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Representation of diversity in contemporary PIXAR animation films

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Abstract (German)

Aktuell gibt es nur wenige Forschungsergebnisse, die Pixars Versprechen progressiver und inklusiverer Darstellungen von Diversität in seinen Kinderanimationsfilmen untermauern. Das Hauptziel dieser qualitativen Studie war es daher, die Darstellung der Diversitätsmerkmale Geschlecht, Sexualität und Behinderung in drei ab 2020 erschienenen Animationsfilmen von Pixar zu untersuchen, um zu ergründen, wie diese identitätsbildenden Merkmale konstruiert werden und welche Botschaften diese Darstellungen an ihr junges Publikum vermitteln. Die Daten wurden auf Grundlage der Filme „Luca“ (2021), „Turning Red“ (2022) und „Lightyear“ (2022) erhoben. Die Analyse deckte gemeinsame Narrative bei der Konstruktion von Männlichkeit auf dem Weg zu Pixars „New Man“-Modell auf und zeigte eine bedeutende Abkehr von der stereotypen „Diswoman“ hin zu einer emanzipierten, unabhängigen Darstellung junger Frauen in Macht- und Führungspositionen. Pixar entfernt sich ein Stück weit von traditionellen Rollenbildern und ersetzt diese durch emotional präsentere Väter und kontrollierende Mütter, die eine Chance erhalten, selbst eine Wandlung zu durchlaufen. Pixar zeigt außerdem neben dem ersten gleichgeschlechtlichen Kuss, eine anhaltende Tendenz, Themen wie Queerness, weibliches Verlangen und sich entwickelnde Sexualität durch Allegorien und Metaphern zu behandeln, insbesondere durch die der Verwandlung und des „Monströsen“. Körperliche Behinderungen werden meist respektvoll dargestellt, Menschen mit geistiger Behinderung werden jedoch weiterhin als soziale Außenseiter, als humoristisches Stilmittel oder als Objekte des Spottes gezeigt. Die Analyse von Paratexten im Zusammenhang mit dem Filmmaterial zeigt, dass technologische Fortschritte, die Einbeziehung von Minderheiten, vielfältige Stimmen von Filmemachern und Publikum die wichtigsten Katalysatoren für eine progressivere Darstellung der einzelnen Diversitätsmerkmale sind.

Die Ergebnisse bestätigen Pixars Behauptung, notwendige Schritte in Richtung größerer Authentizität und Inklusion zu unternehmen. Dennoch untermauern die anhaltende Verfestigung von Stereotypen über geistige Behinderungen, die Bevorzugung subtextueller Darstellungen von Queerness sowie die Tendenz, Mütter in die Rolle der Antagonistin zu stellen, einen deutlichen Raum für weitere Verbesserungen inklusiver Darstellungen.

Abstract (English)

Pixar has come forward to demand and promise more progressive and inclusive representation in children's animation, yet there is little research to substantiate this promise. The main objective of this qualitative study was to examine portrayals of the diversity markers of gender, sexuality, and disability in three feature-length animated movies by Pixar released after 2020, and to explore how these identity-shaping dimensions are constructed and what messages these depictions send to young, impressionable audiences. Data were collected from *Luca* (2021), *Turning Red* (2022), and *Lightyear* (2022). The analysis revealed common narratives in the construction of masculinity through the journey to the New Man, a significant shift away from the traditional, stereotypical damsel-in-distress-type 'Diswoman' toward an emancipated, independent depiction of young women in positions of power and leadership. These findings have broad implications for the importance of family and the gender roles depicted within them, as Pixar shifts away from traditional role models by replacing them with emotionally available fathers and controlling mothers who are given a chance to undergo transformation themselves. Aside from featuring the first overt queer kiss, Pixar displays an ongoing preference for discussing queerness, female desire, and emerging sexuality through allegories and metaphors, especially those of transformation and the 'monstrous'. Findings further indicate that physical disabilities are depicted mostly respectfully; however, some findings indicate a tendency to depict the mentally disabled as social outcasts, objects of ridicule, and comedic relief, perpetuating harmful stereotypes. Additionally, analysis of paratexts in relation to the film material revealed technological advancements, consultation with minorities, diverse filmmakers' voices, and audience support as the most notable catalysts for more progressive portrayals of each diversity marker.

The findings verify Pixar's claim that it has taken necessary steps toward greater authenticity and inclusion, both behind and on the screen. Yet stereotypes of mental disabilities persist, there remains a preference for subtextual depictions of queerness, and a tendency to vilify mothers, resulting in maternal sacrifice. Despite promising progress in the portrayal of diversity, there is room for further improvement.

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my late mother, Alexandra Ingeborg Janosik, who could not see me reach the finish line, although she really wanted to. Despite it all, she was the one who taught me to be kind, inspired me to look more closely, nurtured my love for animated film, and whose insightful and loving discussions I miss daily. I know, wherever you are, you're looking out for me.

I also dedicate an equal portion of this project to my dad, Manfred Janosik, who is the greatest rock to fall back onto and whose quiet but steadfast support means the world to me. You should be *the* Pixar dad template if they really want to get it right.

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My deepest thanks are also extended to my thesis supervisor, whose kindness, gentle support, thoughtful suggestions, continuous feedback loops, and unwavering understanding in the face of 'just this one more' deadline being moved back due to full-time teaching responsibilities go beyond expectations. Thank you for your guidance, especially in the hardest of times.

Last but not least, I am beyond grateful to B.N., who has helped me navigate the roaring sea of academic and self-imposed expectations. Your professional inquiry and trust in my ability to grow are unmatched.

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Introduction

Over the last 25 years, the animation studios Disney and Pixar¹ have gained an indisputable reputation as cornerstones of American culture for many generations, as they hold a large presence in the current children's media landscape of animated feature films. Since its beginnings in the 1920s, the American media empire Disney has had a defining role in the advancement of animation. Initially, Pixar Animation Studios, known for its technological advancements in the animation business, only collaborated with The Walt Disney Studios. The collaborative efforts were well received, and ultimately Disney's significance has only grown further with the merger of Pixar in 2006, the same year Pixar celebrated its 20th anniversary ("Our Story"). The merger seemed advantageous in matters of experience and technological expansion, though it appears not to be in shared values. For decades, Disney's colorful movies have shaped how children perceive the world, yet Disney's animated projects in particular are heavily criticized by scholars for their persistent reproduction of stereotypes and pervasive lack of diversity. In 2022, Pixar employees and LGBTQIA+ allies at Disney's most successful subsidiary joined this gradual wave of criticism by speaking out publicly about gatekeeping practices, mostly focused on limiting queer and diverse characters and storylines, while promising to meet demands for more diversity and to bring about change and progress. However, as Pixar's work has been overshadowed by its parent company in terms of exposure for years, there is comparatively little research on Pixar's filmic canon and approach to diversity to substantiate this claim.

This circumstance inspired this thesis project, which seeks to extend prior research on representation and diversity in children's animation by adding to the small number of studies focusing on Pixar's filmography in light of claims of progress in diversity, and to include movies that were previously excluded due to their fairly recent release. 'Progress' within this context is understood as a "gradual betterment" ("Progress") or "onward movement (as to an objective or to a goal)" ("Progress"), which

¹ For brevity, Pixar Animation Studios is shortened to 'Pixar' throughout this thesis and will refer to the entire animation apparatus including development, distribution, and marketing. The term also refers to the many people involved in the creative decision-making process as well as creation of Pixar films, emphasizing the messages and representations created by Pixar to be shared ideas and not solely that of a single person, unless explicitly stated. Similarly, Walt Disney Animation Studios will be shortened to 'Disney'.

is measured against proclaimed active efforts toward the improvement of the state of inclusivity (i.e., the 'goal'), existing academic documentation and discourse (from which to move forward from) on the studios' presence and representation of diversity from circa 1995 to 2022.

To explore this academic inquiry, a qualitative content analysis of three recent feature-length animated Pixar movies will be conducted. The quality of their representations will be examined against the existing body of research to provide a clearer picture of the research gap regarding inclusive representation within Pixar, offering insight into the messages and values conveyed and imbued within these films. The studio's intended and actual representation of diversity will be analyzed, focusing on how identities are constructed and on the three diversity markers of gender, sexuality, and disability, using *Luca* (2021), *Turning Red* (2022), and *Lightyear* (2022) as examples. The main goal of this thesis is, therefore, to examine how diversity can or cannot be detected in today's children's media landscape, as it serves as a means of socializing around representation and can accelerate the effect of feeling seen, which is a crucial part of advocacy for minorities. 'Diversity' is understood here as a broad range of commonalities and differences through which an individual or group can be identified, and which are generally considered to inform social practices such as affording privilege or responding with discrimination. Dimensions of diversity primarily include gender, sexuality, ethnicity or racialization, physical ability, class, age, language, social origin, and body type, among others, as well as external dimensions such as religion and income, although the majority of this thesis focuses on the analysis of gender, sexuality, and disability representation and their intersectional impact on the narrative. A more detailed definition of diversity can be found in the chapter on terminology, which clarifies several key terms for this project. Based on these considerations, the following questions will be investigated:

RQ1a: *Which characteristics or power dynamics can be identified regarding femininity and masculinity?*

RQ1b: *Which stereotypes or themes are perpetuated or subverted, and in what ways?*

RQ2: *How is sexual orientation addressed against the backdrop of a male-dominated, heteronormative society, and why is this addressed through the allegory of the monster?*

RQ3: *To what extent is disability visible, and how does the portrayal of disabilities lead to othering?*

RQ4: *Why are relationships important, both on and off-screen, and to what extent do their portrayals play a role in the representation of diversity?*

For all three diversity markers of gender, sexuality, and disability, the following overarching questions will be investigated as well:

a) *What intended representation can be identified based on the existing paratexts?*

b) *How is the representation implemented or actualized based on visual and textual parameters?*

To answer these questions, the analytical framework adopts an intersectional approach and draws on different theorists for each diversity marker, such as Judith Butler's concept of 'performativity' in analyzing gender. For the marker of disability, common models of disability representation, including those by John Clogston and Beth Haller, are considered. French semiotics scholar Julia Kristeva's theory on the cost of in-/visibility, as well as Nigerian author Chimamanda Adichie's claim about the inherent problem of so-called "single stories" (00:13:12), inform readings of disability and sexuality and their role in producing stereotypes that inadvertently lead to the hypervisibility of minorities, rendering them vulnerable. If stories with progressively diverse characters, who are representative models of underrepresented minorities, enter a large, predominantly heteronormative and non-inclusive canon to appease the demand for more diversity in children's media, the result may define those few depicted as tokenized examples (Adichie, 00:10:13). The danger of invisibility due to a lack of representation, therefore, lies in its defining character for a larger group of people, which begs the question of how these few diverse identities and relationships are portrayed as representative models to a large audience.

A qualitative approach, based on content analysis and grounded in Stuart Hall's theory of encoding and decoding (166–167), is used to analyze the three selected Pixar movies released between 2020 and 2022. The films include *Luca* (2021, directed by Enrico Casarosa), *Turning Red* (2022, directed by Domee Shi), and the *Toy Story* spin-off *Lightyear* (2022, directed by Angus MacLane). The selection was narrowed through initial viewings and paratextual discussions around each film, including media buzz and claims of progress in the depiction of diversity and/or the inclusion of minority groups. Initial viewings revealed rich material that seems to both support and

challenge the hypothesis that there is positive progress in the depiction of diverse identities and relationships.

Luca, which received the 2022 nomination for *Best Animated Feature Film* at the Oscars, follows a young sea creature who ventures out into a human city on the Italian Riviera in search of companionship and the freedom to travel beyond the shore. The movie explores themes of friendship, family, and community in a small fishing town. In addition, the film addresses prejudice and exclusion as sea creatures are shunned by the human population, rejecting anything different. The film presents a coming-of-age story that is said to bear striking similarities to the queer experience, yet it remains largely subtextual or allegorical, and readings of the film focus on the cost of 'hypervisibility' (see chapter on terminology).

Turning Red (henceforth shortened to *Red* for economic purposes and to refer to each movie in one word) shares this allegory in its theme of a human girl transforming into a red panda, albeit with connotations of puberty and menstruation rather than queerness. Moreover, cultural expectations of a Chinese Canadian immigrant family, friendship, and generational conflicts are prevalent as audiences follow the protagonists, 13-year-old Meilin 'Mei' Lee and her group of friends. The overarching plot centers on parental expectations, adolescent feelings, and the quest to see their favorite boy band live in concert, and it offers insights into Pixar's depiction of gender expectations in a Chinese Canadian household. In an interview with *Skwigly* by Ryan Gaur and director Domee Shi about *Red's* nomination for *Best Animated Feature* at the Oscars, the movie is described as a "landmark of progression from the most celebrated studio in Oscars history" (Shi). Lea Kern's thesis, which forms part of the literature review, notes *Red* as a limitation, as its themes and the central mother-daughter relationship would have posed an interesting contrast to her own findings, but its release made such consideration impossible. Her assumptions on the movie include a typical reconciliatory ending (ger.: "nach der Rebellion Mei Lees gegen ihre Mutter [ist] wieder alles im Lot", Kern 80) but also changes to the expected structure based on the predominantly female production crew as well as the discussion of female sexual awakening, previously unheard of in Pixar canon.

Lightyear invites the reading of themes of found family and modern masculinity, disability, and transformation surrounding the *Toy Story* (1995) protagonist Buzz Lightyear, originally a space ranger action figure now turned human, among the depiction of an explicitly queer character in a speaking leading role. The film follows

space ranger Buzz on his intergalactic mission to return to his home planet and timeline after having accidentally time-jumped 62 years into the future. He and a group of ranger recruits band together to fight Zurg's evil robotic forces to save humanity. A close reading of these movies seeks to uncover in-/visible or coded representations in order to provide insights into Pixar's undercurrent discourses on inclusivity.

While other Pixar movies are referenced and briefly used for contrast, they will not receive the same level of attention or close reading as the three main feature films selected. Given the overall findings on diversity markers of gender, sexuality, and disability, I have decided to set aside any detailed analysis of race/ethnicity and class, as they are beyond the scope of this project. Regardless, the critical intersection of gender, sexuality, race, and class must be briefly acknowledged, as, for instance, Alisha Hawthorne, who is the center of analysis for queer representation in *Lightyear*, unites several categories commonly marginalized, as she is a queer woman of color in a position of power, which comes with different expectations and limitations.

The animation studios' approach to inclusion in their filmography is closely linked to socio-political developments during their production. Although Disney and Pixar offer seemingly increasingly diverse characters as important role models, Disney has been criticized for their lack of advocacy on anti-LGBTQIA+ legislation, particularly Disney's failure to denounce Florida's 'Don't Say Gay' bill in 2020 in its early stages (Maas and Murphy). In an open letter to their parent company and then-CEO Bob Chapek in 2022, Pixar employees put forward allegations of censorship and a deliberate effort against the depiction of non-heteronormative relationships and diverse identities (@JuddLegum). At the same time, Pixar's 2022 press circuit surrounding *Lightyear* addresses an ongoing fight for more inclusivity in production within the Disney-Pixar conglomerate. Producer Galyn Susman recounts in an interview² that more conscious and deliberate attention has been paid towards diversity and towards those who "might otherwise feel underappreciated, not heard, not seen" ("Buzz L'Eclair - Rencontre Avec l'équipe Pixar!", 00:02:07–00:02:11). Director of *Lightyear*, Angus MacLane, later adds their awareness of the "cultural trust" ("Buzz L'Eclair - Rencontre Avec l'équipe Pixar!", 00:02:24–00:02:26) that has been

² Throughout the interview, Angus MacLane and Galyn Susman use the inclusive 'we', which implies the company they are representing within the interview as a whole and is taken as such. It is therefore assumed the pair is not only speaking for the production team itself but also the animation studio's efforts at large by continuously referencing other filmic releases to contextualize.

put into Pixar's production team. This cultural trust is interpreted as the honoring of cultural authenticity and an effort to avoid cultural appropriation or misrepresentation of the cultural identities on screen. Ensuring accuracy and authenticity are largely attributed to technological advancements as well as consultation (i.e., of queer and POC staff, groups of ethnic minorities) to achieve an "organic" ("Buzz L'Eclair - Rencontre Avec l'équipe Pixar!", 00:03:02) look and feel. Considering Hall's theory that there is "power in representation" (259), an 'organic' or authentic representation of diverse cultures would empower those previously overlooked identities. The question of the studio's production team's approach to achieving this look remains.

Technological tools and the voices of production enable more diverse representation in today's animation landscape and, therefore, need to be heard. Prominent queer theory scholars and authors of the influential book *Queering the Non/Human*, Noreen Giffney and Myra Hird, see an important connection to representation in "technological advancements and their impact on conceptions" (3), as these advancements allow for a more accurate or stylized representation of our lived realities and beyond. At the 2022 SIGGRAPH convention for innovative content, Pixar's creative team revealed the development and implementation of the tool *Character Linker*, which allows for improved levels of diversity and helps mitigate unconscious bias in animated movie production (Rogez). The tool is designed to enable manual review of computer-generated character crowds in film backgrounds, which can reproduce or reduce an inherently coded bias. If the reviewing process reveals a lack of diversity, the statistics can be manually improved. The tool was presumably developed for *Soul* (2020) and used during the production of *Red*, to ensure unconscious biases were turned into data sets, later addressed, and subsequently adjusted (Rogez). Adjustments should be made until visibility, screen presence, and vocalization of individual characters are accurate or as close to the intended depiction (Rogez; Kanyuk et al.). The tool, therefore, adds a human element of control over the general representation of diversity and can significantly impact the visual design of diverse characters. In an interview, Domee Shi, the director of *Red* and the first female POC team leader at Pixar, noted that achieving diversity in animation is difficult because it requires both time and financial resources (El-Mahmoud). For example, it takes considerable time and effort to animate what people typically do not notice prominently, e.g., characters in the background, typically to the detriment of authenticity. However, with enough technological support and personal

investment, it is certainly no longer impossible. She goes on to claim that while creating *Red* production staff “would come up to us and give us suggestions on representation, because even though I’m an Asian Canadian woman, I too will have blindspots [sic] and things I don’t normally think about” (El-Mahmoud). This argument is corroborated by queer voices in Michael McDermott’s study on the politics of queer representation, who argue that media in general often adopt a narrow view of queer stories without proper consultation with the depicted groups or communities (847). The involvement of a diverse group of people beyond the production level seems crucial to creating inclusive products. Lindsey Collins, producer of *Red*, mentioned the technological means they employed to ensure a diverse and authentic representation of 2000-era Toronto helped them “override the inherent bias of the team working on the project” (El-Mahmoud). This goes hand in hand with *Lightyear*’s production team advertising their consultation practices, stressing intersectionality in their feedback loop (Rogez).

Apart from the films’ visual and textual content, it seems imperative to include the voices of production in their various forms as “paratexts” (Genette et al.) as they can have a significant impact on the final realization of diversity categories and manifold relationships featured in Pixar’s animated films. While it must be acknowledged that the consideration of an author’s viewpoint, especially in literature and other types of media, has been deemed problematic and oftentimes disregarded as such, this thesis follows prominent Film Studies scholar Cornelia Klecker’s argument that film productions are enormous undertakings involving a large number of staff and creative members. It foregoes the attribution of the final film to a single author and their ideas as the author figure is (typically unevenly) divided into stages and departments of filmmaking (Klecker 405), which absolves the issue of a singular authorial opinion. Nonetheless, paratexts can play a significant role in how texts are interpreted as they possess the possibility of steering audiences into preferred readings (Klecker 411). Professor of Media and Cultural Studies Jonathan Gray additionally points to paratexts as a legitimate attempt to “assert authority and to maintain the role of author” (110), which can only be circumvented by being aware of this potential influence and the consideration of other paratexts, such as audience reviews and critics, in addition to the larger socio-political context of the text’s production. Based on these assumptions and further considerations in the chapter on terminology, and for a well-rounded analysis of diverse representation, the voices of production, in their various forms, should be considered for their impact on the final

realization of diversity and the relationships featured in and behind Pixar's animated films.

To ensure a cohesive analysis of visual material, the process has been divided into several steps. Following Gillian Rose's approach to the content analysis of pictures (88–93), this study draws on and adapts this theory to film. First, a systematic selection of Pixar films was made. Based on the initial literature review, four “enlightening coding categories” (Rose 92) guiding the analytic process were identified, with parameters informed by characteristics identified in the review. The categories consist of a) the visual coding of main characters, b) the textual coding of the protagonists, and c) the aspect of performativity (e.g., gender). The fourth category subsumes the analysis of d) background characters as a marker of in-/visible diversity in animated spaces, and is also examined on the visual and, if given, the textual level to conclude the depiction of diversity. Each visual coding category is informed by the diversity parameters used by Pixar's tool *Character Linker*, which largely align with Lee Gardenswartz and Anita Rowe's model of inner diversity categories, briefly expanded on in the chapter on terminology.

Based on the initial viewings and findings of the literature review, I argue that these films display a diverse range of previously underrepresented identities through technological and visual foregrounding, further defying traditional gender roles and depicting inclusive family constellations. Although preliminary results indicate visual progress of gender and representation of sexuality, the textual level reproduces stereotypes, while queerness and disabilities remain largely ambiguous allegories, leading to tokenism as non-heteronormative identities are predominantly delegated to the background.

Structurally, my thesis leads with a thorough literature review that examines the selected diversity categories, focusing on the limited existing research on Pixar, and, when necessary, contrasts it with findings on Disney to ensure a well-rounded basis for analysis. Its review starts with findings on gender between tradition and subversion, the connection between gender and assigned roles within the family and society at large. The literature review then moves to sexual orientation and its allegorical depiction as monstrous, as well as a discussion of queer baiting/coding practices within animated spaces. This is followed by a section on disability and in-/visibility at the crossroads between authenticity and othering. After a brief outline of the methodological approach guiding this project, key terms are explained to ensure

unambiguous understanding of this thesis's findings. Following an overview of the analytical framework and research design, the discussion will take up the majority of the second half of this thesis, before culminating in the concluding remarks.

I hope that this thesis's findings will help researchers, parents, and young audiences alike see some of the possible messages about masculinity, disability, and queer identities embedded in the selected Pixar films. The following literature review provides an overview of existing research on the diversity markers of gender, sexual identity, and disability in children's media, and specifically, Pixar. In addition, it examines previous works that review familial bonds, the intersection of gender roles and family constructions, as well as the power of community in Pixar's animated children's film.

1 Literature Review

I will begin with an overview of children's animation and gender research on masculinity and femininity, including assigned roles as individuals and family members, and will focus on findings from Pixar, and, when necessary, contrast similar research on Disney if the research gap provides too few insights.

1.1 Pixar's idea of femininity and masculinity

Although most gender research in animated children's media focuses on Disney films, especially analyses of female characters such as princesses, limited research on Pixar films does exist and has begun to reveal a pattern of preferences for different types of gender messages about masculinity and femininity, with particularly rich material on male characters still. Some researchers exploring gender in children's animation include studies of both Disney and Pixar films, which makes it much more difficult to distinguish findings and patterns when the goal is studio differentiation. Sadly, to date, only a couple of articles and scholarly papers address Pixar's portrayal and construction of gender, and even less on other identity markers such as sexual identity and disability, compared with extensive research on Disney by Mia Towbin, Shelley Haddock, Toni Zimmerman, Lori Lund, and Litsa Tanner (2004); Richard King, Carmen Lugo-Lugo and Mary Bloodsworth-Lugo (2010); and Bettina Förster (2014). So, first, I will focus on the few existing contributions by Ken Gillam and Shannon Wooden (2008); Brittany Long (2011); Bruce William Finklea (2014); and Esmée

Ruesink (2020), which provide among the most comprehensive studies of gender representations in Pixar animated films. As initial research has yielded most of the useful findings on masculinities, the subsequent section begins with Pixar's more progressive construction of male characters.

1.1.1 The shift into a 'New Man'

According to Jonathan Decker's content analysis of 10 Pixar films, in terms of numbers, male characters still outnumbered female characters 3:1 (87), which helps explain the scholarly focus on masculinity, as these films appear to offer ample material for comparison. Disney's more traditional ideas of gender as well as previously observed trends of emotional females and strong, authoritative males are largely left behind, as Pixar offers mostly task-oriented females and tends to depict sensitive, caring male characters. The latter Gillam and Wooden describe as the "New Man model" (3) in response to a gradual shift in American culture between the 90s and the 2000s (Finklea, "Nurturing New Men" 90). Pixar's 'New Man' has been studied in released features from 1995 (*Toy Story*) to 2008 (*WALL-E*) and describes the common narrative trajectory of the male Pixar protagonist, or, to put it more simply, the journey from an alpha male with traditional "emotional inaccessibility and [...] keen competitiveness" (Gillam and Wooden 2) to a more progressive postfeminist model of masculinity. This process typically begins with hidden yet acute loneliness and vulnerability, which eventually leads to a figurative emasculation through disempowerment, after which the man finds himself in a homosocial relationship. This relationship is described as playing a key role in helping the ex-alpha male mature and accept some of his hidden, more traditionally feminine aspects, such as his capacity to be emotionally available and to form deep and important bonds with others, platonic or otherwise (Gillam and Wooden 2).

In scholarly discussions of Disney-Pixar's depiction of masculinity and femininity, the degree of emotional expression afforded to men and women, respectively, remains a central focus. A study by Towbin, Haddock, Zimmerman, Lund, and Tanner on the portrayal of diverse principles such as gender, race, age, and sexual orientation in 26 Disney films revealed a stereotypical depiction of male characters' expression of emotion, primarily physical or absent altogether, reinforcing the idea that men mainly show emotion through violence or suppression (29). More generally, research has noted that classic Disney models of masculinity often fall into

dichotomies or extremes, e.g., the excessive machismo of Gaston in contrast to the sensitive, well-read, and misunderstood Beast in *Beauty and the Beast*, or the aggressive hunter Clayton and the innocent yet tactile male jungle protagonist in *Tarzan*. This aligns with American popular culture writer and diversity and feminism scholar Susan Jeffords's criticism that, despite the positive changes in Pixar's New Man, it still largely falls to women to shape men into this new model of masculinity (69–70), as they are either the catalyst, romantic goal to strive for, or offer guidance toward accessing emotionality when suffering emasculation. In *Beauty and the Beast*, for instance, this emasculation takes place during a courting period between Beast and Belle in the second half of the movie, in which the former is allowed to be vulnerable and meet Belle's interest in books and stories on an intellectual and emotional level, which ultimately culminates in a bodily sacrifice made out of love that breaks the Beast's curse. As emasculation is a crucial part of the transitional journey from a traditional to a more modern male character, one hypothesis this thesis will investigate is whether the New Man model remains applicable in contemporary Pixar films, and what the emasculation within it means for the character's development. In Jeffords' study of the meaning of the 'beast' in Disney's *Beauty and the Beast*, she argues that the dominant idea of hypermasculinity serves as a convenient allegory for the curse that punished the beast. Society's traditional idea of the man as a powerful, protective, but authoritative being has evolved into a curse from which they have to be freed. The "curse of living under the burdens of traditional masculinities" (Jeffords 171) sets up the male protagonist as a man shaped by his spoiled upbringing, lacking compassion, and victimized by societal expectations, much like the female heroine and his counterpart, Belle. Additionally, Gaston embodies the very hypermasculine and domineering idea of traditional masculinity to be shed, and, incapable or unwilling to change, falls to his fatal demise. This final opposition of male protagonists sends a clear message that, in contrast, in Pixar, positive masculinity consists of kind, selfless men who serve a protective function while showing respect for women (Finklea, "Examining Masculinities" 135).

Brittany Long's honors thesis presents an interesting case for the construction of gender in Disney-Pixar productions, warranting a closer look. Her research focuses on *WALL-E*, a movie about a lonely trash robot (by the same name) cleaning up an abandoned planet Earth who meets a technologically advanced robot whose mission is to determine whether the planet has become inhabitable again, and their adventure

to save humanity. The thesis argues that in *WALL-E*, a Pixar production distributed by Disney, these robots without a distinguishable sex offer a blank canvas on which to paint the gender binary and its sexed expectations, thereby providing valuable insights into the various ways in which the studio constructs gender. According to Long's findings, masculinity is constructed by societal norms such as names (e.g., Eve represents clearly a female vs. WALL-E a male robot due to its similarity to names such as Wally or Walter), pitch of voice, stereotypically assigned jobs and gender roles, also enforcing a heterosexual relationship of essentially asexual beings, being legible to the majority of conservative audiences (Long 12–16). Physical differences of parts (e.g., feminine = well-maintained and sleek vs. masculine square-shaped and lack of cleanliness) indicate a feminine tendency towards taking care of one's physical appearance, which can be seen in common Western society, as well as the fact that excessive focus on appearance in men often goes hand-in-hand with accusations of metrosexuality, calling into question one's sexual attraction and identity as a man within the community (Pompper 694). Metrosexuality is defined here as a perception of masculinity that is highly attuned to femininity, in the interest of fashion, caring for one's appearance and health, and expanding traditional ideas of masculinity (Pompper 690). Interestingly, Long finds that Pixar subverts gender stereotypes with *WALL-E*, as it presents the male robot as the emotional romantic and the futuristic Eve as the emotionally cold and competent figure, more in line with traditionally masculine characters. WALL-E's masculinity is secured by reading his emotional tendencies as a result of his wondrous, childlike personality rather than as effeminate. WALL-E, as a character, already appears post-New Man transformation, whereas Eve is a strong female-coded lead depicted as in control and technically above WALL-E in authority. Eve's cold, analytical character seems to be a requirement for challenging male dominance as a female-coded character (Long 16–17), since power, authority, and dominance are associated with the masculine. The gender reversal in the ascribed power dynamic, with Eve as the more dominant, is furthered by her technological advancement over WALL-E's outdated tech. Based on these findings, Pixar then primarily constructs gender in *WALL-E* through names, voice pitch, relationships, inherent power dynamics, appearance, and the degree of emotionality afforded. These key factors will therefore be adopted, to varying degrees, in my own analysis of the gender diversity marker.

Long's research largely depends on the idea that sex exists as a binary in Pixar. Continuing research based on this idea, Jonathan Decker's quantitative study reveals that Pixar deviates from Disney tradition by portraying less stereotypical portrayals of gender. His findings reveal that a majority of gender variables show no significant differences between male and female characters in potential based on anatomy and its effect on holding social power (85–87). Decker's findings also rest on the assumption that Pixar depicts a sexed binary, which does not change after 2009. A disclaimer in Lea Kern's dissertation on family structures in Pixar films from 2000 to 2020's *Onward* also points to the understanding of gender within a binary framework. Kern considers the films from *Finding Nemo* (2003) to *Encanto* (2021) to strictly follow the dominant idea of a binary sexed system resulting in her analysis speaking of male and female characters (ger.: "binären Geschlechtersystem", Kern 21), which implies an ongoing absence of, e.g., explicitly non-binary or intersex characters, as well as gender categories inviting such interpretation. Apparently, Pixar's first non-binary character appears in *Elemental* (2023), but only in a paratextual form. As announced by non-binary voice actor Kai Ava Hauser on X (formerly *Twitter*), their character, Lake, is addressed with 'they/them' pronouns (Hauser), assuming their authority to disclaim such details as true. This further highlights the significance and choice of voice actor in shaping the animated character's identity. The impact and relevance of paratexts for this thesis are examined in more detail in the section on terminology.

