer identities. Though the show centers on pirate communities that are mostly male and have a lot of gay men in them, it also manages to include a non-binary character, a polyamorous woman with a harem of husbands and a widow's society. All of these are depicted without resorting to stereotyping, teaching its audience that just like being queer can mean a multitude of things, so can being gay. People are not necessarily defined by their sexuality or gender identity, it is but one aspect of their identity. The show also has several examples of how to treat each other properly, in particular in regard to coming out and when dealing with queer people whose identities one may not understand, but also in general, promoting acceptance of others even if they are not what you expect them to be. In this vein, the Revenge functions as a queer utopia, as it is a place where everyone is free to be who they are without judgment. This is not to say that *Our Flag Means Death* has perfect queer representation, as that is almost impossible, but it can be a great contribution to a library of works that together can constitute proper queer representation. Such proper representation helps build queer memory and queer future. The show challenges notions of masculinity as being entirely defined by assertive, aggressive men and presents Stede's softer approach where one is in touch with their feelings as an alternative. The creators of the show were clearly aware of current issues in the industry such as identity alignment and the domination of white gay men. The non-binary Jim was handled with care and Stede, though he is a white gay man who is both main character and captain of the ship where most of the story takes place, his utter incompetence makes viewers of the show question whether he should in fact be in charge.

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