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Introduction

“Hollywood, that great maker of myths, taught straight people what to think about gay people, and gay people what to think about themselves.” (Epstein and Friedman 1995). The widespread media representation of cis/heterosexual identity as a universal experience influences audiences’ opinions on identities which fall outside of this norm, instilling feelings of isolation and self-hatred in queer individuals. While LGBTIQ+ identities are more visible in the media than ever before, queer media representation is still largely shaped by invisibility and erasure. On the occasions when non-cis/heterosexual identities are represented in the media mainstream, they are most often constructed along limiting societal stereotypes and outdated clichés. Thus, audiences are taught to maintain an attitude of mockery and contempt towards non-cis/heterosexuality, which, in turn, upholds the binary opposition of heterosexuality and homosexuality as an opposition between “normal” and “morally deviant” ways of life. For young audiences, particularly, the trend of LGBTIQ+ media erasure can have damaging effects, teaching children to devalue any form of non-heterosexuality before having the tools to acknowledge such subversive identities within themselves. Alongside Hollywood and mainstream media aimed at adults, then, children’s popular culture texts play an elemental role in maintaining the myth of “heteronormality” (Bruhm and Hurley 2004, ix).

Particularly cartoons exert a stark influence over their audiences, shaping young viewer’s opinions, values, and worldviews. Thus, the animated cartoon plays a critical role in the socialization and self-identification processes of children. Due to the dominant position which this medium takes up in children’s lives, much academic research has examined this format. Importantly, some academic research within the fields of queer theory and film and media studies dissects the ways in which normative power structures and oppressive societal regimes get conveyed to children under the guise of the innocence of cartoons through critical analysis (Dyer 2002a; Cover 2000; Gross 1991). It is argued that cartoons play an elemental role in socializing children into normative sex and gender norms, shaping the way younger generations think about identity, gender, sexuality, bodies, and desires.

Particularly within the academic field of queer theory, critical research seeks to destabilize traditional understandings of cultural texts. Here, the method of queering, or queer reading, as an analytical framework for resisting the oppressive powers of the heterosexual mainstream, is identified as a tool for deconstructing the power relations which are embedded in texts. A significant part of queer academia is dedicated to the project of queering the cultural canon, by

reframing and reinterpreting popular texts, thus separating them from their mainstream understanding to highlight their queer significance. Therefore, the method of queer reading is used by queer individuals and theorists to find representation within the dominant culture that invalidates non-cis/heterosexual realities. It is seen as a way of occupying mainstream spaces which erase LGBTIQ+ realities.

Despite recent efforts to represent a broader range of identities in cartoons, queer realities have yet to make it into the mainstream of children's media. The animated cartoon landscape is starkly shaped by queer erasure and the reinscribing of heteronormative ideals. While media representations of LGBTIQ+ identities have become more visible than ever before, such representations are mainly reserved for adult audiences, and almost exclusively included in live-action formats. Clearly, this lack of queer visibility in children's texts maintains the notion that transgressing normative sex and gender regimes is deviant, fostering feelings of isolation, negativity, and self-hatred in young queer individuals. Furthermore, the lack of explicitly non-cis/heterosexual representations in mainstream children's cartoons upholds the strict separation of the realms of childhood and queerness. This, in turn, maintains the oppressive and heterosexist status quo, educating children into the rules of heteronormativity, and reproducing the assumption that non-cis/heterosexuality is inappropriate.

As hegemonic perpetrators of normative gender and sexuality concepts, children's cartoons require critical deconstruction. Productions by the Disney company, particularly, have been at the center of queer critiques, due to the hegemonic position which they occupy within the landscape of children's media (Fan 2019; Frasl 2018; Juschka 2001). Considered one of the largest entertainment empires in the world, Disney has shaped children's upbringings for decades, and still retains its dominance today (Fan 2019). For this reason, it is particularly important to critically analyze media formats produced by Disney, as a way of interrupting the heteronormative indoctrination at the foundation of mainstream cartoons, thereby resisting against the socialization of children into the regime of compulsory heterosexuality.

To tackle the need for critical research which deals with Disney cartoons, this thesis will apply the method of queer reading to Disney's animated series *Recess*. Disney's commercially successful cartoon series *Recess*, which ran for six seasons between 1997 and 2001, was praised by both adult and childhood audiences, as it promised to depict real tales of American childhood. Centered around a group of six elementary school children, and set within white American suburbia, this series seemed to directly reflect mainstream experiences of childhood (Needleman 2018). It was the group of protagonists which made the series particularly stand out – the clique of four boys and two girls reflected six very different personalities, showing

how the power of friendship can overcome any difference and challenge. *Recess* stood out for reflecting the real adventures and struggles of elementary school children, as opposed to polished and unrealistic stories, which made this series one of Disney's most well-received television projects of the last decade of the twentieth century (Chandler 2016). Considering the mainstream positioning of the series, a queer reading of *Recess* can address the need for interrupting the heterosexual indoctrination of children which the cartoon format is accused of carrying out. This thesis aims to analyze *Recess* from a critical and queer perspective. Focusing particularly on Spinelli, the bold tomboy of the group of main characters, I seek to analyze the dimensions of lesbian identity and subversion which can be detected through queer reading this text. Particular attention will be paid to the queer encodings and cultural stereotypes which can be found in this animated series. In this way, my research seeks to address the question of the implications of the method of queer reading when applied to children's media formats, particularly when queer readings take on the shape of uncovering queer subtext and encodings. Thus, the upcoming research has the goal of reflecting on the politics of Spinelli, not only reinterpreting her as a butch lesbian character, but also discussing the implications of queer reading a mainstream children's text. Therefore, this thesis is guided by the question of which liberatory possibilities or restrictive limitations arise from queering *Recess*, discussing the politics of Spinelli to tackle the need for more academic research which questions the implications of queer readings focused on stereotypes and queercoding.

Additionally, thesis aims to address the need for more academic research which dissects the power relations embedded in children's texts, to prove how analyzing cartoons from a critical queer perspective can unite the realms of childhood and queerness. In this way, this thesis accompanies research aiming to queer the cultural canon, contributing to queerings of cartoons in the field of queer theory. By queering Disney's *Recess*, the research that follows aims not only to bring to light the queerness which is encoded in children's mainstream texts, but also to examine queer reading as a method to navigate heteronormative majority culture. Reinterpreting Spinelli, the series' quick-tempered and bold protagonist, as a butch lesbian representation, I envision a non-heterosexual child, thus rejecting the dominant assumption that children are simultaneously without desire and heterosexual. In doing so, the following research examines the nexus of childhood and queerness, by aiming unite these realms through proving how queer audiences can subvert mainstream texts to interrupt the cultural authority which they hold. Thus, I aim to make clear that dominant conceptualizations of childhood serve to repress realities of non-heterosexual children, reinscribing the marginalization of LGBTIQ+ individuals, and teaching children to devalue all forms of non-cis/heterosexual identity. Queer

reading, then, will be argued as a method for queer individuals to occupy space in the mainstream that erases their realities, forging representation out of invisibility.

Analyzing an American mainstream children's animated television series of the late 1990s from a queer perspective, this thesis rejects dominant readings of *Recess*, discussing the ways in which the text is rooted in power dynamics and used to stabilize the oppressive status quo, as well as how a queering of the series can offer possibilities for broader understandings of identity, gender, and sexuality. Analyzing the dimensions of queerness, subversion, and homonormativity which can be located in Spinelli aims to create a space within the mainstream for the queer child to occupy, thereby dissolving the strict separation of queerness and childhood.

In large part, already existing academic queer readings center around detecting and underscoring counter-hegemonic encodings in texts. While this creates affirmative queer representation, and resists against the erasure of queer identity from mainstream media, there is a lack of academic research focused on the implications which queer readings of children's texts can bring about. Thus, a central goal of this thesis is to examine the implications of conducting queer readings of mainstream children's texts. Along with discussing the liberatory dimensions which come with queering Spinelli, I also seek to dissect the possible disadvantages which queer readings based on encoded stereotypes can present. Pointing out that Spinelli is constructed along cultural signifiers through which her queerness can be identified, I aim to argue that the project of queering children's texts can present obstacles for readers and audiences, as queer readings commonly focus on exposing stereotypes which they, in turn, reproduce.

I posit that the signifiers along which the character to be analyzed is constructed uphold outdated clichés associated with the butch lesbian archetype. Additionally, I will argue how the stereotyped way in which Spinelli's lesbian identity is encoded conveys essentialist notions of identity which can be connected to lesbian identity politics. In this way, this thesis questions the ways in which queering Spinelli reveals restrictive concepts of identity, which queer conceptualizations seek to overcome. In proposing that this *Recess* character can be interpreted as a butch lesbian character, then, my research also critically analyzes the implications of such an argument. Furthermore, Spinelli's position as the series' protagonist, particularly considering the juxtaposition between this character and her enemies, a group of heterosexual girly-girls referred to as "The Ashleys", will be critically reflected upon. I will propose that this juxtaposition can be understood as a butch/straight girl dichotomy, as the series positions Spinelli and the Ashleys as structurally opposite to each other. Considering Spinelli's role as

Recess' hero, and the Ashleys' position as the antagonists, I seek to argue that queering *Recess* can provide childhood audiences with a positive concept of homosexuality to identify with, one which breaks up the hegemony of heterosexuality over homosexuality. In this way, this thesis seeks to reinterpret *Recess* as an animated series which allows queer childhood audiences to envision a future in which deviation from the heteronormative norm is celebrated. Therefore, my analysis seeks to suggest that queering Spinelli offers possibly queer children a positive and stable representation of homosexual identity to connect with, equipping non-heterosexual children with the tools to acknowledge and navigate their own subversive identities.

Simultaneously, it is my goal to interrogate how the stereotypes which shape this character can contribute to the negative trend of hiding queer realities behind problematic clichés, while also maintaining the limiting binary heterosexual/homosexual opposition, which invalidates individuals along intersecting lines of identity such as race, class, dis/ability, and so on. Thus, the following pages seek to discuss the ways in which queer reading practices, while offering a framework for resisting the oppressive powers of the heterosexual matrix, can (re)produce negative prejudices associated with non-cis/heterosexual identities, as highlighting counter-hegemonic encodings in mainstream cartoons reduces queerness to possibly problematic stereotypes.

In addition to analyzing the liberatory possibilities of queer reading *Recess*, I will pose the question of the extent to which queering cartoons can continue the oppressive trend of hiding LGBTIQ+ identity behind stock characters, metaphors, and jokes. Therefore, while performing a queer reading of *Recess*, a mainstream children's cartoon, this thesis brings into question just how 'queer' such a reading actually is. Can exposing Spinelli as a butch lesbian broaden the horizons of children's self-identification processes, or does the rigidity of her identity close the opportunity for queerness, by reinscribing outdated and "conservative" notions of non-heterosexuality? Does Spinelli's butch identity convey restrictive notions of identity, upholding the repressive homosexual/heterosexual binary, or is the stability associated with her identity productive in providing the potentially queer child viewer with a positive character to identify with? These questions will be tackled by queering Spinelli in *Recess*.

The first chapter of this thesis will introduce the reader into the current state of research surrounding this topic. In order to consider the need for queering as a resistant academic method, the academic context in which this thesis is rooted will first be introduced. Key terms will be defined, particularly focusing on the colloquial and academic uses of the terms 'gay', 'lesbian', and 'queer'. It will become clear that the gay and lesbian civil rights movement, which marked U.S. culture for the latter part of the twentieth century, focused on making

homosexual identity visible and accepted in society. As a result of this, the notion that society was made up of individuals who were either gay or straight was reproduced, a binary structure which was criticized for erasing individuals who exist across multiple and intersecting identity lines. Furthermore, lesbian identity politics will be discussed here, providing the reader with an understanding of the archetypes which mark lesbian culture, such as the figures of the butch and femme. The ways in which a strict, unchangeable, and independent lesbian identity was delineated and theorized will be summarized, discussing norms, behaviors, as well as beauty and fashion codes present within lesbian culture. The essentialist dimension of an “intrinsic” identity, central to the lesbian feminist movement, will be overviewed. From this, the need for broader identity term will be described, outlining the emergence of queer theory, and defining relevant terms within this field, focusing especially on Judith Butler’s (1990) concepts of subversion, intelligibility, and the heterosexual matrix. The ways in which ‘queer’ came to be understood as a conceptional basis within academia will be detailed. Through clarifying the main tenets of the academic field of queer theory, the reader will understand the restrictions of identity terms such as ‘gay’ and ‘lesbian’, and be informed about the ways in which queer theory seeks to destabilize all forms of normative categorization. Closing this chapter, I pose a question which has been the source of much controversy within queer studies: if the term ‘queer’ encompasses all forms of non-cis/heterosexual identity, have terms such as ‘gay’ and ‘lesbian’ become obsolete? In tackling this question, I aim to clarify how Spinelli can be queered as a lesbian character.

The second chapter of this thesis deals with queer reading as the methodology chosen for this thesis, describing it as a method which emerged from the need of LBGTIQ+ individuals and theorists to find queer representation in the heterosexual mainstream. Queering will be defined as a method which challenges the idea that texts have only one (heteronormative) meaning, making it possible to conclude that queer reading is a strategy to reject the hegemony of heterosexuality, and of reclaiming a mainstream which invalidates queer voices. In order to deconstruct the normative powers at play in Disney’s *Recess*, the second chapter of this thesis introduces two relevant projects within academic queerings: queering childhood and queering cartoons. Describing the hegemonic conceptualization of the child in U.S. society, a figure simultaneously perceived as heterosexual and without sexuality, I argue for the need for more visible representations of the queer child, and consequently for more academic research which resists the heteronormative indoctrination of children through cartoons, from which the reader can conclude the importance of queering Spinelli. Furthermore, the second chapter will relay the history of queer coding in animated formats, as well as discuss the queerness which has

long permeated the cartoon medium. Importantly, in discussing frameworks for queering cartoons, this chapter seeks to convey that queer readings of mainstream children's texts which are conducted through highlighting queer encodings can contribute to the erasure of LGBTIQ+ realities, by hiding them behind stereotypes, prejudices, and clichés.

The queering of Spinelli makes up the third chapter of this thesis. Here, I seek to bring the cultural stereotypes at the foundation of Disney's *Recess* to the forefront. Guided by the key concepts of queer theory and lesbian studies detailed in the first chapter, the construction of Spinelli's character, her personality, appearance, and interactions with the outside world will be analyzed. Reading Spinelli against the background of Butler's concept of the heterosexual matrix, as well as against the notions of lesbian identity politics, lesbian typologies, and theories of queer cartoon encodings and queer childhood, described in the second chapter, the queering to be conducted aims to reinterpret this character as a butch lesbian character. I seek to argue that *Recess* reproduces cultural stereotypes associated with the stock character of the butch, to allude to Spinelli's heterosexuality while not explicitly addressing it. Particularly, the ways in which the character marked by identifiable butch lesbian signifiers, as she adopts fashion trends, beauty codes, behaviors and expressions commonly associated with this archetype, will be analyzed.

Furthermore, I will focus on several instances in the series which center around Spinelli's struggles with heteronormative femininity. In doing so, my queer reading aims to identify instances which represent heteronormative femininity as a performative identity, structurally opposite to Spinelli's intrinsic homosexual identity. I will discuss the extent to which Spinelli's struggles with intelligible femininity allow audiences to destabilize the hegemonic notions around sex and gender, aiming to connect such moments in the series with Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity (1990). Detecting and highlighting the performative nature of heterofemininity in *Recess* through queer reading the relationship between Spinelli and the Ashleys, I seek to point out that it is possible to interrupt the tradition of heterosexual indoctrination which is central to mainstream cartoon series of the 1990s.

Examining the conflicts between Spinelli and the Ashleys, I propose that heteronormative girlhood presents a threat to the character's agency and happiness. Furthermore, I seek to detect moments in the series where, despite efforts to forcefully ascribe a heterosexual feminine identity on this character, her butch lesbian core prevails. Thus, my queering of Spinelli, aims to reveal a representation of unchangeable and intrinsic lesbian identity. This notion of identity as essential and rigid will be argued as holding potential for young audiences, as Spinelli's coherent butch identity can offer non-heterosexual child viewers a stable concept of identity to

connect with, allowing them to envision a happy homosexual future, thus fighting the self-hatred which permeates many children's coming out experiences. Simultaneously, it will be argued that the rigidity associated with Spinelli's lesbianism maintains essentialist and repressive notions of "intrinsic" identity, erasing the fluidity of identities, sexualities, genders, bodies, and desires, which concepts of queer theory have sought to move beyond.

Connecting aspects of Spinelli to the notions of lesbian identity politics discussed in the first chapter, this thesis aims to examine the ways in which the juxtaposition between the character and her arch nemeses, the Ashleys, upholds the strict homosexual/heterosexual binary which concepts of queerness have sought to overcome. In light of the homonormativity associated with the butch-femme dyad described in the first chapter, I argue that the butch lesbian identity uncovered in the protagonist maintains hegemonic notions around identity, in presenting itself as structurally opposite to heterosexual femininity. Furthermore, I posit that queering Spinelli risks relying heavily on outdated clichés and thereby upholding toxic stereotypes associated with female non-heterosexuality. Thus, I discuss the ways in which highlighting the cultural stereotypes along which Spinelli is constructed erases other forms of non-cis/heterosexual identity, by continuing the invisibility of queer identities at the intersection of other social identity categories, such as race, class, and ability status.

In this way, I aim to argue that queering Spinelli can close the opportunity for queerness, by focusing on problematic stereotypes, as well as erasing the various other identity categories which exist outside of heterosexuality and invalidating the intersectionality, fluidity, and multiplicity of identity categories. Following this, this thesis will argue that exposing this character's lesbian identity can continue the cultural trend of erasure and negativity toward and amongst queer youth. Thus, while queering Spinelli contributes to uniting the spheres of childhood and queerness by undercutting the oppressive powers of the heterosexual mainstream, it simultaneously maintains outdated and problematic notions of identity, reinscribing the binary opposition between heterosexuality and homosexuality that efforts of queer theory seek to move beyond. In this way, this thesis argues that queering Spinelli takes on a gay-affirming shape, rather than truly corresponding to the notion of 'queer'. Discussing the possible negative implications of queering children's media formats is vital for broadening the discussion around queer media representation, as it points out the ways in which queer readings might be going against their intended purpose by maintaining stereotypes and outdated clichés. In discussing the possibilities and limitations of queer readings, this thesis brings the importance of queer childhood concepts in the media to the forefront, calling for the need for media concepts from which queer children can envision futures of queer joy.

A Note on Positionality

First and foremost, it is important to lay out the political and social context that influences the author of this thesis. My identity, in terms of gender, class, race, sexuality, and ability status, and the potential biases that come with it, undoubtedly and unavoidably influence my perspective as a researcher. Recognizing, as Donna Haraway writes in *Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective* (1988), that a disembodied, transcendent scientific objectivity is an illusion, it is important to point out my particular and specific positionality when writing this thesis.

As a white, able-bodied, middle-class, young, queer, cisgender European woman, living in Vienna, the urban capital of Austria, my beliefs, value systems, and moral stances have fundamentally swayed my outlook on the world, whether that be consciously or unconsciously. While my own experience with non-heterosexuality might aid me in performing a queer reading of a text that presents itself as normative, I am aware that my experiences with dimensions of privilege in many ways shape my claims to legitimate knowledge, and are inseparable from my research process.

The object of my analysis, the U.S. animated cartoon television series *Recess*, created by Paul Germain and Joe Ansolabehere, originated in the United States, and depicts the everyday North American suburban life adventures of a group of six school children. The queer reading that will be conducted within this thesis, as well as the theoretical contextualization used to support my analysis, will therefore be anchored in U.S. American culture. In this way, this thesis can be seen as a contribution to the Western discourse on queer theory, specifically regarding the project of queering the cultural canon.

Chapter 1: Theory and Contextualization

This chapter will introduce the reader into the theoretical framework in which this thesis is rooted. For an analysis of the ways in which *Recess*' character Spinelli depicts limiting as well as subversive aspects of non-heterosexuality, it is necessary to define and consider the implications of some key terms first, such as 'lesbian' and 'queer'. Looking at the history, as well as the foundations and main tenets of the academic disciplines of queer theory and lesbian studies will detail how these terms differ from one another, despite, colloquially, being widely used synonymously today. From this introductory chapter, the reader will be able to conclude that the academic field of lesbian studies is intimately linked to identity politics, while queer theory proposes new ways of theorizing that surpass these rigid notions of identity. This chapter will describe the essentialism which is central to lesbian identity politics, as well as the destabilizing nature of queerness and queer theory. This will provide the basis for reflecting on the politics of *Recess* and considering the ways in which, by queering Spinelli to expose her coherent lesbian identity, limitations as well as possibilities can be observed.

Before discussing the practice of queer reading as the chosen methodological approach, it is essential to grasp the theory relating to queer readings. Laying out relevant terminology from the academic context surrounding this topic, and illustrating how this terminology will be used throughout the thesis, connecting terms, definitions, and approaches to the research topic at hand, will detail the tools needed to address not only the importance of queering children's texts¹, but the possibilities and limitations that such queerings offer. By giving an overview of the most relevant academic developments and contributions, this chapter will contextualize the significance of deriving queer meaning from children's cartoon formats, and of bringing to light the implications of this practice.

To delineate the emergence of queer theory as an academic field which aimed to expand the horizon of gay and lesbian studies, the activist history of the terms 'queer' and 'lesbian' must be discussed. Though a comprehensive detailing of the histories of 'queer' and 'lesbian' would surpass the scope of this thesis, a closer look at their emergence and sociopolitical implications will provide some insight into the current state of research within the field of queer theory. In this thesis, Ashley Spinelli, the protagonist of Disney's animated cartoon series *Recess*, will be analyzed through a critical queer lens. Since the cartoon series is positioned within the heteronormative mainstream of children's media, the text presents itself as compliant

¹ Within cultural studies, and specifically within the practice of queer reading, the term 'text' is understood as a wide-ranging term, encompassing different types of cultural material, referring to any cultural meaning-making articulation (see Cranny-Francis et al. 2003).

with societal norms. In order to read non-heterosexual meaning into this children's television format, one must first understand how gender studies in general, and, more specifically, gay, and lesbian studies and queer theory, aim to undercut the heteronormative ideals prevalent in Western culture. Reading this character as one that breaks with heteronormative societal expectations, the queering of Spinelli to be conducted will expose her as a lesbian character. Though this might seem to equate the terms 'queer' and 'lesbian', the two terms are not synonymous, each bearing with it a unique meaning, development, and history rooted in activist efforts. To problematize the ways in which Spinelli, as a lesbian character, reproduces limiting notions of sexual identity, or can possibly be seen as a representation of transgressive queerness, the terms, and the ways in which they are used today will be clarified, defined, and differentiated. Thus, this chapter will provide the theory necessary for considering the simultaneous possibilities and limitations of queering Spinelli.

1.1. Homosexual Activism and Lesbian Studies

While efforts of a "homophile movement" in the United States can be traced back to the 1950s, the riots at the Stonewall Inn in June of 1969 are often regarded as the catalyst for the modern LGBTIQ+ rights movements (Kraß 2005; Hall 2010).² The activist protests that arose following the Stonewall riots bluntly confronted mainstream society with homosexuality, bringing it out of the margins and into the centers of cities, thereby disrupting heteronormative quotidian life (Somerville 2020). Thus, the Stonewall riots are widely seen catalyst for the sociopolitical Gay Liberation movement that permeated U.S. culture from the late 1960s to the 1990s.

Early expressions of the movement focused heavily on the visibility of gay men and lesbian women, and the narrative of coming out of the closet. Lesbians and gay men urged individuals like them to take action in actively rejecting the heterosexual mainstream by voicing their non-heterosexual identities (McIntosh 1968). In pleas for their identities to be recognized, the Gay Liberation movement resisted against the compulsory heterosexuality which led non-heterosexual individuals to stay in the closet, invisible within mainstream society, for fear of marginalization, oppression, and acts of homophobic violence. The terms

² There are several initialisms to designate the community of individuals that exist outside of normative cisgender identity and heterosexuality. Most commonly known, the term LGBT is an acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender. In this thesis, the designation LGBTIQ+ will be used. The acronym includes the terms lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer (and/or questioning). The plus sign recognizes the fluidity of spectrums of sexuality and gender, and encompasses sexual and gender identities that are not heterosexual and/or cisgender (see Stonefish and Lafreniere 2015). This acronym is used to refer to any and all forms of non-cisgender and non-heterosexual identity.

‘lesbian’ and ‘gay’, and the identity politics connected to them, are central to the U.S. Gay Liberation movement. To delineate the differences between these terms and the term ‘queer’, which oftentimes appear alongside each other today, the notions of identity politics which they carry must be examined.