Bruce Finklea's dissertation builds on Decker's quantitative work and expands its lack of depth with qualitative research, considering Gillam and Wooden's concept of the New Man. He also continues his previous research, which revealed a revised list of common themes among male Pixar characters in his examination of all 13 feature-length Pixar films released as of 2012. Finklea's major contribution to research on masculinities in Pixar must be acknowledged, and, given our similar research goals, I will use the themes he has identified and apply them in my analysis to assess whether there have been changes post-2020. His qualitative analyses of the characters and narratives revealed six major themes that serve as "building blocks from which Pixar's portrayals of masculinities are built" (Finklea, "Examining Masculinities" 68) and provide a guideline for interpreting them either positively or negatively, as acceptable or unacceptable. These themes are comprised of (a) males are successful when taking part in teamwork, (b) males are naturally brave, willing to sacrifice for the good of others, (c) male romantic or sexual interest manifests as heterosexual desire, (d)

males desire to be loved and/or needed, (e) males who are fathers or paternal figures express fears about the future, and (f) male bosses are predominantly shown as greedy and driven solely by profit. At first glance, the themes of (a) teamwork, (b) bravery, (c) heterosexual desire, and (e) paternal figures seem most conducive for my own analysis and inform the hypothesis of masculine themes. On teamwork, Finklea highlighted *Toy Story*'s Woody and Buzz and their inability to discuss their more vulnerable feelings and insecurities prior to a moment of emasculation, leading to anger and frustration as the most common emotions displayed. Despite undergoing a New Man transformation, they still use aggression as a prevalent approach. The ability to accept and take part in cooperation and collaboration with others is also a key factor. According to Finklea's research, males are depicted as natural leaders with bravery and loyalty as prominent character traits ("Examining Masculinities" 53–54). A part of this bravery also involves receiving praise for displays of physical strength (Finklea, "Examining Masculinities" 55).

On bravery, it is interesting to note that the source of bravery can vary due to internal factors, such as physical strength, and external (emotional) ones, for instance, the wish to protect others) and can be seen negatively if taken to extremes to add dramatic effect (Finklea, "Examining Masculinities" 81). In Finklea's analysis, he lists *Brave* as the most prominent example of bravery (also somewhat implied by the film's title, which refers to Merida's acts of bravery) in King Fergus and his men's fight against the Demon Bear Mor'du. His choice of example is interesting, as the heroine of *Brave*, Merida, is female and displays equal acts of bravery in fighting Mor'du, yet does not appear to receive the same credit. Bravery is also seen as an innate part of heterosexual attraction, as Merida is supposed to choose her future spouse from a group of the clan's sons presenting their abilities in a highland games-style competition, with bravery among the notable qualities of a good potential husband (Finklea, "Examining Masculinities" 83) or man in general. Although the sources can vary by plot, their associations differ slightly: characters with external sources of bravery tend to be alpha males, whereas those with internal sources are mostly associated with parenthood and friendship (Finklea, "Examining Masculinities" 85). Regarding the latter, Finklea found that the fears of Pixar fathers largely stem from their worry regarding the safety and/or well-being of their own family, as they tend to be more emotionally involved and expressive than traditional fathers, which enables them to not only express their fear but also talk about their concerns ("Examining

Masculinities” 123). While the ease of access to one’s emotions traces back to the learning process towards emotionality in the New Man, Finklea notes that an expression of concern most commonly reflects a fear of losing control and dominance over one’s children’s lives, somewhat casting it in a negative light (“Examining Masculinities” 129).

Overall, Pixar frames admitting one’s weaknesses, talking about one’s feelings, concerns, and insecurities, and actively participating in and supporting family members as positive and admirable traits for male characters. However, according to Finklea’s thesis findings, there is a limit to the New Man model, as Pixar appears to prefer a middle ground, in being emotional without overdoing it, and lauding bravery while condemning it when it endangers others or renders characters too aggressive (“Examining Masculinities” 175). He also criticizes the fact that negative behaviors, such as being too closed off, isolating oneself, and acting selfishly, are generally discouraged, as they tend to lead to a regression of New Man tendencies (Finklea, “Examining Masculinities” 174). His research also found a tendency to present alternative forms of masculinities still framed as questionable (e.g., a love for fashion or excessive caution after trauma in *Toy Story*’s Ken and *Finding Nemo*’s Marlin) as these characters received doubtful looks for deviating from the norm or are a part of comedic relief, which cannot be interpreted as a subversion of expectation serving empowerment. Furthermore, on the subject of empowerment or lack thereof, Finklea addresses that Pixar’s gendered character choices still reinforce the idea that tomboy-esque behavior is generally acceptable, whereas effeminate male characters often pose as objects of ridicule, citing *Toy Story*’s Jessie and Ken as examples, which might send the message that “it is acceptable for girls to act like boys, but boys should not act like girls” (“Examining Masculinities” 176). An interesting factor here is that, although effeminate male characters are objects of ridicule among fellow male characters, they are not so for female characters (Finklea, “Examining Masculinities” 55), who appear to be more accepting of gender-norm transgressions. He concludes that the overall construction of Pixar’s idea of masculinities can be summed up by a tendency toward kinder, more emotionally intelligent males who are not afraid of their feelings and are aware of others’ feelings. The studio contrasts these New Men with antagonists who are portrayed as adhering to stereotypical, traditional behaviors and are unwilling to change their worldviews, thus labeling them as ‘bad’ (Finklea, “Examining Masculinities” 176).

Shifting from broad findings on gender, I take Finklea's findings on new masculinities depicted by father figures and compare them to Esmée Ruesink's research, which focuses specifically on Pixar's depiction of gender representation among biological parents. The influence of gender on expectations of gender roles within and between families is difficult to separate, as stereotypes paint women as traditionally more caring and associate them with motherhood in their behavioral choices. Ruesink's study of Disney-Pixar films found that female characters in motherly roles tended to complete tasks such as preparing children for school, caring for them when sick, and providing food and emotional support, whereas fathers could be emotionally available as well but were mostly considered to engage with their children through games or playful situations (12). According to Ruesink, *Finding Nemo* first opened a conversation about the legitimacy of traditional fatherhood by focusing on a father-son relationship after the loss of the mother. While Finklea argues that Pixar's paternal figures mainly struggle with losing control over their children ("Examining Masculinities" 129), Ruesink's findings show that Pixar depicts a high number of problematic fathers (9). The need to be overly controlling or largely absent perpetuates the idea that men are incapable of caring for their children, without a maternal partner to guide them. However, in contrast to Disney, Pixar stands out in that it typically redeems its problematic fathers by the end of the movie (Ruesink 9–10), which leads to another hypothesis this thesis aims to explore.

1.1.2 Departure from 'Diswomen'

Research on the medium of Disney animated films shows that women are generally underrepresented compared to men (Decker; Gillam and Wooden; Finklea), which might contribute to the apparent research gap on Pixar's construction, particularly of femininity, rather than in contrast to masculinity, as exemplified by Long's research. An inherent representation of gendered bias in media, therefore, informs the reality that children are in the process of forming (Aley and Hahn 501). While Disney has built its animation roster around its Disney princesses and reimaginings of many classic fairy tales (Cheu 2), it is worth noting that after Pixar's first release of *Toy Story* in 1995, it was only in 2012's *Brave*, i.e., 17 years later, that the studio revealed its first female protagonist. Some may argue that *Monsters Inc.* (2012) features the human child Boo as one of three protagonists, but the film follows the male duo of monsters Sully and Mike for most of its plot, whereas Merida in *Brave* is both the narrator and

sole protagonist on par with heroines such as Disney's *The Little Mermaid* (1989) and *Mulan* (1998).

As a counterpart to Finklea's themes of masculinities, Towbin, Haddock, Zimmerman, Lund, and Tanner's content analysis of 26 feature-length Disney films provides four main themes of femininity: (a) appearance is more valued than intellect, (b) women are helpless and in need of protection, (c) domesticity/women are likely to marry, (d) overweight women are ugly, unpleasant and unmarried (30). To clarify, they provide evidence that female characters in the Disney tradition tend to value appearance over intellect and show interest in domestic ideals such as marriage and the nursing of a family. Although the standard female Disney character has notably improved in gaining more agency over time, a change that corresponds with the women's rights movement of the 90s, gender studies researcher Bettina Förster argues that these "Diswomen" (80) (i.e., Disney + women) are still trapped in strong clichés and stereotypical notions of gender, especially when described in song (109), leaving room for a satirical or critical reading of these depictions. In addition, the Diswoman is most commonly confined to the role of a damsel in distress, in need of protection from the plot's schemes, largely denying them agency or the ability to look out for themselves. Even more damning are depictions of overweight female characters, whose portrayals seem to indicate their status as ugly, unpleasant, and egregiously unmarried (Förster 29–32). Förster concluded that Disney's message on gender (and race) is mostly mixed. Female bravery is more common but often results in punishment, with men reclaiming the upper hand in the end (Förster 39), aligning with Finklea's findings. Ultimately, Pixar's works maintain hegemonic ideologies by subtly positioning male characters as superior in the end. Despite making room for portrayals of women in positions of power, authority, and leadership, female characters tend to be unable to maintain their positions, with power taken by male characters or with assistance from men in gaining it in the first place (Finklea, "Examining Masculinities" 177).

Yet, regardless of who holds power and challenges the protagonist, Pixar's adolescent children of all genders, not just boys, show tendencies toward rebellion against their parental caregivers (Kern 38), e.g., Merida in *Brave* and Riley in *Inside Out* (2015), often defying parental authority and leading to the movies' central conflict. Förster identifies the act of 'disobedience' as a central theme, particularly when nontraditional or non-nuclear family constellations are the focus in Disney movies

(e.g., *The Little Mermaid* and *Beauty and the Beast*) (53). To clarify, in Pixar's *Brave*, Merida rebels against her more authoritative, queenly mother's plans for a political marriage and her idea of how a princess ought to behave, which leads to Merida's main act of defiance, the purchase of a witch's spell to make her mother see things from a different perspective. The spell, however, turns her into a bear, leaving Merida and her mother to race against time to find a counterspell that will transform her mother back into human. The transformation invites several readings of performative gender expectations (e.g., the mother as a bear still behaving queenly and poised, eating in proper posture, and caring for the children) and challenges the legitimacy of those expectations in their absence, as well as Merida's need to protect her mother from her bear-hunting father, the King. Overall, between the traditional Diswoman and the female Pixar protagonist, a shift in power dynamics in who gets agency, who is allowed to have a say in matters of marriage or decision-making, as well as who gets to rebel against established norms, challenges traditional ideas of femininity and expectations in appearance as well as behavior. Docility is replaced by speaking up and pushing for more agency in a still largely patriarchal society.

Who gets to have a say in decision-making beyond the screen also seems to influence character choices to some extent. Pixar's first female protagonist, Merida, in 2012's *Brave*, goes hand in hand with Pixar's first female-led producer partnership, Brenda Chapman, in the director's position and producer Katherine Sarafian, although notably partnered with Mark Andrews as her co-director (Kern 34). The goal of Chapman was to "offer up a different kind of princess, a stronger princess [...] that both mothers and daughters could relate to, so mothers wouldn't be pulling their hair out when their little girls were trying to dress or act like this princess" (Griffin). Notably, Chapman left the production before its conclusion citing "creative differences" (Griffin). *Brave* has been mentioned several times in existing research, often in connection with the claim that female representation in animated film is slowly improving (Fought and Eisenhauer 46), and serves as a reference for comparing and contrasting the female protagonist of *Red* for analysis. Yet, despite this apparent improvement, according to Kern and Chapman, there is criticism that Pixar's independent and intelligent female characters are still relegated to secondary roles, often supporting the male main characters (Decker 90; Finklea, "Nurturing New Men" 103), which serves as a hypothesis on shifting gender dynamics and the femininity on screen.

Because most research that addresses femininity is linked to women and their position within the family unit, which is inherently problematic, the connection between gender and gender roles is difficult to separate. Gender, along with the roles and behaviors associated with it, often bleeds into these family dynamics. For this reason, the following subsection examines how gender and sexuality may intersect within relationships depicted by Pixar.

1.2 Family relationships and power in Pixar

Diversity is not uniform in how people identify themselves, but is also expressed in the relationships we form. It comes as no surprise that existing research on Pixar focuses on familial relationships and family constructions, especially that of mother-daughter relationships (Kern; Viswanath), family conflicts and the gender roles that inform them (Kern), as well as the representation of family and fatherhood (Ruesink) based on the changes summarized by the New Man model.

Pixar deviates in several ways from Disney's more traditional family models and the gender roles of its members. In general, scholarship on Disney's parental bonds is relatively limited, likely because classic Disney protagonists are often princesses without living parents or a mother, to introduce the fairy-tale stepmother trope (Viswanath 2). Esmée Ruesink argues that orphaning the main characters allows protagonists greater freedom to be independent and irrational without parental guidance or restrictions, and it also leaves more screen time for introducing other characters (7). In particular, she notes a pattern in which Disney appears to favor absentee mothers and continues this trend in its Pixar productions as well (e.g., *Finding Nemo*, *Ratatouille* (2007), *Up* (2009), *Coco* (2017)), which is notable given that mothers are generally considered the primary caregivers (8). In fact, the result is room for more developed father-child relationships, implying that the mother inhibits such a development, oftentimes leading to fathers being considered incapable of or unfit to raise their own children (Ruesink 8), as briefly mentioned in the chapter on masculinities. According to the book introduction of *The Emperor's Old Groove: Decolonizing Disney's Magic Kingdom* by Susan Hines and Brenda Ayres, Disney productions focus "on the absences or dissolution of families [...] depicting most nontraditional families, most nonnuclear families, as [...] painfully lacking or wholly dysfunctional. [...] In traditional families, threats are always external. Nontraditional families are usually plagued with internal, domestic troubles." (6). After a first viewing,

the selected films appear to break with this tradition and therefore present interesting objects for analysis. Other deviancy from tradition appears to involve the depiction of gender roles within the family. While still presenting traditional family relationships such as the nuclear family and marriage, Pixar seems to expand Disney's repertoire by offering more modern alternative family models, including single parents, 'found family' or 'friends-as-family' constellations, and divorced partners (Decker 89).

Pixar gradually deconstructs traditionally male patriarchal dominance and offers power-wielding matriarchal or non-nuclear found family constellations as an alternative. Within family constellations, Decker finds room for improvement in the representational balance between male and female characters (91). Yet not just the balance between female and male characters seems to have changed. In fact, a significant shift in power dynamics has been observed. Ruesink notes that in Pixar, the male dominance of 'alpha position' appears to be fleeting (14). Specifically, Pixar appears to respond to critiques of a lack of inclusivity in its deconstruction of hypermasculinity, thereby increasing the likelihood that female characters will assert power as well (Ruesink 24). As women hold positions of power in the household, the "subversion of hypermasculinity show[s] that it is possible to exert power without possessing incredible physical strength and that parents can be a better team if they place trust in mutual dependence" (Ruesink 15). Interestingly, however, research by Decker shows that, despite Pixar's improvements in placing men *and* women in positions of power, the ratio of men leading in Pixar films up until 2009 still slightly favors men in authoritative positions (88).

In a family, power and who holds it typically also define how members participate within the household. Feminist family therapy scholars Towbin, Haddock, Zimmerman, Lund, and Tanner argue that there appears to be a clear divide in societal or familial Disney household roles, as male characters were found to primarily hold non-domestic jobs, with only three of 26 instances of domestic tasks depicted as being done by men. In contrast, Decker's study of Pixar movies finds that the studio offers more diverse gender roles and behaviors, breaking open traditional power relations and hierarchies, with domestic labor, such as parenting and household chores, now depicted as more equally divided (86–87). These findings are of particular interest in relation to the presence of non-traditional family units, which Jessica Zurcher, Sarah Webb, and Tom Robinson note in their article on the portrayal of families across generations, as Pixar leans toward their overrepresentation (11), further indicating a

positive increase in alternative and inclusive family constellations. These findings open a conversation about progress in the portrayal of parental gender roles, as a reversal of this trend is evident in the films *Luca* and *Red* and will be discussed in detail in the results.

Building on work after 2009, Lea Kern's thesis examines traditional and modern constructions of family, especially Pixar's contributions to this field, with particular regard to close mother-daughter relationships. The most commonly found family constellations in her set of Disney-Pixar films include nuclear families, extended families or generational households, and single-parent households, with patchwork families and foster care represented only rarely (Kern 8). Taking a closer look at several nuclear families, Kern's findings reveal an overall tendency toward positive depictions of the family, typically resulting in stronger, more well-rounded characters due to their upbringing in functioning families. Additionally, values such as stability and connection seem to be closely tied to being part of a family (Kern 83). Nonetheless, Kern concludes that in a majority of analyzed movies, the return to dysfunctional or toxic family situations is favored over alternative happy-end scenarios, with long-term conflicts being solved only at the surface level or miraculously quickly (85). Finklea adds another common scenario, identifying a trend that emphasizes the importance of plot-driven lessons leading to the transformation of an individual into someone worthy of romantic love, i.e., the betterment of man in his pursuit of love. He further notes the clever disguise of the reproduction of traditionally more conservative family values in seemingly progressive family constellations, in opposition to our lived modern realities (Finklea, "Examining Masculinities" 85).

Communication also plays a key role in family dynamics, as it is shaped and reinforced by the power dynamics between children and parents, as well as by interactions between parents. According to Kern's findings, typical forms of communication include parental threats or praise and parents making decisions for the whole family, largely without consulting their children, with the child's needs and wants considered secondary. Notably, interfamilial dissent often ends with a reconciliation of sorts, which places the child happily back with their family, resulting in a loss of autonomy (33), similar to her findings on dysfunctional or toxic family situations. Overall, creative choices in children returning to their family units suggest that separation from family does not tend to end well, as exemplified by *Encanto*'s Bruno, who is depicted as lonely, a little crazy, delusional, and socially awkward (62). Another

example, which I believe research has yet to address, may be found in *Brave*. When Queen Eleanor warns Merida from straying from her path and family, she does so by telling her the story of a long-forgotten kingdom with four sons. Upon the king's death, the crown was not to be given to the eldest son, but rather split among the four to lead their kingdom by combining their gifts and strengths. The eldest felt disgraced, and his selfish wish to be the sole heir divided him from the rest of his family, ultimately leading to his demise in the cursed form of the Demon Bear Mor'du. Tharini Viswanath's analysis of mother-daughter duo Merida and Eleanor in *Brave* presents an alternative interpretation and reads the queen's transformation into a bear at the hands of her daughter as reflective of anxieties about becoming the wrong sort of adult (1). This anxiety seems to parallel the dangers of not completing the New Man journey, resulting in traditional and isolated males, as well as parents, who are unwilling to let go of the control they have over their children to help them learn who they are as individuals (Gillam and Wooden; Finklea). Based on Disney examples such as *Princess and the Frog's* (2009) Tiana, *Tangled's* (2010) Rapunzel or *Frozen's* (2013) sisters Elsa and Anna, whose mother figures were either absent or substituted in the form of evil witches or their own siblings, there is rarely time for intergenerational bonding and parental teachings between parents, but especially mothers and daughters. *Brave* also breaks ground in this sense, as it centers on a child-parent conflict (Viswanath 3) and questions the dominant social ideology of previous Disney movies.

I will take Viswanath and Kern's perspectives on the construction of family through gender roles, assigned behavior, power dynamics, and their inherent stereotypes as guidelines for analyzing family and platonic relationships. As mentioned, non-nuclear and alternative relationships also appear to be more prominently represented in the Pixar canon, which is why the next section investigates existing research on what they may look like.

1.3 Mixed messages and the ambiguity of non-heteronormative sexuality

Pixar's growing effort to diversify gender portrayals and family constellations, include different minority groups, and represent people who ascribe to different sexualities is evident in the last decade of the canon. This small yet gradual improvement may also be attributed in large part to audiences demanding more representation through

engagement on social media and, as GLAAD has stated in its 2021-2022 report on diverse representation in media, “LGBTQ stories must be a business priority for networks, streaming services, and production companies who wish to remain relevant with current audiences” (Deerwater 4).

A growing body of scholarship has shown that most Disney stories reproduce and enforce a variety of traditional gender norms, render minorities invisible, stereotype, or even vilify them (King et al., Cheu; Aley and Hahn). A study by Towbin, Haddock, Zimmerman, Lund, and Tanner on Disney couples in 26 feature-length animated movies, spanning the period from *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* (1937) to *Emperor’s New Groove* (2000), revealed that only overtly heterosexual couples were featured. Published in 2003, the study specifically lists the absence of “gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender” (367) individuals as particularly noteworthy. However, it does not address any homosocial relationships (e.g., Snow White’s dwarves), subtextual queerness, or aspects of queer culture (e.g., *Emperor’s New Groove*’s Kuzco has several effeminate or metrosexual character moments, forms a homosocial bond with farmer Pacha, is seen crossdressing, takes part in a queer almost-kiss played for laughs, and responds with disgust; the antagonist’s sidekick, Kronc, is similarly queer-coded for his gender-nonconforming behavior and longing for parental approval) in the films analyzed. Carmen Fought and Karen Eisenhauer write about officially recognized queer characters in the Disney and Pixar canon and note that queer representations are primarily found in background characters, offhand mentions, and blink-and-you-miss-it moments (174). Such moments are deliberate political and marketing choices, as progressive content and depictions may be selectively removed from the material later on to market it to a more conservative consumer base (e.g., Chinese markets) and to avoid bans in international markets (Moore; Maier). These ‘throw-away’ depictions of diversity (i.e., their ease of removal without repercussions for the overarching plot) are part of a larger body of discourse surrounding the filmographies of Disney and Pixar alike, with scholars such as McDermott hinting at the possibility of tokenism and queerbaiting (which receives proper attention in the chapter on terminology following the literature review). Hall contends that “ideologies are not simply imposed by governments, business interests or the media as their agents” (348), so there is a case to be made for the mechanism of censorship playing a vital part in the shaping of what the dominant society, or, in some cases such as Southeast Asia, the political regime still largely controls or deems

acceptable and authentic in representation. Towbin, Haddock, Zimmerman, Lund, and Tanner overall see the omission of overt displays of same-sex relationships in Disney as a reinforcement of the invisibility of homosexuality (let alone other queer identities) in society at that time, disparaging images strictly outnumbering positive same-sex contact (40).

To provide an overview of sorts, Maria Niedermayr's thesis offers a short list of possible queer representations in the Pixar canon. However, her project focuses on symbolism and the depiction of family, and her analysis relies mostly on filmic techniques such as the use of color, lighting, and framing rather than themes and dialogue. This means that her references to queer readings are mostly uncited, addressed only briefly at best, and do not rely on the qualitative analysis this thesis aims to provide. Niedermayr's thesis acknowledges limited queer representation in animated feature-length movies yet notes that the Revival Era, starting around 2009, shows increased depictions of queerness, listing possible queer readings of *Frozen*'s Elsa, *Luca*'s titular character and his relationship with Alberto, *Red*'s Priya, Pixar's first non-binary character in *Elemental*, and *Onward* (27). Since two of the three protagonists in my thesis's objects of analysis are included here, this seems promising.

To clarify, although overt queer representation is limited, only a few studies address queer readings from critical and intersectional perspectives, shedding light on the tropes and queer narrative themes in a character's journey, albeit mostly as subtext. 'Subtext' is defined here as "an underlying theme or message in writing [...] evoked through acting and music" (Jackson), with queer subtext resembling or evoking narratives and plot points associated with queerness. As Disney and Pixar's approach to and preference for subtext over text in diverse representations have repeatedly come under scrutiny, overt expressions of queerness have received particular attention from audiences worldwide. For instance, Pixar's allegedly first official queer character appears in 2020's *Onward*. While being chased by police, the main characters are confronted by Officer Specter, a female cyclops whose "girlfriend's daughter" (*Onward*, 00:50:40) gives her grief, marking her a lesbian. Additionally, the character is voiced by lesbian actress and screenwriter Lena Waithe, expanding representation behind the scenes and, to an extent, on-screen as well. Unsurprisingly, including the brief but overt reference to a queer relationship has led to a release ban of *Onward* in four Middle Eastern countries and to changes of the term 'girlfriend' to 'partner' for the Russian release (O'Falt), showing the financial impact and

marketability of overt representation can have, however brief it may be. In her dissertation, Kern marks this moment of queer patchwork-style family dynamic as an important occasion of queer representation, despite its brevity, which serves as a “premiere” (56) and, overall, should be seen as progress (ger.: “Fortschritt”, 56). Brief references like these are also noticed and criticized by Courier Online writer Emy Moore, who writes in her article on Disney’s habitual back-patting over the promise of queer content that if representation is found, it tends to be subtle and offhand, or comes in the form of vague references to a character’s sexual identity, or off-screen coming-outs. Queer writer and member of the British Association of Film, Television and Screen Studies LGBTQ+ Scholarly Interest Group, Jade Evans, is of a similar opinion and states that representation in the form of blink-and-you-miss-it moments or solely through background characters featured once and never to be seen again is simply not enough:

“Ultimately, the representation of queer identity, as well as the normalising of same-sex relationships, goes beyond simply making Pixar’s films specifically more diverse (as cynical inclusions of queerness as background fodder have done) and provides a vehicle for underrepresented viewers to locate their own experiences on-screen.” (J. Evans)

The issue stems from references being subtle and insignificant enough, plot-wise, that they can be cut from the final product entirely to appease conservative audiences, essentially securing financial gains by ‘playing both sides’ (Massoto), which can be interpreted as queerbaiting. Moore goes on to condemn Disney’s practices of taking advantage of queer audiences, claiming inclusivity while receiving credit for representation for minimal effort, and declaring a commitment to the community. Despite the legitimacy of this perspective, this thesis makes a counterargument for the use of minor or background characters and off-screen statements as an attempt to ease conservative viewers into a gradual acceptance of queer identities and the normalization of their existence in media spaces, albeit at the expense of ‘proper’ screentime and varied portrayals (a concept further explored in the subsequent chapter on the invisibility of diversity). Ongoing efforts towards queer representation appear to be taking shape in Pixar movies that feature inclusive content by (also subtly) hinting at non-heteronormative relationships or queer identities, for instance, a queer-coded LeFou in the live-action remake of *Beauty and the Beast*. Such representations have previously led to yet another ban in Southeast Asian countries such as Malaysia and Kuwait (Moore), providing the studios with both an incentive and

an opportunity to keep them subtle and inconsequential enough to avoid alienating conservative markets and losing profits in the process.

To provide a more grounded basis for analysis, I consider findings by queer studies scholar Alexander Doty, who argues that there are three main areas in which queerness may develop within mass culture. One of them considers influences during the production of texts (xi). When filming actors, there are a number of parties whose decisions shape a character's portrayal. Some aspects of a character's diversity are therefore predetermined by choices in casting and costuming. In animation, however, *everything* has to be imagined from scratch. The decision-making power that animators have has an undeniable impact on diversity. Building on this idea, Finklea sees a possible connection between narratives and the production design and reasons for Pixar's type of storytelling to be strongly influenced "because it closely mirrors how the studio produces films." ("Nurturing New Men" 102) He attributes the studio's tendency to feature iconic duos (e.g., Mike and Sully in *Monster's Inc*; Buzz and Woody in *Toy Story 1–4*) to the peer-driven film making process at Pixar typically consisting of a director and producer partnership. This, therefore, raises the question of the involvement and impact of the production crew on the final product and whether it can affect the representation, especially of diversity, markedly as Hall explains that "[c]ompany executives, advertisers, producers, writers, directors and actors, [...] have different professional and personal stakes in the process of generic innovation and social change" (362). Taking into consideration, for instance, queer representation, the creative team makes assumptions about what a queer person does, looks like, acts, or believes in (Giffney and Hird 5) or whether they deserve a place on screen in the first place. Given some of the statements Pixar's staff and leadership have released to various online magazines and interviewers that were met with negative reception, and in response to the question of messages sent by producers versus representation gained, Pixar's history with the representation of sexuality (heterosexual and diverse) over the last decade is briefly summarized and contextualized.

Prior to 2019, unambiguous and overtly queer representation was nonexistent in *Pixar* animated projects, yet not for a lack of trying. Indeed, there have been several instances of speculation about possible queer representation. For instance, Fought and Eisenhower's study mainly looked at queer-coded characters in Disney, and they claim that Pixar "doesn't seem to have these sorts of central queer-but-not-officially characters. Pixar characters are more likely to be 'out' but play a very minor role."

(180). Unfortunately, they do not follow up on which characters they are referring to, other than a single footnote on the scattering of canonically queer representation of Officer Specter in *Onward* (Fought and Eisenhauer 199), as introduced at the beginning of this chapter. Other instances include the presence of two women pushing a stroller in the trailer for *Finding Dory* (2016), and *Toy Story 4*'s (2019) moment in which what appears to be two mothers dropping off their child at school by giving them a hug, staying in the realm of ambiguity.

Then in 2019, Pixar launched an initiative called *SparkShorts* in which independent directors are given a six-month development period and a limited budget to work on innovative stories and “unconventional themes” (Prosperi 80). One such project, titled *Out* (2020), received attention for featuring Pixar’s first unambiguously gay protagonists, highlighting the importance of queer representation by sending a message of courage and acceptance to its audiences, particularly families and their children. The nine-minute short tells the story of a gay man struggling to come out to his parents, who then receives a surprise visit from his parents and desperately tries to remove all signs of his relationship with a man from his home, later wishing to change into a dog rather than be transparent with his parents about his sexuality and partner. The short explores themes of coming out, self-acceptance, assumptions, and the importance of communication.

Out's director, Steven Clay Hunter, himself an openly gay man since 1969 (Hunter), has worked in different capacities on other Pixar films relevant to this thesis. For instance, Hunter is credited for his work in character development and animation on *Lightyear*, additional animation work on *Red* and *Onward*, and as a supervising animator on *Brave* and *WALL-E*. In an interview with writer Nathan Wilkes about *Out*'s release, the importance of gender roles was addressed in that Hunter's own lived experiences as a cisgender, masculine-type man are reflected in the character's stereotypical masculine traits, his need to fit in, and some of the insecurities that come with that wish (Hunter). During the interview, Hunter was also asked about his view on the importance of giving the queer community a voice through the medium to which he responds with the need to explore the process of coming out, which he had done at 27 to supportive parents, in order to help process the feelings around this period of his life that stuck with him, citing the production to have been “a form of therapy” (Hunter). Interestingly, according to the interview, the initial pitch had received no pushback from Pixar's Chief Creative Officer, Pete Docter, at the time regarding the

type of story being told. However, a shift seems to have taken place sometime between 2020 and 2026, as an online article by Chris O’Falt cites an interview with the *Wall Street Journal*³ and Docter in which he explains away recent cuts of queer storylines (e.g., in Pixar’s *Elio*, 2025) by “making a movie, not hundreds of millions of dollars of therapy” nor did they want to expose its global and young audience to “things they weren’t ready to see or hadn’t been discussed with their parents” (Dunn). While the comments may have simply been poorly phrased, the irony of Hunter’s pitch with Docter for *Out* and the shift in tone for feature-length films, which in *Elio*’s case apparently reflected personal experiences of the original director and openly gay and married man, Adrian Molina, is clear. For *Elio*, this meant that early screenings of Molina’s vision were received poorly and led to a replacement by Domee Shi, director of *Red*, and Madeline Sharafian, who made significant changes, amongst them the removal of scenes indicating the titular character to be gay based on an imagined future life with his male crush (Dunn). Adrian Molina, also co-director of *Coco*, has repeatedly expressed his hopes for more queer storytelling and for different interpretations of stories that focus on the queer community since 2018. Apparently, Miguel’s journey in *Coco* of not feeling seen and accepted for his passion and who he is (i.e., a musician) by his family resonated with the queer community as it is reminiscent of a queer person’s journey toward acceptance (Crispim). Almost an answer to Molina’s plea, *Out* came to be, according to Hunter, in an effort to create a fairy-tale version of coming out, authentic to the experiences he and LGBTQ friends he had spoken to could connect to, and simply, to create something that his young, closeted self could watch and feel validated by (Hunter). Furthermore, Hunter reasons that projects like these can also send a message to parents, showing them “how families can talk this out and for them to see that it is possible to come together and love each other” (Hunter). In short, the passion project is an effort to signal to queer audiences that they are seen and heard, and to families of queer children that there are ways to support and accept their children, despite Pete Docter’s and Disney CEO Robert Iger’s claims that *Pixar* productions are not about ‘messages’ at all, but rather entertainment (O’Falt).