The fixation on homosexuality as a rigid identity, fundamentally different from heterosexuality, was at the foundation of the Gay Liberation movement. Activists claimed that homosexuality, as the binary opposite of heterosexuality, was an identity which deserved the same recognition and civil rights as its hegemonic counterpart. While this led to a growing acceptance of homosexual identity within mainstream society, and made homosexual realities visible, the focus on identity politics maintained restrictive notions of identity. Organized around sexual expression and identity, the politics of the gay and lesbian civil rights movement (re)produced essentializing concepts of identity, leaving unquestioned the limiting assumption that Western society consists of individuals who are either heterosexual or homosexual (Epstein 1994). At the heart of its political strategy, the movement concentrated on publicizing personal journeys of coming out as a way of forming a group identity. As a result, activists, particularly gay men, pleaded for the heterosexual mainstream to recognize homosexuality as a group which carries its own culture, the ‘gay and lesbian community’ (Ashley 2015; Kraß 2005). Thus, the identity politics at the basis of the gay and lesbian movement claimed sexual orientation as the center of identity formation. Homosexuality was defined as something that gay and lesbian individuals were born with, which should therefore not be pathologized or discriminated against (Garcia 2017).

The experiences of gay men were at the forefront of the movement (Kraß 2005). Following this, concerns about the political focus on white and male gay identity rose from different sides of the LGBTIQ+ activist movement, voiced, among others, by lesbian women, who criticized that the discussion around a ‘gay and lesbian community’ implied that gay men and lesbian women were fundamentally the same (Piontek 2006). Lesbian feminists rejected this unification of gay men and lesbian women (Weston 1993). Pointing out the dissimilarities between gay and lesbian existence, lesbian activists favored a lesbian politics that would underline the gender differences between lesbian women and gay men, accusing gay men of being complicit to the oppressive patriarchal power structures of society. Additionally, it was argued, amalgamating lesbian identity with gay identity erased lesbian realities behind the interests of homosexual men. Lesbian activists and theorists highlighted essentialist differences between lesbian, gay and heterosexual identity, arguing that ‘lesbian’ is an exclusive identity category, drastically different from gay men and heterosexual culture (Kraß 2005).

This desire to be recognized as an independent identity category is exemplified in French scholar Monique Wittig's claim that lesbians are not women, as, by engaging in sexual acts with other women, lesbians step outside of the fundamental rule of being a woman, which is to be heterosexual (1992). Therefore, it was argued, 'lesbian' should be theorized as its own identity. Scholars sought to theorize lesbian existence and culture to combat the lesbian's invisibility within academia, and Western culture at large. Here, the aesthetic and behavioral norms which shape lesbian culture were identified and analyzed. Theorizing lesbian fashion, scholars such as Arlene Stein suggest that "[t]he lesbian look has never been monolithic; it's always reflected a rich combination of cultural forms and styles—local and national, underground and commercial, multicolored and polyethnic" (Stein 1995, 477). There is no strict guideline which mandates lesbian appearance. However, there are cultural codes associated with the lesbian community, and certain lesbian archetypes can be identified, such as the figures of the butch and the femme, which were particularly present in the U.S. lesbian bar culture of the 1950s and 1960s. In efforts to delineate lesbian culture and define lesbianism as an isolated identity, research within the field of lesbian studies analyzed these lesbian typologies, as well as trends and stereotypes within lesbian culture (Lapovsky Kennedy and Davis 1993; Stein 1995; Reddy-Best and Jones 2020).

The term 'butch' refers to the "lesbian who appears in the straight mind's eye when lesbianism is mentioned" (Ciasullo 2001, 604). This lesbian archetype is marked, to a large extent, by traditionally male physical and personality characteristics. In other words, the butch challenges that which is traditionally considered feminine (Huxley, Clarke, and Halliwell 2014). Commonly characterized by ugliness, short hair, and a masculine style comprised of leather boots and flannel shirts, the butch is considered distasteful by mainstream society (Case 1988; Huxley et al. 2014). Adopting characteristics of the masculine gender as a form of resistance to oppressive patriarchal cultural assumptions, the butch lesbian breaks with the heteronormative frame through which subjects are brought into being and made recognizable, and thus poses a threat to patriarchal majority culture.

In mainstream U.S. culture, it is argued, the hypermasculine lesbian is devalued, as the "component of unfemininity and non-femaleness that characterizes the butch" (Ciasullo 2001, 581) renders her unappealing to the male gaze, and therefore, a threat to hegemonic heterosexual male identity (Farr and Degroult 2008). Another component that contributes to framing her as unattractive, as lesbian scholars point out, is the way in which the butch is marked by classism, as she is commonly conceptualized as working class (Weston 1993; Ciasullo 2001; Lapovsky Kennedy and Davis 1993).

Contradictorily, while the butch lesbian is pushed to the periphery for posing a threat to hegemonic notions femininity, she is also the most visible kind of lesbian, because she distinctly stands out from normative beauty standards. Referring to this, scholar Ann Ciasullo suggests that “because her body is already and always marked as lesbian (...) she is more ‘lesbian’ than the femme” (2001, 604). While the butch lesbian cannot hide her transgressive identity, she is still underrepresented by the media, due to its dominant power of erasing difference (Ciasullo 2001; Sinfield 2015). It is in this context that Ciasullo refers to the butch lesbian as the “unrepresentable body”, stating that because she so visibly transgresses the norms of femininity, “the butch’s perceived unattractiveness renders her invisible in an image-based culture” (Ciasullo 2001, 602).

Due to the butch lesbian’s ability to disrupt the assumption that masculinity is an inherently male attribute, she is largely considered a subversive figure (Vänskä 2014). Presenting as butch challenges normative conceptions femininity, which scholar Arlene Stein underlines by arguing that wearing a leather jacket and having short hair is simultaneously about personal style and freedom, and a statement of political resistance, embracing one’s own authenticity in spite of hegemonic cultural feminine beauty ideals (1995). The butch figure embodies a “deeply felt expression of individual identity and a personal code guiding appearance and sexual behavior” (Lapovsky Kennedy and Davis 1993, 62). Lesbian subculture is marked by the tradition of resisting and rejecting normative standards of feminine fashion and beauty. This is a tactic of separation from the heterosexual sphere, as well as a strategy of becoming visible to other subcultural members. Lesbian, and, particularly, butch fashion, is defined by a reformulation of fashion codes, and a challenge to patriarchal notions of beauty (Clark 1991).

Furthermore, lesbian theorists analyze the connection between the figures of the tomboy and the butch lesbian, as they have in common the adoption of male characteristics into their female expressions, and therefore pose a challenge to hegemonic femininity. The tomboy, like the butch, is able to maneuver the existing space between gender determinations for girls and boys, and for women and men (Zevy 2014). Female masculinity, as embodied in the tomboy figure, and lesbianism, are closely linked (Halberstam 2014). Consequently, theorists identify the ways in which tomboy children might grow up into butch lesbians, recognizing the tomboy child as an early form of lesbian experience, a transiting phase in the coming out process, and pointing out the similarities between lesbian coming-of-age narratives and tomboy narratives (Proehl 2018; Stein 1995; Bruhm and Hurley 2004).

Opposite to the butch lesbian stands the archetype of the femme lesbian. Alternatively referred to as ‘lipstick lesbian’, the femme is a feminine lesbian who follows normative

standards of fashion and beauty. Visually identical to heteronormative concepts of femininity, the femme appeals to the heterosexual male gaze. This, as Ciasullo explains, makes her consumable, and thus more acceptable within majority culture, as she can be ‘de-lesbianized’ to still be appreciated by men. It is from this tendency to ‘de-lesbianize’ the femme lesbian, that a trend of ‘lesbian chic’ emerged in the 1990s, wherein mainstream fashion magazines focused on the white femme lesbian as a new ‘cool girl’ (Smith 2020). Such conceptualizations were largely constructed to please the male gaze while simultaneously profiting from the homosexual market, and accepted the femme lesbian into mainstream culture while simultaneously rendering the homosexual dimension of her identity invisible (Ciasullo 2001; Case 1988).

Notably, lesbian theorists critiqued the butch-femme dynamic, central to lesbian culture in the 1950s and 1960s, and still marking the lesbian community today. This dyad was criticized for reproducing heteronormativity, with scholars describing butches and femmes as anachronic archetypes which imitate the power dynamics of heterosexual culture. Therefore, it has been widely argued that the butch and femme archetypes are expressions of homonormativity, with these lesbian typologies being accused of assimilating to the heterosexual majority culture by which they are oppressed. Lesbian studies sought to redefine this lesbian bar culture, towards a lesbian identity that refused the heterosexual roles that butch and femme lesbians were accused of reproducing (Blackwood 2012; Ciasullo 2001; Case 1988). Here, theorists pointed out the diversity of lesbian identities, underscoring that the butch/lesbian division was limiting, as there is no rule for what a lesbian looks or acts like. Huxley and colleagues point out that even “the butch norm is complex, and women can embody butch style in different ways” (2014, 206).

While lesbian style has come to evolve beyond the butch-femme dynamic, as lesbian appearance norms become more diverse and less dogmatic, recognizing the butch-femme binarism is an essential component of lesbian identity formation and participation within lesbian subculture, especially as a practice of cultural criticism which aims to separate itself from heteronormative ideals (Clark 1991). However, butch and femme styles, while distinctly apart of lesbian cultural heritage, exist alongside many other expressions of lesbianism. Lesbian identity is diverse, and can exist alongside other, intersecting lines of identity, such as dimensions of race, class, ability status, and gender identity, to name a few. Therefore, an ‘authentic’ lesbian identity or fashion style does not exist (Clark 1991; Vänskä 2014).

Despite recognizing a variety in lesbian identities and typologies, contributions to the discourse around lesbian identity and culture heavily focused on lesbianism as the basis for

identity formation. The focus on identity politics reiterated the restrictive division of Western culture into the heterosexual/homosexual dichotomy, later criticized by queer theorists as an essentializing concept that reproduces the categorization of individuals into being either normative or deviant (Somerville 2020; Butler 1990; Sedgwick 2004). Central to gay and lesbian studies, the focus on identity politics was widely criticized for contributing to homonormativity, erasing the possibility of other identity categories, such as race and class, to intersect with gender and sexual categories, and thereby excluding members of their “community’s ‘others’”, meaning other queer identities that exist beyond white homosexuality (Piontek 2006, 3). Thus, it is argued that the insistence on identity politics and lesbianism as a stable category has restrictive and limiting effects. While claiming to be aware that an “authentic lesbian sensibility” (Clark 1991, 197) does not exist, lesbian identity politics concerned itself with forging the conditions of a lesbian collective identity, which became increasingly difficult as the discourse broadened and the heterogeneity of lesbian culture became more widely discussed. As a result, the concept of a unifying homosexual identity took on the shape of repressive homonormativity by focusing on white, middle-class, cisgender, able-bodied homosexuals, and erasing other queer realities. In this way, the Gay Liberation movement, as well as efforts within lesbian culture, misrepresented the members of the community of people outside of cis/heterosexuality by reinscribing sexual difference through its gender-specific construction (Piontek 2006; Doty 2020).

1.2. From Lesbian Identity Politics to Queerness

In her canonical work *Epistemology of the Closet*, published in 1990, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, considered a pioneer scholar of queer theory, argues that the logic of a binary opposition between heterosexuality and homosexuality is at the basis of all societal conceptions within Western culture. According to Sedgwick, this categorization of homo/hetero is overly simplistic, and, consequently, restrictive, as individuals are forced to occupy either one of these positions. In this way, anything in between or outside the binary of ‘straight’ or ‘gay’ identity is impossible to conceptualize. This makes it so that Western societies have no cultural space outside of the heterosexual/homosexual opposition (Garcia 2017). Furthermore, Sedgwick proposes that sexuality, in Western culture, is constructed relationally. Heterosexuality is considered the norm because the sinful deviation of that norm, homosexuality, exists. Thus, heterosexuality defines itself in opposition to its counterpart, homosexuality. Gay and lesbian identity are only understood in contrast to the heterosexual norm.

Efforts within gay and lesbian studies of the 1990s call for the reexamination of the hetero/homo binary and the symbolic order associated with it. Diana Fuss (1991) argues that gender and sexual identities are no longer thinkable within the margins of this hierarchic binary, as the diversity of identity categories becomes increasingly visible, and therefore the stability of the heterosexual/homosexual dichotomy must be questioned. Similarly to Sedgwick, Fuss argues that this binary division limits the freedoms of individuals when it comes to their identity. This demarcates the need for a broader term, one that breaks up the limiting binary of sexual identity and can make it collapse.

Individuals with multiple salient identities, particularly non-cis/heterosexual women of color, further resisted against the rigid identity politics that came with the increasing societal visibility of, and academic discussion about, LGBTIQ+ identities (McIntosh 1968). Particularly, it was argued that the “politics of sameness” (Epstein 1994, 192) central to the Gay Liberation movement, suppressed other forms of diversity, as well as ignored the fact that identity categories can be intertwined in shaping one’s experience of oppression and position in society (Moraga and Anzaldúa 2015). It was argued that focusing on the sameness of all homosexual individuals leads to an erasure of the multiplicity of identity. Realities of individuals existing across intersecting categories of sexuality, race, class, and ability status became invalidated in proposing that all non-heterosexual individuals are homosexual, and, consequently, the same. Importantly, it was underlined that the concept of non-heterosexuality as either ‘lesbian’ or ‘gay’ not only erases the multiplicity of sexual identities positioned outside of heterosexuality, but also any gender identity categories which fall outside of hegemonic societal regimes, such as non-binary and transgender identities (Weston 1993). In stating that “virtually any aspect of modern Western culture, must be, not merely incomplete, but damaged in its central substance to the degree that it does not incorporate a critical analysis of modern homo/heterosexual definition” (Sedgwick 2004, 1), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick expresses the need for a more encompassing term which can go beyond the rigid categories of ‘gay’ and ‘lesbian’. From the necessity for a critical examination of the hetero/homo binary, as well as a term which moves towards a broader way of conceptualizing sexual and gender identities, the field of queer theory emerged.

1.3. Theorizing the Periphery

As Suzanna Danuta Walters puts it, “(...) how to define that which exclaims—with postmodern cool—its absolute undefinability?” (Walters 1996, 830). Here, Walters is referring

to the fact that the term ‘queer’ is notoriously hard to define. This is because ‘queer’, at its core, rejects any form of stability, thereby going against all attempts at a comprehensive definition. The term has been used in contrasting ways – in contexts of homophobia, as well as in contexts of anti-homophobic resistance. Though its etymology remains largely unclear, the term ‘queer’ entered the English language in the sixteenth century, describing anything “strange”, “odd” or “abnormal” (Halperin 2003). In the eighteenth century, the term was used as a verb, meaning “to cheat” or “to ridicule”, which indicates, at this early stage of the term’s existence, an understanding of queering as a way of breaking with the mainstream.

In the early twentieth century, ‘queer’ was used pejoratively, in reference to individuals that expressed same-sex desire (Somerville 2020). By the middle of the twentieth century, it was present in mainstream U.S. culture as a derogatory epithet linked to sexual perversion (Katz 2019; Benshoff and Griffin 2004). Thus, for the greater part of the twentieth century, ‘queer’ was an offensive term for homosexuality. During the late 1980s and early 1990s, in the context of AIDS activism in the United States, activists reclaimed the word ‘queer’, reappropriating it as a positive and empowering term for non-heterosexual identities (Gill-Peterson 2013; Doty 2020). One of the first activist groups to do so was the organization *Queer Nation*, stating in their manifesto, “yeah, queer can be a rough word but it is also a sly and ironic weapon we can steal from the homophobe’s hands and use against him” (“The Queer Nation Manifesto” 1990). Activists took it upon themselves to ascribe new, positive meaning to the slur. Consequently, the term was redefined to refer to a “broadly inclusive ‘community’” (Duggan 1992, 18), as an act of defiance against the heterosexist and oppressive mainstream. In this way, a term once rooted in violence was reworked into something inclusive, expressing pride in that which majority culture considers abnormal (Somerville 2020). Following this, ‘queer’ was implemented, in various circles, as “a new characterization of ‘lesbian and gay’ politics and, indeed, as a potential replacement for the very terms *lesbian* and *gay*” (Epstein 1994, 194, emphasis in original).

Once used in settings of homophobic violence, presently, the term is widely used by LGBTIQ+ identifying individuals in its reclaimed form: as an umbrella term, referring to any non-normative sexual and/or gender identities that fall outside of cis/heterosexual, procreative monogamy (Mardell 2016; Benshoff and Griffin 2004). Despite this, as detailed above, the term ‘queer’ bears with it an injurious history of discrimination. Although its contemporary use may frame ‘queer’ as a neutral term that describes a broad spectrum of individuals, one can conclude from the overview above that its development is far from innocuous.

‘Queer’ has been widely praised by non-heterosexual and non-cisgender individuals, as it provides them with an accurate term to describe their sexual and/or gender identities which does not reinscribe normative notions of identity. Contrary to terms like ‘gay’ or ‘lesbian’, ‘queer’ does not imply any pre-existing gendered categories, nor does it reproduce a fixation on biological sex (Doty 2020). Further, ‘queer’ breaks up the notions of mono-attraction, that is, attraction to a single gender category, at the basis of ‘gay’ and ‘lesbian’ (Mardell 2016). ‘Queer’ destabilizes these terms, which are rooted in identity politics, to describe any and all experience of non-heterosexuality and non-cisgender identity. ‘Queer’ denaturalizes normative concepts of femininity and masculinity, deconstructing binary definitions of gender and sexual identities by recognizing a pluralism of identities and experiences (Kraß 2005). “In essence”, as Michelle Walks puts it, “(...) being ‘gay’ does not challenge the status quo, whereas being ‘queer’ does” (2014, 15).

‘Queer’ officially entered academia as queer theory in 1991, following its definition by Teresa de Lauretis at a conference at the University of California, Santa Cruz and her publication titled *Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities* (Halperin 2003; de Lauretis 1991). In de Lauretis’ explanation of the term, she underlines the possibilities of queer theory in rethinking the standing concepts on sexuality and challenging heterosexist assumptions about what is considered valid knowledge. De Lauretis denotes that there are, at the minimum, three key ideas problematized through queer theory – the rejection of heterosexuality as the basis for analyzing all sexual formations, the focus on the various ways in which race takes part in shaping sexual bias, and the refusal of gay and lesbian studies as a single entity. De Lauretis argues for the necessity of reinventing the norms under which sexual and gender identities are understood, expressing that the aim of queer theory is to create another, more useful and accurate way of theorizing sexuality and gender (de Lauretis 1991). This can be understood as a reexamination, or reworking, of heteronormative power relations. Furthermore, de Lauretis makes the potential of queer theory as an approach which recognizes the inseparability of sexual orientation from other identity categories visible.

Queer theory, then, is an approach for going beyond rigid concepts of gender and sexual identity, a way of understanding categories as socially constructed expressions of dominant discourse. Centrally, queer theory seeks to reexamine standing theories within the field of gay and lesbian studies. As Thomas Piontek puts it, “queer theory makes it possible—some might say necessary—to contest beliefs and practices long considered sacrosanct in gay and lesbian studies” (2006, 2).

Suzanna Danuta Walter expresses a similar notion, explaining how the development of queer academia took place within a changing theoretical field, positing itself as the remedy to “a ‘retrograde’ feminist theorizing” (Walters 1996, 832), which focused on the essentiality and rigidity of identities and the binary of heterosexuality/homosexuality. With the emergence of a queer academic discipline, hegemonic concepts of identity could be questioned. In this regard, queer theory offers a way of moving beyond the established paradigm of the ‘gay’ and ‘lesbian’ identities as fixed categories (Marinucci 2010). In destabilizing fixed identity categories, queer theory is able to draw “attention to the historical and political context in which subjectivities are constructed as fluid, unstable, multiple, internally contradictory, and intersectional” (Dhoest and Simons 2012, 2). Thus, this new theoretical field delivers the promise of challenging categories of identity that had long been considered immutable (Kraß 2005).

This is further exemplified by contributions of queer theorists of color such as Sara Ahmed, who, in *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (2006) provides a theoretical framework for understanding non-normative subjects and bodies, analyzing what it means for specific bodies to take shape within Western culture. Here, pointing to the disruption that queerness brings into the spatial arrangement of social relations, Ahmed examines how bodies matter. Bodies are caught within the web of socially constructed sexed and gendered norms, and these norms make it so that certain bodies take up a certain hierarchically structured position in society (Ahmed 2006). According to the scholar, queerness can bring on a politics of disorientation, a reordering of mainstream cultural relations beyond binaries of heterosexual/homosexual, or male/female. In this way, non-normative subjects traditionally pushed to the periphery can be included, put within reach, through queering. The scholar draws on canonical texts of phenomenology, and connects these concepts with those of queer studies. In doing so, Ahmed provides a basis for queering classical understandings of phenomenology, opening up the horizon of queer theorizing.

Another queer theorist of color to mention here is José Esteban Muñoz. Muñoz’ analysis of how subjects outside of the white heterosexist mainstream navigate Western majority culture provides a significant contextualization for the emergence of queer readings. Calling the process of maneuvering mainstream society, as a non-heterosexual individual, a process of “disidentification”, Muñoz develops a perspective for understanding minority survival, calling for a framework which can disrupt the focus on white homosexual narratives (1999). Muñoz describes the concept of disidentification as “a crucial practice of contesting social subordination through the project of worldmaking” (Muñoz 1999, 200) – a way of dismantling societal oppression by creating an alternative understanding of the world.

Queer theorists of color, expressing criticisms of the identity politics present in gay and lesbian studies, pointed out that the leading feminist theories tackle most prevalently, and almost exclusively, white, upper-/middle-class, cisgender issues, and pleaded for a broader way of theorizing histories of gender and sexual identity, as well as the multiple forms of oppression beyond heterosexism that shape someone's societal positioning (McRuer 2020). These scholars focused on understanding how the regimes of normality were constructed through interwoven and mutually reinforcing systems of oppression and discrimination. The contributions of queer scholars of color are key to understanding how, within academia, the term 'queer' came to be understood as a conceptional basis. Due to the critical nature of queer studies as a poststructuralist, deconstructive tool for destabilizing all definitions of identity, queer theory is considered an interdisciplinary discipline (McRuer 2020; Somerville 2020; Halperin 2003).

'Queer' signifies a complex theoretical field which offers an intersectional lens for examining and deconstructing hegemonic oppressive societal power relations. Though its resistance against reasoning and rigidity makes queer theory a hard discipline to define, by and large, the discipline is seen as "a theoretical approach to rethinking human sexuality" (Benshoff and Griffin 2004, 1), as it describes gender and sexuality as discursive effects of the hegemonic oppression that is inherent to the patriarchal construction of society (Wittig 1992). According to Steven Epstein, "the assertion of the centrality of marginality is the pivotal queer move" (1994, 197), meaning that the most consistent defining attribute of queer theory is the critique of heteronormativity through a focus on those pushed to the periphery.

Principally, queer theory uncovers the ways in which the "normal" is equated to heterosexuality, and how, as a result of this, heterosexuality is made compulsory, providing a fundamental critique of the heteronormative framework by which Western culture is guided (Rich 1980). The hegemonic societal framework stipulates that individuals are born into a strict sex/gender system (Rubin 1992), in which the biological sex of a person defines the role they will (be forced to) take up in society, according to the two immutable gender categories male and female, considered to be distinctly opposite, as well as heterosexual by nature. Heterosexuality is, therefore, compulsory, and reified by institutional, social, discursive, and material practices as the correct way to experience attraction, sexuality, and identity. As Robert McRuer (2020) explains, by the end of the twentieth century, the term 'compulsory heterosexuality', most famously coined by the feminist scholar Adrienne Rich (1980), began to be replaced by the term 'heteronormativity', to express not only the forces of compulsion and repression inherent to regimes of normalization, but the way in which heterosexuality is normalized, privileged and institutionalized by power regimes. Heteronormativity, anchored in

the legitimizing of heterosexuality through normalization, determines not just normative sexual practices, but mandates what is supposed to be the normal way of life (Jackson 2006).

In essence, queer theory identifies and examines institutions, cultural norms, and the overarching societal discourse as a system of oppression that produces the dominant regimes on gender and sexuality which privilege cisgender identity, heterosexual attraction, and the hierarchal structuring of the binary gender categories of male/female. The success of queer theory, as Mimi Marinucci writes, is recognizing “that meaning is conveyed not by definitions of individual terms but by contextual relations between and among various terms” (2010, 33). Focusing on the ways in which power relations shape Western society’s understanding of sexed and gendered bodies, desires, and identities, queer theory offers a way of deconstructing structures which appear to be clearly defined.

1.4. The Heterosexual Matrix, Intelligibility and Subversion

The concepts of compulsory heterosexuality and the binary sex/gender system mentioned above are subsumed in Judith Butler’s (1990) notion of the heterosexual matrix. Butler’s work is significant for an understanding of how dominant societal categorizations and oppressive sexed and gendered norms can be dismantled within cultural texts. For this reason, some key terms the scholar uses will now be clarified, to make it possible to discuss the limitations and possibilities that come with queer reading Disney’s *Recess* character Spinelli.