As the focus of this thesis is on feature-length films, I recognize that a short film produced on a smaller scale and in under six months does not necessarily receive as

³ The original *Wall Street Journal* article is inaccessible due to a paywall and subscription restrictions.

much attention or criticism as a production of feature-length, however, given the paratextual evidence of directors such as Hunter also working on other projects relevant to this field of research and his voice being that of a queer man in the animating apparatus of Pixar, his contributions and context provided through interviews is valuable to gain insight on the importance of queer staff working on stories that represent themselves and their community authentically.

While reviewing existing research on Pixar, *Brave* receives particular attention once again, as it is not only considered groundbreaking in its gender portrayal, as introduced in the literature review on gender and gender roles in family, but also offers a rich text for different readings of relationships. The scholarly view seems two-fold. Ruesink's analysis of *Brave*'s relationship dynamics argues for a reading that presents it as a potentially empowering LGBTQIA+ storyline, given several links to the struggles and experiences of queer people. Eleanor and Merida's relationship progression bears similarities to contemporary 'coming out' stories in that, stereotypically, the parent pretends nothing is out of the ordinary until they are irrevocably confronted with their child's non-conformity, which forces them to decide whether to support or shun them (Ruesink 22). In contrast, in his comprehensive study on masculinities in Pixar, Finklea notes that romantic relationships tend to serve two key purposes in Pixar films: either by driving the plot or by "ground[ing] sexuality in a heteronormative framework that reinforces male and female gender distinctions" ("Examining Masculinities" 92). In his reading of *Brave*, he highlights Merida's mother as the driving force for her conformity to the cultural norm and royal expectation of marrying a lord, whereas the kingly father defers to his wife on the matter. Finklea's thesis concludes that, despite her defiance and the seemingly empowering message of choosing her own fate in not marrying one of the lords just yet, Merida's fate does not truly change nor defy patriarchal norms as she only postpones the idea of marriage through the promise of one day upholding tradition by choosing a husband, albeit for love rather than duty, ultimately, upholding the patriarchy (93). Finklea's reading of *Toy Story*'s Woody, who shows emotional attachment to his owner, Andy, through expressions of ownership, a lyrical lament for lost relationships, and adoration, also builds a case for queer desire that the narrative avoids by adding a love interest in the character of Bo Peep. The heterosexual framework is therefore protected by an expression of clear desire for the opposite sex, thereby framing Woody's homosocial affection for Andy and Buzz as largely platonic or familial in comparison (Finklea, "Examining Masculinities" 93–94; Gillam and

Wooden). Upon review, I noticed that neither Finklea nor Gillam and Wooden, who have also taken a closer look at their relationship in their article on the New Man, addresses a possible reading of this desire for either sex as an emergent bisexual desire, since attraction to one sex need not automatically negate attraction to the other when read through a queer lens. Overall, Finklea concludes that the only openly acceptable form of explicit relationship expressed or shown is that which is heterosexual and the normative idea of romantic attraction between one man and one woman ("Examining Masculinities" 135).

It is worth noting that Disney has also entered into its first unambiguous form of queer representation with the character of Ethan Clade in its feature-length film *Strange World* in 2022, which was the most-watched movie worldwide on Disney's streaming platform, *Disney+*, in the last weeks of 2022 and the beginning of 2023 (Lamadrid). The film features a young gay teen who is also black, is out to his supportive parents, and is struggling not with his queer identity but with getting tongue-tied around his crush, Diazo. An article by Jen McGuire celebrating this overt representation highlights several audience responses, expressing their willingness to support the movie for its representation: "I'm still gonna watch it cuz I love seeing black queers in film". Interestingly, the article also features a comment subtly addressing Disney's tendency for ambiguity in proclaiming joy over the fact that the movie provides "a queer romance that is far more than a fleeting kiss to be missed in the background" (McGuire), most likely in reference to the critique Disney has earned in proclaiming an out-of-focus background kiss between two women in its release of *Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker* (2019), a non-animation movie, for its throw-away characteristics and momentary nature (Moore). *Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker* came under particular scrutiny for the director's stated commitment to diverse representation falling flat in the face of this background lesbian kiss that could easily have been erased from the final cut for global release. The Pixar film *Lightyear* tells a similar story of fighting for visibility amid conservative voices who call a brief queer kiss in an animated children's movie "grooming" (Mahdawi). The controversy and narrative staging of this kiss will be addressed further in the discussion of this thesis's findings.

It is clear that any attraction that does not fall under the category of heteronormative attraction is marked as different not only by the attention it receives but also by the ambiguous manner in which it must be presented. Censorship often emerges where

societies label certain identities or behaviors as taboo, which forces studios such as Disney and Pixar to rely on allegories to explore what, it appears, cannot be shown directly. In doing so, marginalized groups and non-normative identities are 'othered'. Especially in children's media, such allegories include transformation (as a stand-in for self-discovery and the desire for one's true self to reveal itself) and the monstrous (i.e., deviant creatures, feared and stigmatized, often longing for acceptance) (Christie). Children's media is rife with portrayals of monsters in both positive and negative roles, linked to the socializing practice of warning against cultural boundaries and taboos, and it manifests cultural concerns while providing a safe space for exploring one's anxieties about identity (Christie 2). Judith Halberstam notes a meaningful shift in the use of monsters, as the contemporary monster seems less foreign, rather beings that "are on us and in us [...] replaced with a banality that fractures resistance because the enemy becomes harder to locate and looks more like the hero" (163). Stacy Holman Jones and Anne Harris frame the monstrous as the potential to render the unintelligible visible, thereby empowering queer and unnoticed identities (519). Postmodern monstrosity is reduced to facets of identity, with Halberstam drawing an allegory in which the sexual or monstrous other and the racial other are inseparable from one's identity, as is the color of one's skin (5).

The postmodern monster and human identity are closely interlinked. King, Lugo-Lugo, and Bloodsworth-Lugo argue that, despite their appearance, even non-human characters inhabit a humanity the audience feels connected to, while performing categories such as gender or race as a human would, citing examples of animals, toys, and even aliens (95). Certainly, Pixar's *Toy Story*, Sully and Mike in *Monsters, Inc.*, and Marlin and Dory in *Finding Dory* provide clear examples of this in the research on masculinities by Finklea and in some examples by Decker. If non-human appearance does not seem to hinder the performance of human categories of diversity, this calls into question what messages are sent when a non-human, a monster, or an alien performs characteristics such as female or queer. Interdisciplinary researchers Noreen Giffney and Myra Hird pose a similar question by asking "[W]hat might it mean to queer the non/human?" (1) and raise awareness of the consequences of such a depiction in terms of inclusion and normativity. Marginality, power relations, and vulnerability are aspects that humanity and the monstrous share. Kristeva points to this, noting that monsters can be seen as society's fears and learned prejudices taking shape (520). Children's media is no stranger to monsters being slain or

misunderstood by fearful humans who reject these creatures for their differences. Hall's theory addresses such ideas, arguing that visual representation can highlight differences and is largely informed by attitudes and emotions. "[I]t mobilizes fears and anxieties in the viewer" (Hall 226). Some of these anxieties could include the fear of falling outside the socially constructed binary, gender expectations, traditional gender roles/norms, non-heteronormative attraction, an invisible inner self, and a transformation into a societal 'other', thus being labeled a monster. While growing up and exploring one's identity, especially for younger audiences still trying to find their place in society, they may learn about societal expectations and norms and witness how differences of any kind can lead to subtle or violent rejection as early as kindergarten. Children's media is part of this learning process and should therefore offer positive examples of how to respond to the practice of 'othering,' as do large animation studios such as Pixar.

Overall, there are ongoing efforts by filmmakers who are also part of minority demographics, such as queerness, to provide such examples, despite the challenges this entails. Additionally, vocal audiences are calling for more stories that they can not only connect to but that depict them unambiguously. Instead, queer identities are often still relegated to the background, assigned to secondary characters, or allegorized to be palatable for the masses or appeal to overseas markets. It is clear that messages of acceptance and inclusion are being sent, whether influential people such as CCO Pete Docter sanction them or not. In this way, queerness shares similarities with disability in Disney-Pixar productions, shying away from explicit portrayals. Which forms of disability representation *are* afforded in the filmic canon are explored in the following section.

1.4 'Hidden' disabilities and the fight for advocacy

Overall, the literature review has revealed an existing well of research on diversity (or a lack thereof) in Disney's children's media, with a hopeful glance towards Pixar with its gradual actions of improving the production process to make way for more inclusive practices, whereas research focused on Pixar's filmography is still budding. Studies on visibility highlight the double-edged value of being seen, especially for members of queer, non-white, and disabled communities, as tendencies toward stereotypes, insignificant role division, and the assignment of undesirable traits or characterizations (e.g. side-characters, villains, antagonists) paint a rather negative realization of

representation, which can lead to backlash and misunderstanding of members of these identities and communities. The literature review focuses on work by Karen Schwartz, Marie Lutfiyya, and Nancy Hansen on Disney, Clogston and Haller on disability models in media in general, and Jeanne Holcomb and Kenzie Latham-Mintus on their comprehensive study of disabilities in Pixar.

A Disney-centric study by Schwartz, Lutfiyya, and Hansen notes on the portrayal of intellectual disability in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, *The Beauty and the Beast*, and *Cinderella* (1950) that

“[a] negative characteristic can also be referred to as a ‘stigma’ or ‘an attribute that is deeply discrediting’. The significance of being branded in this way means that ‘we believe the person with a stigma is not quite human. On this assumption we exercise varieties of discrimination, through which we effectively, if often unthinkingly, reduce [the perceived’s] life chances.” (180)

Commenting on this dehumanization, Wolfensberger (as cited in Schwartz, Lutfiyya, and Hansen) points to a historical tendency to cast people with intellectual disabilities in negative social roles, such as the “sub-human animal and Other, the object of ridicule and the eternal child” (183). Several critics have noted a similar tendency to rely on such traditional and degrading models of representation, with only a few progressive portrayals of disability. As a result, the stigmatization of people with disabilities⁴ is further perpetuated in children’s animated media produced by Disney and Pixar (Holcomb and Latham-Mintus; Norden; Schwartz, Lutfiyya and Hansen). Previous disability studies research has identified key patterns in the depiction of disability in media in general. These patterns and disability models serve as a framework for reference during analysis to better categorize and understand how disabilities are constructed and depicted in the selected films.

American journalist, founding member of the nonprofit organization *Media and Disability Interest Group of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication* (AEJMC), and disability in mass media scholar John Clogston established several models of disability, which Beth Haller later expanded to include more progressive models. These models divide disability representation into traditional and progressive portrayals. All traditional models have been criticized for reinforcing the cultural binary of able or disabled bodies by perpetuating stereotypes and stigma. Clogston’s traditional models include the Medical model, the Supercrip model, and the Social Pathology model. While the Medical model views disability as a

⁴ Henceforth, the term for the minority group of people with disabilities will be abbreviated to ‘PWD’ for brevity and easier reading experience.

pitiful result of disease or injury and expects PWD to seek a cure, the Supercrip model perpetuates stigma by foregrounding PWD's extraordinary abilities, through which one's shortcomings or deficiencies may be pitiable but overcome, inviting cause for celebration (3). However, the idea that PWD are deviant for managing to live regular lives despite their disability further highlights the rarity of success among disabled people, often setting unattainable goals. Lea Kern offers a different reading of the supernatural aspect of transformation and disability in her thesis on superpowers in children's animation. She argues that magical family problems can easily be interpreted on the psychological level as inter- or generational trauma as well (Kern 66–67). Although the Social Pathology model receives no further attention in the analysis's findings, for clarity's sake, it describes PWD as disadvantaged and economically dependent on the state or society, and holds that the state's or society's support should be considered a gift or privilege rather than a right. In terms of the traditional interpretation of disability, the Moral/Charity model (Norden) can be considered the religious counterpart to the Medical model, stigmatizing PWD as inferior and pitiful based on religious doctrine, equating disability with sin or evil, and portraying PWD as in need of charity (Norden 164). Katherine Smith, in her article on images of disability, trauma, and the subversion of power, also criticizes the tendency to reduce the disabled body to two molds, the helpless (which may be comparable to the Social Pathology model) or the monstrous (121). The latter might be most famously exemplified by the character Quasimodo in Disney's *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1996), as his existence and 'monstrous' appearance are attributed to sin by the film's villain, the devout Lord Frollo, Quasimodo's foster father. Haller later added the Business model as a traditional paradigm, which views PWD and their issues as costly to society and businesses in general, because PWD are seen as a burden rather than a profitable consumer base (qtd. in Haller and Zhang 4). To expand the theoretical framework for analysis, this thesis notes that in 1991, UK disabled writer and activist Paul Hunt identified ten common stereotypes with which people with disabilities are depicted in the media, including the aforementioned portrayals as pitiable, objects of curiosity or violence, evil, super cripple, burden, or laughable. He expands these stereotypical portrayals by adding the idea of PWD as 'atmosphere', PWD as their own worst enemy, and the non-sexual (Hunt 46–47), the latter of which is exemplified by aspects of *Luca's* Uncle Ugo's character and background, which will be explored in more detail in the discussion of my findings. In contrast, progressive models present

disability as shaped by societal factors such as attitudes and ableist or outdated policies. Clogston's more progressive Minority/Civil Rights model, for instance, highlights PWD as a group or community with legitimate grievances, such as political injustice, and as members of a community fighting for their civil rights (47). The Cultural Pluralism model instead emphasizes the normalization of disability, essentially framing it as ordinary, not central to the plot, and portraying PWD as multifaceted. Haller later added the Legal model, in which the media functions as a tool to combat discrimination, and the Consumer model, which declares PWD an untapped consumer group, filling the more progressive Business model gap by addressing how society benefits from greater accessibility (qtd. in Haller and Zhang 3–4).

A notable exception to the criticism of disability representation in the Disney canon is Noelle Lammouchi, whose thesis analysis finds positive representation in the challenge to traditional relations within the community, which are ultimately overcome (71). She also argues in favor of *The Little Mermaid* and *the Finding (Nemo and Dory)* series as children's movies that show the positive aspects of (dis)ability and highlight the strengths of the individual by overcoming shortcomings presented by their disabilities. Lammouchi's analysis fails to acknowledge that the requirement to 'overcome' one's disability can be a sign of the traditional Supercrip model introduced by Clogston. Especially in children's media, the Supercrip model can be applied to many superhero stories and to individuals who convey inspiring messages about overcoming their own limitations (Haller and Zhang 4), which, for some, sets unattainable goals, putting pressure and blame on those who do not meet them.

Whereas animation studios such as *DreamWorks Animation* are praised for their work on disability representation in film franchises such as *How to Train Your Dragon*, particularly for the creation and depiction of the young Viking Hiccup with a severed leg and the significance of his loss of a limb, similar praise for Disney and Pixar's body of work has been slow to emerge. Scholars Jaume Castells and David Escudero concluded in their analysis of Pixar films from 1995 to 2006 that disabled characters are mainly present in the hero's story "in an effort to be politically correct, the personages' appearance of a different race, or other intentions associated with avoiding the personage's concept type of clichés" (17). These efforts toward political correctness, however, are often limited to visible signs of physical disability (such as wheelchairs, ramps for accessibility or insulin pumps) in background characters (El-Mahmoud). Sociology researchers Jeanne Holcomb and Kenzie Latham-Mintus's

study on portrayals of illness and disability in animated feature films between 2008 and 2018 reveals that older characters are frequently depicted in association with mobility issues that may require the use of canes, walkers, or wheelchairs (28). Yet, I argue that such characters largely remain in the background, with a few notable exceptions, including protagonists and their closest allies, as well as the stories' villains, whose antagonistic nature exemplifies disability representation linked to vilifying difference. The latter additionally demonstrates the perpetuation and stereotypical association of PWD with villainy or sinisterness. For instance, *Moana's* Tamatoa, the crab and antagonist of the first movie, displays signs of body dysmorphia, as he is unable to think about his appearance or any non-golden parts of his shell without severe panic-like reactions. *Peter Pan's* (1953) Captain Hook is an amputee out for revenge against Peter, whom he deems responsible for his loss of limb, and whose panicked reactions to any sort of ticking noise (announcing the crocodile that took his hand) suggest a form of trauma similar to PTSD. Martin Norden additionally introduces the disability-related stereotype of the "Obsessive Avenger" (169), seeking revenge on those they deem responsible for their status or other violations of the moral code. The description may also apply to Old Buzz's character in *Lightyear* and bears similarities to *Peter Pan's* Captain Hook. Among notable protagonists are Nemo (with a deformed fin, or 'lucky fin,' from damage to his egg during incubation), Dory (suffering from short-term memory loss), *Moana's* chicken Hei Hei (likely with dyspraxia, i.e., a difficulty with motor functions), Peter Pan (Peter Pan Syndrome), Snow White's dwarves (dwarfism and mutism in Dobey), and Quasimodo (disabled bell-ringer with acquired deafness) (Kapoor and Venkitesch). Although the list has continued to expand in recent years, Elahe Haschemi Yekani, an English and American literature and culture professor researching visual media, argues that mere presence does not automatically imply visibility. For example, foregrounding a character is a deliberate choice, a "filtering mechanism" (Haschemi Yekani et al. 78), and this filtering is socially trained by cultural norms and power dynamics as well. So, it is not simply about whether disabilities are depicted, but also about which ones and in what manner, which informs one of my hypotheses.

Holcomb and Latham-Mintus reveal a palpable wish for more "representations of disability that capture the challenges of disability without falling into pity narratives, and that illustrate the benefit of diversity through different abilities without relying on superpower narratives" (9). This wish stems from their findings on the representations

of disability in 9 Disney and 11 Pixar films. Their study combines films from both studios, so Pixar's results were isolated using the coding sheet table provided in the article's attachment. As there is little insight into Pixar's depiction of disability in isolation, the results provide a guideline for key themes to look out for in animated spaces. Different kinds of media have long used (mental) disability as a symbolic mark of evil, revealing society's fears and implicit biases about PWD and exposing how negative assumptions about moral character and physical impairments are crudely mapped onto non-normative minds and bodies, sometimes even across generations through the shared experience of trauma. Holcomb and Latham-Mintus's study findings show that most portrayals of disability were traditional, while significantly fewer films included progressive portrayals. Among Pixar's portrayals (i.e., 11 films, including *Up*, *Toy Story 3*, *Cars 2*, *Brave*, *Monsters University*, *Inside Out*, *The Good Dinosaur*, *Finding Dory*, *Cars 3*, *Coco*, and *Incredibles 2*), the most common disability representations were associated with evil or old age (6 films), as well as pitiable or 'supercripple' portrayals (6 films), and PWD depicted as objects of ridicule in 5 films, and only 2 films with depictions of ordinary or positive difference, which were *Brave* and *Finding Dory*. Overall, while PWD are present in the films, they are often not the main characters and therefore receive significantly less screen time or are largely irrelevant to the overall plot (Holcomb and Latham-Mintus 5). They find that PWD with unspecified differences were commonly used as objects of ridicule and for comedic relief, for example, animals with abnormal functioning. Animalistic PWD are "often illustrated with large eyes with pupils that pointed in different directions [and] had an ungroomed appearance and were assumed to have low intelligence" (Holcomb and Latham-Mintus 6–7) and exemplified by characters such as the spirit guide dog Dante in *Coco* and the clumsy chicken Hei Hei in *Moana*. Other attributes associated with characters as objects of ridicule and intellectual disabilities include innocent personalities, protruding tongues, and social miscues (Schwartz, Lutfiyya, and Hansen 190).

More progressive portrayals that align with the Cultural Plurism model present characters as multifaceted; this is exemplified in Pixar's *Brave*, where King Fergus, who has lost his lower leg in a battle with the monstrous bear Mor'du, is not hindered by the loss or by his position as a powerful leader. Rather, it is treated as a wound of honor from battle. In general, the loss of limbs or other body parts appears to be normalized and seen as humorous or, in a way, fixable. No films embraced the

Minority/Civil Rights model, which Holcomb and Latham-Mintus argue, underscores Disney and Pixar's unwillingness to take on issues related to disability rights (8). They conclude that children's films still do not fully integrate PWD in progressive ways, and their portrayals continuously include stereotypical depictions (in features and behavior). They highlight the striking connection between mental disabilities and pitiable portrayals, which informs this thesis's hypothesis on the portrayals of mental disabilities after 2022. Holcomb and Latham-Mintus's findings underscore how little to no progress has been made in progressive portrayals of PWD, which not only contributes to the "symbolic annihilation of PWD in children's media" (8), but also reinforces the use of minor characters with different bodies and/or minds as something humorous or to be laughed at. Clogston's previously introduced Supercrip model is also of notable significance in Holcomb and Latham-Mintus's findings. The Supercrip was overwhelmingly present across multiple films, and the characters representing it most often received a happy, 'feel-good' ending typical of children's media, which, as a result, creates unrealistic expectations for PWD about their lived realities. On the subject of intersectionality, they noted a slight gendered aspect in these representations, as it was most common for an older character with a disability to be a woman. Additionally, the use of ableist language was typical in expressions such as calling someone 'crazy' or asking if something is 'wrong' with them (Holcomb and Latham-Mintus 8).

Clogston and Haller's models serve as guidelines for this thesis, helping identify key patterns of disability representation and classify them as traditional and reductive or progressive and diverse. As Holcomb and Latham-Mintus refer to these models in their comprehensive study of disability in Pixar movies, I will consider them tools for interpretation and apply them for comparison with existing findings. In doing so, choices regarding characters' appearance, behavior, assigned roles, and the overall plot relevance of a character's disabilities are scrutinized to assess the quality of disability representation in these animated movies. Additionally, Hunt's list of common stereotypes guides the analysis by narrowing the focus to the replication of stereotypes within these patterns and to the messages these choices send to the audience.

1.5 Visibility: a crossroads between authenticity and othering

1.5.1 The dichotomy of being unnoticeable but ever present

While reviewing existing research, it has come to my attention that the main analytical focus of studies on Pixar films seems to lie on their protagonists. This thesis defines protagonists (or ‘main characters’) as those with active speaking roles relevant to the plot, a strong relationship with other protagonists, and/or being introduced as such. In contrast, background characters are those falling largely outside this definition. These characters do not require much effort from the production team to develop personality and/or motivation, and are mostly seen in the (name-inspiring) background of scenes while the main characters are visible and the general plot unfolds. Nonetheless, these characters are not to be overlooked, as their mere presence and appearance can greatly shape perceptions of representation, i.e., an authentic depiction of societies. To illustrate, Pixar created the web-based application tool *Character Linker*, whose main function is to populate the background of a scene or shot with a random constellation of characters, saving a lot of time and effort. Although such technology is not new, *Character Linker* goes a step further by allowing a breakdown of the resulting composition “in terms of diversity characteristics, such as ethnicity, gender, age, body type and ability” (Kanyuk et al.) and subsequently, the manual reconfiguration or adjustment of generated crowds based on each category. In other words, the tool allows one to manually configure diversity statistics, influencing who shows up on the screen, how prominent they are, and how long they remain visible within a shot. In the only brief SIGGRAPH ’22 conference article on this tool publicly available, developers at Pixar argue the tool’s usefulness in its ability to define and break down “goals to measure progress against, and [...] to ensure each character is utilized to the fullest” (Kanyuk et al.). Of specific interest to the present research, on the one hand, seems the intention to measure progress, which can be inferred to mean a satisfying representation of crowded locations depicting real cities and societies such as 2020’s *Soul*’s New York City population. A dedicated and truthful depiction of authentic locations and communities would address Finklea’s concerns about children being socialized by inaccurate representations and assumptions about the worlds they grow up in (“Examining Masculinities” 102). On the other hand, regarding character design, it is unclear what Pixar creators meant by ‘using a character’s full potential’. What type of potential is meant remains open to interpretation, although it can be

assumed that the goal includes combating unconscious bias as well as honoring realized diversity (Kanyuk et al.). As the conference article demonstrates Pixar creators' ability to directly influence the in-/visibility of certain groups of people and diversity markers through the *Character Linker* tool, the lack of further public information on its use and implementation since its conception raises questions. The most pressing question for this thesis concerns the extent of its implementation since *Soul*, in the subsequent feature films *Luca* (2021), *Red* (2022), and *Lightyear* (2022). The tool's use can only be confirmed for *Red*, to ensure an authentic look at Toronto Chinatown around the 2000s, according to the director Domee Shi's childhood memories (Kanyuk et al.). Assuming that this tool has been applied ever since *Soul*, background characters, and the diversity markers they overtly display are considered during analysis as well, for a more well-rounded argument on visibility in connection to diversity.

1.5.2 The consequences of the in-/visibility of diversity

As previously mentioned, the intersection of disability, queerness, and non-conforming gender identities can reveal those who deviate from the norm as 'other', both narratively and visually. While calls from audiences and Pixar employees for increased representation and visibility in Pixar's animated canon have led to small steps towards inclusive character design and consultation during production, this visibility can also have negative consequences for those most vulnerable. Marginalized identities are frequently framed in connection with deviance, ambiguity, and villainy, which can reinforce the very boundaries these 'inclusive' representations hope to deconstruct.

According to Jim Morris, Pixar's president, the studio's mission statement on diversity and inclusion highlights its commitment to an inclusive environment and to producing "movies for everyone, and hopefully allows everyone who goes to see a Pixar movie to see a bit of themselves on the screen." (Morris) Pixar's guiding principles include producing content that is representative of its target audience, respecting differences, and extending inclusion to benefit the community it seeks to portray. The studio advertises its inclusive learning opportunities by highlighting its annual *Inclusion Summit*, which aims to address unconscious biases within the production team and in its projects, as well as other barriers that hinder the achievement of "full inclusion for all" (Pixar Animation Studios). The question is whether this range of guiding ideas on diversity and inclusive practices can be

detected in its recent filmography. Notably, more recent media coverage has reportedly noted the trend of Pixar “making a larger effort to bring diversity in just about every aspect of the production” (El-Mahmoud). At the same time, interviews with Pixar producers like Galyn Susman seem to emphasize this effort to be “more conscious and more deliberate about having diversity in [Pixar] films” (“Buzz L’Eclair - Rencontre Avec l’équipe Pixar!”, 00:02:18–00:02:23), citing audience feedback, film consultants, and employee experiences during the *2022 Annecy Animation Festival*.

Media Studies researcher and current TMU Chair of the School of Journalism, Ravinda Mohabeer, poignantly writes “[i]t is not uncommon to think about being visible as a social good, but this is not quite so straightforward when one occupies a body deemed as ‘other’” (1031). ‘Othering’ is not only found in research on ethnicity, but is also part of a growing body of queer studies on the monstrous as an allegory for ethnic or queer character narratives (Cheu; King et al.; Halberstam et al.). Visibility, as a person of any minority may likely be able to attest, is more than simply ‘being seen’ and does not equate to being understood or recognized as such. Mohabeer goes on to criticize how these “semi-voluntarily invisible” (1035) communities can lead to yet another resignation to the bare minimum of representation. This draws a parallel to Fought and Eisenhower, who emphasize the extensive discourse surrounding Disney characters who, through queer readings or subtext, have been ‘identified’ as queer by audiences or researchers but are never overtly so (173). Numerous entertainment news articles list queer-coded characters (Moore), which tend to be mostly antagonists, and a pervasive collection of Disney scholarship addresses queer readings of its most iconic villains, e.g., *The Little Mermaid’s* Ursula or *Pocahontas’s* Ratcliff (Putnam qtd. in Cheu). The purpose of these lists is purely speculative, but the few queer readings do speak to a need for positive representation and visibility. This apparent pattern of queer-coded villains, for instance, reinforces the assumption that queer identities are generally ‘up to no good’, remain largely out of sight until they are ready to strike, and evoke the traditional fear of a ‘gay agenda’. This shows, as Mohabeer fittingly observes, that visibility does not equate to acceptance (1040) but can also come at a price.

The “cost of visibility” (A. Evans 478) is often overlooked altogether. While overtly diverse representation may signal a politically liberal or generally tolerant society, it is far too easy to point to these representations without considering their effects and inherent codes. Cultural, Media, and Fan Studies researcher Michael

McDermott gives voice to queer perspectives on the visibility of diversity in the media and argues that a lack of quantitative diversity ultimately leads to stereotypes and the assumption that a single representative of a community may embody the perspectives, experiences, and characteristics of the rest of its members, rendering the acknowledgment of them as individuals beyond their diverse traits almost impossible (846). He determines that the resulting “stereotypes stamp out the diversity of the groups they are said to represent” (McDermott 847), which is an inherent part of this essentialist signifying practice. By recognizing the plurality of minority experiences, situating diverse identities makes visible how the proverbial ‘other’ is constructed through selective visibility and symbolic framing. In his chapter on the spectacle of the ‘other’, sociologist and cultural theorist Stuart Hall, for instance, describes stereotypes as simplified portrayals of a person or group that reduce them to certain, typically memorable, widely recognized, but negative characteristics (257–258). These characteristics tend to be exaggerated, and over time, these boundaries appear to be fixed. Hall then refers to feminist semiotics scholar and philosopher Julia Kristeva, who writes about the power of abjection inherent in stereotyping, which marks everything “which does not belong” (258) and thereby leads to the exclusion of that or those deemed ‘other’ or perceived as threatening one’s own identity. In short, stereotypical depictions can be equated with the imagined, the fantasy of a person or a group, as opposed to the perceived reality (Hall 263), thereby enforcing a hidden hegemony of power (259). If this naturalizing strategy is not contested or questioned, the “dominant regime of representation” (Hall 269) is nurtured, thereby encouraging the formation of biases and exclusionary practices. The result is that those who deviate from this socially constructed binary tend to be categorized as “Other” (Butler 155), oftentimes with punitive consequences as “[m]arking ‘difference’ leads us, symbolically, to close ranks, shore up culture and to stigmatize and expell anything which is defined as impure, abnormal [...] it also makes ‘difference’ powerful [...] because it is forbidden, taboo, threatening to cultural order” (Hall 237). For queer readings, especially the analysis of non-heteronormative identities and narratives, I will draw on queer theory and combine it with Kristeva’s idea of abjection as a common fear of this minority group. I also apply Hall’s outline of reactions towards difference to representations of queerness and disability in the journeys of selected characters in *Luca*, *Red*, and *Lightyear*. Criteria such as the prominence of the role (protagonists versus background characters, heroes/heroines versus villains/villainesses), overt labeling of the self and

one's identity, character dialogue, and (non-normative) behavior and characters' reactions (e.g., acceptance or rejection) to it help identify the visibility or invisibility of diverse identity markers during the viewing stage.