Butler is most renowned in academia for her analysis of gender as performative, a concept which first appeared in her canonical work *Gender Trouble* (1990), and was expanded upon in *Bodies That Matter* (1993) and *Undoing Gender* (2004). Stating that gender is performative, Butler describes how, through repeated speech acts and behaviors, gendered utterances “create the very things they describe” (Morgenroth and Ryan 2018, 3). Drawing on the French philosopher Michel Foucault’s understanding of sexuality as a discursive product, as well as his denaturalization of hegemonic understandings of sexual identity, Judith Butler states that gender is acted out, a discursive construction which, through the repetition of performative acts, is portrayed as a real, essential truth. Gender, therefore, is not static. Instead, it is the product of discourse, which is central to the construction of subjectivity. Through repeatedly engaging in, and playing out, gendered acts, individuals create the illusion of a binary gendered identity that, in turn, appears as pre-discursive and natural. This performance of gender is so credible that the “authors of gender become entranced by their own fictions” (Butler 1990,

522), compelled to believe in the essentiality of their own constructed gender. This illusion, according to Butler, is the central pillar that Western culture is built upon.

Notably, Butler destabilizes the distinction between sex and gender. She disputes the idea that 'sex' refers to biological categories, of which there are the two opposites male/female, and that 'gender' refers to the socially and hierarchically constructed roles, which individuals are compelled to live out, to be accepted in society. Showing scientific examples of biological attributes that are not clearly categorizable into the strict binary classification of male/female, Butler argues that biological sex is, in and of itself, a discursive production. Subjects and, therefore, their bodies, do not exist outside of cultural interpretation (Morgenroth and Ryan 2018). Therefore, Butler argues that the concept of 'natural sex' is performatively constructed. The reason why anatomical, hormonal, or chromosomal attributes are categorized as 'male' or 'female' is due to the preexisting cultural idea of what it means to be a boy or a girl, a man, or a woman. Scholars Thekla Morgenroth and Michelle K. Ryan elucidate this aspect of Butler's work, stating that biological sex obtains its relevance in society as "natural, obvious, and important to us because of the gendered world in which we live" (Morgenroth and Ryan 2018, 3).

The critique of heteronormativity and the binary sex/gender system is one of the foundational pillars of queer academic discipline, serving as the basis for theorizing any transgression of the status quo, and thus, for conducting queer readings. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler develops the concept of the heterosexual matrix, a cultural web in which individuals come to exist, "the grid of cultural intelligibility through which bodies, genders and desires are naturalized" (Butler 1990, 208). The heterosexual matrix describes the seemingly natural norm by which all individuals are compulsorily categorized as heterosexual and oppositely positioned as either male or female. The heterosexual matrix stipulates how sexed and gendered individuals are made comprehensible, and, consequently, acceptable, in society. These stipulations are as follows: there are two sexes, male and female, that exist on opposite and contradicting poles. These sexes manifest a gender identity that is coherent to the biological sex they possess. For example, a male body expresses a masculine gender, whereas a female body expresses a feminine gender, thus performing an intelligible gender. These two genders are structured hierarchically, the feminine being subordinate to the masculine, by means of heterosexual attraction (Butler 1990). In order for bodies to be intelligible, that is, to be coherent, all of the stipulations of the heterosexual matrix have to be met. Thus, as previously mentioned, the practice of heterosexuality is compulsory.

In short, Butler's concept of the heterosexual matrix provides a framework for the deconstruction of standing societal categorizations of sex and gender, a project which is at the center of queer theory. For this reason, the analysis of Spinelli's representation in Disney's *Recess* will occur with Butler's concept of the heterosexual matrix in mind. Butler's use of 'intelligibility' points to the societal belief that there is a correct way of performing gender and sexual identity, making heterosexuality the only appropriate and suitable outcome of being a man or a woman (Butler 1990). The visual gaze is elemental to intelligibility – it is by merely being viewed that people are ascribed a sexed and gendered identity, and thus, made intelligible or not. For example, an intelligible male gender identity would be a male body which is performing masculinity and generally read as heterosexual (Butler 1990; Tredway 2014). The male body mandates the need to express masculinity, and in turn, this gender performance can be deemed intelligible.

If sex, gender, and (assumed) sexuality do not clearly express intelligibility, that is, coherence in a heteronormative way, then that subject is categorized as subversive. In referencing Michel Foucault's theories, Butler supports his understanding of power as a repressive tool permeating all of society. This omnipresence of power implies that anything outside of power is impossible to conceptualize. Butler argues that, since everything exists within the heterosexual matrix of power, this means that the power relations themselves produce 'errors', which is to say, unintelligible genders, sexes, bodies and desires, which do not fit into the binary mandated by the heterosexual matrix.

Subversive identities, then, are created by the regulatory discourse of the heterosexual matrix, while simultaneously attempting to destabilize the strict norms of sexuality and gender that are inherent to it. Subversion refers to gender performances that are not intelligible, describing individuals whose gender performativity cannot be coherently categorized through the visual gaze. To exemplify this, Butler argues that the drag queen is a subversive cultural phenomenon through which the performativity of gender is made visible. The drag queen, as gender parody, is an example of the instability of the relationship between sex and gender, as well as proof of the performative essence of identity. Through drag, the scholar explains, the mimicry that is at the basis of any identity structure is exposed, and the absence of an original foundation to identity is shown:

Drag constitutes the mundane way in which genders are appropriated, theatricalized, worn and done; it implies that all gendering is a kind of impersonation and approximation. If this is true, it seems, there is no original or primary gender that drag imitates, but *gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original*; in fact, it is a kind of imitation that

produces the very notion as an *effect* and consequence of the imitation itself. (Butler 2013, 313, emphasis in original)

Following this, heterosexuality is exposed as a “compulsive and compulsory repetition” that produces the illusion of naturality and originality, which implies that the categories of ‘man’ and ‘woman’ are nothing but “theatrically produced effects that posture as grounds, origins, the normative measure of the real” (Butler 2013, 313). Butler’s rejection of the notion of inherent or original gender identity opens up the possibility of subverting – that is altering, disrupting, and breaking with – rigid identity categories. Presenting identity as something that is constructed means that it is neither strictly determined nor stable. Taking this into account, it becomes clear that the heterosexual matrix is a “prohibitive” and “generative” power structure, as Morgenroth and Ryan put it (2018, 3). Prohibitive, as it represses all subversion, and generative, because it creates and reproduces binary, heteronormative gender performativity. The heterosexual matrix is a self-sustaining, patriarchal and heteronormative system of power structures that defines the regimes of normality, and Butler suggests that it can be destabilized through subversion. The fact that identity needs constant repetition in order to appear as stable, drives the point home that the naturality of heterosexuality can be uncovered as an illusion, a discursive creation. In other words, the heterosexual matrix is a vulnerable construct, as it depends upon the repetition of performativity to sustain itself.

While some critics have understood this part of Butler’s theories to imply that there is free will in choosing one’s performed gender, thereby insinuating an element of voluntarism in the performativity of a marginalized identity, this is not what Butler intends to express, as explained in her later work (Butler 2013). Subjects are produced within the very discourse that forces gender performativity. This means that there is no subject prior to discourse, no “volitional subject behind the mime who decides (...) which gender it will be today” (Butler 2013, 214). According to Butler, gender “(...) is a *compulsory* performance in the sense that acting out of line with heterosexual norms brings with it ostracism, punishment, and violence, not to mention the transgressive pleasures produced by those very prohibitions” (2013, 24, emphasis in original). In *Gender Trouble* (1990), the scholar calls on society to cause gender trouble by subverting the heterosexual matrix. This subversion allows for the heterosexual mainstream to be queered, as the intelligible forces of the cultural canon can be challenged, their discursive nature made visible.

Interestingly, Butler does not provide the exact tools to identify exactly which non-normative practices can be categorized as subversive, and which cannot. The scholar argues

that only gender performances which reveal the non-originality of hegemonic gender identities, and make visible the heterosexual matrix in which they are produced, can be described as subversive, but does not clarify the criteria for delineating if a certain non-normative practice reveals this imitative nature of gender, or not (Frasl 2013). When utilizing Butler's concept of subversion for analytical purposes, then, it is important to argue, against the background of Butler's theories, the reasoning behind describing a given gender performance as subversive. All in all, Butler's theory of gender performativity permits the disruption of the oppressive status quo, as well as a critical reflection on the Western cultural canon, through the deconstruction of seemingly stable categories as discursively performed. Applied to the specific example of the cartoon television series *Recess*, Butler's concept of identity as performative and her rejection of rigid categorizations make it possible to discuss the ways in which Spinelli can be described as subversive, and the extent to which she complies with or disrupts the heterosexual matrix.

1.5. If Everyone is Queer, is Anyone Lesbian?

Queer theory's rejection of strict designations is the central aspect which critics point to. Critics claim that queer studies lacks structure and a clearly defined purpose – the opposition to definitions and the central goal of encompassing all forms of identity into its theorizing, it is argued, lacks actionable expression (Dhoest and Simons 2012). What is more, since queer theory provides an understanding of gender and sexuality as performative and fluid, this seems to suggest that identity terms such as 'gay' and 'lesbian' have been overcome, becoming invalid. The break in gay and lesbian studies that queer theory delivers was heavily criticized by theorists such as Tim Edwards (1998), who argued that non-heterosexual and non-cisgender individuals can have stable identities which remain constant throughout their lifetime, a fact that, according to Edwards, queer theory seems to erase. Edwards suggests that queer theory's claims for transgression do not accurately represent the desires, wishes and needs of LGBTIQ+ individuals, as many people who identify as non-heterosexual do not consider their sexuality the centrally defining characteristic shaping their lives (Edwards 1998; Dhoest and Simons 2012). This leads to the question of whether the term 'queer' implies that the identity terms 'gay' and 'lesbian' are outdated.

In the essay "Christmas Effects", Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick reflects upon the term 'queer' and its openness, which allows for such a wide range of definitional possibilities. Sedgwick praises the term's possibility of referring to "gaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and

excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically" (Sedgwick 2012, 338). Simultaneously, the scholar recognizes that same-sex sexual expression, i.e. lesbian and gay identity, is at the definitional center of 'queer', and "to disavow those meanings (...) would be to dematerialize any possibility of queerness itself" (Sedgwick 2012, 338). Following Sedgwick's reflections, then, it is possible to conclude that the term 'queer' can coexist with, and not invalidate, terms which are more strictly connected to identity politics, such as 'lesbian' and 'gay'. The destabilizing of these terms, made possible by the critical lens of queer theory, does not claim that the terms 'lesbian' or 'gay' no longer hold any validity, but rather opens up and broadens the scope of genders, sexualities, desires and bodies, allowing for further ways of theorizing identity. The terms 'gay' and 'lesbian' remain a central part of the concept of 'queer' and queer theory in general. Sedgwick suggests that 'gay' and 'lesbian' are included when invoking the term 'queer', although 'queer' refers more strongly to a person's self-perception (Sedgwick 2012). Thus, the meaning of 'queer' can shift, depending on who the term is invoked by.

As previously examined, 'queer' is widely used by queer individuals as an umbrella term that encompasses all identities falling outside or beyond cis/heterosexuality. Queer theorist Alexander Doty's use of the term is one such example, as he invokes the term as common ground between lesbian and gay identities, "representing unity as well as suggesting diversity" (2020, 72). Doty uses the terms 'queer' and 'queer readings' as attempts to express the diverse range of "non-, anti- or contra straight" positions existing within Western culture (2020, 73). Thus, rather than insinuating the invalidity of the identity terms 'gay' and 'lesbian', queer theory points out the ways in which these terms can be limiting and simplistic, by offering new ways of describing an individual's sexed and gendered reality. One's societal experience is shaped not only by sexed and gendered cultural interpretations, but by various dimensions of oppression and privilege, through social identity categories that might be interwoven. Dominant power relations take on several forms beyond the opposition of heterosexual/homosexual and normative/deviant, a notion that 'queer' can encompass.

Therefore, today's academic understanding of 'queer' as a conceptional basis for analyzing the non-normative, and disrupting regimes of normal, also demonstrates the validity of 'queer' as an umbrella term, a broader definition that includes, but is not limited to, gay and lesbian identity (Sedgwick 2004; 2012). Recognizing that the categories 'lesbian' and 'gay' bear with them their specific histories and subcultures – i.e., ways of dressing, socializing and interacting – does not negate the usefulness of theorizing queerness, but rather fits exactly into queer

theory's mission of examining how these identity categories, and the cultures they carry, emerge from a dominant cis/heterosexist discourse.

Thus, in queering Spinelli, the aim of this thesis is to make this character visible as a representation of lesbian identity, and to analyze to what extent this lesbian representation offers possibilities, or can be critiqued as a restrictive reinforcement of normative identity concepts. Showing that a subversive reading of a mainstream cultural text can resist the status quo and destabilize normative notions of identity, this thesis will use the term 'queering' for a counter-hegemonic reading of Spinelli. 'Queer' will be applied when discussing concepts of queer theory, as well as referring to examples which cannot be concisely described using the categorizations of 'gay' or 'lesbian', making use of 'queer' as an umbrella term. Additionally, the term 'lesbian' will be used to foreground Spinelli's identity politics. Over the course of this thesis, I will shift between the terms as relevant to the discussion at hand, while being aware of the inconsistency and wide range of use of the terminology on these topics within academia. Queer theory, as a critical lens, allows us to question the regimes of what is considered normal, recognizing the plurality that exists in terms of sexual and gender identities, bodies, and desires. Thus, queer theory as an academic discipline looks beyond sexual orientation as the "authentic and centrally governing category of queer practice", making space for a way of redefining "not just the sexual, but the social in general" (Harper et al. 1997, 1).

Having laid out the central tenets of queer theory, this chapter detailed how the academic discipline is rooted in political activism. The history of the Gay Liberation movement, and the resistance of lesbian feminists against it, as well as central concepts of lesbian identity politics, were described. Further, the move from the strict identity terms 'gay' and 'lesbian' to 'queer' was examined, as well as the emergence of queer theory within academia. Upon detailing the use of 'gay', 'lesbian' and 'queer' in sociopolitical contexts, as well as the central concepts pertaining to lesbian archetypes within lesbian studies, the emergence of queer theory and the main ideas within the field were also described. Defining terms which will be of relevance for this thesis, this chapter provided the readers with insight into the current state of research on this topic. From the introduction to lesbian studies and queer theory provided in the aforementioned pages, it becomes clear that with a queer reading of *Recess*' protagonist Spinelli, this thesis contributes to queer theory's goal of deconstructing and reinterpreting the dominant and oppressive heterosexual ideals which permeate Western societies. What exactly does queering, as a methodical approach, entail? How is it possible to read queerness into a text positioned within Western mainstream television?

In the following chapter, these questions will be answered by clarifying the methodology used for this thesis. The actions taken to investigate the limitations and possibilities that arise from reading lesbianism into Spinelli will be elucidated, and the reasoning for choosing queer reading as the methodic approach applied in this thesis will be detailed. The method of queer reading, and queer theory's central project of queering the cultural canon, will be outlined. Additionally, the next chapter will describe the ways in which the method of analyzing the content of *Recess* through a critically queer feminist lens is the appropriate tool for fulfilling the overall aims of this study.

Chapter 2: Queering the Canon

The method of queering, or queer reading, is the chosen methodology for this thesis. As touched on the previous chapter, queer reading is one of queer theory's central projects, with the goal of subverting and dismantling the dominant cultural mainstream. For an analysis of the dimensions of subversion, queerness and lesbian identity politics present in *Recess*, as well as the limitations and/or possibilities that come with highlighting such dimensions in Spinelli's character, a queer reading of the television series through character analysis was the chosen methodological approach. Analyzing this cartoon character through a critical queer lens makes it possible to examine queer dimensions that lay dormant within the heteropatriarchal and mainstream positioning of the animated series.

This thesis takes into account the entirety of the six seasons of Disney's *Recess* (1997–2001). The four feature-length films of the franchise, *Recess: School's Out* (2001), which premiered in movie theaters throughout the United States, *Recess Christmas: Miracle on Third Street* (2001), *Recess: All Growned Down* (2003) and *Recess: Taking the Fifth Grade* (2003), released as direct-to-video, were not included in the analysis, as they are considered spin-offs of the series, with storylines which are independent from the central narrative of *Recess* (Chandler 2016). The cartoon series *Recess* centers around a group of six schoolchildren, each episode focusing on one of the protagonists. Thus, the analysis began with the author of this thesis watching all aired episodes, of which there are sixty-five, over an extended period of time. In watching every episode of the series, decisions about how to narrow down the object of analysis were made, and particular attention was paid to the episodes in which the plot centers around Spinelli. During this process, notes locating moments that allow for queer interpretation were taken.

The episodes which will be central for the queer reading of Spinelli were identified, namely *First Name Ashley* (1997), *Beauty Contest* (1999), *Dance Lessons* (1999), *That Stinking Feeling* (1999) and *More Like Gretchen* (2000). These episodes have in common that their plots revolve around Spinelli as the protagonist, and, more importantly, the episodes deal with the character's struggles with her personal identity. Additionally, the episodes *The Experiment* (1997), *Operation: Field Trip* (1998), *Mama's Girl* (1998), *Weekend at Muriel's* (1998), and *Parents' Night* (1998) were also identified as containing important general and contextualizing aspects about the character and her interactions with the society around her. All of the episodes mentioned contain counter-hegemonic "gaps" or queer encodings, which, as I will argue in the upcoming pages, seem to reveal the butch lesbian nature of Spinelli. Thus, in closely examining

the episodes previously listed, conclusions about Spinelli's character and the representation of her identity within the entirety of *Recess* can be drawn.

Combining the methods of character analysis and queer reading, guided by the concepts of lesbian studies and queer theory described in the previous chapter, is central to uncovering the extent to which Spinelli can be ascribed a lesbian identity, as well as the limitations and possibilities which arise by exposing this identity. The series was analyzed to identify subtextual encodings, delineate dimensions of lesbian identity, as well as counter-hegemonic and subversive characteristics within Spinelli. The visual and verbal material used here includes dialogue, images, clothing, jokes, behaviors, and interactions with secondary characters, particularly "the Ashleys", Spinelli's archnemeses on the series. Before discussing the dimensions of counter-hegemonic subversion and restrictive lesbianism present in Spinelli, it is first necessary to review the existing scholarship on the method of queer reading.

2.1. What is Queer Reading?

Queer reading, or queering, is a method used to resist the normative regimes within a cultural text. The aim of queering is to undermine what a text claims to mean, and to rework the dimensions of what it can mean, to derive queer meaning. By means of queering, the dominant meaning of a text can be challenged, pointing out its instability, or, in other words, its queerness (Doty 2000; Sinfield 2015; Björklund 2018). Queer theory's notion of the discursive construction of social categorizations came to exacerbate the instability of the assumption of a 'universal' culture, questioning the hegemonic regimes that permeate our cultural understanding. It is from this logic that the practice of queering emerges, a way of uncovering and deriving subversive meaning from mainstream texts, reframing their dominant understandings to portray them as queer. Queering is a strategy of undermining the hegemony of heterosexuality (Björklund 2018). This method allows queer audiences and readers to occupy mainstream spaces, making it possible for them to reclaim the way they are depicted in, or erased, by the cultural canon. Therefore, it can be described as a subversive method.

The queering of texts and other cultural storytelling materials emerged from the need of LGBTIQ+ individuals and theorists to find representation in the mainstream. It grew alongside the development of queer theory, becoming a buzzword for scholars fascinated by the subversive potential of texts (Björklund 2018; Sinfield 2015). As Alan Sinfield states, "culture is political" (2015, viii). Cultural texts are inseparable from the historic contexts in which they are produced and consumed by audiences. Culture is what subjects turn to, as a way to make

sense of the world around them, and their existence within it. Hence, cultural texts play a role in the production of meanings. Experiences falling outside of cis/heterosexuality have a history of largely being erased from mainstream culture, particularly in mass media.

While LGBTIQ+ media representation has become increasingly visible in recent years, non-heterosexual and non-cisgender experiences have predominantly been depicted in a negative light, reinforcing the assumption that anyone who deviates from the regimes of the heterosexual matrix must be immoral. Mainstream texts are situated within the normative powers of the cis/hetero-/patriarchy stipulated by majority culture, and the method of queering meets the need of individuals to resist the dominant forces of Western society, as a way of navigating a culture that renders existence outside of the norm invisible. Alexander Doty describes how the method of queer reading serves to blur the lines between queerness and heterosexuality, bringing the queerness which lies within heterosexual culture to the surface (1993). As a method for reexamining the cultural canon, the hegemonic assumption that heterosexuality is the only valid and natural identity can be rejected through queering (Benshoff and Griffin 2004). Importantly, queer reading is a method for deconstructing both heterosexual and non-heterosexual identities.

The concept of queering texts can be connected to French literary critic Roland Barthes' essay "The Death of the Author", originating in 1967. Here, Barthes argues that a reader's experience or interpretation of a given text matters more than the intent of the author of a text (Barthes 1977). Thus, the scholar argues against the practice of considering the intentions and personal background of an author in interpreting a text, favoring the separation of writing and creator. Applied to the notion of queering cultural media formats such as cartoons, separating a text from its mainstream positioning and the intent of its authors or creators, allows queer audiences and readers to assert a new reality, in which they can combat queer media invisibility and take part in majority culture.

Additionally, contributions to queer readings can be traced back to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's 1985 examination of homoerotic desire in English literary works by male authors in *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, discovering queerness by reading against the stream of English classics (Sedgwick 2015; Björklund 2018). Later on, Sedgwick developed the conceptual notions of paranoid reading and reparative reading as critical modes of reading. These can be applied to unmask the inherent homophobia of cultural mainstream texts. Sedgwick provides an important basis for queer readings as an analytical method. According to the scholar, paranoia, as a "privileged object of antihomophobic theory" (2020, 6), is central to knowledge production, and especially queer reading practices, exposing

gaps, incoherencies, and allusions of cultural texts. Paranoid reading is a tool for pointing out how heterosexism has simultaneously shaped what is counted as knowledge and discriminated against non-normative experiences (Vänskä 2014; Sedgwick 2020). This approach, the scholar argues, is defensive, aiming to expose negative aspects of a text, believing that exposing the oppressive truth behind something directly leads to its transformation for the better. In this way, Sedgwick explains, paranoid reading is a naïve approach (Sedgwick et al. 1997).

Alternatively to that, Sedgwick presents the approach of reparative reading, which sees the potential in the incoherencies and omissions of dominant culture through finding the cracks within the mainstream, to generate new forms of reading. For Sedgwick, the approach of reparative reading is a way of repairing existing knowledge, filling in the cracks of the mainstream and pointing out the wide spectrum of reading possibilities that cultural texts hold, recognizing the possibility of multiple readings of the same text (Vänskä 2014; Björklund 2018). In reparative reading, a position in which the reader does not know and does not imagine the possible meaning of a text, is encouraged. Some readings might deliver an expected outcome, while other reparative readings might reveal surprising results when the “cracks” are filled. This “privilege of unknowing” allows the reader to imagine different futures and meanings of a text, and is affectively driven, focusing on reading that can generate joy and pleasure from the object of study (Sedgwick et al. 1997; Allan 2016).

Drawing on Sedgwick, scholars such as Jonathan A. Allan and Carol Mavor make use of reparative reading as a practice that can repair the fissures within dominant culture and suggest new ways of reading the norm, opening up the horizon for texts to have queer meanings (Mavor 2008; Allan 2016). Allan, drawing on Sedgwick, declares that readings are influenced by the moral compass and life experience of the reader. A queer reader, for example, might be a paranoid reader who has been shaped by hostility and rejection, which would aid them in dissecting queerness out of texts. Sedgwick suggest that combining both reading practices, allowing the paranoid and the reparative to come together, can serve as a method for navigating homophobic mainstream culture. Thus, the conceptual toolbox that Sedgwick proposes lays the foundation for the method of queer reading, a form of reading the ‘normal’ against the grain, finding the queerness hidden between the lines (Sedgwick et al. 1997; Allan 2016).

Similarly to what Sedgwick proposes, Anne Cranny-Francis, Wendy Waring, Pam Stavropoulos, and Joan Kirkby (2003) describe the modes of compliant and resistant readings. Compliant readings, also called mainstream readings, refer to the expected hegemonic reading practices, based on a culturally inflicted common sense. Cranny-Francis et al. point out that compliant reading methods are a cisheteronormative approach, as “conventional patriarchal

gendering practices” (2003, 116) are inherent to hegemonic reading practices, and are thereby reinforced and reproduced. Consequently, compliant readings play into the erasure and forced invisibility of sexual and gender identities that fall outside of the cultural norm, delegitimizing the possibility of alternative readings. The authors describe resistant reading as a method that, as its name already indicates, counters the mainstream reading, challenging dominant interpretations of texts and the production of meaning. The practice of resistant reading detaches the text from what it might be intended to mean, that is, from any meaning inflicted into a text by its author. This goes in line with Roland Barthes’ suggestion that “to give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text” (1977, 147). Cranny-Francis et al. (2003) suggest that through re-reading a text from a resistant perspective, texts are ascribed a new meaning, and the regimes upon which normative texts are built can be destabilized.

Given this, queer readings can be understood as resistant readings which counter the heteronormative framework from which mainstream texts emerge. Furthermore, particularly considering Sedgwick’s reparative method, queer theorists are able to apply the method of queering to search for “cracks and fissures in supposedly heteronormative surfaces, which revealed subversive queer connotations” (Björklund 2018, 8). With the aim of pointing out the queerness of mainstream culture, queer readings are reparative, in the sense that they seek queer joy. Queer readings can also follow the mode of paranoid readings introduced by Sedgwick, by exposing its normative and oppressive nature. By revealing hidden or implicit queerness in texts, the oppressive powers of the heterosexual matrix are resisted through queer reading, indicating the close relationship between this method and what Cranny-Francis et al. introduce as the method of resistant reading.

Susan Sandretto develops the notion of critical literacy with queer intent, a form of taking a queer skeptical stance to normative texts. Recognizing the dominant discourses reproduced in texts, and the silencing of specific groups that comes with it, queer critical literacy can aid the reader in recognizing that texts are influenced by the normative political ideologies that permeate different social and geographic contexts. Texts have the power of suppressing societal difference and maintaining the privileges of hegemonic groups. To combat this, Sandretto argues that by means of queer critical literacy, the reader can adopt an inquisitive and skeptical attitude towards a text. Consequently, the reader has agency over a text, as opposed to being a passive recipient, and can actively challenge and subvert the dominant notions reproduced in texts (Sandretto 2018; Fan 2019). Similarly to paranoid and reparative readings, as well as resistant readings, the concept of queer critical literacy serves as another theoretical basis for

conducting queer readings. By taking a questioning stance towards a text, queer meaning in the text can be exposed or created, and the hegemonic powers that shape it can be undercut.

Alexander Doty argues that “queer positions, queer readings, and queer pleasures are part of a reception space that stands simultaneously beside and within that created by heterosexual and straight positions”, underlining that queer readings are not simply misreadings, wishful readings or “reading too much into things” (2020, 84). Thus, texts can be separated from the meaning introduced into them by their authors, and reworked to signify something entirely different. Queer readings, according to Doty, are closely related the readers’ personal histories which provide them with the tools to ascribe counter-hegemonic meaning to a text. This idea is also developed by Noreen Giffney, in arguing that a reader’s individual queer positioning might lead them to look for and uncover particular encodings within a text, making them privilege certain moments to which they ascribe non-heteronormative meaning (2009). Danae Clark refers to the same notion, stating that “‘gayness’ [is] in the eye of the beholder” (1991, 183). This, again, validates the notion that in queer readings, texts are separated from what their authors might have intended them to mean, to expose the wide range of meanings which texts can hold. In queerings which uncover counter-hegemonic queer encodings within a text, then, the extent to which those encoded subversions were consciously introduced into the text by its author, or derived from it by the reader, is of little importance.

In short, queer readings are a result of a queerness which has been present in popular culture texts and/or readers all along. As Giffney proposes, in reference to film, the verb “to queer” describes an analytical approach or methodological framework. The scholar suggests that queerings of films can be understood as close readings of films as texts, and builds on the argument that viewers produce meaning in film and television texts as much as the creators of such texts. Outlining queer readings as a method for film analysis, the scholar discusses different approaches to queering films, such as the discursive analysis of how sexual and gender identity categories are represented throughout films, as well as the examination of how sexuality and gender intersect with other forms of identity such as race, class, religion, and ability status. Centrally, queer readings of films discuss how particular films reinscribe, make visible, or subvert compulsory heterosexuality. This understanding of queering as a technique of analysis which can be applied to the film medium is useful to consider the subversive potential of Spinelli in the following pages.

As can be deduced from the concepts above, queerings can be conducted in a variety of ways, such as through the exposure of how a given text reproduces or is shaped by hegemonic regimes of power, the uncovering of non-normative subtexts “hidden” within a text, or the total

queer reconstruction of a text, to name only a few. Furthermore, queering does not just refer to examining non-heterosexuality or non-cisnormativity but can be an analytical method to move beyond strict identity categories, an intersectional critical lens for analyzing how various dominant power relations shape culture. Queer reading is a method that dissects how norms are produced in texts, and how gendered and sexed norms present within the Western cultural order intersect with other dimensions of power, such as racism and classism (Atluri 2018). Therefore, this methodological approach has a vast critical potential, aiming not only to undermine and disrupt the heteronormative foundation of cultural meaning-making signs and systems, but, more broadly, “to discover new ways in which power operates” (Björklund 2018, 13).

2.2. Queering Childhood

In a critical analysis of children’s media culture, particularly Disney animated films, Henry Giroux argues for “the political necessity of analyzing how privileged dominant readings of (...) texts construct their power-sensitive meanings to generate particular subject positions that define for children specific notions of agency and its possibilities in society” (1994, 70). From this, one can conclude that texts play a significant role in shaping an individual’s view of themselves and the world, and thus, cultural texts about and for children, such as children’s television formats, have the power of generating specific notions of what is acceptable or not, and what it means to live in a society. Thus, an analysis of children’s popular culture and mass media texts can reveal what children are expected to be like and how they are conceptualized within majority culture, as well as point out the societal ideals and hegemonic notions of gender and identity which shape the figure of the child.

Kate McNicholas Smith describes that “the history of queer representation is (...) a story of invisibility” (2020, 18), adding that despite the recent development in regards to the reorganization of sexual and gender norms, heteronormativity still retains its dominance. While LGBTIQ+ individuals are more visible within American society than ever before, and are afforded legal rights that are, for the most part, equal to those of heterosexual people, permanent attacks on LGBTIQ+ people are still widespread, particularly affecting transgender youth and queer people of color. Forms of non-heterosexual and non-cisgender identity are still widely regarded as a threat to children’s futures, most predominantly in conservative circles. The central arguments within these circles focus on the impossibility of biological reproduction for queer people – meaning same-sex couples, as well as non-cisgender individuals – and the threat

that this poses to traditional family values and thus the future of society. As Michael L. Cobb states, “queers are conceived as poised against the future because they are a threat to children—either because they are accused of recruitment tactics, sexual abuse, or not being able to have children” (2005, 123).

Despite this, in the realm of U.S. television, LGBTIQ+ experiences have become increasingly present. However, such representations are still predominantly reserved for teenage and adult audiences. This reveals the intention of keeping queerness strictly separate from any form of children’s content, and thus, from the realm of childhood. Not only does this separation reinscribe the hegemony of heterosexuality over non-heterosexuality, but it also frames non-cis/heterosexual identity as something which requires maturity to be understood or tolerated. The erasure of queer representation from children’s media formats maintains the oppressive assumption that anything outside of the heterosexual norm is explicit and perverse, thus being inappropriate for child audiences. Confining queerness to the realm of adulthood makes the statement that, since children are impressionable, and non-heterosexuality is wrong, it must be kept away from children’s perceptions, to avoid causing them distress. Thus, separating the realms of childhood and queerness holds up the Butlerian heterosexual matrix that stipulates non-heterosexuality as a deviant form of identity. As a way of navigating and resisting against this separation of queerness and childhood held up by majority culture, a significant part of queer theory’s scholarship has focused on the child.

Kenneth Kidd (2011) distinguishes two ways in which queer theory deals with childhood – through queer critiques of the child, and theories of queer childhood. The former is focused on underscoring the normative power of the figure of the child, while the latter aims at queering childhood by exposing the child’s latent queerness. These two traditions of queer theory and childhood do not exclude each other, with much work taking apart both the figure of the child, and queering childhood at once.

Central to queer critiques of childhood is exposing the socially constructed nature of the child within Western society. Lauren Berlant notes that the United States’ national values are conceived with the American fetus, and particularly the American child, at the center of its figurations, focusing on a future America, instead of presently existing and laboring adults (1997). As a symbol for the future of society, the child also carries the promise of upholding the norm, and thus is conceptualized to bear the political power of preserving heteronormative ideals. Similarly, Lee Edelman expresses the dimensions of dominance within the child figure. Due to society’s focus on the child, he argues, the child figure represents and states the issues which are most pressing to tackle, therefore having the power of determining what counts as

political discourse (2012). Moreover, while childhoods signify a temporary state, described by Michael L. Cobb as “time bridges” (2005, 126), they are not treated as such, as majority culture works to uphold the separation of adulthood and childhood, disregarding the fact that the child figure will grow up into an adult citizen (Rose 1984). In mainstream culture, the child figure is conceptualized as an immutable being, who is and stays innocent and asexual, holding the promise of living out a heteronormative life (Bruhm and Hurley 2004). Thus, the child is culturally constructed in a paradox way, considered to be asexual, in the sense that children are without sexuality, while simultaneously having (or holding the promise of) a heterosexual identity (Stockton 2009; Cobb 2005). The ascription of asexuality to children is intimately connected to the notion that innocence is a central characteristic of childhood, as theorist Jaqueline Rose explains (1984).

Importantly, in *Curiouser: On the Queerness of Children*, Steven Bruhm and Natasha Hurley argue that if the innocence ascribed to children negates children’s sexualities, it does so only to the queer child, as the “supposedly blissful promise of heteronormality” (Bruhm and Hurley 2004, ix) is central to the child figure. Thus, the innocent asexuality assumed in children is a way of masking the regimes of heterosexuality which shape the child figure in majority culture. The child’s innocence is connected to the heterosexuality which children will bloom into. Only the non-heterosexual child’s sexuality is negated, as majority culture allows no way of conceiving of a child who does not hold the potential to live out a heteronormative life. The innocent child then, is fundamental to compulsory heterosexuality and normative socialization (Edelman 2012). Maintaining the child as the figure of symbolic innocence serves the political purpose of erasing difference, thereby reinforcing the heterosexual matrix. Thus, queer theory serves as a lens to underscore the figure of the child as a socially constructed product of heteronormative institution.

Tackling the issue “that childhood is in constant danger of uncritical, sentimentalist valorization” (Kidd 2011, 182), a second tenet of queer theory’s focus on childhood, and one of particular significance for this thesis, deals with queering the child. Discussing the existence of the queer child, this realm of discourse centers around the notion that erasing the possibility of a queer child reinforces the dominant idea that queer childhood, and, more broadly, queerness, is unacceptable in society. Queering the child is a theoretical and analytical approach which acknowledges that queer children deserve texts which allow for safe dialogue, and provide them with the freedom to explore various dimensions of identity (Kander 2011).

Kathryn Bond Stockton’s work is an example of this, arguing the existence of a queer child figure and thereby presenting an affront to the asexuality assumed in children (2009).

Introducing various typologies of the queer child, Stockton describes the intimate connection between children and queerness, offering a set of initial considerations on this relationship. Stockton's work makes clear that the queer child figure can offer a wide variety of routes for analysis. In what the scholar describes as the act of "growing sideways", in reference to the anarchic and awkward nature of childhood, she argues that childhood is an essentially queer experience in a cultural mainstream comprised of omnipresent heteronormative socializing programs for children (Halberstam 2020; Stockton 2009).

Centrally, discussing the queer child figure, and thereby queering childhood, can offer new possibilities for queer theorizing (Cobb 2005). Examining, for example, the ways in which queer adults had childhoods which were also queer, aids in conceptualizing the queerness that is a part of childhood, and of majority culture, more broadly. As explained by Michael Cobb (2005), narratives of the queer child bear significance, as they offer different portraits of childhood. Envisioning queer children's experiences can create accounts of the ways in which children are marked by and riddled with non-normative identity and sexuality. This, in turn, can alleviate young queer individuals of the feelings of self-hatred and isolation by which many coming-out stories are shaped.

One of the grounds for such analyses are cultural texts aimed at, or about children, such as children's media. Queer theorists argue for the importance of the possibility of non-heterosexual identification for children. Representing various identity concepts in the media can broaden the scope of children's self-identification processes and provide them with positive non-hegemonic identity concepts to connect with. Considering the queer child, and thus perceiving, as Cobb suggests, various portraits of childhood in the media, can enable children to navigate the non-normative dimensions present within themselves (Doty 2020). Recognizing that a lack of LGBTIQ+ media representation plays a central role in acts of homophobic violence, feelings of shame, self-hatred and the staggering suicide statistics that disproportionately affect queer youth, special focus is laid on deconstructing the ways in which mainstream media targeted toward children holds up the ideal of compulsory heterosexuality, and, consequently, the heterosexual matrix, shaping children's understandings of sexual and gender norms (Fan 2019).

Furthermore, analyzing representations of childhood from a queer perspective can be a tool for pointing out subliminal dimensions of queerness, same-sex desire, gender transgression and non-normative identity within children's texts. By means of queering childhood, theorists argue that while children's media reproduces heteronormative ideals, it "also homes all sorts of queerness" (Kidd 2011, 185). With this in mind, the method of queering the child can

underline how queerness in children's media can be a safe space for the queer child. Queering childhood, then, offers the possibility of non-heterosexual identification, and thus positive identity formation. By introducing the possibility of a queer child, the paradox of the hetero-asexual child propagated by majority culture can be rejected and destabilized.

The mission of exposing the queer potentiality of childhood is central to the analysis of Spinelli to be conducted in this thesis. Keeping with the tradition of queering the child, I aim to point out subliminal messages of lesbianism and non-normativity within Spinelli, to break with the hegemonic and dominant figure of the asexual, yet heteronormative child. In doing this, I also aim to expose that a queer reading of Spinelli's identity exposes her coded homosexuality, which comes with possibilities and limitations, simultaneously serving as a possibility for audience identification, as well as a limitation and reproduction of restrictive negative clichés, thereby going against the nature of 'queer'.

2.3. Queering Cartoons

The upholding of the normative gender role system, or, to put it in Butlerian terms, the heterosexual matrix, requires that children be socialized "within a set of images and expectations which limit and channel their conceptions of what is possible and proper for men and for women" (Gross 1991, 194). The mass media generally, and children's media in particular, holds cultural authority, which must be critically examined to understand how hegemonic concepts of identity are reproduced and upheld. Alan Sinfield touches on this notion, relating that mainstream media and culture have the purpose of suppressing differences within society (2015). The scholar describes the hostility with which children's media and education formats which recognized the diversity of American identity were met, during the Reagan administration in the United States. The focus laid heavily on teaching "traditional American values", in reasserting "a hegemonic idea of 'America'" (Sinfield 2015, vii), as a way of overcoming cultural tension, leading to the erasure of non-normative identities and the focus on cisgender white, male, heterosexual identity. Thus, mainstream media is a tool for preserving the binary heterosexual gender role system.

As Larry Gross (1991) describes, the lack of visibility of non-heterosexual and non-cisnormative sexual and gender identities in mainstream children's media is elemental in creating and upholding negative feelings of shame and self-hatred within LGBTIQ+ youth. Children seek to fit in and are taught early on, through the media, to devalue all forms of non-cis/heterosexuality, before having the mechanisms to acknowledge such non-normative

dimensions within themselves. Inevitably, this leads to internalized negative feelings towards oneself. As “children learn from exposure to popular cultural forms” (Gross 1991, 75), children’s media, particularly the medium of the animated cartoon, is identified as a central site of enculturation, representing a significant source of the younger generation’s socialization processes, and having the power to reinscribe hegemonic notions of gender, sexuality and identity, thereby normalizing the Butlerian heterosexual matrix. As England et al. propose, “consistently portrayed gender role images may be interpreted as ‘normal’ by children and become connected with their concepts of socially acceptable behavior and morality” (2011, 557). Since “the cartoon as a cultural product is often used to indoctrinate children and re-institute adults in the (correct) ways of heteronormativity” (Giffney 2009, 368), it is especially relevant to queer read the cartoon medium.

The cartoon, according to Sam Abel (1995), is a uniquely American medium, significant in forming an American national self-image. Shaping national identity formation, then, cartoons represent the standards of gender construction in American society, and thus, a queering of this medium offers new possibilities for gender and sexual self-identification processes, by rejecting the hegemony of intelligible gender identity. Acknowledging that “the viewer creates meaning in the text as much as those behind the camera” (Giffney 2009, 366), queer readings of cartoons aim to locate traces that threaten, critique, or show the instability and performativity of heterosexuality within children’s texts (Griffin 2004). Based on the notion that the animated cartoon “must be held accountable for how it sells power and manufactures social identity” (Gross 1991, 75), deconstructing children’s media formats by queering exposes the dominant discourses which these texts reproduce, thereby connecting the realms of queerness and childhood and, as a consequence, subverting the American cultural canon.

The animated cartoons produced by Disney, as icons of Americanism in the twentieth century, set the norm “for the rest of the cartoon world” (Abel 1995, 185), and have especially been criticized for upholding dominant gender power relations (Juschka 2001). Alongside Disney, the Motion Picture Production Code, also referred to as the Hays Code, is seen as responsible for the erasure of LGBTIQ+ representations from U.S. television for a significant part of the twentieth century (Smith 2020; Dennis 2003b). The Code, which was implemented in the United States after 1934 and remained in place until 1968, prescribed moral guidelines for film content, forbidding the representation of pictures which would sway the audience in the direction of sin and any form of sexual perversion, categories under which depictions of LGBTIQ+ desire and identity fell. Despite ending in the late 1960s, the implementation of the

Code led to a severe restriction on queer representation, making such representations a taboo which has only been alleviated in recent years (Smith 2020).

To navigate the Code, certain characters were implicitly coded as queer, so as to not refer to their transgressive identities overtly. Queer coding became a way to include non-heterosexuality and non-cisgender identity in film or television narratives, alluding to a character's subversive identity without explicitly confirming it in the text. This was predominantly done through signifiers which were recognizable to the LGBTIQ+ community and the queerly informed reader, by tropes and stock characters such as the effeminate gay man or the masculine maiden woman. Encoded queerness became most acceptable when in connection with a negative representation, leading, for example, to the trend of the queer-coded villain, as can be seen in several Disney characters, such as Scar in *The Lion King* (1994), Ursula from *The Little Mermaid* (1989), and *Aladdin*'s Jafar (1992). In this way, queerness became villainized to reinforce the belief that not being heterosexual is evil.

Jeffery P. Dennis, in delineating the representation of same-sex desire in popular U.S. American cartoons, argues that, while characters informed by queerness all but vanished from television upon the implementation of the Hays Code, the unstable nature of cartoons allowed animators to introject, and audiences to decode signs of same-sex desire and non-cisheteronormative identity (2003b). Additionally, queer audiences have often forged queer meaning out of mainstream texts to find representation in a culture that erases their experiences. Queer coding and queer reading, then, have been a tool to combat the invisibility of LGBTIQ+ identity in the cultural mainstream. The increasing visibility and growing influence of LGBTIQ+ identities which came in consequence to the gay and lesbian rights movements in the United States, meant that viewers were given the contextual tools to locate queerness within animation formats. Thus, the "average viewer" could now recognize signifiers of non-heterosexual and non-cisgender identity. This led producers to explicitly reject any non-normative possibilities through the insistence on heterosexuality. For this reason, Dennis describes how cartoons of the 1980s on are characterized by a notion that heterosexuality "resides in the very construction of sentient beings" (2003, 1).

Following this, Dennis describes how the early 1990s brought about an era in which queerness became more visible in society and in cartoons, with several shows that allowed for an awareness of same-sex desire and queer gender and sexual identities. By the late 1990s though, this had taken on the form of subtextual allusions, due to the cancellation of American cartoon shows which referenced non-heterosexuality more starkly, and had therefore been at the center of subversive readings by queer audiences as well as scrutiny from conservative

circles, such as *Pinky and the Brain* (Dennis 2003a). In short, the scholar argues that while LGBTIQ+ representations were easier to locate than ever before, the late 1990s, the period in which *Recess* came into existence, strongly insisted on explicit heterosexuality in their cartoon characters, albeit encoding queer elements within them.

Centrally, scholars in the project of queering animation underscore the counter-hegemonic potential of the animated cartoon, pointing out its queer nature. Because the cartoon is so clearly an animated and/or drawn medium, it is visibly dissimilar to real life, and therefore not as strictly subjected to the norms of society. Due to this, the cartoon is allowed to transgress societal norms, such as sex and gender categorizations, without much disruption to majority culture, under the guise of the innocuous children's medium. Therefore, inherent to the cartoon is a sense of fluidity and anarchy, as the cartoon "lubricates deviation from the dominant paradigms of thought" (Perea 2018, 225). Animation formats make incoherent, unstable and nonsensical representations possible, as seen in the common representation of anthropomorphic characters, such as animals who take on human traits like the *Looney Tunes* characters, and other personified non-human entities, like *SpongeBob SquarePants* (Dennis 2003b; Giffney 2009). The cartoon's amorphous nature allows for transgressions which cannot be achieved as easily in live-action formats, an idea reinforced by Sam Abel's description that "by its comic nature, the cartoon world relies on a defiance of normality and 'natural law'; Newtonian physics comes and goes as dictated by sight gags, bodies are stretched and compressed as if they were elastic, characters transform into different characters or objects at will" (1995, 190). Consequently, children's cartoons simultaneously centrally house a reflection of the values of society at large, and have the power to mock or reject these values. The animation format allows for "the smuggling of radical narratives into otherwise clichéd interactions about friendship, loyalty, and family values" (Halberstam 2020, 43), making it the ideal medium for subverting the dominant forces of the heterosexual matrix. Because of their deviation from reality, cartoons "facilitate playful transgressions on normative coding" (Perea 2018, 2). In other words, they facilitate queerness.

The anthropomorphic cartoon has queer potential due to its clear separation from the realms of the human: not subject to the regimes of personhood, anthropomorphic cartoon characters regularly destabilize concepts of anatomy, gender, desire, and identity, as well as notions of time and space (Johnson 2010). Recalling Butler's notions of subversion and intelligibility, it can be argued that some anthropomorphic characters hold subversive potential, as they destabilize the heterosexual matrix. Through the method of queering, many cartoon characters who are not human are reframed to represent same-sex desire, queerness, and other

forms of LGBTIQ+ gender and sexual identity, particularly in the “funny animal” genre (Dennis 2003b). The physical deviance and flux in gender representation of cartoon animals, monsters, and other non-human characters hold queer possibilities, as they merge between gender signifiers to reject societal norms and suggest new ways of being.

Contrary to anthropomorphous non-human characters, animated human characters are more strictly bound to intelligibility. Despite being clearly fictional and surreal, these characters still set out to represent the human, thus being more connected to societal norms. One way of queering a human cartoon character is through identifying and highlighting encoded cultural signifiers of LGBTIQ+ identity present in the text. Such cultural signifiers are, firstly, the asexuality of a given cartoon character, as “the imperative of heterosexual desire as the only possibility has traditionally made gay characters appear as asexual, not interested in anyone at all” (Dennis 2003b, 3). Secondly, queerings of cartoon humans can be achieved through stereotypes. Introducing queer stereotypes into a cartoon character leads to its typification, establishing their non-heteronormative identity at first glance and thus sparing the need to explicitly state it. Such stereotypes might be recognizable tropes to both the heterosexual and non-heterosexual eye, or they might take on the form of “signs of gayness”, as Richard Dyer describes – signs that allude to non-heterosexuality, commonly used and widely known within LGBTIQ+ circles to signify non-normative identities to other subcultural members, while remaining safely undercover within majority culture (2002). A given LGBTIQ+ cartoon character can be queered through exposing “a repertoire of (...) cultural forms designed to show what the person’s person alone does not show: that he or she is gay” (Dyer 2002b, 19). Thus, by recognizing stereotypically gay or lesbian personality traits, fashion and beauty standards in a character, for example, the character can be queered.

In “We’ll Have a Gay Old Time: Queer Representation in American Prime-Time Animation from the Cartoon Short to the Family Sitcom”, Jo Johnson (2010) offers a comprehensive summary of how homosexuality is commonly drawn in cartoons, which offers starting points for conducting queer readings. Johnson describes that homosexual characters are designed to break with regimes of gender intelligibility, by having an androgynous appearance, gender-bending, or taking on “characteristics more frequently displayed by the opposing gender” (Johnson 2010, 255). Further, Johnson delineates how lesbian cartoon characters are constructed. Here, the scholar argues that the lesbian character can be identified by her gender ambiguity, her subversion of femininity, as the lesbian cartoon adopts masculine characteristics and gestures, a more masculine wardrobe, and is drawn with less emphasized feminine traits, such as shorter hair. Additionally, it is described that lesbian cartoon characters

are usually less attractive than their normatively feminine counterparts, and that the cartoon representation of lesbianism is often connected to the figure of the spinster.

Despite subverting the cis/heterosexist mainstream by offering new ways of consuming and interpreting cultural texts, queer readings performed through filling in the gaps available in cartoons, i.e., through locating queer encodings, can also present a number of limitations. While queer coding can be seen as a way of including queerness in the mainstream space that excludes it, such encodings have become limiting in time, as stories continue to reduce queerness to exhausted clichés. As concepts of queer theory allow for sex and gender regimes to continue to be deconstructed, common signifiers and stock characters such as the butch woman or the “sissy” man are becoming increasingly and noticeably dated. Thus, queer readings of texts can bring cultural stereotypes to the forefront, reproducing them and contributing to the oppressive history of hiding LGBTIQ+ identity behind jokes and indirect metaphors. Furthermore, the stereotypes exposed through queerings can uncover essentialist forms of identity, reinforcing the gay and lesbian identity politics mentioned in the previous chapter.