2 Methodological Approach

2.1 Research Questions and Hypotheses

Although quantitative studies of various diversity markers, most commonly gender, are popular research topics, much research on the animated children's media landscape focuses on Disney, and what little research there is on Pixar often lacks depth of analysis across various diversity markers, such as disability. The purpose of this thesis is to closely examine the messages and portrayals of selected diversity markers and relationships in Pixar animated films to add to the limited qualitative research that has been accumulating. Specifically, the aim of this project is to explore how diversity and its representation have been intended and actualized through visual and rhetorical choices by filmmakers, which are cross-referenced with paratextual claims that allegedly informed these choices. The translation of the filmmaker's intentions onto the screen offers a rich text for analysis, allowing for the discovery of new themes and the consideration of common themes identified in the literature review by scholars such as Finklea, Gillam and Wooden, Holcomb and Latham-Mintus, Kern, and Ruesink. Building on the established research focus, I will examine Pixar's intended and actual representation of diversity by analyzing how identities are constructed and focusing on the three diversity markers of gender, sexuality, and disability, using *Luca* (2021), *Turning Red* (2022), and *Lightyear* (2022) as examples.

Based on the outlined findings on the three selected diversity markers of gender, sexuality, and disability in Disney and Pixar films, the following research questions were formed:

RQ1a: *Which characteristics or power dynamics can be identified regarding femininity and masculinity?*

RQ1b: *Which stereotypes or themes are perpetuated or subverted, and in what ways?*

Existing theories by Gillam and Wooden on the New Man model, as well as Ruesink and Finklea's work based on it, lead to the following hypotheses:

H1: The New Man model remains applicable to contemporary Pixar films, and emasculation serves as a key narrative device through which these films

negotiate shifts from traditional masculinity to more emotionally expressive male identities.

H2: Finklea's four masculine themes of teamwork, bravery, heterosexual desire, and paternal anxiety continue to define male characterization.

H3: Female characters are strong and intelligent, yet require protection, value appearance over intellect, and are likely to marry.

H4: Although Pixar expands female agency compared to the traditional Diswoman, independent and intelligent female characters remain secondary to male protagonists and are not granted permanent emancipation.

Next to ever-changing gender roles, different kinds of relationships and bonds, particularly family and community, are at the forefront of Pixar's work in children's animation and arguably define its main audience and consumer base. Therefore, I will take a closer look at the kinds of gender roles presented as well as the different kinds of relationships on display, and the importance placed on them:

H5: Pixar still relies on a New Man vs. traditional-masculinity dichotomy, presenting emotionally aware heroes and inflexible, stereotypical villains.

H6: Post-2022 Pixar films show increased representation of alternative family constellations, offering power-wielding matriarchs and more equal distribution of domestic labor.

H7: Pixar fathers tend to be problematic or are depicted as less capable of caring for their children than mothers, yet are typically redeemed by the end.

H8: Although family conflicts end in reconciliation, they typically still entail a loss of the child's autonomy, with the child reintegrating into the family rather than honoring the child's long-term wishes, essentially refusing to relinquish control.

Based on research by Halberstam on transformation and the monstrous, Ruesink's readings of *Brave*, and Finklea's purposes of romantic relationships, the following question has formed:

RQ2: *How is sexual orientation addressed against the backdrop of a male-dominated, heteronormative society, and why is this addressed through the allegory of the monster?*

H9: Any addressal of overt sexuality remains short or a 'blink-and-you 'll-miss-it' moment, relegated to the background.

H10: Sexuality is addressed through allegory rather than overt discussion, using transformation or the monstrous.

To understand how physical and mental disabilities and those who fall under this category are portrayed in consideration of concerns of hyper/-visibility as addressed by Holcomb and Latham-Mintus, I examine the following question:

RQ3: *To what extent is disability visible, and how does the portrayal of disabilities lead to othering?*

H11: Although some Pixar films attempt portrayals of disabilities, stereotypical supercrip and pity-driven depictions remain dominant, especially for depictions of mental disabilities.

H12: Depictions of disability are linked to vilifying difference and othering those who do not conform to neurotypical norms, predominantly for antagonists.

As this thesis came to be in part due to the premise of Pixar employees speaking out in their open letter, demanding more diversity and representation to make it to the screen, and in consideration of the impact of consulting on character design, a part of the analysis aims to shed light on the power that advocating individuals, consultation, and minorities in production can wield for on-screen representation. So, the following question guides my analysis and consideration of various paratext surrounding the selected films:

RQ4: *Why are relationships important, both on and off-screen, and to what extent do their portrayals play a role in the representation of diversity?*

H13: The hopes of diverse identities and voices within the production (directors, staff) and reception (audiences) are increasingly reflected in the messages sent by these films.

For all three selected diversity categories (i.e., gender, sexuality, and disability), I will overarchingly examine:

a) *What intended representation can be identified based on the existing paratexts?*

b) *How is the representation implemented or actualized based on visual and textual parameters?*

Based on the initial viewings and existing research of the Pixar canon in the literature review, I argue that these films display a diverse range of previously underrepresented identities through rhetorical and visual foregrounding, further defying traditional gender roles and depicting inclusive family constellations. Although preliminary results indicate visual progress of gender, particularly representation of femininity, the textual level reproduces stereotypes, while queerness and disabilities remain largely ambiguous allegories, leading to tokenism as non-heteronormative identities are

predominantly delegated to the background. Due to the ambiguity of some of the terminology used in this thesis and in an effort to limit misunderstandings, the following section defines key terms used throughout this project.

2.2 Terminology

A variety of methodologies and terminology from Queer Studies, Cultural Studies, Gender Studies, Disability Studies, and, to a smaller extent, Film Studies are used to analyze representations of diversity in the selected films. The following subsection guides readers through this thesis's working definitions of some of the most crucial terms, clarifying their use within and relevance to the analytic framework.

Clarifying key terms in this chapter aims to ensure transparency and provide a foundation for consistent interpretation. As this thesis relies on concepts that, due to their ambiguity, can be interpreted differently across contexts, such as 'diversity', 'queer', and 'paratexts', these definitions lay the conceptual groundwork for subsequent chapters to build upon. The key concept of this thesis is 'diversity' in children's media. To clarify how 'diversity' is understood with regard to the films and the overall theoretical framework, I refer to the *University of Vienna's* statement on equality, diversity, and inclusion, which defines diversity as the inclusion of a wide range of shared and/or different personal and group traits among humans. These differences and commonalities are generally "linked to privileges and discrimination" (University of Vienna). To investigate the presented research questions, this thesis primarily focuses on the internal dimension of Lee Gardenswartz and Anita Rowe's four-layer model of diversity, including age, gender, sexual orientation, physical ability, ethnicity, and race, with personality at its core. The analysis primarily covers realizations of gender, sexual orientation, and disability. Race and age are only tentatively considered; the former is due to the limited scope of this study, and the latter stems from the small data set. As diversity categories are largely intersectional, e.g., a woman of color may carry an insulin pump and be part of the working class all in one, it is vital not only to analyze each category in isolation but also to draw conclusions from any occurring intersecting categories or lack thereof. If representation lacks diversity, variety, and authenticity, it can reproduce stereotypes and reinforce cultural biases, leading to prejudice (Hall 257–258). As children partially grow into social beings through exposure to children's animated movies, it is worth

exploring which types of characters, dynamics, related themes, and cultural depictions they tend to encounter.

If representation of diversity is not handled respectfully and truthfully, thereby addressing and challenging existing power relations, the term ‘tokenism’ is commonly used. Tokenism is understood here as the act of symbolically including a small number of people displaying some of these marginalizing dimensions of diversity in order to appear diverse, without aiming for true diversity. This often has negative effects, including high visibility of minorities and increased pressure to perform in a specific way. Additionally, tokenization might reduce individuals to a single characteristic (e.g., ethnicity or sexual orientation), overlooking other, more distinctive aspects of a person’s identity, thereby perpetuating stereotypes about an entire group of diverse people (LaPointe). Starting with gender as a diversity category, Simone De Beauvoir’s famous statement in her book *The Second Sex* that “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman [...] it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, [...] which is described as female” (273) advances several arguments on the understanding of gender. Sex and gender are separate categories, yet neither is natural nor static. Despite the possibility of many different categories, cultural norms typically classify people as either male or female. This normative dichotomy is attributed to the naming practice immediately after birth (Butler 179) and is often viewed as oppressive when one’s perceived identity does not align with societal expectations. Besides societies’ predominant idea of a gender binary, unique gender identities are lived and are performed through various choices of actions. The binary of the sexed being is equally arbitrary and serves no other function than the political naturalization of heterosexuality as the dominant ideology, relying on its reproductive aspect. Judith Butler, whose book *Gender Trouble* builds on De Beauvoir’s idea, then points to Wittig, who argues that sex is “a gendered category, fully politically invested [...] but not natural” (qtd. in Butler 153). If it is not natural but rather constructed and political in some form, the manner in which it is presented sends a message that invites interpretation, which this thesis seeks to explore in the construction of animated characters. Further, individuals do not possess an inherent gender but rather *do* gender (Butler 34) or construct it through the re-enactment of various actions and behaviors, such as gestures, body movements, and any form of expression that could be ascribed to a gendered norm, that are then ritualized (190–191). Gender is neither true nor false and is more likely to be fluid and prone to change and develop as a

person does over their lifetime. Neither sex nor gender necessarily conforms to the dominant idea of a binary and may even fall outside of it (Flowerday 75). During the analysis, the main focus on gender is therefore on its construction and the various acts that are assigned to different genders, particularly the feminine and masculine.

As pertains to sexuality or sexual identity, defining the concepts of queer, queer-coding, and queerbaiting is essential for distinguishing between overt and covert forms of representation. Clear definitions enable a precise analysis of visibility, intention, and interpretive practice throughout this thesis. 'Queerness' is a term mostly defined within the framework of how society sees sexuality. Like gender, it is a term with a complex history, largely dependent on established social practices and bound to change alongside them. The shortened term 'queer' is often used as an umbrella term referring to anyone transgressive of society's idea of gender or sexuality ("Glossary of Bias Terms"). The deliberate use of terms such as queer in the thesis's discourses or readings is not intended as a definitive labeling as an 'Other' but should be seen as an attempt to be inclusive of all individuals, positions, identities, and expressions that do not conform to or fall into the categories of 'straight' or 'cisgender' in a heterocentric society. This thesis takes a closer look at narratives and characters that exhibit behavior, engage in dialogue, or appear in ways audiences might perceive as transgressive of the expected norms for their respective genders. Whether these portrayals are overt or covert makes a difference in the overall interpretation of inclusivity and visibility of minority groups such as queer people. Close readings through a queer lens might seek to uncover messages concealed in subtext. The term 'queer coding' refers to any "act of subtextually associating a character with queer identities" (Fought and Eisenhower 177) or to the insertion of queer themes, identities, and relationships without an overt resolution of queerness. This is most commonly associated with the goal of going unnoticed by conservative viewers (Maier), which would lend support to the protective nature of invisibility, as later explored in the findings. 'Subtext' here, in short, is typically seen as opposed to the actual text of, for example, a movie, i.e., the canon and explicit labels. Explicit labels are part of our language, and their use or absence can shape how we react to the world and the people in it. Discourse around queer coding can lead to accusations of 'queerbaiting', which involves the promise of queer content or representation that is not fulfilled, rejected, or abjected, and is typically done to draw queer or progressive viewers (Maier). Targeting this particular audience may exploit their economic and socio-

political interests in queer media without delivering on the promise of representation. Although Feminist Studies scholar Dr. Eve Ng argues that queerbaiting does not lie in the failure of explicitly queer representations (25), the term is used in the results to address the tendency to favor subtextual allegories of queerness over explicit representations of queer identities and their realities and struggles, possibly causing harm in its own right. Such harm can be inflicted by uncovering or removing a subject or character from the protection of invisibility, either singling it out or turning the focus towards it where there is usually none, which leads to what Haschemi Yekani refers to as 'hypervisibility'. Hypervisibility here is understood as "being especially vulnerable to forms of violence or discriminatory policies" (Haschemi Yekani 82) and can be likened to the increased violence against trans people due to heightened trans visibility in the contemporary media space. This is only exacerbated by "intersectional forms of discrimination, such as racism, [...] access to health care and/or legal status" (Haschemi Yekani 82). Therefore, some minorities such as queer people (or people with disabilities) may rely on invisibility in unsafe political climates to a certain degree, whilst fighting for more acceptance and inclusion in order to be able to step into the light without fear of repercussions. Media practices trying to be considerate of these anxieties and honoring the wish to remain hidden often lead to exploration of, especially, queer themes through allegories or metaphors instead, which may lead to accusations of queerbaiting, if they are not realized.

Because queerbaiting stems from the voices of media and production companies that create and market their content to targeted audiences, it is worthwhile to consider these very voices (e.g., producers, directors, studio executives) in the production process, as they provide insights into the suggested readings of these movies and the deliberate or not-so-deliberate representation of their characters and relationships. These accounts will be treated as "paratexts" (Klecker 402) and will provide a contextual basis for comparing Pixar's promise or intention of representation with the analysis's results. The consideration of texts and paratexts should be deemed sufficient to allow for, for instance, a 'sanctioned' queer interpretation (Ng, sec. 9.1). Paratexts typically include behind-the-scenes footage during production, documentaries, interviews with the production teams and studio representatives, as well as metatexts such as reviews, magazine articles, and more. Ng's assumption that audiences of realized texts (e.g., films) also receive supplementary information through paratexts broadens the interpretative scope of this study and calls for the

consideration of these paratexts to ensure an accurate picture of how Pixar aims to embrace inclusion in the public eye. Additionally, I take the lead in this from researchers Valentina De Santi, Nicola Gabellieri, Stefania Mangano and Pietro Piana, who have undertaken a similar methodological approach in their study on the impact of Pixar's portrayal of tourist destinations, particularly the fictional Italian seaside town of Portorosso in *Luca* as a mirror to similar locations in Italy, by considering public commentary, non-academic press articles, and social network postings as paratextual data (4). Only publicly available paratexts, such as interviews, press releases, and behind-the-scenes material, will be considered for two reasons. Procuring qualitative data by personally conducting interviews would not only go beyond the analytical scope of this thesis but also disregard the fact that film studios actively participate in advertising how their product and work are to be read and interpreted by audiences through their 'on-the-record' statements available to the public.

2.3 Analytical Framework and Research Design

The chosen body of films has been pre-viewed for its potential for analysis and while some aspects of their storylines or depiction of characters may not immediately be seen as an overt act of representation of, e.g., minorities, queer voices or previously underrepresented groups, a close reading spanning four coding stages with parameters based on theory seeks to uncover these in-/visible or coded instances of representation in an effort to provide insights into Pixar's undercurrent idea of inclusion. Hall recognizes the merit of content analysis as an approach to examining character roles and plot messages, as it allows for the uncovering of the reproduction of stereotypes or outdated ethnic and gender ideologies (343), which is, in part, one of this thesis's aims.

Following Rose's approach to the content analysis of pictures (88–93), this study has taken inspiration from and adapted this theory for film, similarly to Decker, in that first, a systematic selection of Pixar films was made. Based on the initial literature review, a total of four "enlightening coding categories" (Rose 92) guiding the analytic process were identified, whose parameters are described in more detail in the following subsections. The categories consist of a) the visual coding of main characters, b) the textual coding of the protagonists, c) the aspect of performativity (e.g., gender), as well as d) background characters as a marker of in-/visible diversity in animated spaces. Each set of visual coding categories is informed by the diversity

parameters introduced by the tool *Character Linker*, currently in use at Pixar to improve visual representation (Rogez). Textual coding categories include selected character dialogue excerpts, their content value for performed inclusivity (rather than length or duration), and relations between textual statements and paratexts. Paratexts, as outlined in more detail previously, include critiques and responses by mainstream media channels, such as reviews in online journals, and will be considered to cover audiences' reception and the resulting discourses surrounding each film release.

Consequently, this study does not provide a list of 'studio-sanctioned' queer characters within the (Disney and) Pixar canon or quantify the different minorities represented throughout the last two prolific decades of Pixar animations. Rather, it considers the kinds of readings these texts allow in the context of various paratexts, providing additional insights into the development process and suggested readings (Gray 110) in light of inclusivity claims or a lack thereof. The same categories will be applied to the analysis of diversity in background characters.

To ensure each category of analysis receives due diligence and to allow for cross-referencing insights both during and after notetaking, each movie is viewed at least three times, with each set focusing on one of the three diversity markers. Borrowing from Decker; Keys; and Reedy, several rounds of watching and subsequent coding while completing a coding sheet with enough room for extensive and reflexive notes are planned with the goal of covering each film as objectively and as focused as possible. John Creswell and David Creswell recommend the strategy of keeping an observation protocol for ensuring research validity and reliability (190). Their advice of multiple validity procedures to check for accuracy is heeded in the use of a) a rich description of findings (e.g., detailed information of setting, and perspectives) both during the observation stage and after, and b) a clarifying reflection of the researcher's bias which might influence the interpretation of findings (Creswell and Creswell 200). This method resulted in approximately 42 pages of notes available for consultation, kept in printed and digital forms.

The present analysis of the representation of diversity in contemporary Pixar animated movies is conducted by a female researcher who identifies as queer (specifically demisexual) and whose childhood was fundamentally shaped by Disney and Pixar's filmography. A personal relationship through membership in the queer community and subjective knowledge of its struggles are consciously reflected in the conception of this thesis and beyond, although they may provide an insider

perspective on certain performative acts in relation to queerness. Whenever this occurs, these instances are marked as such during the observation process. Having been raised in Austria, with constant exposure to U.S. American ideology in children's media produced by North American media companies alongside European classic television series, the likely impact of the presented performances has been appropriately reflected to ensure the validity of the material's interpretation.

While the main focus of analysis remains on the protagonists and their relationships, the concept of in-/visibility also requires consideration of background characters, albeit in lesser detail. Assumptions established from previous research are cross-referenced, compared to, and reflected on to answer the main research questions and hypotheses. The coding framework for visual representation includes several aspects. I analyze in accordance with Creswell and Creswell's approach to documenting audiovisual digital materials (189). Due to the limited scope of this thesis, the coding process is limited to the analysis of physical characteristics (including clothing, facial features, posture, nonverbal mannerisms, and behavior (Hall 308; King et al. 96; Butler xxiii)). Each category was given deliberate attention during the viewing process to provide a broader overview and more detailed documentation, thereby ensuring qualitative reliability (Creswell and Creswell 201). For textual coding parameters, I draw on Paul Kanyuk, Mara MacMahon, Emily Wilson, Peter Nye, Gordon Cameron, Jessica Heidt, and Joshua Minor, who, in their conference paper on tracking character diversity during production at Pixar, state that the production team not only tracks data on "who said what" (2) but also the duration of characters' speaking down to the word count, which provides concrete data on the presence of diverse subpopulations in each shot. While this study's design is not quantitative, this process implies even stricter control over which character or representative of diversity is allowed a voice on screen. Exploring Pixar's gender portrayal, Decker's study raised interest in active speaking roles in relation to gender roles (19), whereas Butler highlights the aspect of power that inhabits the model of dialogue (20) while exploring the concept of performativity. It is therefore a logical step to consider what is being said and by whom, especially in relation to the character's understanding of the world. To document the textual level of each film, a section of the coding sheet is dedicated to detailed notes and transcripts of key scenes, and space is provided for selecting quotes and dialogue of particular interest.

3 Discussion: Identities and representation

In the following chapters, a selection of categories of representation is delineated to examine commonalities in the analysis of the chosen films from an intersectional perspective and address gaps in existing research. The discussion follows the order of diversity markers as outlined in the literature review, and first examines the performativity of gender and Pixar's subversion of traditional gender roles, especially of masculinities and the role of fathers within the family unit, by presenting the example of Pixar's New Man model at work in both *Red* and *Lightyear*. The analysis moves on to explore changes in the female character's agency and to reveal gender expectations regarding obedience versus defiance. Examples from Pixar's *Brave* and Disney's *Beauty and the Beast* are occasionally used to enrich the analysis, but due to this thesis's limitations, they cannot be explored in comparable detail. The last subsection of this chapter, then, aims to unpack these ideas and combine theory on the expectations placed on the roles of parents and their children through a gendered lens to examine changes to traditional patterns in Pixar's development process and in the voices advocating for change.

3.1 Gender

3.1.1 Traditional masculinities & Pixar's 'New Man' model

In this first chapter, the main protagonist of *Lightyear* is analyzed and contrasted with two prominent father figures in *Luca* and *Red* to illustrate how depictions of traditional gender roles have changed in Disney and Pixar's media landscape, and the impact this has on on-screen patriarchal power dynamics. The chapter provides examples of the postfeminist disappearance of the alpha male and the persistent presence of empowered female protagonists, drawing on critical-theory research, and applies the New Man model developed by the Gender Studies scholars Ken Gillam and Shannon Wooden. A closer look at the gender roles concerning (non-)traditional family constellations follows, and the shared characteristics of the main father figures in *Red* and *Luca* are discussed. Additionally, the chapter will highlight key observations on protagonists' refusal to conform to gender stereotypes, arguing that these subverted gender norms depict female power, agency, and the empathetic New Man model.

A striking example of the New Man model can be found in Buzz Lightyear's journey, as Gillam and Wooden argue based on his character in *Toy Story*, where he is first introduced as a toy inspired by the main character from Andy's favorite space movie at the time. *Lightyear*, released in 2022, is considered a spin-off, and the movie's first few frames establish that "that very movie" (*Lightyear*, 00:00:58) is what little Andy has watched, and that its success has fueled the production of Buzz Lightyear figurines, leading to the events of *Toy Story*. The story, therefore, can be positioned as both a prequel and a spin-off. Presenting a switch from *Toy Story*'s journey of identity-finding of a sentient toy in the human world to the journey of acceptance and emasculation of a human Buzz in the face of humbling failure and loss, *Lightyear* invites a reading of human Buzz undergoing the New Man journey. Within the first few minutes of *Lightyear*, Buzz is introduced as a cocky, headstrong, and single-minded space ranger on a mission, which immediately reveals a few negative masculine traits. For instance, his inability to comply and ultimately submit to decisions from upper authority, or making use of unnecessary support like rookies or tools such as the autopilot is justified by his claim that they not help but overcomplicate simple matters, therefore he is "better off just doing the job [him-]self" (*Lightyear*, 00:03:26–00:03:28). The scene reminds of stereotypical and traditional scenes that depict men's aversion to consulting manuals and maps or confessing to needing any support to get a job done as women are more prone to do, which is likened to showing weakness. Instead, Buzz rejects the very idea of teamwork, positioning himself as the lone ranger. Additionally, his disappointment in and disregard for the rookies in training, as well as his advanced calculations by an AI (with a notably female voice), indicate Buzz's toxic male character. He displays blatant disinterest in anything beyond the mission, which promises prestige and recognition from the space corps that employs them, and his narrow circle of confidants and career-driven personality underline this negative image. Buzz's self-worth appears to be solely based on the success of his mission as a space ranger. At his side, and arguably one of the main female protagonists of the movie, is Major Alisha Hawthorne, a queer POC woman in a position of power. In an interview with Tracy Brown of the *Los Angeles Times*, director Angus McLane revealed Alisha's character to have been added after the original pitch (Brown, "Lightyear's Alisha Hawthorne breaks new ground"). Despite her significance to the final movie and the importance of depicting a strong woman of color in a position of power and authority, initial versions of *Lightyear* included a female space ranger pilot as Buzz's

professional and romantic partner. The idea was allegedly scrapped as MacLane states that he “didn’t think Buzz worked in romantic situations” (Brown, “Lightyear’s Alisha Hawthorne breaks new ground”). While the lack of a female love interest initially runs counter to the New Man model and traditional themes of masculinity, *Lightyear* shifts the focus to a pointedly self-inflicted emasculation, thereby upholding a key element. As the movie’s pivotal scene shows Buzz escaping an alien attack, the female-voiced ship AI ‘Ivan’ warns Buzz about an imminent collision, essentially suggesting his plan is about to fail. While the rookie trapped on board alongside Buzz offers support, inquiring whether Buzz was sure about his actions considering the AI’s calculations, he responds with a decisive “I’m Buzz Lightyear, I am always sure” (*Lightyear*, 00:07:44–00:07:47). This posturing is immediately followed by the inevitable crash and a brief glimpse for the audience at Buzz’s surprised facial reaction. The plot establishes Buzz’s decision that leads to the ship’s crew being marooned on a previously unknown planet as entirely selfish, a choice that might even have been avoided with teamwork. In quick succession, Buzz attempts to court-martial himself, dramatically wrist-cuffing himself and demanding to be thrown into the rig. Meanwhile, Major Alisha Hawthorne, Buzz’s superior officer and best friend, takes charge and offers rational solutions. From this point onwards, Buzz’s disempowerment stems from being, in his eyes, the sole reason his crew is stranded, which is a direct result of his more negative ‘alpha male’ characteristics. Much like toy Buzz Lightyear in *Toy Story*, his most commonly expressed emotions at this point are guilt, frustration, and anger, in line with Gillam and Wooden’s findings of characters undergoing the New Man transformation. The only way out of his misery is presented in the form of test-flying experimental chemicals, allowing a spaceship to go into hyperdrive, testing the chemical’s stability to perform on a larger scale. His first jump, however, reveals that this option comes at a steep price as time moves differently for him in hyperspeed. Each foray into hyperdrive displaces him in time, leaving everyone on the planet to age while he only experiences what he believes to be a few hours to days. While he time-jumps and leaves his friends behind, Alisha takes charge of the crew’s settlement on the planet, assuming the leading authority to ensure survival until reinforcements arrive or they find a way to leave permanently. Buzz’s time-jumps fail to bear satisfying results. Whereas Alisha seems to have stepped up in hierarchy, Buzz’s increasingly frustrated mental state earns him a mental health companion in the form of a robot cat called Sox (whose role will be examined more closely in the chapter on disability). This

could be interpreted as an unconventional way of positioning Buzz in a homosocial buddy relationship that helps him access his emotions, albeit in a rather original manner, as illustrated in the movie's final third. As Buzz grows increasingly frustrated and devastated at failing his mission time and again, he is forced to witness Alisha's, i.e., his partner and closest friend's, life passing by in little glances upon each return from hyperspeed. The significance of Alisha's lived experiences as a queer woman of color in a position of power will be examined in more detail in the following section on sexual orientation and the impact of representation of non-heteronormative relationships in Pixar movies. Returning from hyperspeed leaves Buzz one last time, opening the door to Alisha's office only to find it empty save for a desk and a holographic message from a visibly older and fully grey Alisha in a hospital bed, talking about her life coming to an end. She is visited by her granddaughter, Izzy, who interrupts the message and is seemingly enamored with the idea of Buzz in space. The surprising loss of his dearest friend is emphasized by Buzz looking at a picture of a young Buzz and Alisha. Visually, a tear falls onto the picture, and the audience is granted a wide shot of a dimly lit Buzz in the empty room, with large shadows surrounding him, almost creeping in, as he wipes his face from afar, as shown in Figure 1. Besides anger and frustration, the loss evokes an emotional yet still visually obscured reaction, allowing masculine Buzz the space to grieve and, for the first time, get in touch with a more 'feminine' coded palette of emotions, including sadness.



Figure 1: A wide shot depicting Buzz Lightyear's emotional reaction to the loss of his friend Alisha Hawthorne (*Lightyear*, 00:24:40)

This moment of vulnerability is cut short by the newly appointed male Commander Burnside entering the room, immediately shifting the tone of the scene into an

awkward introduction, providing evidence for softer emotional displays of affection and connection to others, yet shrouded in isolation and short-lived. It is worth noting that Alisha's position is taken by a new male director (albeit a POC as well), adding to Finklea's findings of Pixar subtly maintaining hegemonic ideologies, making room for women in positions of power and leadership, yet unable to maintain these positions ("Examining Masculinities" 177). Pixar is quick to also provide Buzz with a new partner in the form of Izzy, Alisha's aforementioned granddaughter, now about 22 years old and dreaming of becoming a space ranger herself. The character of Izzy and, by extension, the 'Junior Patrol,' a "volunteer team of self-motivated cadets" (*Lightyear*, 00:42:06–00:42:09) requires a reluctant Buzz to face the pinnacle of the New Man narrative, the idea of "community as a site of power" (Gillam and Wooden 6), inviting a new form of post-feminine non-physical but communal strength "marked by cooperation, selflessness, and intelligence" (Gillam and Wooden 6). That Buzz has transitioned from alpha to New Man through his new role within his expanded team is illustrated in the ultimate showdown, which separates him from his newfound team of misfits who need a second chance, as all members failed to become proper space rangers for various reasons. Buzz's confrontation with the mysterious Emperor Zurg, who threatens the galaxy with his army of mechanical cronies and a time-altering plan, requires support, which he is finally willing to ask Izzy for. In the film's climax, a surprise awaits as Buzz discovers that Zurg is, in fact, an older version of himself trying to rewrite history and change his fate by erasing the one decision that has left his crew stranded on a hostile planet. The climax centers on younger Buzz's rejection of this plan in favor of protecting his team, the crew, and the lives they have built. It directly positions him against his own older self, bitter and weathered by loneliness (as his only companions are robots), willing to sacrifice everyone's lived experiences to soothe his hurt ego in the desperate hope of finally distancing himself from his failure and reinstating his honor, like Buzz Lightyear the toy in *Toy Story* (Gillam and Wooden 5). Older Buzz can be interpreted as a version that was never able to overcome his emasculation. After reaching hyperspeed, Commander Burnside planned to have him arrested for stealing the shuttle, forcing him to escape and never meet Izzy, the second female lead of the movie, who is in charge of delivering him from his traditional idea of masculinity into the new, changed man alongside the Junior Squad. As the elderly Buzz has never met his new team, he remained emasculated, never completing his journey, and compensates in a hypermasculine fashion by reclaiming traditionally

alpha male character traits such as ideas of dominance, leadership, physical power, competitiveness for positions of power, and a lack of visible or shared emotion stemming from social isolation. His isolation leads the character to attempt hyperspeed one last time with New Man Buzz's perfected hyperspeed crystal to return to the moment in which they failed the mission, thereby stranding the crew on the planet:

OB⁵: She'll get to be a space ranger again, Buzz.

BL: Yeah ... although.

OB: What?

BL: Well, she won't have her family. She won't have Izzy.

OB: Who's Izzy?

BL: (looks taken aback by the question)

OB: Look, she's not gonna miss anyone if she never meets them in the first place, right? The only thing people are gonna know is that we finished the mission. [...]

BL: I don't know, maybe, (sighs) maybe we should think about this.

OB: Think about what? Commander Hawthorne believed we could fix this mistake we made. And that belief cost her everything.

BL: Oh, no, no, no, we had that all wrong. She had a whole life down there.