In presenting strict homosexual identities, uncovering subtextual non-heterosexual encodings in cartoons can lead to a reproduction of the cultural trend of denial and negativity toward the existence of queer children, thus erasing more marginalized queer positions, such as those formed around the intersections of race, class, ethnicity, ability status, and sexual and gender identity (Doty 2012; Kander 2011). Queer readings can offer restrictive representations of identity, by delineating strict dimensions of homosexuality and consequently upholding the homosexual/heterosexual dualism that queer theory seeks to overcome. From this, one can conclude that the method of queer reading, when applied uncritically, can lead to the erasure of queer positions formed around the intersection of race, class, ethnicity, dis/ability and sexual and gender identity (Doty 2012). Thus, while queer reading is a tool for queer audiences to reclaim the way they are depicted in the media and occupy the mainstream, such readings can also uphold limiting cultural assumptions.

In the analysis portion of this thesis, Spinelli, one of the protagonists of Disney’s *Recess*, will be analyzed with stereotypes commonly associated with the butch lesbian figure, as detailed in the previous chapter, in mind, as well as against the background of the notions of queering childhood and queering cartoons. Queering Spinelli while considering the possibilities and limitations of queer reading as an analytical method, this thesis makes use of the methods of queer reading and character analysis, posing the question of the extent to which *Recess*, as a mainstream children’s text, reveals a non-heteronormativity that is “gay-affirming

rather than queer, even oppressively so” (Kidd 2011, 185). In other words, I seek to interrogate how pointing out the counter-hegemonic encodings of the animated series and “filling in the gaps” within *Recess* allows for a reinterpretation of Spinelli as a butch lesbian character, which, in turn, might reproduce restrictive and essentialist notions of identity, as it maintains the negative trend of contempt and disregard toward LGBTIQ+ media representations, upholding the erasure of queer identities which exist across intersecting social categories.

Chapter 3: The Politics of Spinelli

Disney's *Recess* features a bold tomboy character in one of its leading roles. Considering that Disney is famous for reinscribing dominant sexual and gender norms under the veil of representing "traditional family values", as well as the company's influential position in the mainstream of children's media, this analysis of Spinelli through a critically queer lens aims to underscore the transformative potential of the character, thus destabilizing the "assumptions of heterosexuality which colonize Disney films" (Fan 2019, 120). Further, this analysis seeks to examine the simultaneously liberatory and restrictive implications of exposing Spinelli's lesbianism.

Can reading Spinelli as a lesbian character offer childhood audiences a non-normative identity concept to identify with, thereby serving as a safe space for the queer child? Does Spinelli's role as the protagonist point to a positive representation of homosexuality? Can queering the character facilitate children's self-identification processes by providing child audiences with the necessary tools to navigate their own possibly non-heterosexual identities? These are some of the questions which will guide the upcoming analysis. Along with discussing the possibilities which a queer reading of Spinelli uncovers, the restrictive elements of her identity will also be explored. The ways in which a coherent lesbian identity, which reinforces prohibitive and limiting notions of identity, compliant with the homonormative lesbian identity politics mentioned in the first chapter, can be located in Spinelli, will be analyzed. Here, the extent to which a queer reading of Spinelli reveals a "gay-affirming" representation, compliant with the imperatives of intelligibility, rather than destroying the hegemonic categorizations which permeate U.S. culture, will be brought into question.

Does queering Spinelli reveal a conservative, essentialist representation of non-heterosexuality, which conceptualizations of queerness have sought to overcome? Does reframing Spinelli as a lesbian continue the cultural trend of invisibility and negativity towards the existence of queer individuals along intersecting lines of identity? Do the queer encodings by which Spinelli's character is shaped hold up outdated and oppressive societal clichés, maintaining the masking of LGBTIQ+ media representations behind mockery and metaphor? Rather than making visible the multiple and wide array of meanings a text can have, does reading Spinelli as a lesbian close the opportunity for queerness? By discussing Spinelli's potential of subverting the heterosexual matrix while, simultaneously, recognizing the confining stereotypes and notions of intelligible identity which are reinscribed through the character, the problems and benefits of queering Spinelli will be debated. In this way, this

analysis contributes to efforts of queering the child and queering animation, connecting the realms of queerness, childhood, and the cultural mainstream by envisioning the existence of a child who is not heterosexual. The central goal is to make visible how underscoring Spinelli's lesbian identity can and interrupt the U.S. media's dominant processes of heteronormative socialization, while considering the implications of such a reading. Thus, simultaneously to reinterpreting Spinelli as a lesbian character, it will be discussed how queering the text, by making the implicit explicit, furthers the negative tendency to erase identities which are queer rather than homonormative.

After a short summary of Disney's *Recess*, in which the central themes of the animated television series will be illustrated, Spinelli will be analyzed against the archetype of the butch lesbian. Through a resistant reading of the text, highlighting moments which indicate queerness, it will become clear that Spinelli's rejection of femininity is not simply a tomboy characteristic, but a way to point to her lesbian identity. Arguing that the animated cartoon series *Recess* presents coded female homosexuality without explicitly thematizing it, this thesis will examine the gaps which can be filled in order to *queer* the text. Consequently, this thesis will analyze the juxtaposition between Spinelli and the Ashleys, the antagonists of the show, and the implications of this relationship, to argue that Spinelli's lesbianism is especially visible in contrast to the Ashley's normative heterofemininity, which the show depicts in a negative light. Following this, instances of *Recess* trying to forcibly characterize Spinelli as heterosexual will be discussed, bearing in mind the mainstream positioning of the show and the 1990s trend of heterosexualizing cartoon characters, as described by Dennis (2003b). Lastly, my queer reading will reveal the dimensions of gender performativity which shape the show. In this way, the politics of *Recess* will be examined, arguing the potentiality as well as the possible obstacles of queer reading Spinelli.

3.1. What is *Recess*?

Recess (1997-2001) was created by Paul Germain and Joe Ansolabehere, airing on ABC-TV and subsequently on the Disney Channel. The animated cartoon series focuses on the adventures of six nine-year-old children, attending the fourth grade of the suburban Third Street Elementary School. The friend group is comprised of T.J., Gretchen, Vince, Gus, Mikey, and Spinelli. In the recess period of the school day, the students at the school form their own society. Ruled by King Bob, a sixth-grader who reigns from his throne atop the playground equipment, the recess society is complete with a government and class structure, as well as its own strict

rules and moral guidelines, written out in the constitution of the playground (Huckins 1997). There are rigid values and social norms which members of the recess society are expected to conform to. Thus, the recess society can be seen as a microcosm of grown-up society, a witty criticism of the “real world”. The struggle between conformity to social norms and these fourth grader’s search for individuality is central to the shows plot.

Running for six seasons, *Recess* was one of Disney’s most commercially successful television projects during this time. The series is the product of an era in which the Walt Disney Television Animation network focused on creator-centered animation (Chandler 2016). In order to stay competitive in the growing market of the late 1990s, alongside growing children’s cable networks such as Cartoon Network and Nickelodeon, Disney made efforts to diversify their content by promoting independent productions, implementing program concepts created by autonomous producers rather than collective studio work (Perlmutter 2014). Considering that *Recess* was produced by Disney, widely known for its idealization of hegemonic heteronormative femininity, the animated series offers a compelling opportunity to analyze the queer potentiality of children’s animated television formats. Through queering this series, the potential for positive representations of non-heterosexual identity in children can be discussed.

By virtue of its commercial success, one can conclude that *Recess* was, during the time it was broadcast, positioned in the mainstream of children’s television. Showing the everyday, albeit heightened and exaggerated, adventures which the six friends experience, *Recess* “really captured what it was like to be a kid” (Needleman 2018). The main setting within the series is Third Street Elementary School, which follows a very traditionally American public-school aesthetic, complete with yellow school buses, peanut-butter-and-jelly-sandwich school lunches, as well as flags of the United States of America hanging in every classroom, and on a flagpole in the center of the playground. Set in white, middle-class American suburbia, the series gained its relevance by representing relatable and witty tales of childhood in ten-minute episodes.

Contrary to other cartoon series which were popular during that period, such as *SpongeBob SquarePants* (1999) and *CatDog* (1998-2005), *Recess* plays in the human world. Thus, it excludes some of the surrealist aspects common to other animated cartoons – the characters are bound to their human physicality, their bodies do not morph or surpass the realms of time and space, and there are no talking animals or sentient non-human beings. This makes the characters and the animated world depicted more strictly bound to the regimes of intelligibility. As the creators of the show explain, the aim was to capture the act of going to school, as this, they argue, represents the most universal experience of childhood (Nivea 2016). *Recess*, then,

claims to represent the real world, asserting itself as a reflection of the American cultural mainstream of the late 1990s. Therefore, queer reading this cartoon series contributes to the project of subverting the status quo of that time period.

Recess' representation of the real world frequently makes use of stereotypes and stock characters. Particularly compelling for an analysis of non-heterosexual identity in this series, is the way in which *Recess*' characters are constructed along the notion of typification – as most of the characters are created along societal stereotypes, common character tropes are clearly recognizable. Each of the protagonists can be associated with an archetype, not only reflected in terms of personality, but in the very way in which the characters are drawn.

T.J. Detweiler, the leader of the friend group, is brave, adventurous, and popular. As Figure 1 illustrates, he is white, has brown hair, big eyes, freckles on his cheeks and is frequently depicted with a wide smile on his face. T.J.'s cartoon outfit consists of a baseball hat facing backwards, a green bomber jacket, a white T-shirt, baggy jeans and sneakers – an outfit which represents him as the all-American boy. His friendly face and simple, yet trendy clothing convey that he will grow up to be attractive, a fact reinscribed by his positioning as the group leader and his popularity among the other kids in school. T.J. can clearly be associated with the likeable boy next door archetype. Furthermore, I argue that the ideals of hegemonic masculinity are embodied in the cisgender, white, heterosexual, good-looking T.J., who has the most screen-time out of all of the protagonists. Thus, it can be argued that this character seems to reflect the androcentric dimensions which permeate U.S. culture, and Western societies in general (Chandler 2016).



Figure 1: The Recess Protagonists

Vince LaSalle, T.J.'s right hand man, is the only person of color within the group of main characters, an upbeat, sarcastic and competitive athlete. His typification as the basketball jock is reflected in his appearance – tall and slender, he wears a basketball jersey, grey shorts, and high-top black sneakers. Reduced to being the non-white sportsman of the group, it can be argued that through Vince, *Recess* reproduces the cultural stereotype of the Black athlete, as well as the stock character of the Black best friend. He is one of the protagonists, which suggests that this character demonstrates a positive representation. Despite being represented positively, and the audience being invited to like him, little is known about him besides his athleticism and cheerful personality. Thus, I argue, he serves as the token Black character. While this shows some effort of *Recess* to be inclusive of members of minority groups, Vince's typification as the token Black friend creates the illusion of inclusivity while reproducing societal stereotypes. The character lacks depth and agency over his own personality as he is reduced to T.J.'s sidekick and the token Black athlete. In this way, *Recess*' effort to represent diversity is limited and can reproduce racist cultural assumptions.

Gus Griswald can be connected to the military brat stereotype, a term used in U.S. culture to describe children of parents serving in the military. Gus' father, whom he refers to as "Sir", is in the U.S. military, which caused the family to move multiple times, and Gus to transfer schools often. He is paranoid, insecure, and naïve, which is reflected in his perpetually worried facial expression, in which the inner corners of his eyebrows are furrowed up behind thick glasses, his mouth a wave frowning down (Figure 1). He has short, blonde hair in the fashion of a marine cut, and wears only military green colors, making it appear like he is dressed in an army uniform.

Mikey Blumberg represents the drama kid archetype. Tall, blonde, baby-faced and overweight, wearing a messily tucked in beige shirt and brown pants, Mikey is sensitive, poetic and has a passion for dance. His effeminacy lead a queer reader to conclude that Mikey represents the opposite of hegemonic masculinity. His unspoken unattractiveness, delicate personality and emotional nature allow for a queer reading of him as gay, as he corresponds to stereotypes commonly associated with the effeminate gay man.

Gretchen Gundler is the only female protagonist besides Spinelli. She is the intellectual one in the group, described by her peers as the smartest kid in school. Often solving problems with her logical thinking skills, she has deep a knowledge of mathematics, chemistry, and physics. Gretchen has brown shoulder-length hair, which is tied into two low pigtails, wears a blue knee-length dress with a pink sash and bow in the middle, pink, scrunched up socks and large brown and white shoes (Figure 1). Her tall slender frame, disproportional to her long face

and large feet, further underscores her dorky nature. Gretchen wears oversized glasses and has large buck teeth as well as a hyponasal voice, making it sound like her nose is perpetually blocked. Thus, this character clearly represents the stock character of the geek.

It is not just the main characters who are created out of stereotypes. Miss Grotke, the eccentric class teacher, wears a long green tunic dress, has messy hair, a mellow voice, and does not shave her legs. Frequently talking about environmentalism, criticizing the eurocentrism of history books, and teaching her students feminist lessons, yoga-loving Miss Grotke embodies the archetype of the hippie. Miss Finster, one of the show's antagonists, is constructed along the stereotype of the bitter spinster. Finster is a tall, broad, angry-looking woman with a witch-like nose. With a deep, unfeminine voice, she is an authoritarian, ice-cold teacher who would prefer children to not behave like children. Not much is known about her, except that she is lonely, fosters cats, and lifts weights in her free time. Finster will be described in more detail later, as I propose that she, too, can be read as a lesbian character.

Clearly, *Recess* provides its childhood audience with a wide array of characters to identify with, which can be seen as positive, considering the elemental role which mainstream cartoons play in the socialization and self-identification processes of children. However, I argue that these character representations are reproductions of cultural stereotypes used to stabilize the status quo. The fact that the main character group features only two girls points to a common androcentric trend within cartoons of the late twentieth century – some of the most popular animated cartoons of the time period in which *Recess* emerged featured male protagonists, particularly male dyads, privileging and universalizing the male experience (Dennis 2003b). While Gretchen and Spinelli are positioned as central characters of the show, they are still in the minority. Thus, dimensions of androcentrism can clearly be identified within *Recess* (Chandler 2016). Constructing the characters by means of typification reduces these to the cultural stereotypes which they represent. This contributes to the conservation of oppressive societal norms, as well as limits the uniqueness of the characters, leading to a lack in character depth. Therefore, along with limiting the characters' originality, the use of typification and stock characters in *Recess* also serves to reinscribe negative cultural stereotypes, by representing common tropes of the American mainstream. Thus, it can be said that the stock characters present in the cartoon series have the purpose of upholding, and socializing the childhood audience into, the dominant societal heteropatriarchal status quo.

3.2. Spinelli as the Butch Lesbian

As with most other characters in *Recess*, Ashley Spinelli is informed by stereotypes. These stereotypes connect her to the butch lesbian archetype. The only other girl in the friend group, Spinelli can be described as the antithesis of normative femininity. It is important to denote that the notion of normative femininity refers to heteronormative feminine identity, and equated to the intelligible performance of femininity as detailed by Butler (1990), to describe the hegemonic notion of femininity which prescribes beauty, the performance of normative heterosexuality, a passive attitude, and the cultivation of feminine traits (Cole 2014). As will become clear, a queer reading of Spinelli in Disney's *Recess* exposes the lesbian stereotypes by which she is shaped. Spinelli uses gender ambiguity to subvert the regimes of the heterosexual matrix, transgressing normative concepts of femininity, which makes a reading of her as a butch lesbian character possible.

While, as described in the first chapter, female homosexuality, and non-cis/heterosexual identities in general, can be found along all types of bodies, appearances, fashion trends, and personality types, there are certain signifiers that commonly indicate lesbian identity, as well as visible representations of the lesbian community, such as the figure of the butch lesbian. Marked by signifiers of non-heterosexual identity, which are visible and recognizable to LGBTIQ+ individuals, the butch is often employed as a stock character, to allude to a character's queerness without explicitly confirming it in the text. In this way, queerness can be encoded in a text without making it overt and thus unappealing to the dominant heterosexual audience (Clark 1991). Characterized by the adoption of a masculine or androgynous look, the butch lesbian is recognizable for the ways in which she rejects normative assumptions of femininity.

In the cartoon medium, lesbian characters are commonly drawn to break with heteronormative expectations, adopting characteristics of the male gender to indicate their non-heterosexual identity (Johnson 2010). By reading butch identity into female characters who do not comply with the norms of intelligible femininity, queer audiences are able to reclaim and occupy heterosexist mainstream spaces. Thus, through "gestures, expressions, stances, clothing and even environments that bespeak gayness" (Dyer 2002b, 19), Spinelli's lesbian identity can be located. There are three main butch lesbian characteristics which can be identified in Spinelli in several instances, namely the embodiment of butch fashion codes, her socioeconomic background, which represents the working-class cultural history of the butch lesbian, and her masculine personality traits. These will be the main aspects focused on to *queer* Spinelli, and

to argue the ways in which *Recess* produces the recognizable trope of the butch lesbian through this character.

3.2.1. The Lesbian Look

Spinelli's gestures, expressions, and clothing, reveal, at first glance, that she represents the tomboy of the group. This is the first indicator of her lesbian identity, as the interrelatedness between the tomboy figure and the butch lesbian archetype was previously discussed. Queer theorists underscore that individuals living out a tomboy personality in their childhoods, can be associated with having butch lesbian identities, which they are able to reveal and live out upon growing up. It is argued that some lesbian children turn to the subversion of femininity through tomboy identity to "develop emblems, scripts and symbols of a future fantasy life that will help project them out of a heterosexually embedded childhood into a future where desire and longing (conscious or unconscious) of being sexually desired by a woman can be realized" (Zevy 2014, 151). Thus, adopting tomboy traits is seen as a form of freedom from the heterosexual matrix before the subversive child can come into her lesbian existence. This is true for Spinelli, whose agency and happiness are contingent upon rejecting normative femininity, as will be detailed in the following pages. The tomboy child is a subversive child, who uses the tomboy lifestyle as way of expressing non-heterosexual identity before fully grasping it. I argue that this is the case for Spinelli, and suggest that an alternative reading of *Recess* reveals tomboy Spinelli to be a representation of butch lesbian childhood.



Figure 2: Spinelli in "That Stinking Feeling"

Considering that movement and body language contribute to making a cartoon character intelligible, a look at Spinelli's physicality frames her in a subversive light. She is usually drawn with either her arms crossed in front of her chest, or her hands formed into fists on her hips, as can be seen in Figure 2. Standing with her legs spread far apart, Spinelli takes up space wherever she goes, making her body resemble the shape of a triangle. In her stance, she adopts masculine characteristics, as this posture is reminiscent of a manspreading position. This is a way of visibly communicating Spinelli's confidence. Furthermore, I propose, it signifies her embodying of male attributes, transgressing gender norms and going against what is considered to be 'ladylike' and proper, as intelligible femininity mandates unprovocative, discreet body language. Her perpetually arched eyebrows give her an incessantly provocative facial expression. These gestures, body postures and facial expressions exude a confidence which is uncommon for feminine characters, but commonly attributed to the butch figure, who adopts masculine traits as a form of self-expression and personal freedom. Therefore, Spinelli's physicality subverts normative assumptions of femininity, further exemplified by her deep and raspy voice, placing her as structurally opposite to normative, intelligible femininity.

As is typical for cartoons, Spinelli looks the same in each episode, only rarely changing clothes if forced to do so by the storyline. Figure 2 shows that Spinelli's beauty and fashion style is resemblant of the butch lesbian archetype. She wears large, black military-looking boots, which appear heavy in comparison to her thin, long legs. These boots were handed down to her by her older brother Vito: "One time, he made me wear his old shoes, and you know what?! I like 'em!", she proudly explains (Parkins 2000, 08:44-08:48). Spinelli's comfort in wearing men's shoes points towards her butch identity, as she takes on masculine fashion trends. The cool leather jacket which Spinelli wears reflects the boldness of her character, and also seems to divert attention from the fact that she is wearing a classically girly piece of clothing – a dress. However, this dress does not resemble traditionally girly dresses, which are form-fitting and made to accentuate physical traits, but is rather a straight piece of fabric, which she complements by wearing red and orange striped leggings. Even when wearing a piece of clothing which commonly signifies normative femininity, Spinelli exudes the female masculinity associated with the butch figure (Halberstam 2014).

The orange beanie covering her short black hair resembles the "beanie-lesbian" look connected to the butch. Thus, Spinelli's wardrobe and appearance serve to underscore her non-normative femininity. Remembering that normative femininity implies the performance of heterosexuality, it is possible to make the claim that Spinelli's non-normativity can be interpreted as lesbian. Moreover, taking into account Jo Johnson's description of the lesbian

cartoon character, wherein “women take on masculine gestures, display a reduction in their traditional feminine signifiers such as smaller, less emphasized eyes or shortening of the hair, and also a more masculine wardrobe” (2010, 255), the encoded lesbianism in Spinelli becomes apparent.

While gender expression can be completely separate from sexed and gendered identities, desires and bodies, I argue that Spinelli’s non-normative fashion choices make her a butch, as “lesbians have (...) learned to speak about their sexuality by not naming it directly, but through their clothing, style, and behavioral signifiers” (Vänskä 2014, 451). Spinelli’s appearance, then, is a tool for revealing her subversive nature without explicitly stating it. The character is shaped by cultural signifiers which point to butch lesbianism, as she embodies the butch lesbian anti-fashion of “gender confusion and ambiguity that disrupts and confounds patriarchal culture” (Clark 1991, 184). Spinelli’s androgynous outfit is clearly allusive to the fashion trends of the leather-jacket-and-jackboot lesbian look, which resists cultural definitions of beauty, and distinguishes lesbians from heterosexual women (Stein 1995; Walker 1993). She adopts masculine fashion codes, such as the leather jacket, men’s boots, and beanie hat, as a manifestation of butch identity. Thus, in adopting an “iconic butch appearance” (Huxley, Clarke, and Halliwell 2014, 207), Spinelli conveys at first glance what can’t be said explicitly – that she is a lesbian. In this way, the cultural signifiers that shape Spinelli’s appearance cause the character to subvert the heterosexual matrix, as she does not intelligibly convey heterosexuality through the visual gaze (Butler 1990).

3.2.2. The Blue-Collar Butch

As previously detailed, a working-class background is a further attribute of the butch lesbian archetype. Ann Ciasullo (2001) discusses the “blue-collar butch lesbian” stereotype, detailing the ways in which the butch figure is marked by classism. This is true for Spinelli, as well. Her full name, Ashley Funicello Spinelli, consists of two Italian surnames, implying a family history of immigration, which is commonly associated with a working-class social positioning. Her father, Bob Spinelli, speaks in a New York Italian accent, further alluding to the family’s positioning within the Italian-American working-class. As Emily Chandler (2016) describes, Spinelli’s quick-tempered and aggressive personality is “ascribed in some part to her working-class, Italian-American background, through an understanding that physicality and confrontation are more accepted in her culture” (154). Spinelli is known for being rough and impolite, attributes which are depicted as an expression of her upbringing. In *Operation Field*

Trip (1998), it is revealed that one of Spinelli's brothers, Joey, is in prison, where he majored in auto repair. Having an immediate family member, such as a sibling, incarcerated, is a further aspect which suggests a blue-collar background. Another indicator of this is Spinelli's way of speaking. This character's language is the most informal and colloquial out of all of the protagonists, as she is frequently heard abbreviating words such as "them" to "em", as well as using the contraption "ain't", a term widely stigmatized for being associated with a lower class.

The episode *More Like Gretchen* (2000) is one of the moments in which the audience gets some insight into Spinelli's home life. When Gretchen visits her friend for dinner, we see the inside of the Spinelli family home, which is modest and unassuming. Spinelli tells her friend about her family's traditions, mentioning, for example, the family spaghetti dish: "Now I don't wanna brag or nothin'" (Jennett 2000, 03:52-03:54), she starts saying, before Flo Spinelli, her mother, corrects her language. Slightly annoyed for being interrupted, Spinelli continues, "You see all them little black olives chopped up in there? That was my idea!" (Jennett 2000, 04:00-04:04). Later, Spinelli tells Gretchen about her favorite family activity: "You see, Gretch, watchin' wrestlin' together at the dinner table is a special-moment-thing my parents and me share. Kinda like church!" (Jennett 2000, 04:10-04:16). Watching television during a meal goes against the etiquette which is foundational to stereotypical upper-class conceptions. Furthermore, the hobby of passionately following sports, such as wrestling, is typically associated with a working-class background. As Chandler describes, "normative femininity is constituted through the performance of decorum, self-effacement and gentility, which are associated with the middle and upper classes" (2016, 153). Thus, Spinelli's non-normative femininity, constituting the opposite of these attributes, is connected to the working class. Therefore, *Recess*' representation of Spinelli as working-class is a further aspect through which Spinelli can be interpreted as a butch lesbian character.

3.2.3. Butch Personality Traits

Taking a closer look at Spinelli's personality, *Recess* seems to hold encoded indicators of Spinelli's non-heterosexuality. Thus, I argue that Spinelli's lesbian identity is reflected in her personality, which is equally as subversive as her drawn appearance. A queer reading of the text reveals that her core values, passions, opinions, and interactions with the outside world mirror the "mannishness" associated with lesbian cartoon encodings and the butch archetype (Genter 2016). Analyzing Spinelli through a queer lens, a resistant reader is able to locate

personality traits which are traditionally associated with the male gender. A closer look at these personality traits allows for a reframing of this character as a butch lesbian.

Firstly, she is referred to only as Spinelli, dropping her feminine first name, Ashley. As Marie Lyn Bernard, alias Riese, points out in an *Autostraddle* article, going by one's last name instead of first name is a quintessentially lesbian trait (2016). In omitting her given name, Spinelli tries to erase her femininity, rejecting and distancing herself from hegemonic ideals of gender and sexual identity, which she attempts to vocalize in the explanation that "'Ashley' isn't just a name, it's a curse!" (Huckins 1997, 03:24-03:26). This also follows the butch trend of having gender ambiguous nicknames, informally known as "lesbian names", as, contrary to the girly name 'Ashley', the name 'Spinelli' does not invoke gendered notions. This omission of her first name will be discussed again when examining the juxtaposition between Spinelli and the Ashleys, Spinelli's biggest enemies.

Stubborn, outspoken and forceful, Spinelli is best known for her quick temper, which leads her to frequently solve conflicts with violence. Her tough and aggressive personality is mainly focused on standing up for her loved ones. In *Randall's Friends* (1999), the six main characters are, once again, betrayed by Randall Weems, Miss Finster's secret informer and one of their main adversaries on the playground. Confronting him, Spinelli utters in her raspy voice: "The jig is up, Weems, prepare to be dribbled like a human basketball!" (Chassman 1999, 06:21-06:25). Threatening with brutality is often her way of resolving conflicts and earning the respect of kids trying to mock her. From this, one can deduce that she subverts hegemonic notions of femininity in which girls are not supposed to speak up and should take on a passive role. Spinelli is certainly active, often being the front-runner of the friend group's newest schemes. She is happiest spending the recess period beating all the boys on the playground at arm-wrestling, or playing sports – from basketball to dodgeball, kickball, or football, she masters them all, being a runner-up only to Vince, who is the school's best athlete. The fact that Spinelli most often takes on boys as her adversaries is an example of her destabilizing the binary gender system prescribed by the Butlerian heterosexual matrix, which hierarchically structures girls and women under boys and men.

One of Spinelli's many talents is the skill of playing songs through making fart noises with her armpit, always leading to roaring laughs from her friends, and, again, breaking with the etiquette of normative femininity. Additionally, she is talented in auto repair, able to fix the broken-down school bus with her mechanics skills (Kramer 1998). When asked about her favorite things in life, Spinelli answers, without hesitation: "Kickboxing, pro-wrestling, and the first ice ball of winter" (Bideau and Adomaitis 1999, 03:50-03:53). Her favorite things are

common attributes of the opposite gender, again framing Spinelli along the masculine butch lesbian stereotype.

In the opening sequence of *First Name Ashley*, Spinelli is seen retelling her latest adventure to her friends in the cafeteria: “So I says to Joey, ‘That’s Mister Girly to you!’ and I let ‘im have it! POW!” (Huckins 1997, 00:37-00:41). Spinelli referring to herself as “Mister Girly” is of particular interest here, as it is a moment in which the character purposely positions herself outside of the spectrum of normative femininity, expresses her subversion of gender norms, and vocalizes her internal butchness. The butch lesbian figure embraces masculine personality traits in order to transgress and reject that which is mandated by intelligible femininity, thereby subverting the Butlerian heterosexual matrix by destabilizing dominant notions of what it means to be a girl or woman.

Again, Spinelli’s masculine personality traits serve to signify what *Recess* cannot explicitly represent, and what she can’t vocalize herself – that she is not a normative girl, because she is a butch lesbian. This is reminiscent of Monique Wittig’s (1992) claim that lesbians are not women, since, by being attracted to women, they destabilize the factors that are imperative to normative femininity. Spinelli is a butch, and therefore, rather than being a girl, she is “Mister Girly”. Therefore, it can be concluded that *Recess*’ characterization of Spinelli and the visual codes present in and around this character, such as non-normative fashion, a working-class background, and butch personality traits, produce in Spinelli a character who destabilizes the gender binary by representing the “well established trope of ‘mannish’ lesbians” (Reddy-Best and Jones 2020, 162).

3.3. Rejection of Heteronormative Femininity

Spinelli’s relationships with the surrounding society reveal a profound aversion to normative femininity. This aversion is extreme, expressing itself in the form of disgust, and, in several instances, as a source of anxiety. This stark rejection to heteronormative femininity further alludes to the lesbianism encoded in Spinelli.

In the opening sequence of *Dance Lessons* (1999), the character is seen holding a boy from the collar of his shirt, preparing to tackle him. When T.J. asks what the fight is about, Gretchen explains that he had called Spinelli a girl. “Say it while you still got teeth!” Spinelli screams, holding up her fists. Scared, the boy utters “Bu-but you are a girl!”, making her even more furious (Walsh 1999, 0:11-0:14). The boy’s statement shows that *Recess* equates the word ‘girl’ with heterosexual feminine identity. Spinelli, as a butch, does not correspond do this.

Throughout *Recess*, she often refers to herself as a girl, for example in saying, “You are the best friend a girl could ever have!” (Jennett 2000, 00:55-00:57). Thus, while Spinelli is a cisgender girl, she gets frustrated by being ascribed femininity, because she does not correspond to normative notions of “being a girl”. The forceful ascription of femininity does not only result in feelings of aggression in Spinelli, but leads to her total loss of agency and identity. When she is forced to be a girl – meaning, a straight girl – Spinelli ceases to be herself. To preserve her agency, she must keep far away from normative femininity. In other words, she must hold on to her butch identity to maintain her essence. Spinelli’s aversion, disgust, and fear of femininity communicate to the audience that she is not just a girl, but rather a masculine butch lesbian.

An example of Spinelli’s loss of self through the forceful ascription of femininity can be found in her relationship with her mother. At the base of this mother-daughter dynamic seems to be her mother’s wish of having a more feminine daughter. When revealing to her friends that her mother is taking her to the “Glamour Plus Museum of Make-Up, Wigs and Pantyhose”, Spinelli says “I think it’s another one of my mom’s plans to make me more girly and junk” (Jennett 2000, 00:18-00:22). The word “girly” is emphasized with a body shudder, showing just how repugnant she finds the concept of femininity. She can’t bear to go to this museum alone, so she invites Gretchen to come along. Once there, the butch protagonist makes fun of the artifacts in the museum, putting on a wig and mocking the “whole lot of girly dumbness coming out of my brain” (Jennett 2000, 01:18-01:21). The need to mock “girlyness” signifies Spinelli’s transgressions on normative femininity, which make the interpretation of her as a butch lesbian easy, since the rejection of feminine beauty and fashion regimes are a central characteristic of butch identity. When Spinelli’s mother suggests she be more open to feminine topics, Spinelli understands this as a demand to change an essential part of herself, and becomes frustrated.

In *Dance Lessons* (1999), Spinelli’s mother enrolls her in ballet classes to promote her daughter’s feminine side, threatening that if she refuses, she will be barred from watching wrestling shows until she reaches the age of 21. Spinelli goes against her will, and hates the dance lessons, feeling uncomfortable in having to wear a tutu. Significantly, when putting on her unitard, Spinelli does not change out of her boots or beanie, showing just how important

her butch signifiers are to her (Figure 3). Thus, the rejection of femininity and the embracing of butch identity are at the foundation of Spinelli's character.

To Spinelli's surprise, her friend Mikey also attends the dance lessons. Upon discovering this, tells him that she is confused, since she knows that he rarely gets in trouble. In Spinelli's eyes, the only possible explanation for engaging in a feminine activity such as ballet is by punishment, which is why she cannot comprehend that Mikey would willingly enroll in dance class. The two friends decide to become dancing partners, and, instead of ballet, perform



Figure 3: Spinelli in ballet class in “Dance Lessons”

extreme dance moves which involve high jumping and extreme spinning. These are more aggressive movements which are thus considered more masculine, and in turn, I argue, more in line with Spinelli's homosexual core. Shortly before the dance recital, Spinelli decides to quit, telling Mikey and Mademoiselle Pavlova, the dance teacher, that she has worked too hard on her tough reputation to ruin it in the performance. Spinelli does not want her butch image to be destroyed by performing intelligible femininity. I suggest that she expresses here that her happiness and confidence are dependent upon her butch identity, which the ballet performance would repress. Toward the end of the episode, realizing how sad this decision has made Mikey, Spinelli changes her mind, joining him on stage for a dance to fast, thumping electronic music. Thus, even when she gives in to normative femininity, Spinelli does so in a subversive way, destabilizing the norms of ballet by making it look rough, aggressive, and loud. In order for Spinelli to preserve her agency, she must masculinize normatively girly activities to fit her butch identity.

3.4. Butch/Straight Girl Dichotomy

Spinelli's lesbian core becomes most visible when she is juxtaposed with the Ashleys, a group of four mean girly-girls who all share the same first name. The leader of this group is Ashley Armbruster, a blonde, slender, white girl dressed in pink and grey, as seen in Figure 4.

She is surrounded by Ashley Boulet, who is Black, dressed in yellow, Ashley Quinlan, a pale white girl clad in blue, with auburn hair, and Ashley Tomassian, an Armenian-American girl who wears various hues of green. The four are rarely seen separate from each other, and share the same opinions and values, with one of them, usually the leader, speaking for all of them. The only aspect which seemingly sets them apart from each other is the colors schemes they embody – blue, yellow, pink, and green. They are usually called Ashley A, B, Q, and T, diminishing their individual identities even further. As can be derived from Figure 4, their cartoon bodies have the same shape – a slender line which, compared to the triangle shape taken up by Spinelli, symbolizes the Ashley’s normative femininity.



Figure 4: The Ashleys in their clubhouse in “First Name Ashley”

On the playground, they spend most of their time at their hideout spot, a pile of old tires which, inside, is styled with luxurious furniture and décor (Figure 4). The Ashleys all come from wealthy families, and speak in high-pitched Valley girl accents, in which they utter their catchphrase, “Scandalous!” (Bideau and Adomaitis 1999, 00:45). These beautiful and catty it-girls correspond to the common archetype of the ultra-feminine mean girl posse. They highly value their appearances and engage in activities which center around cultivating their feminine traits. Usually depicted talking about boys, gossiping, or complaining about “that obnoxious tomboy” Spinelli (Bideau and Adomaitis 1999, 00:37-00:38), the Ashleys adhere to normative beauty and fashion standards, and therefore embody what, against the background of the Butlerian heterosexual matrix, is considered intelligible femininity.

Clearly, the Ashleys represent the antithesis of Spinelli. In the narrative of the cartoon series, the Ashleys are Spinelli’s biggest enemies. *Recess* episodes which follow Spinelli often focus on a Spinelli/The Ashleys juxtaposition, which I identify as a butch/straight girl dichotomy. In her interactions with the Ashleys, it becomes visible that Spinelli’s agency is reliant upon keeping distance from the possibly contaminating influence of normatively

feminine girls (Chandler 2016). A perfect example of this is the episode mentioned previously, *First Name Ashley*.

In the beginning of the episode, Randall searches through Spinelli's permanent school record, to retaliate against her for breaking his tape recorder. Here, he finds grounds to blackmail Spinelli – the fact that her first name is Ashley, which he promptly reveals to the entire playground, causing a wave of shock through the entire recess society, followed by loud, roaring laughter, while Spinelli shouts a long “NO!” with a clear look of disturbance on her face (Huckins 1997, 3:00-3:10). Spinelli explains the source of her panic to her friends, confessing that “every other girl named Ashley has always been one of them” (3:40-3:43), pointing to where the Ashleys are sitting. “Snotty, prissy, and a member of their stupid, snotty, prissy club! (...) So, now that everybody knows my name, I’m gonna have to join their stupid club, and wear makeup, and play dollies, and drink—”, Spinelli says with an audible body shudder, “—tea!” (03:44-03:54). With this statement, she separates herself from normative, heterosexual, femininity, subverting the heterosexual matrix in showing that the mere thought of performing intelligible femininity causes her significant discomfort. Spinelli's friends reassure her that this won't happen, as the Ashleys dislike her too much.

Mikey's question, “Would not a Spinelli, by any other name, punch as hard?” (Huckins 1997, 3:16-3:21), an attempt to comfort his friend, is answered with a clear no in the scenes that follow. Upon the revelation of Spinelli's given name, the Ashleys agree that the only way to save their reputation is to include her into the clique, a decision which does not come easy to them, as Emily Chandler retells in her essay:

Ashley T: “This is, like, a major tragedy!”

Ashley Q: “That creature, an Ashley? How could it be? I mean, just look at her hair! She doesn't even mousse.”

Ashley T: “All these years of primping and blow-drying the Ashley name to perfection, and now this? It's a disgrace!”

Ashley A: “Girls, we have to do something.”

Ashley Q: “Like what, Ashley A?”

Ashley A: “Our only choice is to make Spinelli into one of us.”

Other Ashleys: “Ewww!”

Ashley A: “What choice do we have, Ashleys? I mean, if we let her go around being her crude, disgusting Spinelli self, the name Ashley will be ruined forever. No longer will it stand for beauty and specialness. Soon, other girls will be considered cooler than us, and if we're not careful, by the time we're in junior high, our first dates will be with guys named Paul or Joe!”

Ashley B screams and buries her face in her hands.

Ashley A: “Ashleys, we have no choice. We must make Spinelli into one of us. It's like, the only way.” (Chandler 2016, 156f)

The Ashleys' panic about sharing a first name with Spinelli reinforces the idea that she represents the opposite of normative femininity, and is, therefore, a lesbian character, a fact which is understood by her peers. Thus, Spinelli's peers play into her transgressions on the heterosexual matrix, by confirming her subversive nature. Transforming Spinelli into an Ashley will mean transforming this lesbian tomboy into a heteronormative girly-girl. When the Ashleys demand that Spinelli join their group, she runs away screaming "No, you'll never take me alive!" (Huckins 1997, 5:34-5:36), having to be dragged into their clubhouse by her hands and feet. There, the Ashleys circle in on her with evil looks on their faces, holding hair products, tools, and brushes as if they were weapons. Clearly, normative femininity is torturous for Spinelli. Following this, the Ashleys introduce the kids on the playground to the newest member of their club – "Ashley S."



Figure 5: Ashley S.

Out of the pile of tires crawls Spinelli, shown in Figure 5, dressed in a similar outfit to the Ashleys, her color scheme being red. Her head is tilted down, and she has an unusually timid look on her face. Her body language is altered, as well – she stands with her feet closer together, hands shyly clasped in front of her waist. The forceful name change, I suggest, signifies the erasure of Spinelli's identity, as she gets turned into a clone of heterosexual girlhood. No longer is she the confident, manspreading butch. Transformed into a straight girl, Spinelli cannot be herself anymore. The makeover into "Ashley S." leaves the other schoolchildren astounded. The mocking laughter comes from Randall, who screams, "Spinelli?! In a dress?! This is rich, this is really rich!" (Huckins 1997, 06:30). This crucial moment reveals that, in the eyes of her peers, Spinelli is seen as lesbian, as well. Seeing her perform normative femininity, i.e., seeing her embody heterosexuality, is a change so ludicrous that it causes shock and laughter from the other kids. As mentioned previously, Spinelli wears a dress daily. However, Randall is surprised at this new outfit because the dress she regularly wears is not read as a heterofeminine practice – the butchness she exudes renders the heteronormativity of the dress invisible. In the eyes of the recess society, then, Spinelli is read as a butch lesbian, which is why the sight of

her performing intelligible femininity, complying with the heterosexual matrix, leaves the other schoolchildren incredulous. Clearly, Spinelli's makeover into a normative "straight girl" implies her loss of agency. It is a threat to her identity.

What follows is a montage in which Spinelli's loss of agency through the forceful ascription of femininity is intensified, when the Ashleys attempt to 'turn' Spinelli further into a girl. Her nails are polished while she screams, Ashley A tapes her eyes open and ties her wrists to a chair, forcing her to watch a unicorn movie, and she is denied of holding a football, which is swapped out for a doll. Spinelli's butch lesbianism is chased out of her. Eventually, she gives up, defeated: "Argh! I can't take it anymore! I can't take it, you hear me?! I am not an Ashley, I never wanted to be an Ashley! I'm no good at this stuff. Please, please let me go, I beg of you!", she pleads on her knees (Huckins 1997, 07:42-07:53). When she is made to be in accordance with the heteronormative feminine gender role, Spinelli tries with everything in her to resist. The seemingly life-threatening issue is finally resolved when Spinelli's best friends jump in to help. With fake IDs showing their first name as Ashley, all of the other kids in the school claim they have the right join the clique, forcing the Ashleys to free Spinelli. Immediately, she regains her confidence and goes back to aggressively chasing Randall, proving that "There's a lot of Ashleys out there, but there's only one Spinelli" (Huckins 1997, 10:02-10:04).

In this episode, Spinelli is forced to give up herself under the Ashley's rule. Not only do they strip away her tomboy traits, but they suppress the essence of her being. She suffers significantly, as she loses agency over her life, but loudly protests against the Ashleys' dominance. All of the other children in the recess society recognize that Spinelli's identity is at risk, and step in to save their friend. Getting fake identification that shows 'Ashley' as everyone's first name is not only a tactic to free Spinelli – it's a way to reinstate the recess society's natural world order, a status quo in which Spinelli is a butch lesbian. This episode shows that Spinelli's individuality, happiness and personal fulfillment are contingent on the preservation of her butch lesbian identity.

In another instance, in the episode *The Beauty Contest* (1999), the Ashleys enter Spinelli into a beauty pageant as a prank. Guy McMann, the presenter of the pageant, makes a visit to the classroom and calls out Spinelli's name, along with Ashleys A, B, Q, and T, as the girls selected to compete in the contest. The whole class erupts into laughter at the thought of Spinelli participating. Again, being positioned close to normative femininity is a source of embarrassment for Spinelli. Spinelli's peers implicitly read her as a butch lesbian, which is why they find the situation absurd.

After the initial shock, the group of friends propose that the best revenge would be for Spinelli to win the contest, beating the Ashleys at their own game. Spinelli tells her friends that she would “rather scarf down a dead bird” than participate in a beauty pageant (Bideau and Adomaitis 1999, 01:32-01:34), but, with the goal of finally defeating her enemies in sight, she agrees. Participating in a beauty contest, arguably one of the most feminine activities, where the extremes of the heterosexual matrix are potentiated, takes a lot of preparation for a butch lesbian like Spinelli, and her friends are prepared to transform her into “a beautiful butterfly” (Bideau and Adomaitis 1999, 02:00-02:05) – a heterosexual girl like the Ashleys. This transformation process requires unlearning everything about herself, and abiding by the rules of intelligible (hetero)femininity, from how to walk, to correct posture, facial expressions, appearance, and interests.

In the scenes that follow, she is coached into being a normative girl by her friends. Spinelli is visibly scared, frustrated and confused, again losing her agency when forced into the heterosexual matrix. Vince reads from a beauty pageant guidebook that states guidelines for how to perform intelligible femininity – she must learn how to walk in high heels, be graceful, and have hair that is “soft, full-bodied and frame[s] the face for a complimentary look” (Bideau and Adomaitis 1999, 03:29-03:31). She prepares for the questions and answers segment, where she is advised to mention “world-peace, happiness, hair, unity, and teaching others to read” (Bideau and Adomaitis 1999, 3:41-3:46). These somewhat exaggerated rules of girlhood transmitted by *Recess* point to a mockery of normative femininity that the show makes through Spinelli. When trying on her floor-length pageant dress, she locks herself in the bathroom, not wanting to be seen by her friends. Spinelli is in a clear state of distress, as she is moving from her butch lesbian identity to looking like the ideal heterosexual girl.

On the day of the contest, Spinelli’s friends are unable to locate her on the stage, a moment which shows that having dropped her butch identity, Spinelli has lost her individuality, becoming just another (heterosexual) girl. Eager to win, Spinelli impresses the jury, much to the Ashleys’ surprise. Shortly before the final round, Ashley A. talks to Spinelli backstage, where she expresses admiration for her, praising Spinelli’s beauty and talent and saying that “before, you were just a regular low-class kid, but now, you’re just like us” (Bideau and Adomaitis 1999, 07:55-07:58) – meaning that Spinelli had successfully performed intelligible femininity.

What is meant as a compliment throws Spinelli into an anxious state of self-reflection, as she realizes that she had willingly broken up the butch/straight girl dichotomy. In this moment, Spinelli becomes aware of the loss of herself through the performance of femininity,

concluding that she does not want to be like the heteronormative Ashleys. When called on stage for the questions segment, she confesses to the crowd that she had been entered as a prank, and was not being true to herself. In a powerful moment of *Beauty Contest* (1999), Spinelli puts on her beanie on-stage saying “THIS is me!” (Bideau and Adomaitis 1999, 9:40), claiming back her butch identity. From a queer perspective, this instance can be understood as Spinelli’s confession that she had been acting like a heterosexual girl, which she is not.

In a surprising turn of events, this confession leads Spinelli to win the beauty pageant, for showing “exactly what the fourth-grade girl of today should be – herself” (Bideau and Adomaitis 1999, 09:34-9:40). Spinelli ends up conquering the day by embracing her butch identity. In a telling moment, rather than being alienated for publicly ‘coming out’, Spinelli is praised. This seems to indicate that *Recess* equates Spinelli’s butch lesbian identity with being unique, and therefore, heroic. In contrast to that, the series equates being feminine with being just like everyone else, therefore being insignificant, as revealed in the moment where Spinelli’s friends cannot locate her from the audience. As Spinelli resembles normative femininity more and more, approaching the finals of the beauty pageant, she slowly loses sight of who she is. Luckily, her butch core prevails, enabling her to restore herself shortly before she loses agency over her life.

The conflicts between the Ashleys and Spinelli in *Recess* all have in common that Spinelli comes out better and stronger on the other side. Juxtaposed to the Ashleys, her butch identity prevails over the dominant forces of normative femininity. By being herself, and sticking to her butch identity, she is able to overcome conflicts and adverse situations. Spinelli is one of the protagonists of *Recess*, with multiple episodes centering around her. Her position as one of the main characters draws audiences to like Spinelli. Rather than making her an unlikeable character, a common trope for queer television representations, her transgressions on the heterosexual matrix serve to highlight her heroism and uniqueness. This quick-tempered character is loved by her friends and peers for undercutting hegemonic notions of femininity. Viewers are invited to connect, relate, and identify with the aggressive, masculine, lesbian Spinelli.

Reading Spinelli as a positive representation of butch lesbian identity is significant for queer child audiences. Spinelli, as the butch, represents a different “style of dress, attitude, sexual stance, activity, action, and means of relating to the world”(Zevy 2014, 152) than commonly found in children’s television formats. Having alternative representations of girlhood to relate to, as with Spinelli, offers the queer child new possibilities to identify with, and broadens the horizon of children’s self-identification processes. The absence of LGBTIQ+

representations on television leads to feelings of isolation within non-heterosexual audiences, particularly in children, who heavily rely on the media as a means of enculturation.

Additionally, the trope of representing non-cis/heterosexual individuals on television steeped in negative stereotypical portrayals, through tragic storylines or positioning them as villains, leads young audiences to devalue LGBTIQ+ existence prior to understanding their own identities, which often promotes feelings of self-hatred (Smith 2020; Gross 1991; Dennis 2003b). Seeing a butch lesbian child such as Spinelli as the hero of an animated series can give potentially lesbian children the tools to acknowledge and navigate their own non-heterosexuality. Spinelli's character shows a different version of girlhood, which conveys to children how the oppressive powers of the heterosexual mainstream can be destabilized, as she is proof that there is more than one way of "being a girl". Thus, in reading Spinelli as a butch lesbian, new possibilities of identification are opened up for the queer child, who now has a subversive hero to connect to.

Through Spinelli, the overall investment of children's media discourses on normative femininity, particularly of those produced by Disney, can be destabilized, as this character subverts hegemonic notions about the activities girls should like, the way they are supposed to dress, the hobbies they should engage in, and what they should look, talk, and act like.

While, in Western societies, non-heterosexuality is still considered the 'abnormal' counterpart to heterosexuality, *Recess* reveals a different perspective through the Spinelli/The Ashleys, i.e. the butch/straight girl juxtaposition. Here, the 'abnormality' is the heteronormative femininity that the girly-girls embody. The Ashleys are interested in fashion, beauty, and boys, and they are also judgmental, superficial, and mean. Their femininity is inextricably intertwined with the fact that they are bullies. Emily Chandler describes that the Ashleys' "meanness may as well be the same thing as femininity, and vice versa" (2016, 158). Thus, Chandler argues, the favoring of Spinelli over the Ashleys suggests an androcentrism present in Disney's *Recess*, as the masculinity of Spinelli is privileged over the Ashleys' femininity. Chandler describes the animated series as a reflection of sexist notions present in North American popular culture.