OB: What kind of life? We're supposed to be space rangers. We're supposed to matter. You don't wanna live like this, Buzz. Waking up with that same nightmare. Haunted by your mistake. But you can finally let go of that. (*Lightyear*, 01:14:00–01:15:10)

The verbal confrontation depicts a fight between two different generational mindsets of men, with an elderly and bitter Buzz essentially deciding not only the lives of all their crew but also disregarding the life and choices of a woman he once considered a best friend. The idea of making decisions for Alisha and thereby negating her experiences and decisions seems invasive and wrong to a younger Buzz, who has transitioned to a more progressive idea of masculinity, considerate of his communal bonds. OB, however, is willing and prepared to erase Alisha's lived experience of a fulfilled (queer) family and all its following descendants in favor of a shared professional goal and the personal wish not to have to live with the guilt of having failed a mission. The more traditional and egocentric mindset of OB seemingly incapacitates any possibility of empathy, which is boiled down to 'new ideas' and which are almost held like a mirror to his younger version, vilifying older, more traditional thinking in the process:

OB: I don't understand what's happening here. You've changed, Buzz, and not for the better.

BL: No, you can't do this. You're gonna erase it all.

OB: Ha, exactly.

BL: No, you're gonna take away everything. People's families, their friends, my friends. They have lives on that planet, everyone does. Except for us.

OB: (sighs) I hardly recognize you, Buzz, all these new ideas. You know what, we'll go ahead and erase those too.

(Sox shoots OB in the back, incapacitating him briefly) (*Lightyear*, 01:16:48–01:17:25)

⁵ For easier transcription, concerns of legibility and differentiation between the older and younger version, "older Buzz" is henceforth abbreviated to "OB" and "BL" stands for the younger New Man Buzz *Lightyear*, if coherence and syntax allow doing so.

The conflict in this scene exemplifies a key consequence of OB's isolation and choices leading up to this point. OB embodies what happens to characters if they do not evolve into New Men. Buzz, having undergone the New Man journey with the help of Izzy and the Junior Patrol team, can no longer condone the actions and goals of his elder self, whose comment that the changes were not for the better clearly positions him as stuck in his alpha-male mindset. By explaining his reasoning and transitioning to an understanding of the importance of family and empathy at the detriment of his own prestige and ego, OB's version of Sox finds reason to support BL in his plan to stop his master. By and large, traditionally gendered aspects such as emotional availability and the appreciation of the inherent strength of communal bonds are depicted as positive character traits of men and women in a more progressive understanding of gender, as seen in *Lightyear*, which ultimately leads to the villain's demise.

In *Luca*, a young sea creature whose wish can be largely compared to Princess Ariel's in *The Little Mermaid* (i.e., to leave the ocean and live amongst humans), displays no discernible alpha-male traits just yet. Quite the contrary, Luca is portrayed with soft, rounded features, headstrong but sensitive to his mother's and others' feelings as well as his family's concerns. Every step of his rebellious foray into the human world is accompanied by expressions of insecurity and fear, illustrating Luca's remarkable emotional availability. By meeting fellow sea creature Alberto, in whom he finds a companion and a shared dream, the importance of homosocial bonds as the most transformative relationship comes into full effect. Luca still appears to be finding himself, and his innate character does not require the journey of emasculation to become a New Man. Despite still being a boy, he already embodies the most prominent traits of Pixar's New Men. Instead, the characters of Giulia's father, Massimo in *Luca*, and Mei's father, Jin, in *Red*, offer more room for interpretation.

Interestingly, while both father figures are introduced through cooking scenes, they differ in their execution and in how they play on audiences' assumptions about their characters, which are then either subverted or warrant reconsideration. Massimo's introduction is led by Giulia, who prefaces the boys' first meeting with her father by warning, "act casual, he doesn't do well with fear" (*Luca*, 00:37:40–00:37:43). The warning may stem from Massimo's impressive size and, at first glance, intimidating appearance. Viewers are first introduced to Massimo while he is chopping fish with a large cleaver, his rugged face only partially in frame, emphasizing the prominent scar on his chin (as shown in Figure 2), yet his eyes are obscured by his

bushy eyebrows. While chopping, Massimo is singing along to the classic Italian opera “Cavatina: Una Voce Poco Fa” from *The Barber of Seville* by Gioachino Rossini, which somewhat softens the foreboding scene by hinting at a silly, playful side in his singing. His quiet nature and initial communication through grunts rather than clear words only add to his menacing frame, which is revealed alongside a tattooed forearm once he turns around, as illustrated in Figure 3. The addition of holding a bloodied cleaver appears to reinforce the assumption that Massimo is dangerous and terrifying.



Figure 2: First introductory shot of Massimo singing in the kitchen (*Luca*, 00:37:36)



Figure 3: Massimo's introduction to the boys (*Luca*, 00:37:49)

Giulia explains Luca and Alberto's presence in town by claiming them to be visiting classmates from her school in Geneva who are there for the town's race, which Massimo initially doubts:

GIULIA: Yeah. You know what? Don't worry about it.
MASSIMO: Don't worry about it?
GIULIA: Don't worry about it. (Massimo sets his glass down)
MASSIMO: Giulietta? A word? (hard cut to them conversing semi-privately)
MASSIMO: I don't want you doing the race again. (in a worried tone) You get so upset.
GIULIA: Papà, per favore! I have a team now!
MASSIMO: There's also the entry fee. Money's tight.
GIULIA: I'll work double shifts at the pescheria...whatever you need!
MASSIMO: (with a pained smile) I can't sell what I don't have. What I need is more fish in my net. Mi dispiace, Giulietta. (*Luca*, 00:39:40–00:40:10)

The conversation reveals several aspects of Massimo's character as a typical Pixar father figure. He worries about Giulia's well-being over her obsession with the race, reasons with her due to financial troubles, shows incredible emotional availability, and apologizes for not being able to provide for her dream financially. Massimo, visually a traditional, hypermasculine male father figure, is seen preparing dinner and caring for Giulia in various scenes throughout the film. In fact, he promptly takes Luca and Alberto in for the night, even taking them on errands to discourage their plan to enter the local race for the prize Vespa with Giulia. Contrary to his mostly unresponsive and harsh facial expressions, Massimo is shown to be a deeply caring, involved, and dutiful parent as he goes out to look for Alberto upon his disappearance, in addition to

supporting Giulia and her team on the day of the race, having prepared or simply holding a banner to cheer her on. Massimo is, in a sense, visually easily misunderstood but narratively and in conversation, his New Man characteristics shine. *Red's* Jin is also introduced in connection to cooking and in a similarly misleading fashion. A major difference, however, is Jin's cooking montage, which evokes a commercial-like scene of him dramatically cutting ingredients and watching over the boiling pot. The camera direction leads the audience to believe that the cook is confident, precise, and in charge of every move. This image is initially briefly enforced by holding on to a shot of Jin, revealed through the cooking steam as the cook, with a stern face, focused on the dumplings in the pot before him, his glasses lit up in a style reminiscent of classic anime characters (such as Edogawa Conan in *Detective Conan* by Gosho Aoyama or Kyouya Ootori in *Ouran High School Host Club* by Bisco Hatori) often associated with an air of mystery, cold detachment, and showing off their superior skill, as can be seen in Figure 4.

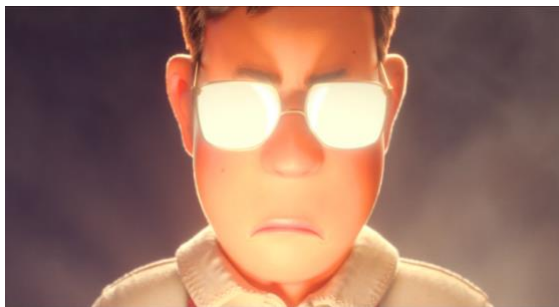


Figure 4: Jin Lee's introduction in a serious anime-style with glowing glasses (*Red*, 00:09:44)



Figure 5: Jin Lee's softer second introduction, depicting him with a flowery apron on (*Red*, 00:09:46)

According to director Shi, *Red's* character designs take great inspiration from and pay homage to anime in the expressions and acting (i.e., movements, behaviors) (*Embrace the Panda*, 00:27:00), so this introduction additionally serves to parallel common anime tropes to those familiar with them and continues to build on these expectations in what follows. In a comedic move, this air of superior strength, control, and competence is softened as he seemingly snaps out of his cooking-montage fantasy. The illusion is broken by him looking around in confusion, with fogged-up glasses and a pink-and-blue flowered apron on, watching over the boiling pot, as shown in Figure 5. His wife and daughter are hard at work across the room, preparing dumplings for cooking while watching what appears to be a traditional Chinese drama, presumably set in the Ming dynasty, in Mandarin, complete with subtitles. The mother-daughter duo criticizes the male lead for his choice of fiancée, likely leading to his

ultimate demise, which could have been avoided had he only “listened to his mother” (*Red*, 00:09:55), to which Mei agrees. The fiancé in question is accused by Ming of having chosen her partner to reach the throne and is likely to stab her partner on her wedding night, playing into traditional Asian filmic tropes. Mei then seeks approval for her dumpling skills and celebrates the “perfect” (*Red*, 00:10:10) rating she receives from her father.

Jin’s introduction sets up the idea of a softer depiction of masculinity, which is later built upon through the role reversal in which Ming, Mei’s mother, is revealed to be the controlling, strict parent. This leaves space for Mei’s father, who provides significant emotional support in key scenes throughout the film. One such scene takes place shortly after she falls victim to and learns about a family curse that turns her into a large red panda when she loses control of her emotions. The first half of the movie focuses on Mei’s struggles to come to terms with this transformational affliction. Luckily, there seems to be a cure in the form of a banishing ritual, which does not fully get rid of the panda but rather locks it away, the implications of which will be discussed in the chapter on sexuality. Mei is expected to lock away her panda, much like her female ancestors have done before her, including her mother, aunts, and grandmother. Faced with the decision of either banishing her panda or defying her family’s tradition of keeping it, Mei finds herself alone in her room, at a loss for what to do and in need of emotional support, which she then receives from her father. As emotional support is traditionally associated with motherhood, fathers are often relegated to similar roles, but only in playful scenarios (Ruesink 12). *Red* steps away from this requirement and puts Jin in a pivotal role in Mei’s journey towards emancipation from her mother’s control by showing sympathy for his daughter and admiration for his wife, ultimately helping her keep her panda by finding and sharing a video recording that captures a moment of joy Mei has found in her panda state. He visits his daughter, who is getting ready for the ritual, and encourages her:

MEILIN: (Jin enters her room) Hey, Dad. I-I’m almost ready.

JIN: (shows her the recorded footage of her in her panda form and her friends having fun) Did you make this?

MEILIN: Here, I’ll erase it.” (Jin pulls away the camcorder) What? We were just being stupid. The panda’s dangerous, outta control.

JIN: Huh. You sound like your mother. What has she told about her panda?

MEILIN: (sighs) Nothing. She won’t talk about it.

JIN: It was quite destructive. (chuckles) And big. She almost took out half the temple.

MEILIN: You- You saw it?

JIN: Only once. She and your grandma had a terrible fight.

MEILIN: Over what?

JIN: (points to himself) Your grandma didn’t approve of me but you should’ve seen your mom.

She was...incredible.
MEILIN: But I'm a monster.
JIN: (sighs) People have all kinds of sides to them, Mei, and some sides are messy. The point isn't to push the bad stuff away. It's to...make room for it, live with it. Mei, erase it if you want, but this side of you... (chuckles softly) ...made me laugh.
MING: Mei-Mei. It's time. (*Red*, 01:04:07–01:05:50)

Jin's support touches on several critical aspects of Mei's journey. The excerpt emphasizes Mei's association with the red panda as a loss of control, both over herself and her emotions, which her father kindly admonishes her for by comparing her to her mother. He gently invites her in on what appears to be yet another, albeit smaller, family secret, namely that of her grandparents' disapproval of Jin as a partner for Ming, which the latter apparently fought against. He proceeds with brushing off Mei's self-deprecating label of 'monster' by showing incredible emotional intelligence, encouraging her not to push away negative aspects of her identity, such as excessive emotions. Instead, he confesses to being amused by Mei's previously hidden and now unleashed panda side, providing emotional support and a shift in perspective for his daughter, leading her to defy tradition and ultimately keep her panda. While this role reversal confirms more progressive and inclusive portrayals of gender, the analysis finds that Pixar often does so only partially, at the expense of placing women in antagonistic roles, as is the case for Ming. Jin's advice is antithetical to what Ming and her ancestors have practiced for centuries, and ultimately led to the generational trauma of many women locking away a manifestation of an aspect of their identity out of shame, expectation, and tradition. In showing up for his daughter and providing her with context about her family's handling of the panda, Jin subtly expresses concern for her, not to keep her under control, but out of concern for Mei's future well-being. He does so at the expense of tradition, setting in motion a great change.

In summary, for the depiction of masculinities, this thesis finds that key factors of the Pixar male journey towards the New Man include acts of selflessness and cooperation. Alpha males tend to be put in situations that require them to learn the value of teamwork, typically, though not solely, in relation to emasculation and to becoming more reliant on others. Finklea's themes of bravery and teamwork are especially prominent in *Lightyear's* portrayals of masculinity. In fact, acts of selflessness by good characters to support others are contrasted with the selfish agendas of antagonistic characters, who focus only on their own benefit (Finklea, "Examining Masculinities" 135). Both themes are strongly featured in the depiction of positive masculinity in characters such as Buzz Lightyear, *Luca's* Massimo, and *Red's*

Jin. Whereas antagonistic OB falls into the thematic trappings of embodying the selfishness of Old Men-type characterization, unwilling to learn through emasculation.

3.1.2 Femininity and breaking gender expectations

Most Pixar films up until 2022 were produced by a room full of men, creating protagonists who are mainly boys or men, leaving little room to explore Pixar's ideas of femininity. Pixar's *Brave* and its first female main character, albeit still a princess, as well as female side characters, present the beginnings of how Pixar sets itself apart from traditional depictions of femininity as presented by Disney for decades. The scarcity of female protagonists, surrounded by male characters, leaves little opportunity for interactions among Pixar girls or women to expand on their construction of femininity. The literature review revealed some findings for Pixar, but as they were largely situated in the contexts of mothers and daughters, motherhood in general, and gender roles in the family, the idea of femininity outside those parameters and relationships is difficult to define. For this reason, projects such as Pixar's *Red* stand out for breaking away from tradition by centering on a female character and her three closest friends, and exploring what girlhood or femininity means. Director Domee Shi's statement about the story and development of *Red* to "have been breaking conventions" (*Embrace the Panda*, 00:05:32), therefore, particularly rings true. *Red* is the first feature-length Pixar film helmed by an almost exclusively female leadership team and the first animated feature with a female Asian protagonist at its center, who is navigating the challenges of growing up and into her body. Although puberty is a familiar topic for Pixar because its main characters are often children and teenagers, *Red* is unique in examining the female side of puberty and the discomfort it evokes in those going through it, or in those around them. The movie explores themes of femininity, sexual awakening, and close mother-daughter relationships influenced by cultural expectations. The core of *Red*'s synopsis is based on Shi's relationship with her own mother and growing up as part of a second-generation immigrant family in Toronto in the 2000s, and aims to expand previously limited impressions of what 'girls' can do, listing examples such as burping the alphabet, playing video games, and laughing at oneself in embarrassing situations. The messiness of growing up and all that comes with it was the focus during development as Rona Liu states about the transformation to be "bodily, it's emotional, it's all about, can I embrace this, can I grow into it, can I still love who I am knowing that I've become someone that I am not used

to” (*Embrace the Panda*, 00:03:51–00:04:05) but this blueprint also lends itself to readings besides a gendered one. The narrative of embracing and growing into one’s identity and hoping to still be able to live with oneself has been received positively by global audiences and invites the reading of this professed ‘new’ uninhibited depiction of femininity and where it may intersect with queer narratives (as discussed in more detail in the chapter on sexuality). Most of *Red* has been inspired by the lived experiences of this predominantly female production team, whose choices and experiences significantly inform the characters and their design. Besides the director, the team is mainly comprised of production designer Rona Liu, visual effects supervisor Danielle Feinberg, and producer Lindsey Collins (*Embrace the Panda*). In the behind-the-scenes documentary *Embrace the Panda*, on the production of *Red*, Danielle Feinberg, expresses her joy over the all-women leadership team due to having been one of the few women in the room for the entirety of her career so far (*Embrace the Panda*, 00:04:25–00:04:37). Feinberg is the first woman in 20 years of Pixar to have the job of visual effects supervisor (prior to 15 years as a lighting DP) in a new role. All while becoming a mother for the first time alongside her wife, Paige, she not only represents one of the few women in higher-level production roles at Pixar but also advocates for the queer community.

On the subject of femininity, *Red*’s all-female team behind the scenes is mirrored in the main group of characters, consisting of four girls on-screen. Even the rest of the film’s ensemble favors female characters (e.g., mothers, grandmothers, and aunts) and interactions within female homosocial environments. Clearly, the movie offers a female perspective where there have been few examples before. Visually and narratively, the design team wanted Mei to “feel like a real girl” (*Embrace the Panda*, 00:20:30–00:20:33) and clarified that this entails being “spunky, loud, [someone who] doesn’t care what anyone thinks” (*Embrace the Panda*, 00:19:30–00:19:35). These few adjectives already position Mei’s expression of femininity as distinct from traditional expectations of how women were expected to act. At the beginning of the movie, Mei’s arrival at school and monologue inform the audience of several aspects of her character. Mei takes up space, is unapologetically herself, does not shy away from expressing her opinions in class, and appears comfortable in her own skin. This declaration is interspersed in the documentary by a clip of Mei claiming to “accept and embrace all labels” (*Embrace the Panda*, 00:19:35–00:19:37), which makes a point of not putting Mei into a box. It may also cheekily hint at her open-mindedness, as

exemplified in a later scene where Mei shows allyship to her friend during a queer moment, since the term 'label' is commonly used in connection to sexuality. In a documentary-like montage completing Mei's introduction, she is described by other characters as "very enterprising ... mildly annoying" (*Red*, 00:02:59–00:03:02) by a math teacher, "a major weirdo" (*Red*, 00:03:05) by a punk girl under the bleachers, "an overachieving dork and narc" (*Red*, 00:03:06–00:03:08) by her classmate Tyler, which round out first assumptions audiences might make of her. Mei is generally well-behaved and studious. Her strengths and interests vary from her love of math and music, as she is part of the mathletes and plays the flute (slightly falling into stereotypical Asian depiction), to singing and dancing (mostly to her favorite band 4*Town). The only stereotypical displays of femininity are the pink-red-purple color scheme of her main outfit and some of the activities she shares with her mother. For example, during the opening moments of the film, the audience is shown images of her mother combing her hair while Mei does the same to a Barbie-like doll. Another picture shows the two sitting on a couch with face masks and cucumbers on their eyes, a towel on their head, and waiting for nail polish to dry, clearly enjoying a 'spa day', focusing on self-care and beauty, which is a common scene in media depicting girls and women bonding.

As colorful and diverse as Mei is portrayed, so is her group of close friends, who she introduces to viewers one by one in the school hallway. Miriam is a Caucasian redhead wearing braces and a more tomboyish style, including a shirt with the word 'SK8' on it, which places her in the skater scene. Abby is Korean and, in contrast to Miriam, seems to prefer a very pink-and-purple aesthetic, with flower-patch overalls. Despite her soft, feminine look, Abby's character traits include being rather aggressive in expressing her emotions, as depicted by extreme outbursts or reactions in several scenes. Abby is depicted as extremely outspoken and firm in her convictions, yet soft and gentle in tone when Mei needs support. The audience is first introduced to Abby in a school scene where she loudly reprimands three students in Korean. She expresses her anger by kicking a ball of scrap paper on the floor next to a bin, while shouting, which makes the kids jump in surprise or feel slightly intimidated, as shown by their facial expressions. The illusion of her intimidating character is shattered immediately when Mei shouts her name, which transforms her anger and puts a cutesy smile on her face as she poses for a 'character shot' with a peace sign in front of her face. Her friend group is completed by Priya, who appears Indian, sporting glasses

like Mei, and whose most significant characteristics are her very minimal facial expressions and aloof nature, providing contrast to Abby. Her fashion sense leans more toward the emo/punk side, including black nail polish, and her introduction suggests she is well-read. All girls are wearing some form of jewelry (e.g., the same friendship bracelet, different types of necklaces, or earrings). Priya even wears a nose ring and is seen reading a romance novel heavily inspired by the *Twilight* series by Stephanie Meyer (here: *The Final Chapter - Nightfall* by Roberta Moyer). In terms of design, the friend group is based on Domee Shi's experiences growing up as well. In an interview with Ryan Gaur, she explains that they

"are definitely a representation of the types of kids that I hung out with that I befriended. There's a large Asian population in Toronto [...]. It's funny because we will always get comments saying 'wow, you made your movie so diverse. How did you do that? Why did you do that?' And I'd be like, well, that's just reality." (Shi)

Notably, Mei's friend group is extremely diverse in several identity-informing categories, such as ethnicity, appearance, and body type (e.g., Abby is short and stubby, Miriam is more on the lanky side). Each girl varies in her facial expressions and the level of emotionality they show (from Priya's almost passive attitude and slow, monotone voice to a neutral Miriam to a very expressive and emotionally charged Abby), which conveys how diverse female characters can be in matters of emotionality, with the latter playing a key role in the theme of transformation in the movie.

Mei's mother, Ming, is first introduced to the audience by Mei with the words, "I do make my own moves, it's just that some of my moves are...also hers." (*Red*, 00:06:50–00:07:00). Upon arriving at home from school, Mei presents her curricular achievements to her mother, whose ambitions are clarified in her praise: "That's my little scholar. Today, honor student, tomorrow, UN Secretary General. The ancestors would be so proud." (*Red*, 00:07:11–00:07:19), a sentiment that clearly pleases Mei, prompting a large smile. So, the first introductory scenes not only try to establish some similarities between the two but also emphasize Mei's reliance on Ming, and Ming's control over and expectations of Mei as her mother. Interestingly, Mei's mother, Ming, is then presented as diametrically opposite to her daughter. Ming's expression of femininity is very traditional, likely the result of a cultural mix of her mother's style and a westernized touch, as much in her expressions of propriety as in her fashion. The documentary addresses this particular choice by stating that "in terms of design, we wanted her to have the really powerful shoulders with these like thin eyebrows kind of

like Chinese ladies from like the 60s with the cheap traditional Chinese qipao mixed with like working girl.” (*Embrace the Panda*, 00:37:15–00:37:30), with her clothes unifying ideas of diversity categories such as class and ethnicity in the cultural influences of her style. Not through fashion alone, Ming also appears to define herself through her daughter, a point strongly emphasized by her teachings on traditional ideas of filial piety and parents’ sovereignty over their children’s decisions and lives. She is presented as poised, strict but warm in her parenting, highly protective of her daughter, unwavering in her convictions, headstrong and elegant.

Much of *Red*’s runtime focuses on Mei and her struggle with controlling the transformation into a panda when losing control of her temper, which has been briefly introduced in the previous chapter. Additionally, Ming’s struggle with motherhood, shaped by her lived experiences with her controlling mother, is also important, since all female descendants are blessed or cursed by the red panda transformation. According to Ming, the curse originated when all men were gone during the war, leaving mothers like the shrine’s goddess, San Yi, desperate to protect their daughters. The era mentioned is presumed to be the Ming dynasty, based on a flag symbol briefly shown on a family scroll. Ming reveals that the gods gave their ancestors the ability to harvest emotions, transforming them into beasts to protect their family and village. As the curse appears to draw strength from a woman’s emotions, a second warning is issued, and Mei is told to anticipate the signs and prepare in advance. The audience is then informed about a cure for this curse, based on a ritual performed at a specific phase of the moon, which is Mei’s only chance to banish the red panda within herself. Female descendants of San Yi are taught to control their emotions or to suffer the consequences, a fact that can be argued to be reminiscent of traditionally male-dominated spaces. As Ming, based on her own experiences with the red panda, tends to hold her more intense emotions in check, she can be seen expressing more negative and ‘masculine’ emotions, such as anger, without consequence. This results in Ming often steamrolling her daughter rather than inviting discussion about emotional regulation. Interestingly, after Mei’s initial approach to the family curse with ignorance and hoping the transformation to be a bad dream, her tactic shifts. She tries to expose herself to situations and visuals that evoke strong emotions and attempts to actively suppress them to convince her mother that she is in control of her transformation, but this only works for a short time and after an explosive episode resulting in Mei hurting

her classmate, Tyler, at his birthday party, the family's plans shift to speeding up the time and preparation of the family's banishing ritual, explained in the previous section.

Building on the analysis of Mei's conversation with her father in Mei's bedroom shortly before the ritual from the previous chapter, Ming's sheer power is emphasized by Jin, which refutes Kern's assessment of the common Pixar mother only being allowed to be powerful in a non-threatening way to their male partner (24). This is not the case here, since the film pointedly subverts the idea of the strong, impulsive, and dominant father figure and the caring, submissive mother. By gently stressing, in a soft tone of voice, that the red panda and all its implications of control, femininity, and filial piety are messy sides that are maybe even 'bad' but permitted to exist, Jin allows Mei to expand her boundaries of what traditionally makes a woman and a good daughter.

Lightyear focuses on a man but places importance on Alisha and Izzy Hawthorne as female support characters, offering insights into femininity in relation to power dynamics and gender roles. In terms of power, *Lightyear* features a broad range of female characters in various positions of authority, and with interests traditionally ascribed to men, such as Junior Patrol member Darby Steel, who not only has a record but is also interested in and knowledgeable about weaponry. In the end, she even takes on ammunition duty for the crew, whereas the only other man on the patrol team, excluding Buzz, is in charge of sustenance, subverting traditional gender expectations. Alisha is depicted as a strong, intelligent, resourceful, and highly capable woman and POC who can hold her own in a fight out on patrol and lovingly teases Buzz for his overly serious attitude on a mission. Alisha is not only funny but also competent, rising quickly in rank over the course of many of Buzz's time jumps. Her rise in military space authority is not hindered by pregnancy nor her being queer and in a loving relationship with her wife, discussed in more detail in the chapter on sexuality, which undeniably paints a rather progressive picture of femininity and female ambition. Finklea criticizes the emergence of strong female protagonists or characters in his study on Pixar's homosocial relationships as they eventually largely conform to the conservative notion of marriage as their 'true' happy end ("Examining Masculinities" 102). He goes on to point out that, despite being granted positions of authority, they also tend to require male guidance to fully step into those roles, thereby weakening their authority (Finklea, "Nurturing New Men" 103). Instead of "shattering gender barriers, we see that these acts are clearly confined within the bounds of patriarchy" (Finklea, "Nurturing New Men" 103), as their male counterparts are granted similar status, levels of authority,

and sometimes even female romantic interests. Alisha's character fully subverts the idea that women are granted access to higher positions and authority only at the behest and with the permission of a man. In fact, in *Lightyear*, her promotions happen in spite of Buzz's obsession with his mission, which Alisha seems to defend for the longest time, prolonging his efforts beyond what they might have been. It is, therefore, her authority which allows Buzz to go on the journey of a New Man. Alisha appears to be a doting grandparent and wife, earning great respect to the point of being her granddaughter Izzy's role model. Izzy shares many similarities and character traits with her grandmother but has to learn to overcome her insecurities about not being able to follow in her footsteps, which highlights the pressure many young women face to measure up not just to societal expectations but also to the impressive women who challenged gender barriers before them.

Luca also centers on male protagonists but presents an alternative form of femininity in Luca's (and later Alberto's) friend, the red-headed Giulia, who can be considered a tomboy based on her fashion and unapologetic, mouthy attitude. Giulia is a sweaty, sporty, competitive, and headstrong girl, similar to Mei, but the sweatiness is less wanted/accepted by Mei as part of the panda (and/or puberty). During her official introduction to the main characters, while biking both boys around on a carrier attached to her bike, she displays impressive strength and proclaims:

GIULIA: You know, we underdogs have to look out for each other, right?

ALBERTO: What's under the dogs?

GIULIA: Underdogs, you know, kids who are different. Dressed weird or a little sweatier than average. (raising her arms to show sweat patches under her armpits, sporting an awkward smile)

LUCA: (unsure) Uh...?

GIULIA: (in a worried tone) Too much? Too much. (*Luca*, 00:33:04–00:33:17)

The scene reveals that she feels different and left out because of her fashion and attitude towards personal grooming. At the same time, she limits her expression of careless disregard for hygiene, quite atypical in terms of femininity, by labeling showing off her sweaty armpits as 'too much'. The words seem to have an effect on her, as a later scene has Giulia reiterate that her mother also chides her for sometimes being "too much" (*Luca*, 00:53:22), which can be interpreted in three ways. The remark could address her tomboyish character, an exuberant and expressive character falling outside the norm or her mother's resignation in parenting an energetic and headstrong daughter. The comment may also be just a playful chiding of a mother by her daughter and not have any deeper meaning, yet her living arrangement and tendency to

instinctively apologize after bursts of energy or self-declared moments of being ‘too much’ speak to a pattern of behavior marked by constant reminders to rein herself in.

Overall, *Red*, *Luca*, and *Lightyear* present an abundance of strong, independent female characters without relegating most of them to the background in favor of male characters. All three films depict femininity as a combination of various characteristics, not confined to traditional expectations of appearance, behavior, or emotionality. Themes of Diswomen are largely left behind, with female characters being outspoken and unapologetic, and exhibiting incredible individuality in both appearance and character. Contemporary depictions allow them to challenge traditional ideas of femininity, which limit it to being overly interested in their appearance and in need of rescue. They are granted agency and the freedom to choose their identity and destiny, thereby creating opportunities for emancipation from traditional gender expectations.

3.1.3 The subversion of and non-conformity to gender stereotypes

This chapter will explore the defiance of gender norms in the face of the transition into adulthood, as illustrated by the fictional boy band “4*Town” in Pixar’s *Red*. The introduction of the fictional boy band 4*Town effectively references female gender stereotypes in fan behavior and subverts gender expectations in the depiction of the five male band members, offering insights into female ideas of masculinity. An early scene featuring Mei, Miriam, Abby, and Priya provides an illuminating example. After eyeing the local Daisy Mart employee ‘Devon’ as a group, Mei’s friends openly discuss the softness of his hair, noting that Abby’s mother works at the salon Devon frequents. Miriam and Priya go so far as to request locks of his hair, in an almost strangely obsessive infatuation. Devon’s appeal initially eludes Mei, prompting her to urge her friends to remember “what real men look like” (*Red*, 00:04:02–00:04:05) by displaying a magazine with a boy band on its cover. The impact seems to visually blast the girls away with the boys’ charm and sex appeal. The men in question are the five members of the in-universe boy band 4*Town, introduced as blond, likely Caucasian Jessy, who went to art school and is the father of two children; Korean Tae-Young, who is known to foster injured doves; Robair, the leader of the group and a black teen emphasized to speak French, and shown reading a book while enjoying a coffee in a café in Paris. The last two members are Aaron T. and Aaron Z., twin brothers who are simply described as talented, since Mei’s friend group’s interest tends to focus on the other

members. Their appearances seem diverse, as their ethnicities include Caucasian, Korean, French-Canadian, and Afro-Asian-Canadian. A study on media representations of boy bands and their fans by Renita Coleman and Annie Lyons reports a tendency toward negative stereotyping and an interplay of age and gender, as most boy bands tend to provide “manufactured masculinities designed to appeal to young girls and their families, manifesting in the use of descriptors such as ‘vulnerable’, ‘delicate’, and ‘gentle’, which are considered traditionally female characteristics” (5). According to Coleman and Lyons, part of the widespread appeal of boy bands is owed to this very vulnerability, which incites caring feelings for their often youthful, prepubescent, feminine, lean, and sensitive members. Boy band members are commonly unafraid of emotional expression and tend to lean into androgyny (Coleman and Lyons 4), which generally applies to 4*Town, albeit not from their initial creation.

Early depictions of 4*Town in the paratextual documentary on the production of *Red* present a different picture of the band’s members, arguably in a more hypermasculine manner. Visually, the sketch in Figure 6 depicts sharper facial features, a larger frame, and even a hint of a beard in the form of a ‘goatee’. In stark contrast is the final design of the band’s characters, depicted in Figure 7, which evidently shows softer, more rounded, almost androgynous features, largely fitting into Coleman and Lyon’s categories of manufactured masculinities.



Figure 6: Early sketch of 4*Town, showing all 5 members, (*Embrace the Panda*, 00:16:02)



Figure 7: Movie version of 4*Town, showing all 5 members, (*Red*, 00:10:20)

In creating a boy band for her movie *Red*, director Domee Shi drew heavily on the early-2000s boy-band aesthetics she grew up with. Therefore, while some stereotyping may be intentional in this case, as the band’s creation has been inspired by groups such as BIGBANG, BTS, Backstreet Boys, NSYNC, One Direction, and O-Town, which can easily be described with similar terms; a case can be made for

deliberate subversions, as especially gendered stereotypes often stem from a deeply rooted history of power and male dominance (Nowicka 31).

Coleman and Lyons argue that boy bands' general appeal is aimed at young girls, adolescent women, and their families. A parallel can be drawn in Mei's parents' attitudes toward 4*Town early and later in the movie. Shortly after learning to somewhat control the panda, Mei pitches the idea of going to a 4*Town concert to her parents by giving an elaborate presentation to secure their permission to attend. Her parents approach the presentation from different angles. While Mei's father appears willing to give his daughter's pitch a chance, as evidenced by his attentively perusing a band flyer and suggesting they trust their daughter, Ming vehemently refuses and proclaims the band's music to be "filth" (*Red*, 00:38:39), a sentiment that appears to be shared by Abby's Korean mother, who labels it "stripper music" (*Red*, 00:04:11), marking their daughters' interest as something shameful in the eyes of societal norms, at least in Ming's generation. It is all the more interesting then that in a post-credit scene (*Red*, 01:38:40–01:38:50), Mei can be heard shouting for her father, asking whether he has seen her 4*Town CD, followed by the camera slowly panning away from the basement staircase to reveal Jin secretly dancing to 4*Town's hit "U Know What's Up". Jin can be seen sporting 'Jesse' glasses and a light stick (e.g., common band merchandise). In the background, a tape recorder and a board displaying the band-style logo '4' lie on the ground. Jesse being Jin's 'bias' (i.e., preferred member) of the band might stem from personal preference or from Jesse's status as a father, a role Jin can relate to and which might appeal to him in a fellow man. The short scene confirms that Jin knows the lyrics to the song and, to a degree, the matching choreography, implying a deeper interest in the band and that Jin is indeed part of its fanbase. On the one hand, the scene subverts the viewer's expectations by positioning a man, presumably in his forties, far beyond the movie's established fanbase, as participating in its fan culture. On the other hand, his joyful participation in fan culture is clearly done in secret, as he is hidden away in what appears to be the family's basement. The setting around him is framed by a tool bench, shelves with files and archived documents, and, to its right, two lines of sausages hanging from a string connecting the shelf to a wooden beam. Jin's surroundings suggest the basement is mostly his private domain, assuming he is the one in charge of fixing appliances and therefore needs the tool bench. Due to the brevity of the scene, it is unclear whether this moment occurs before, during, or after the movie's events. Taking Jin's passivity

and neutral facial expressions in response to Mei's presentation on 4*Town into account, the character's non-judgmental interest in Mei's 'Why must I go?' presentation flyer does not provide enough information either. In addition, his thoughts remain unclear as Ming questions her daughter's interest in the band, responding to Mei's emotionally charged yet restrained disappointment after Ming's largely rhetorical rejection of the concert idea. In fact, Jin's response is cut off by Ming's more dominant motherly opinion. Another subverted expectation of the targeted fanbase can be found in the character of Tyler, a fellow classmate of Mei and her friends, who often incites Mei's anger with his thoughtless comments. In the movie's third act, Mei and her friends spot Tyler in the crowd of concert attendees, and his initial reaction appears to be to hide behind his 4*Town merchandise and cup. The glasses he is wearing point towards Aaron Z. being his favorite member, which is later confirmed upon the band's individual introductions, at which point Tyler screams in a fanboyish manner, "Z, I love you, man" (*Red*, 01:13:38–01:13:40), expressing both fanboy behavior and extreme parasocial emotions. Interestingly, Tyler's presence sparks an immediate celebratory reaction from the girls toward their fellow 4*Townie, welcoming Tyler into their midst with the words "welcome to the sisterhood" (*Red*, 01:12:58), implying a gender-transcending idea of community within their friend group and even forgiving past transgressions. The easy acceptance of Tyler's fanboyish behavior goes hand in hand with Finklea's claim that female characters are often portrayed as more accepting of gender-norm transgressions, as outlined in the literature review. During the concert, the girls and Tyler are seen crying excessively and looking euphoric upon their band's entrance, showing that all genders are equally excited, with no visible differences in level or expression of emotion. Ultimately, the design of 4*Town is based on female ideals of vulnerable, sensitive, and non-threatening men, which is shown to defy societal standards of masculinity to some degree and has been confirmed to appeal to men and boys alike. While Coleman and Lyon's study is limited in its intersectional approach, as it does not account for racial intersections, 4*Town presents a diverse group of boys in terms of appearance and race, much like Mei's friend group. The analysis also shows an audience beyond the stereotypical young woman, without persistent instances of ridicule, yet with a hint of shame in older generations' enjoyment.

3.2 Sexual orientation

After exploring how gender, gender roles, and the expectations that inform them shape the expression of power dynamics, I now aim to foreground Pixar's depiction and ideological message regarding the diversity category of sexual orientation. First, I examine the novelty of overt displays of queerness in *Lightyear* on the textual and narrative level, focusing on Alisha Hawthorne. Subsequently, a close reading of dialogue allows me to identify queer analogies in the relationships of *Luca*'s protagonists, Luca and Alberto. Through an analysis of *Luca* and *Red*, I investigate the interrelations among invisibility, hypervisibility, and the marginalization of communities. Another connection will be drawn by reading the fantastical transformation of its characters into non-human beings as an allegory of the monstrous queer, an expression of adolescent desire, and of the body's maturation, for example, through signs of puberty.

3.2.1 Queer coding vs. a departure from ambiguity

Lightyear breaks new ground not only by having Buzz Lightyear explore unfamiliar planets and time travel, it also does not shy away from queer representation that is central to the plot and cannot easily be removed from the movie to appease non-Western markets. Commander Alisha Hawthorn is established as Buzz Lightyear's superior, teammate, and best friend. After each hyperjump, Buzz actively seeks out Alisha at the settlement, reorienting himself to the current timeline and updating himself on what he has missed. The movie uses these brief sequences to visualize the passage of time while Buzz is gone, or rather, the length of time that has passed for everyone else in the meantime. When Buzz returns from his initial time jump, Alisha welcomes him with a hug, and he notices her wedding ring. Their ensuing conversation reveals that Buzz knows her sexual orientation or romantic preference for the same sex, as his inquiry uses the female pronoun for her assumed partner.

BUZZ: Wait, what's that?

ALISHA: Oh, I got engaged.

BUZZ: Oh, wow. That's great. What's her name?

ALISHA: Kiko. She's one of the science crew.

ALISHA: It's funny, it never would've mattered if we hadn't been stranded.

BUZZ: You got engaged to someone you just met?

ALISHA: Buzz, I met her three years ago.

BUZZ: Oh, right. Right. Well, congratulations. I'd love to meet her.

ALISHA: Well, there's plenty of time for that. Get some rest. That's an order. (*Lightyear*, 00:17:35–00:18:02)

The ease of the exchange and the way she responds confirm Alisha's willingness to share her romantic inclination with her teammate and friend. Upon learning this, Buzz's immediate and nonchalant congratulatory response demonstrates a positive attitude toward same-sex couples and marriage, making him a safe space for Alisha's relationship. Additionally, this tender but brief moment between the two offers audiences an opportunity to see acceptance of diverse relationships and attractions, without drama or the slightest hint of rejection. Similar to the use of 'her' for an (to the audience) closeted Alisha, the Pixar short *Out*, referenced in the literature review, features a moment in which the gay protagonist's mother expresses her hope that her closeted son will find someone who makes him happy by using the male pronoun 'he', signaling his mother's suspicion but acceptance. The use of the female-pronoun presumption and the protagonist's nonchalant reaction help normalize queer relationships on screen.

Lightyear, in production and beyond, navigates the fine line between authenticity, visibility, and censorship. The dialogue clearly establishes Alisha's queer, interracial relationship as something positive to be celebrated, normalizing same-sex attraction within the movie universe. Additionally, Alisha's relationship is the main narrative focus of Buzz Lightyear's time-jump journey and is inextricably linked to the central problem of *Lightyear's* plot. This is important in the context of the movie's supposed in-universe origin. The opening scrawl of *Lightyear* references one of *Toy Story's* central characters, Andy, receiving a Buzz Lightyear toy for his birthday in 1995, a figurine of a character from his favorite movie. The last opening line declares, "This [i.e., *Lightyear*] is that movie" (*Lightyear*, 00:01:00). In an interview with *Lightyear* director Angus MacLane, instead of the plausibility of *Lightyear's* release due to its portrayal of queerness, the presence of a post-credit scene (which *Lightyear* features) is called into question, as this seems to be an unusual occurrence. MacLane's response highlights that the production was not "super strict with the conventions of the movies of the era" (Brown, "Here's Why") and states that he imagines the Buzz Lightyear toys to be a result of a TV show, which was "an offshoot of a popular sci-fi movie" (Brown, "Here's Why") released sometime in 1986. Several scenes in the original *Toy Story* establish that the in-movie *Lightyear* was indeed a box-office hit and well-received by audiences at the time, warranting a spin-off. *Toy Story* also features a scene at a toy store, depicting several shelves and aisles full of *Lightyear* movie merchandise, which makes it easy for Andy's mother to acquire the Buzz Lightyear

toy for her son's birthday, introducing the character to the rest of the main cast in Andy's vicinity. Instead of strict, period-accurate attitudes toward queerness, authenticity was supposedly at the forefront of the depiction of Alisha's relationship, according to MacLane. MacLane's comment on the production's consideration of 1990s conventions is notable, as the period's attitudes toward same-sex attraction, affection, and marriage were still contested. Because the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) of 1996 defines marriage as a union between one man and one woman, same-sex marriage was not granted federal support either (Henry). The implications remain that the first *Pixar*-led animated movie, *Toy Story*, released in 1995, is based on a franchise that would have prominently featured positive queer representation or, in the original franchise, possibly cast Alisha in a more heteronormative relationship to get past censorship. To clarify the historical context, *Disney* acquired *Pixar* in 2006, and in the 90s its attitude toward queerness was largely limited to the queer coding of its most prominent villains. One such example is Ursula from *The Little Mermaid*, whose style and mannerisms were largely inspired by drag queen Divine (Jackson). Other examples include *Aladdin*'s Jafar (1992) and *Peter Pan*'s Captain Hook, whose exaggerated mannerisms, use of makeup, and homosocial relationships have been the subject of queer readings by scholars such as Dion McLeod, a Queer Theories researcher and PhD student, in his PhD thesis. Assuming Andy's favorite childhood film of the 1990s is *Lightyear*, it does not support the goal of historical authenticity at the very least. At the time, Alisha's prominent role as a queer POC woman in power in an explicitly queer interracial relationship and marriage is also highly unlikely to have passed censorship, given that it does not comply with the first principle of the Hays Code, a set of self-imposed guidelines developed and adhered to by the Hollywood film industry for films between 1934 and 1968. The influence of this morality code extended beyond its active years of enforcement, cementing decades of restrictive policies and shaping societal expectations that no sympathy should be shown for anything that might lower the audience's moral standards, or for those committing wrongdoings or sinful acts (Rosenfeld). At the time, homosexuality was still very much considered a sin and, hence, would not have received the green light to be so prominently featured in a children's movie. Besides MacLane's inconsistencies in production goals and in the authenticity of the depiction of inclusive relationships, time passing in *Lightyear* during Buzz's various time jumps is measured by the progression of Alisha's family life and her relationship developments with Kiko. Despite the brief

but significant focus on their relationship in the plot, the concept of Buzz jumping through time several times diminishes the potential to feature the queer relationship or character beyond brief glimpses into their lives. After the engagement reveal, the second jump follows soon after, and with another four years having passed, Buzz greets Alisha, who is heavily pregnant. As seen in Figure 8, upon Buzz's next return from yet another time jump, Alisha and Kiko's little family seems loving, with Buzz watching as the couple holds each other while their now toddler-aged son sits on Alisha's hip.



Figure 8: Kiko, Alisha, and their toddler son embracing (*Lightyear*, 00:21:31)



Figure 9: Kiko, Alisha, and their grown son celebrating his graduation (*Lightyear*, 00:22:00)

The small family is warmly backlit, presenting a family unit at the very center of each held medium shot. The time-jump montage continues, and Alisha can be seen climbing the career ladder as her growing accolades are hung on the office walls, and the number of military insignia on her uniform grows, which she wears at each encounter with Buzz. One of Buzz's last time jumps shows Alisha visibly aged, with a strand of gray in her hair and wrinkles on her face, proudly putting a graduation cap on her now-grown son's head, holding hands with a bespeckled Kiko, softly smiling at each other (as seen in Figure 9). The progression of the family's lives is sped up, as the timestamps confirm that this development occurs in less than a minute of screen time. Their family unit is last seen only twenty movie seconds later (in Figure 10), with Alisha opening the door for Buzz to her family once again. A banner in the background speaks of the 40th anniversary of their partnership or marriage. Their son has a woman under his arm, who appears to be his partner. Kiko welcomes Alisha with a celebratory drink in a flute before kissing her, and her son and his partner toast to them.



Figure 10: Kiko and Alisha kissing in front of their son and his partner at their 40th anniversary (*Lightyear*, 00:22:20)

The significance of this kiss has been a topic of debate in several articles ever since the movie's release, as it marks the first on-screen same-sex kiss in Pixar and Disney studio history that has not been relegated to the background, and has been linked to *Pixar's* most prominent LGBTQIA+-related scandal so far. The kiss was hard-fought and earned through the combined efforts of many voices at Pixar and cost the film its release in 15 countries, including China, Saudi Arabia, and Indonesia (O'Falt).

The necessary disregard for historical accuracy and authenticity in the source material for *Lightyear* is particularly striking given the criticism Disney has received from within Pixar. In a letter to Disney's executives, a group of LGBTQIA+ Pixar studio employees and allies strongly criticized the studio's censorship practices, claiming that "nearly every moment of overtly gay affection" (Vary) had been cut from recent films. This incident prompted major changes to related projects released thereafter, including *Lightyear*. History seems to repeat itself, as this timeline of changes and major shifts in production strikingly parallels the events outlined in the literature review on *Elio's* production. As an article by Adam Vary for *Variety* reports, the queer kiss was cut entirely at one point, only to be reinstated later in response to public pressure, as opposed to *Elio's* storyline. Moreover, Vary's article notes that Disney's pushback against *Lightyear* was directed at the kiss itself, not at Alisha's relationship, clarifying where Disney's priorities lie. Yet despite Alisha's significance, she was not originally in the script either. Her position was originally intended as a love interest for Buzz Lightyear, but the idea was scrapped because Buzz was not considered a character

suitable for romance. This idea is particularly interesting because it deviates from the source character of toy Buzz Lightyear, who does receive a love interest in the *Toy Story* sequels and enters a confirmed relationship with Jessie the Yodeling Cowgirl by *Toy Story 3* (2010). The consequences of Alisha's character entering the script and thereby replacing a potential heteronormative relationship are noteworthy, especially given that director Angus MacLane and producer Galyn Susman allegedly fought for meaningful queer representation not just on-screen but also beyond (Brown, "Lightyear's' Alisha Hawthorne breaks new ground"). Efforts to remain authentic in Alisha and Kiko's relationship are attributed to a diverse team, including several queer members in animation and editing. The previously cut kiss at the couple's anniversary party is argued to be the "most natural and organic thing [...] something that felt authentic [as] every other workaround felt just a little bit less than authentic" (Brown, "Lightyear's' Alisha Hawthorne breaks new ground"), while a first considered moment of handholding was deemed too weird to keep as an alternative, according to the production teams' input (Brown, "Lightyear's' Alisha Hawthorne breaks new ground"). Highlighting queer staff beyond the screen underscores the importance of involving queer voices in the ongoing fight for on-screen representation to provide more diverse storytelling and support authentic representation of queer relationships.

3.2.2 The monstrous (queer) as an allegory

Having introduced *Lightyear* as a hard-earned example of notable queer representation, I discuss, in the following subsection, insights into *Luca*'s sea-creature protagonists as an allegory for the queer experience of (in-)visibility in violent spaces and relate these findings to key scenes. Initial viewings provided ample evidence for multiple readings of *Luca* as a tale of discrimination based on sexuality or race. While the former receives more attention, the latter's significance is woven into the analysis to provide further intersectional insights, given the thesis's limitations.

Pixar's *Luca* exemplifies queer human experience and its close connection to the safety of invisibility and the power of being seen and accepted by using the allegory of the sea monster on both the visual and textual levels. Queer Studies researcher Kodi Maier discusses queerbaiting in animation in his article, highlighting similarities between *Luca*'s sea monsters' lived experiences and those of the LGBTQIA+ community. Kodi Maier goes on to accuse the film of queerbaiting in its thematic story beats and in its portrayal of the protagonists' close male friendship. While Maier rightly

draws parallels between the animated coming-of-age adventure and queer themes, he criticizes the lack of truly queer representation, citing alleged queerbaiting, an unfulfilled explicitly queer label, and Giulia's presence as a supposed love interest. Although I agree that the depth of the relationship between Luca and Alberto is largely left to the audience's interpretation, Maier's article, in its evaluation of queerbaiting through queer-coded characters, glosses over the aspect of in-/visibility and its protective function for queer identities. In *Luca*, human society rejects, hunts, and shuns sea monsters, similar to the reactions openly queer folk face from bigoted minds. Unlike Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, in which the creature is incapable of adapting to human society despite his ability to feel on a human level, sea monsters in *Luca* can take on human form when their bodies are sufficiently dry. Hence, they can wander among humans and may even live in harmony with them, as long as their monstrosity is not discovered. The voices and strength of the masses and their pitchforks are the faces of rejection in the light of visibility (Jones and Harris 529), which, in a queer context, often leads to keeping one's non-heteronormative identities hidden for fear of persecution. As sociologist Ravindra Mohabeer points out, "[k]eeping one's head down to avoid scrutiny is a reasonable survival mechanism" (1038). *Luca* illustrates this survival mechanism by drawing a line between Luca and Alberto in their reactions to being 'outed' as sea monsters. Whereas Luca tries to live in his human skin, plans to leave the sea behind, and later attends Giulia's school in the city by passing as human, Alberto struggles with the idea of hiding yet fears being discovered. These different trajectories result in a marked tension between Luca's wish for freedom through invisibility and Alberto's fear of losing his connection to Luca. Briefly returning to Maier's secondary criticism, which points to Giulia as a supposed love interest, a *Variety* interview with director Luca Guadagnino revealed creative team discussions about a potential queer Giulia (Vary), which were allegedly stymied by questions of how to approach Giulia's queerness without creating a girlfriend. In this case, the lack of overt queer (feminine) representation in *Luca* is partially due to the production's difficulty in visualizing queerness without a partner. The assumption behind this statement is that queerness in itself requires a partner to be visible, which disregards non-romantic sexualities entirely. This implies that overt expressions of same-sex attraction, such as explicit statements, conversation clues about previous romantic interests, and other actions such as flirting with the same sex or common narrative tropes, are either not worth considering or never appeared as an option at

all. It is also likely that the production team simply lacked creativity in portraying queer sexuality removed from others as objects of desire, due to a lack of diversity and personal experience with the subject, or due to a limited consultation of LGBTQIA+ staff.

Regardless, Giulia's heteronormative characterization and lack of a queer love interest reinforce the idea that she occupies the role of the supposed love interest, visualized several times in wide shots, such as the one in Figure 11. At this point in the plot, Luca and Alberto have found an ally in Giulia and have received care and companionship. Luca's growing wish to join Giulia upon returning to the city and attending school drives a narrative and visual rift between the boys. There are several scenes sprinkled throughout the movie in which Alberto is clearly very briefly showing worry and surprise whenever Giulia comes in between them physically (e.g., joining their seating arrangement by positioning herself in between them) or in moments when Luca is left alone with her because he is called by Massimo to help with the fishing nets (*Luca*, 00:52:12–00:52:32), hinting at a deeper fear of losing Luca to Giulia. Alberto's fears of abandonment manifest as anger, leading to a dramatic fistfight near the shore, after which the open space is promptly filled by Giulia between them once again. The shot frames Giulia in the center and keeps her there as she approaches them. She then hugs them close, each in one arm, before an angry Alberto exits the embrace to growl at Giulia. This reaction hints at Alberto's humanity, as his flaring temper and the fear of losing his companion seem to war within him. Giulia's positive response to Luca's wish to join her leads to them shaking hands and exchanging laughter in joyous excitement, while a worried-looking Alberto hugs himself in the foreground, quickly thinking of a response, as can be seen in Figure 12.



Figure 11: Giulia arrives at the beach on which Luca and Alberto fight (*Luca*, 01:03:08)



Figure 12: Alberto reacts to Luca and Giulia's interaction (*Luca*, 01:03:37)

On the textual level, Luca opens space for the species reveal or 'coming out' by asking "Uh, Giulia, your school, does it take all kinds of people?" (*Luca*, 01:03:40–01:03:44).

The statement itself leaves room for interpretation on exactly what 'kind' he is speaking of, leaving his vulnerable position to the scene behind and actively putting them both at risk by choosing to approach the water to reveal his monstrous form. The preceding scene additionally offers insights into the vulnerability of visibility and will therefore be examined in closer detail.

Members of humanity and the monstrous encounter marginalization, struggle with power relations, and experience vulnerability and violence. Being seen, whether voluntarily or not, is constantly at the center of Luca and Alberto's fight for freedom and a future traveling together, inviting a queer reading focused on fears of persecution and the threat of separation. Persecution takes many forms in this scenario. Shortly before the fistfight, Luca and Alberto are on a bike ride through town when they briefly cycle past Luca's parents, who have become so worried that they have come to land and are looking for him. To hide, Alberto drives them off a cliff into the sea. On the verge of being detected and chased by a group of teenagers on a sea monster hunt along the shore, Luca confronts Alberto:

ALBERTO: It's fine-

LUCA: NOTHING is fine! My parents just saw me!

ALBERTO: Luca, your parents aren't here.

LUCA: You don't! Know! What you're talking about!!

ALBERTO: Look. This town is making you crazy. We just need to win that Vespa and get outta here.

LUCA: It's not gonna be any different! I don't want to- (he stops and gathers himself) I want to go to school.

ALBERTO: THAT again?! WE CAN'T GO TO SCHOOL!

LUCA: You're just afraid you can't do it!

ALBERTO: I'M NOT AFRAID. YOU'RE THE ONE WHO GETS AFRAID. [...] (they fight) [...]

ALBERTO: WHAT HAPPENS WHEN SHE SEES YOU? WHEN ANYONE SEES YOU? (Luca, 01:02:30–01:03:06)

Following this heated exchange, the protagonists fight both physically and verbally. Whereas Luca remains firmly in his singular perspective, defined by fear of being found out by his parents, Alberto responds with the inclusive 'we', stating that it is impossible to ever attend a human school, thereby gaining access to the human world and becoming part of it. On the cusp of the exchange, the eventuality of 'being seen' not only by their mutual friend but by 'anyone' gives the characters pause. The conversation, read through a queer lens, invites drawing a parallel to the fear that non-heteronormative children's sexuality will be discovered by their parents or the world at large. This is highlighted by taking sides in the argument and by the metaphorical place of Giulia's school, which takes Luca from Alberto's side, effectively ending their shared dream of traveling across the land on a Vespa in favor of a (possibly heteronormative)

future with their one female friend. The threat of becoming visible, and thus a possible victim of the roaming threat of persecution by the 'land monsters' (as humans are called by merfolk), is framed by Alberto as a shared one. As queer theorist Anthony Clair Wagner writes in his statement on visible monstrosity, "[t]he reaction that is provoked by [...] fearmongering is one of violent aggression—monsters can be beaten, abused, cast out, and even killed with impunity" (342). So, by posing the question of what might happen if the safety of invisibility behind the mask of humanity is removed, Alberto inadvertently reminds Luca of the danger his decision could pose to their plans and their physical well-being.

Representation cannot always take place at the expense of safety, since survival is a key factor in supporting diversity. The opening scene of *Luca* immediately establishes that sea monsters are a marginalized group hunted by a fear-mongering town, as shown when two fishermen throw a harpoon into the water after spotting what they believe is a sea creature. Several scenes leading up to Luca's defiant act of going to the surface underscore the reality of the persecution Luca, a merfolk-like character, faces on the surface. Their decision to remain in hiding and heed caution is therefore justified as Queer Theories and Gender Studies professor Haschemi Yekani fittingly clarifies that "[v]ision is far from neutral and the question of recognition often a matter of survival" (92). That survival cannot be guaranteed in the face of Ercole, the main antagonist in town, who is obsessed with winning the local race that Luca and his friends have decided to join to procure a Vespa. At a surprise encounter at night, the audience, alongside Luca and Alberto, is reminded of the reality of violence stemming from Ercole's obsession with the race and hunt for sea creatures alike:

ERCOLE: I want to make myself very clear. This is my town, number one... (Ercole punches Alberto, who is being held by his two cronies, in the stomach)...and number two, I don't want you in it.

LUCA: I...I said stop! (Luca is now holding a fishing spear he grabbed from their attackers)

ERCOLE: Put that down, piccoletto. You'll hurt yourself. [...]

LUCA: Let him go! (Alberto grunts in pain)

ERCOLE: Go. Now. Before I change my mind. Nobody wants you here, idioti! Keep running! (Luca, 00:57:48–00:58:12)

Luca and Alberto suddenly become hypervisible, exposing them not only to the strange looks and scrutiny of others when they deviate from the norm due to their unfamiliarity with certain human customs and phrases, but also to persecution for their true nature as sea creatures, since the latter are actively hunted. Alberto and Luca are, by all means, strangers in a small town with a tight-knit community that, as can be assumed, knows everyone living there and is likely to be wary of newcomers,

especially children without parents. In addition, they have recently decided to enter the town's triathlon to win a Vespa and fulfill their shared dream of escaping together, drawing negative attention as the town's tyrant, Ercole, and his two followers aim to win the prize for themselves by any means necessary. They start with several hostile warnings, antagonizing Giulia and the boys, yet he repeatedly targets Alberto and Luca with physical threats, as illustrated in the excerpt above. Their tyranny seems well-established, as other children often appear frightened in their presence. The extent to which invisibility is truly imperative for Luca and Alberto's survival is finally revealed in the movie's final climax and the triathlon's last stage. The race is interrupted by sudden heavy rain, forcing Luca to take shelter under a nearby roof. Unable to pedal down the last stretch of the race on his bike because the moment the rain touches his skin, his monstrous appearance would be revealed. In a moment of compassion, Alberto shows up with an umbrella, determined to come for and shelter Luca from the downpour. Ercole, however, steadfastly rides past Alberto and shoves him to the ground, the umbrella flying away, revealing a quickly transforming Alberto. The onlookers spread across the racing route immediately respond with shock and surprise. Ercole even abandons his lead in the race to shout "sea monster" (*Luca*, 01:14:53), mobilizing others to capture Alberto, who orders Luca to stay hidden as he is still not discovered. Luca bravely decides to pedal into the rain, willingly sacrificing his safety to join Alberto, the two of them biking the last stretch of the race in their true form for race watchers to see.

The ensuing chase sequence explicitly states Ercole's wish to 'kill' a sea monster that day, accompanied by a lightning strike and maniacal laughter, framing it, at least visually, as an act of evil. This reading is supported by Giulia's final act of defiance in the last stretch toward the finish line, as she declares this the end of the "evil emperor of injustice" (*Luca*, 01:16:40) before deliberately riding into Ercole's bike, sacrificing both her place in the race and her own safety, as she suffers a great fall. Although the injustice Giulia addresses here can be interpreted as Ercole's vicious tactics of terrorizing the town's young population, Luca has already shared their secret with her, making her an ally and presumably allowing her to speak out against injustice toward those who are different, or even 'monsters' like Luca and Alberto. Giulia's act of solidarity and sacrifice is immediately repaid as Luca and Alberto give up their newly earned lead to help her up and toward the finish line on foot, only to be welcomed by a shocked crowd immediately attempting to capture them:

TOWNSPEOPLE: Look at that! You're not going anywhere. Come on.
ERCOLE: I saw them first! The reward is mine!
LUCA AND ALBERTO: We're not afraid of you!
ERCOLE: No, but we're afraid of you. Everyone is horrified and disgusted by you because you are monsters.
GIULIA: Stop! They are not monsters.
ERCOLE: Oh, yeah? Who are they, then?
MASSIMO: I know who they are. They are Luca and Alberto, and...they are the winners. (*Luca*, 01:17:08–01:17:45)

The textual excerpt illustrates and confirms several previously implied facts about the persecution of sea creatures, namely the horror and disgust that underlie their difference, thereby labeling them as monsters. Massimo's momentous, accepting response, accompanied by the symbolic letting go of the spear he has been carrying, once again invites the conclusion that community and allyship may beget change and tolerance. Massimo is a well-respected member of the town's community, previously subscribing to the monster hunt and showing skepticism toward Giulia's newfound friends. His single act of acceptance allows other townsfolk to reflect, remember, and welcome Luca and Alberto back into their community, showing that serving as an ally can be a powerful catalyst for acceptance. It is worth noting, however, that Ercole's choice to question 'who' rather than 'what' they are in response to the denial of their species briefly breaks the dehumanizing rhetoric Ercole has been the face of and continues in the next excerpt, which reads as an inconsistency of sorts. Moreover, the question of 'who' may be more commonly associated with demeaning discussions about class than with sexual identity, although they are not limited to either. Returning the argument to the crowd's initial disgust and othering invites clear parallels to the criticism conservative voices have spewed at queer identities. This reading is further supported as Ercole pushes through the masses, exclaiming his outrage:

ERCOLE: They can't be the winners. They are not even people!
MASSIMO: Signora Marsigliese?
SIG. MARSIGLIESE: Technically, legally, yes, they won. (crowd gasps)
LUCA AND ALBERTO: We won?
ERCOLE: Who cares if they won? They are sea monsters. (*Luca*, 01:17:50–01:18:05)

Ercole's abjection of the two boys runs deep, as he not only refuses to accept their win but also does so by dehumanizing them. *Luca* can be read as a cautionary tale that follows the narrative beats of classic queer coming-out stories. The monstrous othering shares striking similarities with discussions of the diversity category of race and ethnicity, and, in some ways, that of disability. In a sense, Luca and Alberto are creatures from 'a different land', namely the deep sea down under, with several scenes showing the boys exploring the local culture without fully understanding it, inviting

readings of learning how to 'pass' not only visibly but also how to assimilate into a new culture. Because many parts of one's identity are intrinsically linked and reliant on others, they are intersectional and largely cumulative. Hence, in light of the movie's narrative, which confronts the audience with the claim that the protagonists, at least in the eyes of the antagonist, are not perceived as human, a parallel can be drawn to the discrimination of marginalized people, especially POC and queer people, as dehumanization is a common tactic employed by bigoted and racist speakers alike (D. Smith). People with disabilities often suffer from a similar dehumanizing rhetoric, which will be expanded on in the chapter on disabilities and othering.