Despite the sexism by which the antagonistic positioning of the Ashleys might be informed, as Chandler proposes, I argue that representing the visibly heterosexual characters in a negative light destabilizes dominant regimes of heteronormativity and interrupts the homophobic trend of negative LGBTIQ+ representations in the media. My understanding of the Ashleys as the antagonists of the cartoon series is that, finally, heterosexual characters are not able to exert power over the non-heterosexual one. In standing up to the Ashleys, Spinelli

is standing up to heteronormative majority culture and subverting the heterosexual matrix, claiming her queer power. This queer understanding of the text allows queer child audiences to envision a future in which they can dismantle the oppressive regime of the heteropatriarchy. Thus, Spinelli can be interpreted as a positive representation of lesbian identity, which offers new possibilities for the queer child.

3.5. Forced Heterosexuality on Spinelli

As Jeffery Dennis describes, “the imperative to present heterosexual desire as the only possibility has traditionally made gay characters appear as asexual, not interested in anyone at all” (Dennis 2003b, 3). While, in part, Spinelli’s asexuality is due to her young age and the previously discussed imperative of childhood innocence, I suggest, along with what Dennis posits, that it is a further indicator of lesbian identity. She does not express desire in anyone, nor is she interested in talking about romance, like some of the other children in the series are.

However, there is one instance in which Spinelli has a crush on a boy named Johnny V. This demonstrates the heterosexualization of cartoon characters which came about in the final decades of the twentieth century, when the growing visibility for LGBTIQ+ individuals allowed audiences to speculate queer identities into the cartoon characters they saw on television. Due to this, producers were forced to “defuse the possibility through continuous demonstration of heterosexual desires” (2003b, 5). The episode *That Stinking Feeling* (1999) reflects exactly this, when trying to force a heterosexual crush on the butch lesbian protagonist.

During a game of football in which she is winning, Spinelli realizes that she is unable to tackle Johnny V, having become blinded by his “baby tooth”. Concluding that there must be something wrong with her, she visits the school nurse, whom she asks, desperate: “How come I can’t cream Johnny V?” (Einbinder 1999, 02:02). The nurse tells her that she is perfectly healthy, as these symptoms are a part of her blooming, referring to her development into heteronormativity. The notion of heterosexuality is so far away from Spinelli’s self-perception that she does not understand the nurse’s statement – “Blooming? What does she think I am, a daffodil?” (Einbinder 1999, 02:19-2:22).

Immediately, it becomes clear that having a crush on a boy causes an identity crisis in Spinelli. Back at home, Spinelli is sad and unable to concentrate on the wrestling match playing on television. Upon telling her father what is on her mind, he panics, calling out to Spinelli’s mother. This goes beyond the heteronormative worry of a father over his daughter approaching puberty, and potentially starting to date men, but signifies the worry which Bob feels at the

complete change of identity in his daughter. Spinelli is implicitly viewed and treated as a butch lesbian by the world around her, so her father is shocked at her possible heterosexuality, knowing this would mean that she is suffering and acting out of line for herself. When he sees her stepping out of an intrinsic part of her identity, her lesbianism, and moving toward heteronormative femininity, this causes him a great deal of worry, sharing the concern that there might be something seriously wrong. Spinelli's mother is delighted about her dream of having a heterosexual daughter seemingly coming to fruition, explaining to Spinelli that she has a crush. This news is significantly distressing for the protagonist. Spinelli falls into a depressed state, keeping to herself and not wanting to participate in any games or activities with her friends in the days that follow. Concern grows among the friends: "Spinelli thinking, rather than kicking something?!" (Einbinder 1999, 03:29-03:31), Vince exclaims, confused. Agreeing that Spinelli is unwell, the friends resort to a personality analyzer program on Gretchen's computer, which reveals that Spinelli has an infatuation. Shocked at the ludicrous suggestion of her heterosexuality, Gus asks if it is fatal.

To keep Spinelli safe from gossip, Gus, Vince, Mikey, Gretchen and T.J. agree to keep this information a secret, but it is leaked by Randall, who had once again been spying on the group. "The great Spinelli is a boy-liker!" (Einbinder 1999, 04:39-04:41), he yells during the lunch break. The whole cafeteria bursts into laughter, transmitting to the viewer just how out of place the idea of a heterosexual Spinelli is. After running away, ashamed, she has a conversation with her friends wherein they express their acceptance of her newfound crush, and the fact that she is heterosexual. Even if she is a "boy-liker", they assure Spinelli that nothing between them will change. This resembles the inverse of a coming-out conversation that some LGBTIQ+ individuals experience in their private lives. Mikey tries to comfort her, saying that it is sweet that she has a crush, to which she replies that "Sweet is me clobberin' that clown with one of my monster moves. But this?! This stinks! My whole life is messed up royally now!" (Einbinder 1999, 05:06-05:12). Clearly, Spinelli is frustrated about being assigned a heterosexuality which does not fit her identity. And her life, is, in fact, turned upside down, as her friends, particularly the boys of the group, start treating her differently.

Through the ascription of heterosexuality onto Spinelli, the forces of the heterosexual matrix become potentiated in the friend group. Mikey covers a puddle with his shirt to avoid Spinelli from stepping on mud (Figure 6), Vince and T.J. step down from the playground ladder to let her go first, and Gus presses down the button on the water fountain for Spinelli to drink, all of them acting chivalrous now that Spinelli is a normative girl.

Later, when the group is delegating roles to pull a prank on the school principal, they tell Spinelli to spare her energy rather than participate. She loses control over her own life, as her friends are now treating her like she is someone different. Clearly, being heterosexual, means



Figure 6: Mikey being chivalrous toward Spinelli in “That Stinking Feeling”

not being Spinelli. The lesbian identity is so inherent to this character, that once it is stripped away from her, Spinelli becomes unable to live out her personality and interact with society as usual. She is loudly mocked on the playground for liking boys, and, following this, sits alone and pensive, until the Ashleys invite her to follow them into the clubhouse, where they proudly present to her a wall full of framed pictures of boys, saying that they, too, are “boy-likers”. Ashley A. starts naming off the boys in the pictures, suggesting a potential contender for Spinelli.

Disgusted at the sight of this wall and Ashley A.’s suggestion, Spinelli exclaims that she does not want to participate in the activity of having a crush. “Some boy-liker she turned out to be”, Ashley B. says to Ashley A. (Einbinder 1999, 07:01-07:03). This indicates not only that Spinelli’s peers do not view her as a heterosexual, but shows that Spinelli’s lesbian core is unchangeable. Despite the storyline of the episode mandating that Spinelli become a “boy-liker”, she fails at this, as her lesbian identity persists. Upon escaping from the clubhouse, cursing the Ashleys and their wall of boys, Spinelli runs into Johnny V, screams in his face, and runs away (Figure 7). The sight of Johnny V, who symbolizes her forced heterosexualization, is something which instills fear in lesbian Spinelli.

In one of the final scenes of the episode, Spinelli sits at a table outside, plucking off the petals of a flower: “I hate him... I hate him more... I hate him... I hate him more” (07:19-07:24). While compliant readers might understand this to be a representation of teasing as a sign of (heterosexual) affection, my queer reading of the text understands this moment as one

in which she is angered and frustrated at the mere thought of Johnny V, because having a heterosexual crush feels wrong to her. It is a characteristic of her enemies, the feminine Ashleys, and Spinelli is angered at *Recess*' suggestion that she, too, should engage in heteronormativity.



Figure 7: Spinelli scared at the sight of Johnny V

The identity crisis comes to an end when Miss Finster, who is usually depicted in a negative light, sits down next to Spinelli to give her advice. She explains to Spinelli that “women of power, like us, we’re not allowed to have emotions” (Einbinder 1999, 07:40-07:42), but that, as hard as it may be, it is worth it to suffer for love, because “It’s better to feel something than nothing at all” (Einbinder 1999, 08:18-08:21). I argue that the suffering which Finster connects to the experience of falling in love takes on a different shape for Spinelli, as she is not suffering due to wishing that her feelings for Johnny V be requited, but rather suffers from being forced into heterosexuality. Finster reveals to Spinelli that the other children will feel similarly one day. Spinelli is somewhat skeptical of this final statement, asking, with furrowed eyebrows, “Are you sure about that?” (Einbinder 1999, 08:31), knowing that the feelings she is experiencing differ from the feelings of her peers, as her emotions go against the heterosexual mainstream. The other children do not, indeed, understand what Spinelli is going through, as she is not sad over experiencing feelings of romance, but is mourning the loss of her butch identity from being ascribed a heterosexuality which does not fit her. She is not simply suffering for love, but she is suffering from an identity crisis, as her butch core is stripped away from her.

The little significance of Johnny V's character in the episode indicates that the source of her anguish is not her crush, but her forced heterosexualization. While Johnny V is the supposed object of Spinelli's heterosexual affection, he plays only a minor role, appearing only in instances that lead to Spinelli's embarrassment, shame and fear. All that is known about the character is transmitted by visual codes, and what other characters say about him: that he is sensitive, has a baby-face, a buck tooth, and a lisp. *That Stinking Feeling* (1999) is the first and only time in which Johnny V appears in the cartoon series, pointing to the fact that his creation had the sole purpose of stating, or attempting to state, Spinelli's heterosexuality. Furthermore, Johnny V does not correspond to the beauty ideals of hegemonic masculinity – his lisp, large front tooth and baby-face serve to demasculinize him (Figure 8). Thus, even when Spinelli 'does' heterosexuality, she does it in a queer way.



Figure 8: Johnny V in "That Stinking Feeling"

From a queer perspective, the conversation between Spinelli and Miss Finster marks a moment in which lesbian Spinelli takes advice from a lesbian mentor, and is thus absolved from the threat of heterosexuality. Finster, a deep-voiced, angry woman, is constructed along lesbian cultural signifiers. She lives alone, spending her free time lifting weights and taking in stray cats. Her "physicality draws on stereotypes of the lesbian body – rotund, unfeminine, ugly" (Giffney 2009, 364). She represents the "archetype of cultural assumptions of what it means to be 'lesbian', 'old', 'ugly', 'unwomanly'" (Giffney 2009, 365), as seen in Figure 9. A cat-loving loner, Finster demonstrates the ways in which "the representation of the lesbian often goes hand in hand with the representation of the spinster" (Johnson 2010, 255). Therefore, Miss Finster can be read as a 'gay spirit guide', a term colloquially used within the LGBTIQ+ community to refer to older, more experienced queer individuals who mentor younger members of the community.



Figure 9: Miss Finster in “That Stinking Feeling”

Spinelli’s fear of being forced into heterosexuality is only resolved, then, when talking to an older, more experienced lesbian. Finster’s encoded lesbian identity calms Spinelli down, and reassures Spinelli that she does not have to take this heterosexualization seriously. When Miss Finster tells Spinelli to “get back out there and play” (Einbinder 1999, 8:34), the threat of identity loss through the forceful ascription of heterosexuality seems to come to an end. This is the teacher’s way of telling Spinelli that if she trusts herself, she can go back to living out her butch identity.

Immediately after this conversation, Spinelli jumps in to join her friends at another game, telling them that her “‘condition’ has nothing to do with playing football” (Einbinder 1999, 09:09). Johnny V, on the opposing team, is scared she might try to kiss him, to which Lawson, a boy known for being a bully, says “Relax, baby-tooth! She can’t touch you now, she’s in love, remember?” (Einbinder 1999, 09:15-09:19). Following this, Johnny V plays on, only to be tackled at full force by Spinelli, who wins the game for her team. Contradictorily to Lawson’s statement, Spinelli proves that she is not, in fact, in love. The regaining of her aggressive nature signifies Spinelli’s reclaiming of her butch identity, and resistance against the dominant powers of the heterosexual matrix.

Spinelli is an evident representation of the butch figure. Shaped by visual codes, physical attributes, and personality traits that visibly convey lesbian identity, she can be detected as a subversive character to even those compliantly reading the text. For this reason, I argue that *Recess* might have felt forced to address the question of Spinelli’s sexuality, and depict heterosexual desire, or the promise of heterosexuality, explicitly in the character, so as to avoid audiences from making queer interpretations. Heterosexualizing Spinelli was essential to ensure the preservation of the series’ success and popularity. While *Recess* provides a

subversive representation of girlhood through Spinelli, *That Stinking Feeling* (1999), illustrates the shows need to promote the hegemonic child figure which is innocent, asexual, and holds the promise of intelligibly developing into the heterosexual matrix, to ensure its commercial success. Spinelli resists this forced ascription of heterosexuality, though, proving just how constant and fundamental her lesbian identity is.

Considered in light of the project of queering childhood, Spinelli's rejection of a heterosexual crush offers child audiences the possibility to consider a world in which they do not have to submit themselves to compulsory heterosexuality. Spinelli's butch lesbian nature is depicted as constant and unwavering. Even when threatened by normative femininity and heterosexuality, she quickly finds her way back to herself, showing that the lesbian essence of her being is immutable. In this way, Spinelli's identity as a butch lesbian is rigid.

Being confronted with a stable representation of non-heterosexual identity holds possibilities for the queer child viewer, who wants to fit in and thus seeks a coherent concept of identity to relate to. Spinelli's character shows an alternative way of 'doing' girlhood, one which is cool, relatable, witty, adventurous and does not have to like boys. Reading Spinelli as a butch lesbian, then, can make the thought of subverting the heterosexual matrix become less intimidating for queer child audiences, who would be better able to consider a queer life in which they aren't victims of homophobic oppression or repressed by heterosexuality. Thus, bringing the counter-hegemonic encodings of Disney's *Recess*, and the cultural signifiers of butch lesbianism within Spinelli, to the forefront, brings together the realms of childhood and queerness, helping the queer child viewer envision a future in which not being heterosexual is not a source of fear or self-hatred, but leads to a stable and fulfilling life. In this way, reading Spinelli as a butch lesbian can have liberatory effects on the queer child viewer.

3.6. Queer Potentials or Lesbian Limitations?

Judith Butler's (1990) statement that gender is performative paved the way for queer theory. Arguing that the repetition of gendered acts over time are what lead a subject to a sexed and gendered identity, the scholar exposes that identity categories are not natural, but, instead, compulsory repetitions of acts which produce the illusion of naturality. Recognizing the performativity of sexed and gendered identity makes the instability of seemingly rigid identity categories visible. This instability opens up the possibility of interrupting the oppressive powers of the hegemonic sex and gender regime, and allows us to conclude that there is no intrinsic or original dimension to identity. While Butler's theories shifted ways of theorizing

and discussing gender, sexuality, bodies, and desires, they remain largely invisible within the Western cultural mainstream. By and large, media representations and cultural texts convey the essentialist idea that there is an intrinsic identity, a sexed and gendered core to every individual. This is exemplified in Spinelli's stable and unchangeable butch lesbian identity.

Simultaneously, *Recess* proves to be more gender-critical than common in a children's cartoon series of the late 1990s. While *Recess*' characters largely conform to intelligibility and the stipulations of the heterosexual matrix, Spinelli rejects categorical notions of heteronormative femininity. Her body language, appearance, ways of speaking, holding herself and the interactions with her peers, represent a rejection of the oppressive powers of the heteronormative mainstream. She transgresses gender norms, adopting characteristics common to the butch lesbian archetype. Visually, this character cannot be made intelligible at first glance. Thus, she subverts the Butlerian heterosexual matrix, challenging concepts of identity and interrupting hegemonic notions of proper, feminine and innocent girlhood.

Spinelli's aversion to compulsory heterosexuality and normative femininity, read against Butler's theories, seems to reflect a notion of identity as performative. Conflicts between the protagonist and the Ashleys come in the form of a forceful ascription of heteronormative femininity onto Spinelli. In both of the "girl transformations" described, *Recess* transmits the idea that if Spinelli acts like a girl, she will "become" a girl. In other words, if Spinelli acts out normative femininity through the repetition of gendered utterances, she will successfully become identifiable as an intelligible girl. Despite failing at normative femininity in each of the instances described, for a moment in *First Name Ashley* (1997) and *The Beauty Contest* (1999), both Spinelli and the Ashleys seem to support the notion that intelligible feminine identity can be correctly performed through the repetition of gendered acts over time, in line with Butler's theory of gender performativity.

When, in *First Name Ashley* (1997), Spinelli repeatedly wears a more feminine wardrobe and engages in feminine activities, she transforms into "Ashley S.". Her new identity leads to her being ridiculed by the recess society, and her friends become worried about her. When Spinelli repeats normatively feminine acts, she embodies a new identity, ceasing to be herself. From this, it can be concluded that *Recess* transmits the idea that feminine identity is something which can be performed. The notion that femininity is performed through repeating feminine acts breaks with the normative regimes of the heterosexual matrix, and, more broadly, regimes of sexed and gendered identity. Normative femininity not depicted as an intrinsic quality of oneself, but something which can be repeated, making visible the ways in which it can be interrupted or broken up.

In *The Beauty Contest* (1999), Spinelli believes that learning new ways of talking, walking and dressing will make her a girl, a role she has to perform in order to win the beauty pageant. Her performance is so well executed that Ashley A. becomes impressed by Spinelli's new identity, making her like "one of them". Thus, the Ashleys and Spinelli treat intelligible femininity as something which is performed through certain acts. When pushed into heterosexuality in *That Stinking Feeling* (1999), Spinelli's peers play into Butler's concept of gender performativity, as well, as they change their attitude towards her. When seen repeating acts associated with having a crush on a boy, Spinelli is understood to be performing a heterosexual identity, and treated as such by the world around her. Her friends take up a chivalrous stance towards her, treating her differently than when she performed the identity of a butch lesbian. Through these "girl makeovers" and the attempted heterosexualization of Spinelli, then, Disney's *Recess* reflects Butler's concept of gender performativity, in depicting that Spinelli, by repeating certain gendered acts in time, can become a real, heterosexual girl.

The characteristics associated to girlhood in *Recess* – watching unicorn movies, talking about boys, and painting nails, to name only a few – can be understood as a mockery or critique of normative femininity concepts, since they are connected to the superficiality and meanness embodied by the Ashleys, the series' antagonists. In making the Ashleys' femininity synonymous with their position as bullies, one can argue that *Recess* contains dimensions of sexism and androcentrism – the male experience is privileged over feminine experiences. Thus, it can be said that Spinelli constitutes the protagonist of the show only due to her closeness to masculinity, which is elemental to her butch lesbian identity. However, queering the Spinelli/The Ashleys juxtaposition makes a butch/straight girl dichotomy visible, in which the butch is able to overcome heteropatriarchal oppression. From a queer perspective, I understand this as a rejection of heterosexual hegemony and a subversion of the heterosexual matrix. Spinelli as the protagonist, then, brings up liberatory possibilities for queer child audiences, in representing a positive butch lesbian identity. Spinelli as a lesbian hero can enable child viewers to envision a future of queer opportunities.

The performative dimension represented in connection to normative femininity, further allows viewers to conceptualize how dominant gender regimes can be interrupted and rejected, as Spinelli provides viewers with an example of the subversion of dominant gender regimes. The representation of (hetero)normative femininity in *Recess*, as well as the representation of gender as performative, can provide a safe space for queer child audiences feeling restricted by the limiting conceptions of identity available and acceptable in the societal mainstream. Therefore, while *Recess* largely reflects the hegemonic cultural stereotypes present in

American culture of the 1990s, a queer reading of the series shows that it also reflects developments in the ways of thinking about identity, offering, to the resistant and subversive reader, a gender-critical perspective on the stability of identity.

Contrary to the normative femininity represented in the Ashleys, Spinelli's identity is represented as an immutable dimension of the character, as her butch core prevails over any conflict. Attempts at performing a heterosexual feminine identity are a source of suffering for Spinelli, and despite the efforts, her transformations into a girly-girl are short-lived. From this, it is possible to conclude that her butchness is at the foundation of her being, preventing her from successfully performing another identity. In all instances described, Spinelli quickly reverts back to her butch identity, so fundamental to her that it represents the source of her agency, happiness, and freedom of self-expression. Therefore, it can be said that the animated cartoon series represents Spinelli's lesbian identity as an intrinsic, constant and essential dimension. This representation of a character whose homosexual identity is stable and unchangeable comes with liberatory aspects for young audiences, as discussed above – the queer child viewer can recognize lesbian dimensions within themselves, relate to and learn from a coherent identity, and thus associate less uncertainty with not complying to the heterosexual matrix, as well as overcome internalized feelings of homophobia. Thus, the lesbian visibility which queering Spinelli provides, means that the possibly queer child viewer can connect with a character who seems to have a similarly complex and subversive inner life.

However, analyzing Spinelli's butch lesbian core against the background of the lesbian identity politics discussed in the first chapter, one can argue that the rigid representation of her identity potentially conveys limiting and repressive notions to *Recess*' childhood audience. The construction of Spinelli's character largely promotes the notion of identity as something strict, unchangeable and immutable. This invokes the essentialist notions of lesbian identity politics, criticized by conceptions of queerness of being homonormative and restrictive. Through a queer reading, it can be argued that the butch/straight girl dichotomy created through Spinelli's rivalry with the Ashleys reinscribes the oppressive notion that society is made up of individuals who are either heterosexual or homosexual. As this thesis has made clear, this concept was heavily at the center of queer critiques for being exclusionary and repressive. Thus, while a queer reading of *Recess* can make lesbian identity visible, it also risks reinscribing problematic and exclusionary cultural assumptions. While the juxtaposition between the Ashleys and Spinelli can be seen as *Recess* privileging lesbianism over normative femininity, it can also be interpreted as a limiting representation of lesbian identity – the butch archetype is depicted as the only form of “doing” female non-heterosexuality, which leads to the erasure of the diverse

forms and expressions that lesbian identity can take on. Furthermore, it erases the importance of the interwovenness of identity categories, representing the butch lesbian identity as the foundational part of Spinelli's person. In Spinelli, *Recess* depicts one form of lesbianism as essential, failing to leave the possibility open for other queer realities, existing across intersecting identity lines. Therefore, I argue that for the queer child viewer, the essentialism connected to Spinelli's lesbian identity can negatively impact processes of self-identification, as identity is represented as an unchangeable and fixed category. The butch/straight girl dichotomy represented in the animated series informs the queer child viewer that if they do not identify with the heteronormative Ashleys, they must identify with Spinelli. This (re)produces the internalized feelings of shame and hatred that come as an effect of the underrepresentation of LGBTIQ+ identities in the media. Additionally, I argue that Spinelli's rigid lesbianism conveys a "conservative" image of non-heterosexuality, one rooted in homonormative ideals, that queer theorists and activists have sought to overcome. Consequently, it can be concluded that decoding Spinelli as a butch lesbian representation takes on a "gay-affirming" form, as Kenneth Kidd (2011) put it, which furthers the cultural trend of negativity and denial toward the existence of queer youth along multiple intersecting identity categories. The possibility of queerness is erased through a representation of rigid homosexuality.

With the cartoon landscape fundamentally built along the regimes of the heterosexual matrix, I propose that Spinelli corresponds to what Jeffery Dennis (2003) describes in stating that "the only way to even conceive of gay people was to so thoroughly align their gendered behaviors with those of the opposite sex that their desire, too, became arguably heterosexual" (Dennis 2003b, 2). Thus, Spinelli's representation as a masculine lesbian can lead to the erasure of her homosexuality, by positioning her within the norms of the gender binary system. Considering Spinelli's distinctly non-feminine behavior with the butch/femme dynamic in mind, it is apparent that she perfectly embodies the stereotype of the masculine lesbian.

The butch/femme dyad was widely described as homonormative, accused of reinscribing the heterosexual ideals. It was argued that the butch/femme dynamic had the effect of reproducing the "man" through the butch and the "woman" through the femme lesbian, assimilating to compulsory heterosexuality. Categorizing all lesbian women into either butches or femmes restricts lesbian individual's possibilities of self-expression, and ostracizes women who do not, or do not want to, fit into either of the categories. Reading Spinelli as a butch figure, then, erases other lesbian typologies and existences.

Taking into account the mainstream positioning of the animated series within the landscape of children's media of the late 1990s, it can be said that *Recess*, in order to preserve

its central position, could not explicitly represent homosexuality. In accordance with Dennis' statement, then, the only way of allowing butch lesbian Spinelli to exist within the show, was to make her lesbianism masculine to the point that it resembles heterosexuality. Johnny V perfectly reflects this – even when Spinelli has a heterosexual crush, the object of her affection is an effeminate man, making it a queerly heterosexual pairing. Disney's *Recess* positions butch Spinelli within the male pool of characters, as can be derived from the activities she engages in, her ways of dressing, and the fact that most of her friends are boys, and her enemies are girls. The only way for Spinelli to engage in feminine acts without losing her identity, is to act these out in a transgressive way, ridding an act such as dancing from its feminine dimensions by turning it into an aggressive and ungraceful performance, as seen in *Dance Lessons* (1999). This masculinity elemental to Spinelli's lesbianism furthers the erasure of queer experiences from the media as her butchness is easily reduced to "boyishness" and the innocent tomboy figure. In this way, Disney's *Recess* is able to conceive of a lesbian character only by aligning her gendered behavior with commonly masculine attributes so much that her lesbian identity becomes masked. Therefore, queer reading Spinelli poses some limitations, as she constitutes a butch lesbian masculinity which can lead to the erasure of her transgressive nature.