Some narrative choices draw direct parallels between Luca's and Alberto's relationship and classic heteronormative filmic tropes, as well as other forms of loyalty leading to sacrifice. After the reveal in the final act, the audience follows the protagonists and their families to the train station to send Giulia off to her mother and the new school term. To Luca's surprise, he does not have to say goodbye to Giulia but rather to his family and Alberto, as Alberto has sold the Vespa they had won for Luca's train ticket to the city and has reportedly talked Luca's family into letting him leave, according to the grandmother's statement. By essentially giving up or postponing their shared escape for Luca's benefit, Alberto makes one last sacrifice: his shared dream and future (at least for a while). As Massimo offers to take Alberto in, leading to a foster-father relationship, his plans to leave on a Vespa shift significantly, as suggested by the credit pictures depicting several scenes of Alberto enjoying life in the little seaside town, including spending time among friends and the town's grandmothers. More instances of a 'settled-down' Alberto can be seen in the related Pixar Short *Ciao Alberto* (2021), which follows Alberto's adventures while staying with Massimo during Luca's time at school with Giulia. Yet Alberto's sacrifice to fulfill Luca's dream proves deeply moving and tragic through a queer lens. At a shared dinner, his family wonders whether they can let Luca stay in this sheltered world, lamenting that some people might never accept him, ending their conversation with the reassuring words that "some will [...] and he [i.e., Luca] seems to know how to find the good ones" (*Luca*, 01:20:13–01:20:18). The 'good one' referred to being none other than Alberto, finds a home with Luca's father Massimo, yet any queer resolution or allusion to a happy end by Luca's side is left behind as Luca joins Giulia on her journey to school. Essentially, despite Giulia's platonic standing in their group, she still wins in a sense.

Interestingly, Luca and Alberto's long and emotional goodbye shares similarities with the classic, romantically connoted movie trope of the "train station goodbye" ("Train-Station Goodbye"), in which two lovers are shown saying goodbye to each other at a train platform, with the threat of the departing train taking one of the lovers forcing them to part. Alberto can be seen as embodying the common trope of the left-behind lover, to the point of running alongside the departing train to keep the other in his sight as long as possible. Similarly, Luca matches the corresponding role of the one on the train, leaning out of the window, or in his case, the door, to watch him in turn with Guilia, presumably waiting at their seats on the train. An article by *Variety* on *Lightyear's* release mentions that Enrico Casarosa, director of *Luca*, in an interview with *The Wrap*, confessed that the production team considered the potential of Luca and Alberto's friendship to be romantic or queer but emphasized the briefness of these conversations, citing the film's focus on their friendship as "pre-romance" (Vary). Labeling the boys' relationship as 'pre-romance' seems accurate to the attentive viewer, given their interactions throughout the movie, including their trope-like goodbye. Relying further on paratexts, in early 2024, an *Instagram* story post released by *Luca's* story lead, and director of the Pixar short *Ciao Alberto* McKenna Jean Harris (who uses they/them pronouns), in celebration of the movie receiving its theatrical release, revealed four pictures titled *Kenna's Unsanctioned Fanart* in support of a queer reading of Luca and Alberto's relationship, depicting them Luca and Alberto cuddling, gazing into each other's eyes and an implied but hidden kiss behind an umbrella that supposedly spans their relationship over four summers (Iftikhar)⁶. The pictures have not been recognized by Disney or Pixar (as the title also disclaims), but their existence and release by a member of the production team speak to an unfulfilled wish to officiate a development that was cut short. It is debatable whether these pictures truly canonize their queerness and mark *Luca* as a subtle but undoubtedly queer coming-of-age movie for young audiences, or simply aim to appease vocal audiences accusing the filmmakers of yet another instance of queerbaiting. The decision to release this supposed fan art certainly seems to satisfy some audiences' need for less ambiguity in the depiction of queer relationships.

⁶ Due to the fleeting nature of the original *Instagram* story and Harris' decision not to archive it on their profile, the pictures and post are referenced from a *ThePinkNews* article by Asyia Iftikhar on their release for easier and prolonged access.

A notable post-credits scene in *Luca* might hint at a possible happy, queer-positive future, regardless of Harris's pictures. A colored drawing or still shows him and Giulia at school, essentially capturing a coming-out moment as Luca holds his hand in a fishbowl, revealing his transformed hand to his teacher and two other students, whose faces are surprised but show no disgust or rejection. If the post-credits scenes are chronological events set at school and feature uniformed children, the reveal has no negative consequences, as the same audience is later shown in a subsequent picture joining Giulia and Luca, using a telescope to scope out the stars, likely on a field trip to the museum. Assuming, then, that Luca feels safe enough at school to reveal his nature and bring more people outside Portorosso into the fold, the reveal broadens the possibilities for a potentially happy (queer) future through others' acceptance.

The deliberate sacrifice of safety through invisibility and assimilation in the face of public acceptance and positive representation is exemplified in often-overlooked background characters, who also serve as subtextual representation in a sea of conservative voices. The second important queer relationship hinted at on screen is the pair of grandmothers, seen several times throughout the movie, mostly in the background. Their presence reminds me of Haschemi Yekani's claim that mere presence does not imply visibility. This point especially rings true after the final climax, namely, the race, which reveals the two elderly women to also be sea creatures. The two women appear only in each other's company, except for a dinner scene at the film's end, in which several townsfolk are present. Regardless, the brief glimpses of the two older Italian women tending the same property (*Luca*, 00:49:47), along with three cats that may be strays or shared pets, reinforce the cliché of the elderly cat lady. Neither appears to wear a wedding band, and they seem to spend a notable amount of time together, for instance, eating ice cream in town (see Figure 13) or strolling about (see Figure 14).



Figure 13: The grandmothers eating ice cream in town (*Luca*, 00:29:20)



Figure 14: The grandmothers are seen taking a walk together (*Luca*, 00:46:08)

They, too, can be seen together after the children's reveal and following the village folk's subsequent acceptance, giving a curt nod toward each other as if silently agreeing to 'come out' and reveal a long-held secret (see Figure 15). When they lower their umbrellas, they are smiling serenely as raindrops reveal their true form (as shown in Figure 16).



Figure 15: The grandmothers under umbrellas look at each other, silently communicating (*Luca*, 01:19:14)



Figure 16: The grandmothers transformed into sea creatures under the rain, quietly smiling (*Luca*, 01:19:17)

The townsfolk, who can be assumed to have known them for years if not decades, respond with more radical acceptance, ripping up a 'WANTED flyer' for monsters and joining the celebrations of the race winners. Notably, the most dramatic reaction is that of the village priest or padre (based on his priestly garb and traditional headwear reminiscent of a biretta), who faints upon the reveal. The significance of the priest fainting upon yet another public display of transformation, or what can be considered a public 'outing,' can be read through a queer lens as well, indicating religious homophobia or, less severely, exaggerated surprise. It can further signal subtle rejection of non-heteronormative attraction, or it might simply be intended to serve as common comedic relief, albeit at the expense of queer-coded characters displaying an act of bravery and vulnerability.

All in all, *Luca* illustrates the power of acceptance and the repercussions of personal sacrifice in the face of bigotry. The narrative cleverly uses the monster allegory to invite readings of queer adolescent desire and the wish to break free from societal judgment. Allies and communities are presented as powerful support systems in the fight for acceptance and safety in the face of visibility, while overtly criticizing, violent, prejudiced, and persecutory patterns of behavior. From Luca and Alberto's story of a friendship that might dare to be more, the next section will focus on family as a source of abundant safety and limited personal freedom of expression. Further, it invites a different reading of othering through transformation as an exploration of adolescent desire and female sexuality.

3.2.3 Budding sexuality, female desire & monstrous maturity

Female desire is often overlooked in contemporary animated media, as the focus still tends to center on boys becoming men. *Red* appears to be a direct response to the lack of female sexuality and its exploration, weaving an intersectional tale about womanhood, puberty, filial piety, and cultural diaspora. The movie explores themes of transformation and the fear of assimilation at the expense of personal development and freedom.

The monstrous transformation of the female body serves as a powerful allegory for the changes of puberty and sexual awakening in adolescent girls. Exemplified by a long line of female ancestors passing down a family 'curse' to the protagonist, *Red* invites audiences to take a critical look at the damaging practices of shame and repression. The protagonist, Mei, is allowed, or rather forced, to express and live out her budding sexuality more openly, at least visually. In an early scene, the viewer follows Mei's journey as she discovers her rapidly growing interest in the other sex. The object of her attraction is Devon, the local Daisy Mart employee with a trendy haircut, a bucket hat, and a shell necklace, typical of early-2000s fashion. While Mei is initially visibly and verbally in disbelief at her female friend group's audible desire for Devon, she quickly discovers, while doodling in her notebook in the safety of her home, that the figure she absentmindedly scribbles starts to look like Devon, as she wonders out loud what her friend Miriam sees in him. The scene continues with Mei's visible surprise at this sudden attraction, yet she embraces her newfound desire and keeps adding romanticized doodles of her and Devon to her notebook, including drawings of them kissing, writing their names in a heart, and similar scribbles. This desire appears to be framed as somewhat shameful, as most of the drawing is done in the privacy of the small space beneath her bed, safe from prying parental eyes and shrouded in the warm pink glow of the light shining through the blanket over the side of the bed. Secrecy and shame over this sudden interest are further implied by Mei's quick attempt to appear nonchalant as her mother approaches her room, the notebook not making it fully under her bed in her haste. Several moments of Mei's inner dialogue follow, as she begs her mother not to look at or spot the notebook, beads of sweat forming on her forehead, revealing her growing nervousness. In a mortifying twist of fate, her mother picks up the notebook, assuming it is homework. Upon discovering it, a clear invasion of Mei's privacy, her mother flips through the notebook, her pace

quicken as, based on her facial expressions, she grows visibly more upset and disgusted with each new page revealing her daughter's growing desire for the other sex. At one point, she holds the notebook sideways, the motion of the spread pages eerily reminiscent of media depictions of someone holding a double spread from an old-school *Playboy* magazine. The scene culminates with Ming confronting her mortified daughter, who holds a pencil drawing in manga style of what appears to be Mei and Devon, the latter holding Mei's face while gazing into her eyes, their cheeks showing blushing lines typical of the style. Ming's immediate conclusion leads to assumptions of predatory behavior from outside sources, namely Devon, the "sketchy clerk from the Daisy Mart" (*Red*, 00:12:50–00:12:55), instead of recognizing it as the result of innocent adolescent fantasies fueled by her daughter's sexual awakening. Ming's subsequent decision to drive her daughter to the supermarket to confront Devon with the 'evidence' of her daughter's drawings (depicting a merman Devon, complete with bucket hat, necklace and earrings, sixpack, and other sketches depicting emotional scenes or poses) in a righteous manner, while a panicking Mei has to face her mother's overprotective response, seems to draw on early findings by Förster on early Disney portrayals of sexuality. Förster's thesis paper on gender constructions, stereotypes, and hidden ideologies in Disney animated movies particularly notes that overt, explicitly expressed sexuality (even heteronormative preference) is consistently portrayed as negative and manipulative, something to be condemned (106). Ming's overreaction to her daughter's drawings, as well as the present Daisy Mart shoppers witnessing the scene, represents this negative view of adolescent sexuality. This is further emphasized by the surrounding youthful shoppers, who laugh at the drawings and whisper judgments, labeling a mortified Mei as a 'weirdo.' Meanwhile, Devon looks at her in surprise. Returning to theory, considering that the target audience of animated children's movies is children and adolescents, Förster strongly criticizes the possible negative consequences this might have for a child's development and for navigating adolescence. Moreover, this negative portrayal may result in limited ideas about sexuality and restricted expressions of what is considered an acceptable relationship between the sexes (Förster 106). Thankfully, *Red* appears to pick up on such criticism in Mei's response to the humiliating public exposure of her desire. Shortly thereafter, the audience sees her screaming into her pillow, admonishing herself: "You sicko, what were you thinking? Why would you draw those things, those horrible, awful, sexy things" (*Red*, 00:14:22–00:14:29). By labeling

her drawings as 'horrible' and 'awful' while still acknowledging their 'sexy' nature, she seems to adopt her mother's perspective (as she does most of the first half of the plot), even going as far as physically slapping herself. She then looks in the mirror to get herself back together, before throwing out her drawings one by one, promising herself that this will never happen again. At this point, Mei has essentially already internalized a limited idea of what is deemed an acceptable expression of desire and sexuality.

In the documentary *Embrace the Panda* on the development process of *Red* during the pandemic, Red's visual effects supervisor and queer woman, Danielle Feinberg, shares that bringing their experiences to the table was different for this movie than it would have been, for instance, for WALL-E (which was spearheaded by a team of almost exclusively men, with the exception of one). This scene in which Mei is going under the bed, sketching her fantasies about her crush was inspired by the lived queer experience of Danielle, who reminisces about Mei "drawing theses sexy pictures and the conflict there and why did I draw those things, I mean, I wasn't under my bed drawing things but when I was 11, I had a little wooden clothes' pin and I had this mad crush on this woman that was older than me but...I did not know I was gay at the time and I remember drawing her name on the clothes' pin and [...] you know, like, these things, these silly things you're doing, [...] I get what Mei's doing" (*Embrace the Panda*, 00:30:00–00:30:38). Feinberg's story reveals a crucial aspect of emergent sexuality, namely, that regardless of the gender one is attracted to, experiences of puberty and emergent attraction can be universally understood. Here, Mei exhibits heterosexual attraction for a slightly older boy, yet the scene is informed by the experience of a queer individual having done the same for their same-sex crush, normalizing attraction and experiences surrounding it across different preferences.

I argue that *Red* intends to criticize and overcome normative and restrictive ideologies about adolescent female and heteronormative sexuality by transforming Mei into a red panda soon after. It frames the red panda curse as a vessel for female expressions of strong emotions, puberty, and desire. The connection arises because the supermarket confrontation directly inspires a nightmare-fueled dream that ultimately awakens the panda. The nightmare features a terrifyingly lit, out-of-water merman, Devon, gasping for air; the male 4*Town band members morphed with flowers and other frightening scenes, interspersed with short clips in red and green of her ancestry and traditional Chinese symbolism. Essentially, Mei's first transformation is accompanied visually and narratively by a nightmare in which she faces horrifying

visions of various boys she is attracted to, interwoven with images of statues breaking in front of the family temple, which can be interpreted as an act of defiance and desecration of the sanctity of the family and the temple through her emerging womanhood. Visually, the transformation into a red panda is accompanied by a burst of pink dust or a smoke cloud. Narratively, Mei awakens, sees herself in the mirror, panics, and locks herself in the bathroom.

Female puberty not only brings sexual desires to the surface but is also typically accompanied by a woman's first period. The red panda, then, is partially a metaphor for puberty itself, further underscored by Ming's worried question about whether the 'red peony' has bloomed from outside the bathroom. A question that causes Jin, the father, to back away slowly in the background after audibly gulping, indicating shock, and immediately removes him from the scene, marking the topic as solely handled by the mother figure. The peony reference supports the idea that Ming believes Mei must have started her first menstrual cycle and was therefore overwhelmed, which explains her decision of hiding in the bathroom. This reading aligns with Alison Walker's idea that there is a clear correspondence between metamorphosis and the physical changes at puberty (qtd. in Viswanath 44). From this point on in the movie, Mei's panda is described in various ways. Still in the bathroom, she declares herself "a gross red monster" (*Red*, 00:17:45). A bit later, in front of her newly informed friends, it becomes an "inconvenient genetic thingy" (*Red*, 00:32:35–00:32:40), only to be summed up as a "freak" (*Red*, 00:33:20). After a confrontation with classmate Tyler later in the movie, she is accused by Tyler's mother of being "an animal" (*Red*, 01:00:04–01:00:06) after losing control and assaulting Tyler at his birthday party due to her emotions taking over.

The monster narrative signals the loss of control and power over desires and emotions, typical of puberty, yet also the gaining of community through acts of sacrifice and protection. While *Luca* presents the monstrous as a separate species of sea creature living in communities and fully aware of their differences from humans, *Red*'s audience learns about Mei's ancestral family secret at the same time as she does, and must learn to navigate this transformation. The expectation of learning to control the red panda and ultimately seal it away is set up early on by Mei's family, as Ming shares the family lore. Children's Literature and Adolescence Trauma Studies researcher Lydia Kokkola describes "fictional children and adolescents [as] far more likely to undergo metamorphosis than their adult counterparts [...] the beastly nature of the

youngster is an omnipresent source of uncontrolled power that can be unleashed at any minute” (qtd. in Viswanath 5). Despite the odds Kokkola describes, motherly transformation into an animal has occurred in the animation studio’s filmic canon before *Red*. Having Ming’s transformation also led to quite the challenge. According to Director Shi, who worked closely with production designer Rona Liu and the art team on Ming’s behavior to avoid her being too terrifying, as the intention was to ensure her character reads as a “giant, angry mom, not a giant, angry monster” (Shi). The deliberate distancing from the label ‘monster’ is noteworthy.

Returning to the example of Pixar’s *Brave*, Eleanor, Queen of Dunbroch and Merida’s mother, is cursed to turn into a bear by a witch’s spell purchased by her daughter, who longs for her mother to change her mind about an impending marriage arrangement with neighboring lords, while Merida wants to remain unmarried and break with tradition. Feminist and Queer Theory scholar Tharini Viswanath’s paper on mother-daughter relationships and transformation finds that the transformed Eleanor “embodies a monstrous motherhood [that] is physically overwhelming, monstrous in shape and size, and dominates space and situation [by being] too large and too powerful to ignore” (8). The description of being overwhelming, too large, and powerful matches the one given by Mei’s father about Ming’s own experience with the red panda curse in an effort to foster understanding between his wife and daughter. Shortly before Mei is scheduled to perform a family ritual, which will allow her to banish and contain the panda for the rest of her life, just as her female family members before her, she is approached by her father. Jin shows her a video he found on a camcorder that Mei and her friends at school have previously used to record her adventures raising funds for the 4*Town concert tickets with her friends through paid ‘meet-and-greet’ style photo and video sessions featuring a transformed Mei. The video reminds her that the panda has more than one side, and not just destructive ones at that. He advises her that “[p]eople have all kinds of sides to them, Mei, and some sides are messy. The point isn’t to push the bad stuff away. It’s to...make room for it, live with it. Mei, erase [the video] if you want, but this side of you...(chuckles softly)...made me laugh” (*Red*, 01:05:35–01:05:50). Jin highlights an important aspect of what has thus far been described as monstrous, namely that the panda within her can also lead to community and companionship.

Viswanath reached a similar conclusion in her analysis of *Brave*’s Eleanor, arguing that the winning of man over the animal was also linked to a sense of

community, albeit by putting the daughter's well-being above the mother's own and through a subsequent maternal sacrifice to reestablish the mother-daughter bond they share (9). In *Red*, community formation occurs in several ways, including through Mei's friend group, her schoolmates, and her family members (i.e., aunts, grandmother, and parents), as well as through others' support and protection. The focus on relationships is also visualized in similar ways in *Brave* and *Red*. During a fight, Merida rips a painstakingly crafted tapestry her mother made, which shows them as a family. The rip separates Merida and her mother, and it later must be repaired by hand to break the spell and restore her mother's humanity. They have to physically mend the bond. A similar 'break' occurs in *Red* when Mei breaks a picture of her and her mother while trying to leave her family behind, visualizing the rift that has formed between the mother-daughter pair. Thus, the transformation can be read in two ways. On the one hand, it expresses the uncontrolled power of the womanly desire emerging in the pubescent body, as exemplified by Mei and, according to Mei's father, by Ming's anger at her desire to be with Jin, since Ming's mother initially disapproved of their union. On the other hand, the transformation can be read as a visual metaphor for adolescent puberty and the onset of a girl's first period. The latter reading is supported by several instances of Mei's discovery of the family's curse. The female body as a site of transformation and change is also addressed in the movie's final arc, as Mei draws the libertarian conclusion to keep the connection to her inner panda rather than banish it, as her female ancestors have done. This, in turn, enrages her mother to the point of breaking the seal on her own long-banished curse, unleashing an enormous red panda in search of her daughter, leading to the final climax. A related scene post-ritual has Mei proudly proclaim, "My panda, my choice!" (*Red*, 01:28:09–01:28:11), which is interpreted as a clear reference to the slogan of the abortion rights movement 'My body, my choice', further connecting the transformation to the female body as a political site. As the overall theme of *Red* focuses on the first steps into womanhood, several scenes explicitly link events to a different kind of transformation. For instance, when Mei and her friends dream about attending the 4*Town concert, they declare that this opportunity means 'going in as girls and leaving as women', clearly indicating a shift to take place at the concert. The event in question may refer to the possibility of openly expressing attraction and desire, as well as to the freedom of self-expression, aiding the transformation from girl to woman.

Visual effects supervisor Danielle Feinberg's goals for the movie's reception are to make people laugh but also, on a deeper level, to

"reach out and say it's OK, like, if you're confused and feeling crazy, and you don't know who you are and you might let your parents down or you might let yourself down and that's sort of a natural part of growing up, and if that could be what we provide for, I think, even one kid out there, that would be really amazing" (*Embrace the Panda*, 00:45:15–00:45:32).

The message reads universal, with audiences of young girls finding themselves and their place in the world by navigating an ever-changing body and also queer young audiences embracing who they are for the first time, despite fears of letting down their family because of their non-heteronormative desires. Considering the presented queer reading of *Luca*, it is important to note that Ruesink points out striking similarities between the narrative progression of *Brave*'s Eleanor and Merida's relationship and contemporary 'coming out' stories of LGBTQ individuals (22). These similarities stem from a common plot in which parents willfully ignore their children's nonconformity until they are directly confronted with it, forcing them to either support or shun their children. A similar narrative is spun by *Red* here, in Mei's breaking from tradition by embracing her panda (and therefore her excess of emotion and the desires that come with it) rather than banishing it. The reveal of her norm-/tradition-breaking choice puts Mei's parents into the position of either supporting her decision, which Jin does, or lashing out in anger, which unleashes Ming's fury.

Moving on from queer allegory, a moment of queer subtext appears in a blink-and-you-miss-it scene in *Red* at Tyler's birthday party. As Mei and her girl group dance in the living room, Priya is briefly seen dancing with another girl in all-gothic attire. The other girls seem to seize the opportunity and push the two together before appearing excited and hyped up a few spaces away, suggesting they are aware of Priya's same-sex interest. Similar to Harris' *Instagram* story fan art, which somewhat addresses Luca and Alberto's queer romantic future, Pixar cinematographer Andrea Goh (former *Twitter* handle @Andreagoh) seemingly confirms the subtle scene as "a slice of queer representation" (qtd. in Chudy)⁷. As previously referenced as an example for the expression of female attraction, Priya and the rest of Mei's girl group are standing outside the Daisy mart, eyeing the boy behind the counter with clear appreciation and attraction, which Mei does not understand. Priya also expresses interest, so it can be

⁷ The original tweet has been taken down. There are several articles and online spaces that have archived this tweet, and an article by *ThePinkNews* by Emily Chudy has been chosen to legitimize its content, provide a source and reference the tweet's contents long-term.

assumed that she is implied to be bisexual. Beyond paratextual confirmation, the scene appears to be romantically coded in the choice of setting and characters' (re)actions. No further instances of overt or implied non-heteronormative attraction between any of the other girls were identified. The existence of desire for the other or the same sex serves here as a marker of community and belonging. While Mei, at first, is only interested in the other sex in 'safer' parasocial relationships due to the attraction likely not leading to a real connection, her first instance of real sexual attraction to a more attainable subject (albeit only in actual access to the person instead of age or mutual interest) is met with shame and rejection from her mother, which does not seem to be the broader case for Mei's friend group. Shared interest in the boy band 4*Town and Mei's first non-parasocial crush, instead strengthened the bond between Mei and her friends, rooted in their shared experiences of desire and attraction to others, regardless of sex. Their seemingly natural acceptance of Priya's same-sex crush and supportive reaction to Mei's panda sends a message of safety, acceptance, and belonging in spaces of friendship rather than family. Similarities are evident in Giulia, Luca, and Alberto's friendship, which displays emotional support, community, and a shared wish for freedom, (queer) affection, and acceptance of (racial and sexual) differences.

Overall, findings on Pixar's portrayal of sexuality reveal that *Luca* exemplifies the queer human experience and its close connection to the safety of invisibility and the power of being seen and accepted, using the allegory of the sea monster on both the visual and textual levels. *Lightyear* offers a progressive and positive representation of same-sex attraction and delivers the first animated on-screen kiss between a same-sex couple, largely due to the ongoing efforts of queer staff and their allies advocating for more representation on screen and behind the camera. Last but not least, *Red* marks the first animated Disney-Pixar movie targeted at children whose central theme encourages adolescent audiences to demand the right to explore their budding sexual desire without fear of transgressive repercussions or repressive rebukes, thereby providing a positive representation of bodily autonomy and different facets of female (and/or queer) desire through the metaphor of transformation into a red panda, sharing story beats of queer coming-out stories in placing families into the position of acceptance or rejection.

The next chapter aims to critically examine the disparity between depictions of physical and mental disability in the selected films by comparing plot developments

and character backgrounds in *Lightyear* and *Red*, and to support this analysis with the outlined theoretical framework.

3.3 Disability and Otherness

This chapter conducts a close reading of *Luca*, *Red*, and *Lightyear*, using parameters based on common disability models introduced by journalist and disability-in-media researcher John Clogston and professor and researcher Beth Haller, to uncover in-/visible or coded instances of representation. The findings are then embedded into the broader context of Pixar's representation of disability based on research by Holcomb and Latham-Mintus. Paratexts on the production of each film are consulted to reveal the positive effect of filmmakers' attitudes towards authentic representation, through consideration and consultation with the voices of PWD affected by the representation.

Starting with *Red*, a scene that focuses on Mei arguing with her friends before taking the tram features a background character in a wheelchair at the tram station who is lifted into the vehicle through what looks like an automatic lift/ramp system, giving Mei a valid reason to catch it after an extended conversation. This is not acknowledged further unless someone notices the slightly blurred background during the protagonists' conversation, and it may go unnoticed, as it is arguably dismissed by the subsequent plot. The relegation to the background and subsequent tokenization of characters with disabilities are linked to the plight of authenticity, since, as Andrea Warren, the producer of *Luca*, highlights, "there's a fine line between organic representation and forced tokenization" (Zornosa). The simple presence of PWD is not enough, and pushing PWD into the background does not allow for fully fleshed-out characters or well-rounded personalities, with disabilities addressed and acknowledged without being reduced to them. Cultural Studies and Sociology scholar Magdalena Nowicka points out that

"the ways we are seen do not do justice to us, in many ways. People suffer when some of their features which, to them, are vital to their identity are overlooked by others; or when they are reduced to only a few characteristics and the complexity of their personality or positionality remains unrecognised." (20)

So, a common problem appears to be a lack of attention to design and lackluster portrayals of characters representing those with 'invisible' disabilities. The issue of visibility is only exacerbated by the imbalance in the representation of physical disability and that of mental or intellectual disabilities, simply because the former is easier to visualize quickly. By relying on socialization and shared cultural knowledge

to quickly tell a story, it is not so easy for invisible disabilities, such as chronic pain, mental health conditions like depression, neurodivergence, and autoimmune disorders, in animated characters to receive the care and attention they deserve. This is why this first section aims to examine the depiction of mental disorders and intellectual disabilities in the selected characters in more detail.

3.3.1 The in-/visibility of disability

With *Lightyear*'s Buzz being an exception, PWD in children's animated movies are often not the main characters, with little screen time or limited involvement in the overall plot (Holcomb and Latham-Mintus 5). In the selected films, while disability does not appear to be the singular focus of each story, characters with indicators of mental disabilities or of old age, such as *Luca*'s Uncle Ugo and *Lightyear*'s Old Buzz, tend to be portrayed as embodying undesirable traits. At the same time, mental disabilities are objectively more difficult to identify due to several factors. First, they often go unspoken or unaddressed (the extent of which also depends on cultural norms and acceptance), and second, mental disabilities do not offer as many explicit visual clues or physical markers as, for example, a missing limb or a walking cane. *Lightyear* then shifts the disability narrative from the physical to the mental. On the one hand, the origin of Buzz Lightyear in *Toy Story 1* presents him as a toy who is unable or unwilling to accept that he is indeed a toy, not a real space ranger. Only after losing his arm after a tumble down the stairs does he begin to consider the possibility of his makeup, which forms a significant part of his character's struggle with acceptance throughout his introduction and the movie's journey. On the other hand, *Lightyear* mostly focuses on mental health and trauma, and moves Buzz's struggle further inward by giving the audience the impression that he suffers from depression through means of changes in his emotionality as well as concerns from his crewmates and therapy companion cat. The shift toward often-overlooked mental health issues may be partially attributed to the fact that Buzz's disability as a toy was solely a result of his non-human nature, largely accidental and temporary (i.e., reattached by the end of the movie). It would therefore not directly translate into the plot of *Lightyear*, where Buzz is fully human, reliving his origin story alongside people suffering the same plight of being stuck on an alien planet with little chance of escape. Throughout *Lightyear*, Buzz encounters various characters who may also be read as having less visible disabilities or mental and/or physical impediments. For instance, *Lightyear*'s Junior Patrol members are a

ragtag group of volunteer cadets training to protect the fledgling society stranded at the hostile planet. The patrol team comprises members of varying ages, and among them is Maurice 'Mo' Morrison, a middle-aged black man who lacks direction and struggles to find it. He is joined by Darby Steel, a woman estimated to be in her late 50s with short grey hair, presumably of mixed race, and a gruff personality, a former criminal and explosives expert. Darby Steel does not outright show any disability markers, but requires assistance getting up after falling in a crucial escape scene, possibly due to her aging body. Alisha's granddaughter and overeager leader of the patrol team, Izzy, is afraid of space, and her severe astrophobia (i.e., the fear of outer space) limits her opportunities to pursue her dream of becoming a space ranger, like her grandmother. D.E.R.I.C. is a service robot prone to miscalculations and errors, serving as a target of ridicule and rendered essentially useless to the patrol's mission. Another robot and honorary member of the patrol team is Buzz's therapy cat, Sox, whose mission is to ensure Buzz's well-being and his emotional transition after each time jump. Sox is a red tabby robot cat, part of a companion program and a self-proclaimed 'excellent listener', who is promptly introduced as Buzz's personal companion robot. While the introduction is brief and unwelcome on Buzz's end, the cat is clearly tasked with providing mental support and companionship to Buzz, akin to a therapy animal or sidekick, after Buzz fully grasps the extent of his failed mission and prolonged stay on a new planet. The movie does not explicitly state who arranges for the therapy cat to be assigned to Buzz, but it can be inferred that Alisha or the medical staff at the settlement facility might suspect that Buzz has fallen into, or is showing signs of, depression such as social withdrawal and isolation from his constant time jumps leading to other people moving on with life while he is periodically time travelling, which would explain the assignment of Sox to Buzz's personal quarters. As mental impediments such as depression are hard to discern, especially if they remain verbally unaddressed in animation, visual communications scholars Charles Forceville and Sissy Paling investigated how metaphors are used to visualize mental disorders such as depression in these animated spaces. They found patterns of using dark, confined space, being confronted by 'dark' monsters, indicating depression as a burden, weight, or pressure that weighs someone down and/or isolates them, and recovery might involve "undertaking a journey [...] actively achieving goals" (Forceville and Paling 113). In *Lightyear*, it can be argued that depression predominantly manifests in several of these metaphoric ways.