While the representation of her identity as an intrinsic core provides the queer child viewer with a stable identity concept to connect with, thus providing the tools for children to envision futures of queer joy, the rigidity of her character simultaneously conveys to child audiences an essentialist notion of identity, restricting viewer's processes of identity formation by erasing dimensions of intersectionality. Underscoring her encoded lesbianism can maintain the invisibility of queer experiences along lines of race, class, ability status, ethnicity, religion, and so on. Furthermore, while a queer reading of *Recess* can expose Spinelli as a lesbian character, thus finding lesbian representation in a text which presents itself as normative, the stereotypes along which Spinelli is constructed are brought to the forefront and, in turn, reproduced.

Therefore, as my arguments have shown, queering children's cartoon formats such as Spinelli's representation in *Recess* risks upholding problematic stereotypes associated with LGBTIQ+ individuals, as well as maintaining the tendency to hide non-cisgender and non-heterosexual representations behind encoded indicators, jokes and metaphors. Thus, while queer reading Spinelli holds liberatory possibilities for LGBTIQ+ youth, as it deconstructs the heterosexual matrix by imagining a world inclusive of lesbian sexuality and butch identity, the cultural trend of negativity toward the existence of the queer child is continued, as *Recess* strictly mandates what the queer child should act and look like.

Conclusion

This research aimed to analyze the politics of Spinelli, the protagonist of Disney's animated cartoon series *Recess*, with the purpose of bringing to light the opportunities and obstacles of queering cartoons. Over the course of this thesis, the central role which children's texts, particularly children's mainstream media formats, play in (re)producing and upholding hegemonic sexed and gendered norms, was highlighted. Furthermore, in discussing the relevance of queer reading cartoons, it became clear that the lack of visibility of LGBTIQ+ identities in mainstream media aimed at, or about, children, is elemental in creating and maintaining feelings of self-hatred amongst queer youth, as well as upholding the homophobic societal status quo. To combat this, the method of queer reading the commercially successful U.S. cartoon series *Recess*, was identified as the appropriate approach. In this way, this thesis demonstrated that the gender ideologies which are embedded in majority culture can be actively deconstructed by means of queering cartoons.

As can be concluded from this thesis, the mainstream animated cartoon format is largely used to indoctrinate children into the guidelines of heteronormativity. In queering *Recess*, this process of indoctrination can be interrupted. By identifying the lesbian encodings located in Spinelli, this thesis contributes to efforts of dismantling the dominant cis/heteronormative ideals which shape children's cultural texts. Providing an alternative reading to this mainstream text, the research presented brought the lesbian signifiers by which Spinelli is shaped to the forefront. From the analysis conducted in this thesis, it is possible to conclude that reinterpreting this animated cartoon character to highlight her queer potential makes it possible to resist dominant Western notions of innocent and heterosexual childhood. Reflecting upon the counter-hegemonic subtext which marks Spinelli's character against the background of queer and lesbian theory, the results indicate that Spinelli can be seen as a representation of butch lesbian identity. The analysis of this character proves that she embodies the personal codes guiding masculine appearance and behavior which are elemental to the butch lesbian figure, and is shaped by a deeply felt expression of individual non-heterosexual identity. This thesis proved the ways in which queering Spinelli brings about liberatory possibilities as well as restrictive limitations, which potentially affect the child viewer's processes of enculturation, self-reflection, and identity formation. In critically reflecting on the obstacles which queer reading *Recess* presents, this thesis questioned how 'queer' a queer reading of Spinelli actually is, and proved that many queer reading practices can continue the oppressive stereotypes associated with LGBTIQ+ realities.

Firstly, the theoretical context in which this thesis is rooted was delineated. An overview over the key historical developments which led to the academic institutionalization of gay and lesbian studies, and the emergence of queer theory, was provided, elucidating the reader on the differences between the terms ‘gay’, ‘lesbian’ and ‘queer’. Here, the rooting of the terms ‘gay’ and ‘lesbian’ within essentialist notions of identity politics was described. In this context, the reader was given insight into the lesbian feminist movement, which fought for the recognition of ‘lesbian’ as an independent category. Furthermore, lesbian typologies were identified, such as the figure of the butch lesbian, who is seen as masculine. The ways in which the figure of the butch lesbian is shaped by the subversion of feminine beauty and fashion codes, a masculine personality, and a working-class background, aspects which deem her as unpleasant in the eyes of mainstream culture, were described. Delineating the archetype of the butch lesbian served as a foundation for understanding how Spinelli can be queered.

Following this, the exclusionary effects of the heterosexual/homosexual dichotomy which permeated the Western mainstream were described, heavily criticized by arguments claiming that this binary division does not consider individuals in between or outside of those categories, nor does it consider the multiple and intersecting lines of identity that shape a person’s societal experience. Thus, lesbian identity politics played a part in reproducing repressive and essentialist notions on identity. From describing the clear need for a conceptualization around sexed and gendered norms which went beyond essentialist notions, the research above described how the term ‘queer’, once a homophobic slur, entered academia as an analytical framework which makes the instability, performativity, and unnaturality of identity visible.

The central tenets of queer theory were explained, describing how the gender identities and sexual acts that dominant regimes tend to divide into normative or deviant categories can be theorized on in queer theory, examining the socially constructed nature of gendered and sexed identities and behaviors. This was further elaborated upon in describing the work of scholar Judith Butler, considered a pioneer of queer theory. Butler developed the concepts of the performativity of gender and the heterosexual matrix, an important theoretical background against which to queer Spinelli. Defining terms and concepts coined and commonly employed by Butler, this thesis laid the foundation for the reader to consider the ways in which a queering of Spinelli can be conducted. Understanding that the heterosexual matrix stipulates the existence of two binary and hierarchically structured genders, as well as the intelligible, that is, coherent, performance of a cisgender heterosexual identity, is crucial to consider the ways in which Spinelli transgresses the societal status quo.

Along with discussing the different usages and histories of emergence of the terms ‘gay’, ‘lesbian’, and ‘queer’, this thesis also tackled a prevalent question in the field of queer theory, which interrogates if an inclusive and broad term such as ‘queer’ renders more rigid identity terms like ‘gay’ and ‘lesbian’ invalid. Here, it became clear that ‘queer’ emerged from understandings of ‘gay’ and ‘lesbian’. As such, while queerness as a conceptional basis allows for a better way to understand how power operates in Western society, serving as a tool for dismantling the norms of intelligibility, the identity terms are still at its basis. Therefore, while ‘queer’ provides a lens to go beyond strict categorizations, this thesis proposed that these strict terms, ‘gay’ and ‘lesbian’, are valid, with many individuals choosing to identify with such terms.

In the second chapter, an overview over the existing scholarship on the academic method of queer reading was provided. Arguing that texts are shaped by specific cultural, social, and political contexts, thus carrying with them assumptions and values which are often oppressive, the second chapter reviewed different applications of queering as methodical approach for resisting the powers of dominance which shape cultural texts. It became clear to the reader that queer reading is a method which permits us to imagine worlds which are free from the regimes of the heterosexual matrix. In outlining the specific projects of queering childhood and queering cartoons, the foundation for considering the ways in which interpreting Spinelli as a butch lesbian character contributes to the mission of resisting the oppressive heteronormative status quo was laid.

The research above proved that queer reading Spinelli in Disney’s *Recess* can envision a world in which non-heterosexuality is not reserved for the realm of adulthood, but, instead, promoted as a part of children’s realities. Therefore, in exposing the politics of *Recess*, the erasure of queer childhood narratives from mainstream media was interrupted, and the queer potentiality of cartoons was underlined. Additionally, it was argued that within U.S. society, children are simultaneously conceptualized to be innocent, without sexual desire and treated as heterosexual, as they hold the promise of developing into adult heteronormativity and furthering the development of society within the heterosexual matrix. Arguing for queer childhood realities, as this thesis does, can dismantle the oppressive figure of the innocent child. Therefore, this research has shown that uniting the realms of childhood and queerness by providing an alternative reading to a mainstream text can allow for a better understanding of the cultural atmosphere surrounding queer youth. My analysis discussed the ways in which queering Spinelli can have a positive impact on the audience’s processes of coming out, as they are given the freedom to consider their own identities outside of compulsory heterosexuality.

Additionally, this thesis underlined the important role played by the mass media in the process of coming out. Thus, since media representations of LGBTIQ+ individuals are limited, the method of queer reading is used to dismantle the regimes of normalcy which shape cultural texts, a particularly important task considered in light of the cultural authority held by the Disney company, widely known for the significant role it plays in the heteronormative indoctrination of children. For this reason, queering an animated cartoon format which was produced by Disney makes it possible to discuss the queer encodings that permeate all of society, as well as to demonstrate how an alternative reading of a mainstream text can destabilize heteropatriarchal regimes, offering non-cis/heteronormative representation. The realm of queerness is kept strictly separate from the realm of childhood, perpetuating the marginalization of LGBTIQ+ individuals. Queering a children's animated cartoon, such as *Recess*, and reinterpreting one of its protagonists as a positive representation of lesbian identity, can unite the realms of childhood and queerness. As proven by this thesis, this opens up new ways of thinking about gender, identity, and society, alleviating non-heterosexual children from feelings of internalized homophobia, shame and self-hatred. Therefore, this thesis has clearly shown the need for more research which aims at uniting the realms of childhood and queerness through *queering* children's texts.

The limitations of queer reading as an academic method were also considered, as it became clear that queer readings can lead to the confirmation and upholding of negative societal stereotypes by underscoring essentialist dimensions of homosexuality when "filling in the gaps" of a given text. It was proven how, in exposing counter-hegemonic encodings of mainstream texts, some queerings offer restrictive representations of identity, consequently upholding the homosexual/heterosexual dualism that queer theory seeks to overcome. Thus, it became possible to conclude that while queer reading is a method which aims to rework, reframe, or reinterpret texts to find queer meaning, as a way of highlighting the multiple meanings a text can have, this framework can also reproduce problematic notions of identity. Considering the implications of interpreting homoerotic subtext, this research has shown that while queering is a resistant method, it can also reproduce problematic societal trends, by leaving the cultural stereotypes which are identified unquestioned.

This thesis has proven that queering a mainstream children's cultural text, particularly one which claims to depict the "real" experience of childhood, can offer the audience ways of understanding existence outside of the heterosexual matrix. This is critical for combatting the fear which still shapes many coming-of-age coming out processes. The analysis of Spinelli in Disney's *Recess* discussed against the background of lesbian identity politics results in the

conclusion that she clearly represents a butch lesbian figure. *Recess* makes use of cultural stereotypes in the construction of its characters, and the stereotypes by which Spinelli is informed allow for a queer reading in which this tomboy is reinterpreted as a butch figure. While her homosexuality is never explicitly mentioned, it is possible to locate aspects which indicate her butch identity, namely her adoption of butch lesbian fashion codes, her masculine personality traits, and her working-class socioeconomic background. The analysis above clarified that her appearance, stances, expressions, opinions, and interactions with her peers are all shaped along stereotypes connected to the butch lesbian figure. Episodes which center around this character often deal with her identity struggles, taking on the form of the threat of normative femininity, and her forceful heterosexualization. Furthermore, it was discussed that Spinelli's non-normativity becomes most visible when she is juxtaposed to her archnemeses, the hyperfeminine Ashleys. As can be concluded from the instances described in the analysis, the juxtaposition between Spinelli and the Ashleys can be understood as a butch/straight girl dichotomy. The threat that normative femininity signifies for Spinelli proves just how intrinsic Spinelli's butch lesbian identity is, pointing to the series' representation of rigid and essentialist notions of identity.

Additionally, one can conclude from the analysis that the cultural trend of erasing queer allusions from cartoons, which marked the last decades of the twentieth century, can be located in *Recess*. As visibility of LGBTIQ+ identity grew in U.S. society, producers forcibly stated the heterosexuality of characters which had been at the center of speculations by their audiences. Since Spinelli embodies the leather-jacket-and-jackboot-wearing butch lesbian so visibly, it was argued that *Recess* felt the need to explicitly mention her heterosexuality, in order to maintain the guise of innocence which afforded the show its mainstream positioning.

Analyzing from a queer perspective, the ways in which the forceful heterosexualization of Spinelli in *That Stinking Feeling* (1999) has the opposite of its intended effect, further reinscribing Spinelli's lesbian identity, were argued. She thoroughly suffers when ascribed a heterosexual crush and, in the end, is able to resist against it when reminded to be herself by a lesbian mentor. Generally, the conservation of her butch identity leads to a happy end in most of Spinelli's crises – whether confronted with the straight Ashleys, or pushed into a heterosexual crush, Spinelli's unwavering lesbian masculinity helps her overcome her troubles. In this way, this queering of *Recess* proved that reading Spinelli as a butch lesbian can facilitate viewers of the series to challenge the assumptions of heterosexuality which are at the foundation of children's media, as well as assumptions of normative girlhood.

Given Spinelli's position as one of *Recess*'s protagonists, it was made clear that exposing her butch lesbian identity makes it possible to identify a positive representation of non-heterosexuality in *Recess*. This character's rejection of heteronormativity is what makes her unique, and audiences are invited to praise her transgressions on the heterosexual matrix. Thus, queering the show's hero undercuts the trend of tragedy and negativity associated with non-heterosexual representations on television. Furthermore, it enables the queer child viewer to connect with Spinelli, having the tools to recognize a similar identity within themselves. As Spinelli offers an alternative way of "being a girl", this can liberate potentially queer audiences feeling oppressed by the heterosexual matrix. This thesis has shown that giving child audiences a coherent identity concept to identify with can alleviate them of feelings of isolation, allowing them to envision a fulfilling non-heterosexual future. Thus, the findings show that an alternative reading of Spinelli within *Recess*, from a critically queer lens, can bring about liberatory opportunities for kids, uniting the realms of childhood and queerness. Thus, queering *Recess* can destabilize the dominant status quo of heteropatriarchal inculcation of children by the media.

Considered regarding its positioning within the 1990s U.S. mainstream children's television landscape, this thesis underlined the particular relevance of analyzing Spinelli's struggles with heteronormativity, and connected these "girl-transformations" of Spinelli to the notion of gender performativity as theorized by Butler (1990). In her confrontations with the Ashleys, it became clear that the series transmits the idea that if Spinelli repeatedly acts and dresses like a girl, she can become intelligible in the eyes of the heterosexual matrix. When Spinelli expresses a normatively feminine identity, she is treated differently – being ascribed a new name in *First Name Ashley* (1997), praised by Ashley A. and becoming unrecognizable to her friends in *The Beauty Contest* (1999), and being treated chivalrously by her friends in *That Stinking Feeling* (1999). Connecting this with the queer theory detailed in the first chapter, I concluded that repeating certain gendered utterances, then, seems to be what *Recess* sees as making up identity. Therefore, expressions of the gender critical concepts of Judith Butler were read into these moments in the series.

Following this, my analysis argued that if gender identity in *Recess* is performative, this seems to only be true for the superficial heteronormative feminine identity epitomized by the Ashleys. Spinelli's butch core is unwavering. While representing a lesbian tomboy as an alternative performance of girlhood can aid in broadening the horizons of children's self-identification processes, thereby undercutting the regimes of compulsory heterosexuality, it became clear that the rigidity by which Spinelli's intrinsic core is shaped reveals essentialist

views on identity. From this, the reader was able to conclude that his character conveys the idea that sexed and gendered identity is intrinsic and foundational to her being. Thus, while the research illustrates the liberatory dimensions of queer reading Spinelli, it also raises the question of possible obstacles which queer readings can bring about.

It was proven that Spinelli's rigid identity goes along with limiting concepts of lesbian identity politics, which risk erasing queer positions formed around intersecting lines of identity. Thus, this thesis proved that, due to the elemental role played by societal stereotypes in the construction of this animated cartoon, queer reading *Recess* takes on the shape of confirming the homosexual encodings of the text. Connecting this with the notions of queer theory and lesbian identity politics laid out in the first chapter of this thesis, it was argued that queer reading *Recess* by focusing on Spinelli's butch signifiers restricts the possibility for queerness. Therefore, it became clear that Spinelli, as a butch lesbian, conveys an outdated representation of non-heterosexuality, which concepts of intersectional queerness have sought to move beyond. In short, while queering Spinelli reveals a positive representation of a lesbian child, it also brings about the question of possible problematic limitations of such queer readings. In conducting a queer reading of a mainstream children's text, then, this thesis not only points out the queerness that is present in mainstream children's texts of the 1990s, but also offers relevant considerations on the implications of the method of queer reading as a framework to leverage majority culture and combat the heteronormativity of children's cartoons. Thus, this thesis serves as a reminder that when producing alternative queer readings and reinterpretations of cultural material, the underlying danger of (re)producing negative tropes associated with non-cis/heteronormativity must be actively considered. In conclusion, queering Spinelli in *Recess* raises the question of how queer readings can be employed in a way that does not reproduce negative tropes and limit realities of queer freedom.

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Abstract

The upholding of the hegemonic sex-gender regime requires that children be socialized and maintained within a heteronormative set of images and cultural representations. Animated cartoons hold influential power on their child viewer's processes of socialization and self-identification. For this reason, it is critical to analyze the ways in which the oppressive powers of the heteropatriarchy operate in children's text, as a way to interrupt the media's heterosexual indoctrination of children. Despite growing visibility of LGBTIQ+ identities on the screen, such representations are largely reserved for adult audiences, (re)producing the assumption that queerness is too inappropriate to present to children. This maintains the marginalization of non-cis/heterosexual identities as deviant, upholding heterosexual dominance. By applying the method of queer reading to Spinelli, the protagonist of Disney's commercially successful animated cartoon series *Recess*, this thesis can be seen as a contribution to queer theory's central goal of *queering* the cultural canon, accompanying existing research on *queering* cartoons. Therefore, this thesis aims to resist against the erasure of LGBTIQ+ individuals from children's media, seeking to unify the spheres of childhood and queerness by proposing the existence of a child who is not heterosexual. In dissecting the ways in which Spinelli can be connected to the archetype of the butch lesbian, the method of queer reading is discussed as tool for reclaiming and occupying space within the majority culture that renders non-cis/heterosexual existence invisible. Furthermore, this thesis tackles a question which prior research has left unanswered – What are the limitations and possibilities of highlighting the counter-hegemonic encodings on which queer readings largely rely? While recognizing that queer readings are elemental for young audiences, as they can give potentially queer children the tools to navigate their counter-hegemonic identities and dissolve the feelings of isolation and shame which mark many individuals' coming out processes, this thesis discusses the cultural stereotypes and notions of identity which are brought to the forefront through *queerings*. Spinelli, as a butch lesbian character, reveals an identity which is immutable and unchangeable. This becomes potentiated when she is juxtaposed to her biggest enemies, a group of girly-girls called "The Ashleys". Structurally positioned as opposites to each other in *Recess*, my research proposes that the relationship between them represents a butch/straight girl dichotomy which frames butch lesbian identity in a positive light. In this way, *queering* Spinelli holds liberatory opportunities for the queer child viewer, who is presented with a stable, positive and affable identity concept to connect with. This can provide young queer audiences with the tools to navigate their own non-heterosexual identities. Simultaneously, it

is argued that the rigidity of Spinelli's identities can be connected to essentialist lesbian identity politics, restrictive notions of identity which concepts queer theory have sought to move beyond. Furthermore, I propose that the cultural stereotypes which shape Spinelli's character serve to continue oppressive and outdates societal clichés, such as the stereotype of the 'mannish' butch lesbian, as well as reinscribes the erasure of existences positioned across intersecting lines of identity by upholding the strict heterosexual/homosexual binary. Additionally, by underscoring a homosexual identity which is never referred to directly, queer reading Spinelli can contribute to the history of hiding LGBTIQ+ realities behind metaphors, allusions, jokes and stereotypes. Thus, while resisting the mainstream meaning of the show in an effort to destabilize the oppressive powers of the children's media mainstream, this thesis also clearly expresses the need for academic mass culture work which considers the limitations of queer reading practices, by exposing how *queering* Spinelli takes on a gay-affirming shape, rather than truly corresponding to the notion of 'queer'. In this way, this thesis expresses the need for queer readings which are self-critical, and consider the implications for positions formed around intersections of identity such as race, class, dis/ability, ethnicity, sexuality, and gender.

Deutsche Zusammenfassung

Die Aufrechterhaltung des hegemonialen Geschlechterregimes erfordert, dass Kinder innerhalb eines heteronormativen Rahmens von Bildern und kulturellen Repräsentationen sozialisiert und gehalten werden. Zeichentrick- und Animationsfilme haben Einfluss auf die Sozialisations- und Selbstidentifikationsprozesse ihrer Kinderzuschauer*innen. Um die mediale heterosexuelle Indoktrination von Kindern zu unterbrechen ist es wichtig, zu analysieren, wie die repressiven Strukturen des Heteropatriarchats in Kindertexten enthalten sind und sich auf das Publikum auswirken. Trotz der zunehmenden Sichtbarkeit von LGBTIQ+-Identitäten auf Film- und Fernsehformate, sind solche Darstellungen weitgehend nur in Realfilmformaten zu finden, die sich an erwachsene Zuschauer*innen richten, was die Annahme (re)produziert, dass Queerness ein unangemessenes Thema für Kinder ist. Dies hält die Marginalisierung von nicht-cis-/heterosexuellen Identitäten als „abnormale“ Lebensformen aufrecht und verstärkt die Hegemonie heterosexueller Machtstrukturen. Diese Masterarbeit führt ein *queer reading* von Spinelli, der Protagonistin von Disney's *Große Pause* durch. So wird der Frage nach den möglichen Implikationen von *queer readings* von Kinderfernsehformaten nachgegangen. Durch die Anwendung der Methode des *queer reading* auf Spinelli, der Protagonistin von Disneys kommerziell erfolgreicher Zeichentrickserie *Große Pause*, kann diese Masterarbeit als Beitrag zum zentralen Ziel der Queer Theory, den Kulturkanon zu *queeren*, angesehen werden, und die bestehende Forschung zu queeren Cartoons bereichern. Diese Arbeit zielt darauf ab, sich gegen die Auslöschung von LGBTIQ+-Personen aus den Medienformate, die auf Kinderpublikums abzielen, zu wehren. Es wird hierfür versucht, die Sphären von Kindheit und Queerness, zu vereinen, indem das *queer reading* von Spinelli Existenz eines nicht-heterosexuellen Kindes vorschlägt. Bei der Analyse, inwiefern die Darstellung von Spinelli in Disney's *Große Pause* mit dem Archetypen der Butch-Lesbe in Verbindung gebracht werden kann, wird die Methode des *queer reading* als Werkzeug zur Rückeroberung und Besetzung medialem Raum innerhalb der Mehrheitskultur, die nicht-cis/heterosexuelle Existenz unsichtbar macht, diskutiert. Darüber hinaus befasst sich diese Masterarbeit mit einer Frage, die in der bisherigen Forschung unbeantwortet geblieben ist – Welche Grenzen und Möglichkeiten impliziert die Hervorhebung gegenhegemonialer Kodierungen, auf die *queer readings* weitgehend beruhen? In Anbetracht der Tatsache, dass *queerings* für junge Zuschauer*innen elementar sind, da sie potenziell queeren Kindern die Werkzeuge geben können, um ihre gegenhegemonialen Identitäten zu verstehen und so Gefühlen der Isolation und der Scham, die den Coming-out-Prozess vieler Individuen

kennzeichnen, auslösen können, diskutiert diese Arbeit die kulturellen Stereotypen und Identitätsvorstellungen, die durch *queerings* in den Vordergrund gerückt werden. Spinelli offenbart als lesbischer Butch eine Identität, die unveränderlich und unveränderlich ist. Darüber hinaus wird in dieser Arbeit der Frage nachgegangen, inwiefern ein *queer reading* von Spinelli, durch die Betonung ihrer homosexuellen Identität, auf die nie direkter Bezug genommen wird, dazu beitragen kann, dass LGBTIQ+-Realitäten hinter Metaphern, Anspielungen, Witzen und Stereotypen versteckt werden. So hat diese Arbeit als Ziel, die Mainstream-Bedeutung der von Disney's *Große Pause* zu dekonstruieren, um die repressiven Kräfte des Kindermedien-Mainstreams zu destabilisieren, drückt aber auch klar die Notwendigkeit einer akademischen Massenkulturarbeit aus, die die Grenzen queerer Lesepraktiken berücksichtigt, indem sie aufzeigt, welche Limitationen das *queering* von Spinelli mit sich bringt, und inwiefern ein *queering* von Kinderfernsehformaten der Absicht von queeren Konzepten widersprechen kann. Auf diese Weise wird die Notwendigkeit für queere Lesarten die selbstkritisch sind und die Implikationen für Positionen berücksichtigen, die sich um Schnittstellen von Identität wie *race*, Klasse, Behinderung, Ethnizität, Sexualität und Geschlecht bilden, ausgedrückt.