The mission is being impeded by mysterious antagonist Zurg, chasing Buzz and his team, and acting aggressively towards them, which are common characteristics a personified form of depression can display. As most of these characteristics are shared by antagonists in general, what stands out is the fact that, later in the movie, Zurg is revealed to be an older version of Buzz whose time-travel efforts have failed. Buzz is, therefore, literally haunted by a more jaded, darker version of himself who has lived through his greatest fears of failure, whose plan threatens to eliminate him. Forceville and Paling find that depression as a monster aims to interfere with a person's activities and therefore can only be treated by taming or fighting it, so that it disappears, which is also the case in *Lightyear*. Animation also lends itself to conflating longer stretches of time into shorter periods (Forceville and Paling 116). As introduced in the gender chapter, Buzz misses most of his closest crew and, importantly, his partner's life due to his inability to let go of his supposed failure, which further isolates him. The mere implication of a Pixar protagonist or (anti-)hero with a mental impediment like depression is rather uncommon; even less common is medical help in such an instance, which might be the extent of therapeutic support he can receive while stuck on a foreign planet, which leads back to Sox's introduction and assigned role. Sox does not simply remain a therapy cat, as he completes the mission he was initially assigned only jokingly. To Buzz's surprise, Sox manages to solve Buzz's fuel problem for the hyperspeed missions and is, therefore, given further significance in the plot. As the plot picks up, two officers arrive to 'decommission' his cat due to 'security problems', which apparently have led to the shutdown of the companion program. Buzz declines and states his wish to do so himself, but escapes with Sox through a window. During their escape, Sox tranquilizes a person with a dart incorporated into his system, which leads Buzz to realize Sox had the ability to incapacitate him in case Buzz lost control of himself, inviting a critical reading of the assumptions placed on people with mental disorders. Additionally, the threat of decommissioning Sox immediately follows the aforementioned reveal that Sox has very likely found a solution to Buzz's main fuel problem, which keeps him (and those reliant on him) grounded on a planet riddled with guilt and, thus, appears to weigh him down by feeding into his depression. The shutdown of the companion program and Buzz's severe reaction to the robot he has fostered a genuine connection with (and who provides him with a possible solution to the situation that led to his mental health issues) shed critical light on and open up the discussion about the necessity of aids

such as personal companions for those with anxiety, depression, and other mental health disorders. It is also worth noting that OB, once revealed to be the main villain Zurg, still has his version of Sox by his side, albeit damaged, with machinery visibly exposed. This circumstance might imply that, in his damaged state, his ability to support was compromised, or that his decline in functionality may also serve as a visual reminder of OB's decline in mental health. At a critical moment, the damaged Sox tranquilizes his master, OB, giving the younger Buzz a better chance of executing his plan. He explains his choice as a result of supposedly 'liking the new him' (*Lightyear*, 01:17:30). Later, while providing aid to his younger, presumably less depressed and certainly less obsessed version, Zurg crudely crushes his companion, the damaged Sox, under his mechanical foot, judging him a "traitor" (*Lightyear*, 01:18:50), essentially eliminating any potential positive effects he might have provided in the future. This rejection can be interpreted as a drastic and deliberate refusal to continue using his mental health companion or source of therapeutic support. This reading of *Lightyear* as the story of a character haunted by his decisions and failures in the form of a dark and evil older version of himself, whose attempted mental health support has failed him, paints mental disability as an impeding state of being. It isolates, impedes the community aspect of teamwork, and requires some form of aid, in this case, an individual providing companionship and therapeutic support, to allow the hero to grow and ultimately save the day.

Old age is another common characteristic connected to physical deterioration and mental decline, other than in OB, also exemplified by Grandmother Coco (in the movie with the same title, 2017), who suffers from Alzheimer's or dementia. Her forgetting her father serves as a central plot point that also significantly advances the story. In contrast, the mark of evil is commonly emphasized through physical assistance, for instance, in *Lightyear*, OB's mechanical body is the clear visualization of evil in the form of Zurg. As Holcomb and Latham-Mintus examine the correlation between disability and the mark of evil, they identify Disney's *Wreck-It-Ralph's* (2012) antagonist, King Candy ('Turbo'), as mentally disabled and unstable, yet their analysis overlooks his pronounced lisp, a noticeable speech impediment. They claim that the film presents mental decline as a signal of a character's trustworthiness, "predicated on a shared cultural understanding that disability is undesirable and an indicator of a person's moral character" (Holcomb and Latham-Mintus 6), which lends power to the

outdated but prevalent Moral model, similarly to the suggested reading of OB as a manifestation of Buzz's depression.

Moving on with the analysis of *Red* shows the prevalence of the Moral model in children's animation, centered on family and generational trauma. Katherine Smith's findings on Disney's infatuation with the Moral model, based on examples like *The Beauty and the Beast*, support the criticism that parental failure is at the very center of the Moral model, as it leaves children to suffer the consequences of parents' decisions or mishaps (115). Just as a lack of parental affection, emotional intelligence, or morality affected Beast's decision not to aid the sorceress who would later curse and transform him, Mei's maternal ancestry and the dominant maternal influence can be seen as causally linked to her predicament of transforming into a large panda. The text supports this link in a brief moment of dialogue when Mei's friend group discovers her new ability to transform into a red panda. To explain the power to her friends, Mei labels it an "inconvenient genetic thingy I got from my mom" (*Red*, 00:32:37–00:32:42), likening her transformative powers to a genetic disease and establishing her condition as both inherited and undesirable. The genetic explanation for Mei's transformation also reflects common concerns, such as the possibility that some disabilities may be inherited, briefly leaning into the Medical model. In this regard, it must be acknowledged that the argument presented in the chapter on sexuality, namely that Mei's transformation and symptoms (such as sweating and irritability) are part of an overarching metaphor for puberty and the menstrual cycle, would also fall on the more medical side of interpreting Mei's sudden change in body and abilities. In the second half of *Red*, Mei's struggle to reconcile her transforming nature is also explained as inherited, as generational trauma has led her mother, Ming, to suffer from her condition in the same way, until she metaphorically locked her panda away. The panda, in this instance, can be read as largely symbolic of her family's trauma of conforming to a new culture and the lack of space for healthy emotional vulnerability. Ming's pain and mental trauma also manifest physically in the form of an injury inflicted on her own mother, stemming from her inability to truly 'control the panda'. Another intersectional link to the diversity marker of race and ethnicity may be attributed to cultural factors, such as going against filial piety, which is foregrounded in many Asian-centric households and offers another interpretation of the symbolism presented in *Red*. The

Chinese character for ‘filial piety’ can even be seen at the very beginning⁸, in the first visible frame of the movie, on a hanging scroll in the background of a family picture taken by Mei’s family on Chinese New Year in 1994 (*Red*, 00:00:48). A voiceover by Mei further emphasizes the primary rule of her family being to honor your parents, warning the audience in the same breath that, taken to an extreme, “you might forget to honor yourself” (*Red*, 00:01:21). After reviewing my notes on *Red*, it becomes clear that Mei’s aversion to her transformed may also largely stem from her desire to fit in with others and simply be a teenager, able to attend her favorite artists’ concert, a different type of assimilation than the cultural one her ancestors had to endure but one that is still met with disapproval from her mother.

After an initial focus on mental disabilities, the following subsection examines transformation and instances of dysmorphia through the lens of disability and takes a closer look at the narrative surrounding the loss of limbs, as well as the example of PWD as objects of violence and ridicule.

3.3.2 Physical disability and transformation as a superpower

Although Massimo and Uncle Ugo will serve as the main frame of reference for this chapter’s argument about *Luca*’s portrayal of disability, it also considers past portrayals of Quasimodo in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* and, briefly, *Encanto*’s Uncle Bruno. These characters serve as parallels and/or points of contrast to illustrate the differences between traditional and more progressive models of PWD in the selected movies. Previous research by Holcomb and Latham-Mintus identified the voices of those with disabilities, their responses to and interpretations of characters supposed to represent them, as a notable limitation of their study on Disney and Pixar films (9). The discussion aims to narrow this gap by considering filmmaker attitudes and the voices of PWD on the development and reception of PWD and their community. The importance of consulting is acknowledged because it ultimately advocates for representation that aligns with the progressive Cultural Pluralism Model of depiction in modern media, supporting the ongoing effort to normalize depictions of PWD without focusing on their disabilities.

The chapter on sexuality introduced a queer reading of *Luca*’s monstrous form as an analogy for deviance from heteronormativity. However, the transformative

⁸ I am indebted to my supportive friend and colleague, Mag. Barbara Pointner, who is capable of reading modern Chinese characters and thankfully pointed out the occurrence and translation of the character, during a communal viewing experience in the process of collecting data on each movie.

aspect and his rejection of his 'true form' also lend themselves to a reading of *Luca* as an example of different disability models commonly used in media. In the literature review, Smith's criticism of the tendency to reduce the disabled body to two molds, the helpless or the monstrous, was addressed. While the former is evident in Uncle Ugo as an object of pity and a representative of the Charity model, I argue that the latter also has merit. I will therefore review interactions and character design choices introduced in the chapter on sexuality through the lens of disability representation. One aspect in favor of this reading is the focus on what Luca seeks to overcome, which, at first glance, suggests a link to the Supercrip model. However, it is not just his body's innate abilities or his perceived limitations he is trying to rid himself of, but society's stigmatization of them, resulting in rejection and verbal abuse. This is best illustrated by Luca's antagonist, Ercole, who, during the movie's climax, assumes the role of speaking for the town, judging Luca and Alberto's state of being by reducing them to the label of 'monster': "No, but we're afraid of you. Everyone is horrified and disgusted by you because you are monsters." (*Luca*, 01:17:13–01:17:22) It is notable that the impact of public rejection is mitigated immediately afterward, in Giulia's and Massimo's show of courage by speaking up and out for Alberto and Luca:

ERCOLE: Oh, yeah? Who are they, then?

MASSIMO: I know who they are. They are Luca and Alberto, (he drops his harpoon)
and...they are the winners.

LUCA: Wh...what?

ALBERTO: Really?

ERCOLE: They can't be the winners? They are not even people! (*Luca*, 01:17:23–01:17:45)

The scene, as previously established, places Luca and Alberto at the heart of a circle of people at the very end of the town's race route, with onlookers showing shocked faces as they watch Ercole threaten the two visibly transformed children with a harpoon, amplifying the threat of impending violence. Notably, the first to stand up for Luca and Alberto are Massimo, whose innate disability and society's response to it shape his worldview and paternal nature, and Giulia, the daughter he presumably raised with a positive attitude toward people with similar underlying conditions. Their crucial and vocal support in front of the majority of the townspeople during a culturally vital competition at the movie's climax suggests that the portrayal of monsters in *Luca* may alternatively be read as a call for justice and equality in access to land and in mingling with human society, linking back to the more progressive Civil Rights and Legal models. The lack of use of the Civil Rights model has previously been criticized in Holcomb and Latham-Mintus' analysis of Disney and Pixar's body of work until 2018

(8) and may therefore be seen as a much-needed addition, whereas the Legal model uses media to teach the audience that, for instance, open-mindedness, courage to stand up to others, and the value of community are valuable tools with which to combat discriminatory behavior. Placing Massimo and Giulia, two of the central supporting characters in *Luca*, in a position of power during a moment of clear societal rejection, having them speak up for those facing a familiar struggle (i.e., a visible difference from the norm) with conviction and receiving virtually no pushback but rather support and acceptance from the surrounding crowd, may function as a teachable moment. The implications of these findings are significant for Pixar's message to its audiences. By informing audiences on how to respond to moments of social injustice, these films highlight the reality of rejection and may encourage (especially younger) viewers to use their voices to stand up for others facing adversity or to advocate for those in need.

The choice to have Massimo advocate for the boys is particularly interesting, as he represents not only an ally in the form of a trusted town member and supportive father figure, but also an affected party who is visibly different due to his disability. As briefly introduced in the gender chapter, Giulia's father, Massimo Marcovaldo, is a massive, broad-shouldered Italian man whose most striking facial features are his bushy eyebrows and a short mustache that covers his mouth. Initially left unaddressed, the audience learns in a light-hearted, joking manner that Massimo is a congenital amputee, born without his right arm. A deliberate intersection of disability, Luca and Alberto's species or race, the topic of sexuality, and otherness is drawn through Massimo's explanation of his lack of limb to a curious Alberto, as he states that "[t]his is how I came into the world" (*Luca*, 00:44:20–00:44:22). The statement cements Massimo's status as being born with a physical disability. The line appears to have been chosen deliberately, as the filmmakers note that "[l]ike Luca and Alberto, Massimo was born different. The fisherman handled his limb difference deftly his whole life, and remained a loved, respected and vital part of his community" (Zornosa). Supposedly contrary to the filmmaker's expectations, this quote raises additional questions, as it first confirms that the difference from birth was deliberate. In the same breath, it implies a connection between his beloved and respected status and the level of effort (i.e., his deft handling and dealing with only one arm) he has put into fitting in and living a normal life, which places all the responsibility for acceptance on the PWD rather than on the society he lives in. This questionable idea that a person's right to belong and worth are directly linked to their competence and ability to navigate

inequality is only one example of Pixar filmmakers' attitudes contradicting some of their intended messaging and ongoing efforts toward better representation. Moreover, the lack of Massimo's appendage is initially joked about when he claims the arm was eaten by a sea monster, to the horror of the masked sea monsters across from him, before promptly defusing the situation by laughing at their reaction. The joking tone of his explanation, combined with Massimo showing off his expert knife skills despite his birth defect, presents his disability as something that does not impede him in the slightest, a portrayal that holds throughout the movie. As a fisherman, one might expect difficulty handling equipment, but Massimo remains a capable cook and fisherman, not held back by his single hand. Furthermore, Massimo's interactions with his daughter depict him as a kind, caring, and capable father to Giulia and, to an extent, later also to Alberto, contradicting traditional and stereotypical connotations of PWD, which often "call into question the status of character as an adult" (Schwartz, Lutfiyya, and Hansen 190).

Notably, the only acknowledgment of his disability during the movie is also immediately contextualized as something that does not impede his life, normalizing the lack of his limb. Although the normalization of his amputee status is surprising in the context of Disney's typically traditional portrayals of PWD, it is less so for the intended target audience, as Holcomb and Latham-Mintus find that the loss of a limb or body parts tends to be normalized in animated children's media and is often depicted humorously or deemed fixable (8). While not fixable in *Luca*, the film remains light-hearted and allows Massimo to find humor in Alberto's shock, perhaps easing the audience's reaction to the absence of a body part even further. Interestingly, related to the loss of a limb, Luca appears to learn to transform his body and adapt to the surface's requirements once he steps onto shore. His merfolk physique transforms into that of a regular human boy, including the loss of his long, scaled tail and fins (between his usually elongated toes and fingers). The lack of a tail results in initial balancing problems on land, which surface-savvy Alberto addresses as "phantom tail" (*Luca*, 00:12:34), a term that can be inferred as a direct comparison to phantom pain typically associated with or found in persons who have lost a limb. Alberto goes on to teach Luca how to walk in a crude, silly facsimile of a trainer coaching someone to relearn walking after an injury or prolonged inactivity. However, Luca quickly picks up his new skill and continues to navigate the surface without further mobility issues.

The framing of Massimo's disability as normal and non-restrictive invokes the Cultural Pluralism model and may reflect an acknowledgment of the importance of consulting represented communities during the production process to ensure better representation. According to a *New York Times* interview by Laura Zornosa with Enrico Casarosa and producer Andrea Warren, the disability rights activist and filmmaker Jim LeBrecht was consulted on details for Massimo's character. Jim LeBrecht was born with spina bifida, which requires the use of a wheelchair, and is known for fighting for greater diversity and the same level of inclusion for disability that filmmakers have begun to extend to other marginalized groups. Zornosa argues that "authenticity portrayed in films like 'Luca' only happens when people from the communities represented onscreen are also working behind the camera". Fittingly, Disney has been heavily criticized for its refusal to employ disability consultants during the development of *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, despite numerous requests. The lack of such consultation, Norden speculates, may be a remnant of the outdated Medical model view of disabled people. A common misconception of the outdated model marks PWD as a minority, neither in need of consultation nor representation, but rather as a group of individuals who have to endure difficult medical circumstances (172). In response to a letter-writing campaign protesting the film's title (organized by Paul Spudich, a man with kyphoscoliosis from San Francisco) because it includes the word 'hunchback', Disney spokesman Howard Green states: "Absolutely not [...] we will do something very sensitive to the concerns of handicapped people, or the physically challenged, or whatever the correct term is these days." (qtd. in Norden 172) The lack of interest in the accurate and politically correct addressal of PWD at the time does not inspire confidence in the statement's veracity, justifying the call for more inclusive representation aligned with progressive models such as the Civil Rights and/or Legal model or Cultural Pluralism, as in Massimo's portrayal.

Children's media helps shape expectations and socializes children from a young age about how to respond to otherness, including the depiction of negative reactions such as rejection, the threat of violence, and verbal abuse. Here, the thesis takes Quasimodo as one of the most visible, researched, and well-known examples of the adaptation of a disabled character in Disney canon based on a novel. Given the utterances and decisions of some of the most prolific producers of *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, it comes as no surprise that, historically, audiences who are part of the disabled community feared further discrimination. Some even predicted and dreaded

persecution after a movie with this focus and form of representation was released, highlighting the very real dangers of misrepresentation and stereotypical portrayals of PWD beyond the screen. One notable response at the time of release came from Kathi Wolfe, an American freelance writer who is legally blind: “I and others with disabilities fear [an] increase [of] the ridicule encountered by both disabled children and adults” (qtd. in Norden 173). This fear was not entirely unfounded, as research by Schwartz, Lutfiyya, and Hansen warns that “inaccurate portrayals can potentially create misunderstandings and foster prejudicial attitudes towards these individuals” (190). Sadly, the release indeed led to a surge of physical attacks on PWD immediately afterward, as reported by *The British Scoliosis Society*, where there had previously been none. This indicates that a portion of society responded with prejudice and discrimination to a movie that claimed to promote tolerance of otherness while perpetuating problematic stereotypes concerning PWD, despite attempts to have their voices and concerns heard (Norden 174). Norden further criticizes the reduction of *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* novel’s narrative to something more akin to *The Beauty and the Beast*, thereby falling back “on one of the most enduring beliefs about ‘good’ PWDs: that they possess an inner beauty that compensates for their less-than-perfect exteriors.” (166) and refers to the similarities of Quasimodo’s character changes to that of Pixar’s New Man model, referenced in the chapter on gender. This is problematic precisely because the good intention behind this interpretation fails to question the propriety of equating PWD with freaks of nature, akin to animals, resulting in fear, humiliation, and subsequent rejection by society at large (Norden 166). Such a rejection is exemplified by the townsfolk’s treatment of Luca’s kin and specifically by Uncle Ugo in *Luca*, whose appearance, behavior, mannerisms, and dialogue point towards a more traditional depiction of a person with mental disability.

In contrast to the human Massimo, Uncle Ugo serves as a unified example of several negative stereotypes about PWD, embodying the mentally (and, to a lesser degree, physically) disabled as an object of ridicule or comedic relief, often relegated to side characters. Ugo has been a recluse ever since an incident in which he went to the surface and had a near-fatal encounter with humans. The event supposedly ‘reformed’ him and led him to turn his back on his ‘addiction’ (i.e., going to the surface, similar to Luca), resulting in “an ascetic life of deprivation” (Casarosa), as a direct result of his abuse, according to a post by *Luca*’s director, Enrico Casarosa, on the platform X. Casarosa’s use of ‘ascetic’ is interpreted here as yet another indicator of

stereotypical representation of PWD, as it links to Ugo's nature as a now non-sexual being, introduced as a common theme for PWD in the literature review (Hunt 46). Ugo is visually designed as a sea creature with an anglerfish-like appearance, and, other than his brother, Luca's father, has a see-through torso and appears mentally disabled in several ways, which aligns with stereotypical expectations. His large eyes constantly move out of sync in different directions, resulting in a thousand-yard stare, while his open mouth is most often frozen in a perpetual smile, with visible teeth, consistent with findings from Holcomb and Latham-Mintus on depictions of animalistic PWD as objects of ridicule. Social miscues and childlike innocence, along with hints of lower intelligence, are also emphasized in a scene in which Uncle Ugo attempts to greet Luca. This nearly kills Ugo, since he is not used to low-pressure water, having lived permanently in deeper waters, requiring Luca to crudely punch his heart to reanimate him on the spot. This near-death experience illustrates Uncle Ugo's seemingly nonchalant understanding of and careless attitude toward danger to his life. The severity of Ugo's naivety is never addressed again, depriving the audience of the means to understand Uncle Ugo's careless attitude and instead attributing his behavior to someone incapable of navigating adult life. In addition to Ugo's behavior and returning to his appearance, Ugo's body deviates from that of his family and leans toward that of an anglerfish, a deliberate choice, according to a tweet by director Enrico Casarosa, meant to reflect his time spent in the deep waters. The audience gets a glimpse of his quarters in the depths in a short, supposedly comedic post-credit scene, in which he seems to monologue to himself or to the general audience. His audience is ultimately revealed to be a fish, appearing in an awkward position, maybe even frightened, as suggested by its small pupils, who then quickly exits the screen to the right while staring at Ugo in silence. His monologue is remarkable for its simple, staccato-like sentence structure and delivery, reminiscent of a child or an elderly person monologuing:

"Some people think I'm mad to live in the deep. I think that they are the ones who are mad, not me, the one who is mad, it's them. It's a nice life, simple life. It's away from the hustle and bustle, all the stuff that you don't want. [proceeds to eat a floating piece of meat] Mmm. Whale carcass. Anyway, you're gonna have fun. You'll get to hear me talk. I can talk without stopping, sometimes for maybe twelve hours. And you get to listen, so you're lucky. Well done." (*Luca*, 01:33:46–01:34:24)

In this instance, the speech validates Ugo's separation from society as self-imposed and, therefore, as a matter of society's involvement or inclusion. Its depiction infantilizes Ugo to some extent by subtly affirming his status as a social outcast who

struggles to maintain adult relationships, a pattern that parallels Norden's reading of Disney's portrayal of Quasimodo (168). His tendency to switch topics at the drop of a hat and to speak in seemingly nonsensical monologues for twelve hours without stopping also draws parallels to similar speech patterns in younger children. The comedic relief of the fish fleeing this monologue can be read in two ways. The first implies a natural response to the unusual or uncanny, namely flight, while the second shows outright rejection of Ugo by a fish, possibly out of a feeling of dread, who is arguably more closely related to the whale carcass Ugo swallowed than to the merfolk Luca and Ugo are part of. Although the moral grounds for ingesting sea creatures in Luca are not clarified by any other scenes, an added layer of the monstrous is implied, as none of the other characters are seen eating larger sea creatures, which makes Ugo a cannibal of sorts. Both readings, however, establish Uncle Ugo as an object of ridicule and validate the characters' reactions and rejection as permissible.

Beyond the act of rejection of the unknown or different, the use of words to reject unwanted thoughts and feelings is exemplified in *Luca* by the name 'Bruno' for shutting down inner negative voices that hold one back from what one truly desires. A notable yet subtle parallel between *Luca* and *Encanto* can also be drawn. As previously mentioned in the chapter on sexuality, Luca's protagonists end up personifying the undesirable voice in their heads, which reminds them of their limitations, and give it the name 'Bruno'. By shouting "Silenzio Bruno" (*Luca*, 00:20:00–00:20:30), they effectively silence their thoughts and reject their very existence, despite some of their objective merits. In comparison, *Encanto*'s protagonist, Mirabel, wants to learn about her estranged Uncle Bruno (as opposed to Luca, who distances himself from Uncle Ugo), whose special power is the ability to tell the future through prophecies, for which he has been shunned. Mirabel, at the center of a less-than-desirable prophecy foretelling her role in her family's demise, seeks out her uncle, who is revealed to live in the walls of their sentient home, having never left, going unnoticed and living in seclusion from his family. On her way to find her uncle, her family audibly tries to refuse to talk about him at all costs, and the film segues into a full musical number titled "We Don't Talk About Bruno". The song presents unfavorable descriptions of him, including wearing a mischievous grin, apparently feasting on people's screams, stuttering, muttering, mumbling, and stumbling, and painting his affinity for and closeness to rats as odd. These descriptions and Bruno's rejection by his family provide another parallel to the negative depiction of PWD in accordance with

the Supercrip model. Bruno's ability is something to be overcome, not just by him but also by his family. However, whereas Uncle Bruno gets his happy ending and is reunited with his family by the end of the movie, as underscored by the final song focusing on his re-emergence and reintroduction to the family, *Luca's* Uncle Ugo remains distant, secluded, and rejected by his single audience in deep waters even in the end credits. Overall, the findings indicate a clear difference in the message conveyed by the depictions of Massimo and Uncle Ugo. Massimo is born with a disability, overcomes the difficulties that come with it, and is rewarded with in-universe inclusion and social standing, as well as paratextual praise, whereas Uncle Ugo is unable to move on from his violent experience, which results in mental injury akin to a phobia of going to the surface (and can be likened to anthropophobia, the fear of other people), punishing and relegating his depiction to that of a pitiful fool, ostracized to the deep waters that physically deform him further.

The end of this chapter briefly examines physical disability in the form of visual impairments, whether due to age or declining eyesight, as an often-overlooked marker of disability and of ableist language. It contributes to existing disability research by expanding insights into the presence of visual impairments in *Lightyear* and *Red*. Because the normalization of aids like glasses and the representation of their use lead to the rejection of the label of disability, Holcomb and Latham-Mintus do not include glasses in their selection of disability markers. Their lack of significance to the characters is interpreted as evidence of the ordinariness of vision impairments, since most people who wear glasses do not consider themselves disabled (8). However, given Clogston and Haller's progressive portrayals of disability models, the idea that glasses are treated as an unspoken, ordinary tool for those with visual impairments rather than a significant marker of disability can be read as aligning with the Cultural Pluralism model. This, in turn, renders the requirement for glasses and their active use, without further discussion or plot-central effect, as a further normalization of visual aids. For instance, the novelty of *Encanto's* Mirabel wearing glasses and being lauded as Disney's first bespectacled female protagonist points to a perceptible need for more representation in small details, such as visual aids. According to *Encanto's* production designer Lorelay Bové, having the main character wear glasses is a deliberate design choice to underscore one of the film's main themes, 'perspective' and "how different points of view can affect a relationship [...] to reinforce that theme" (Giardina). Although the lack of glasses on protagonists' faces may be read as a jab at beauty

ideals, other protagonists, such as Carl Fredricksen from Pixar's *Up* and Sadness from *Pixar's Inside Out*, are not examined further, as the scope of this thesis does not allow for a deeper analysis of how the absence of glasses as a mobility device overlaps with beauty ideals across different genders. The use of glasses as a remedy for what are presumably regular visual impairments, however, appears several times in *Lightyear* and *Red*. In *Red*, the main character, Mei, and her friend, Priya, wear prescription glasses (as they do throughout the movie and are not assumed to be a fashion statement), whereas most of the characters in *Lightyear* shown with glasses are background characters or initially had full vision. Captain Alisha and her wife, Kiko, are depicted wearing glasses only later in life, presumably due to age-related vision loss. Main characters wearing glasses have been rare but have become more common in recent years, e.g., *Encanto*'s Mirabel and *Red*'s Mei are two of the most recent examples; Miles from Disney's *Atlantis* (2001) and Carl Fredricksen from *Up* are earlier instances of main characters wearing glasses as part of their standard character design. For *Red*, it is worth noting that once Mei transforms, her visual impairment seems to disappear alongside her human appearance, aligning with the Supercrip model of an improved body. This improvement is akin to Marvel's Peter Parker becoming Spider-Man, who no longer requires glasses after his superhero transformation following a radioactive spider bite, which grants him superpowers. Additionally, both of Mei's parents are shown wearing glasses and, given their significance in Mei's life, can be considered part of the main character circle. Jin's glasses are part of his character model and remain present throughout the movie, whereas Ming is seen only for a few seconds wearing glasses as a teenager, implying the use of contacts or other corrective measures between her youth and adulthood. Although an argument has been made for glasses as a visual aid and legitimate disability marker, the issue of glasses as a non-disabled fashion accessory remains.

Findings also suggest that the use of ableist language, such as labeling someone as acting or being 'crazy' or an 'idiot', or asking what is wrong with them, is fairly common, as supported by previous studies on disability (Holcomb and Latham-Mintus). Notable examples include Alberto's reaction to Luca's wish to stay on the surface and follow Guilia, in which he tries to reason by insisting: "Look. This town is making you crazy." (*Luca*, 01:02:30–01:03:06), and the repeated use of the term 'idiot(i)' by different characters in *Luca*. In contrast, there are no instances of similar meaning in *Lightyear* or *Red*, so this aspect receives no further attention.

To summarize Pixar's construction of disability, a closer inspection of the results reveals how Pixar engages with prevalent disability-related themes and stereotypes in portrayals of physical and mental disability in current animated children's media. As the analysis focuses not only on the film's depictions but also the filmmakers' attitudes and paratextual commentary, this chapter emphasizes how Pixar partially succeeds in 'moving with the times' and appears politically correct on the subject of physical disabilities, yet fails to fully leave traditional depictions of mental disabilities in the past. Textual and visual clues do indicate the reproduction of stereotypes or outdated and harmful depictions of people with mental disabilities, critically addressing Luca's Uncle as a visual manifestation of people with disabilities as objects of violence and ridicule. *Red's* family circumstances and the transformation of her female family members were examined in greater detail. Results show traditional ideas of disability as a medical condition, and that Mei's transformative nature is partially framed as a superpower requiring her to overcome hidden family trauma to remain filial to her family. The monstrous analogy in *Luca* is analyzed through the lens of disability, with the character Buzz Lightyear presented as a reconstruction of physical disability as a toy and as a more subtle representation of a character displaying signs of depression and trauma in human form. This thesis's findings call into question the presence of negative and demeaning stereotypes and the expectation placed upon people suffering from mental disabilities or generational trauma to overcome their limitations to be accepted by those around them. However, *Luca* also offers positive representation through one of the character's parental figures, whose disability is treated with dignity throughout the movie and visually naturalized through displays of competence and, on a textual level, in several scenes that are significant to the central plot.

3.4 The importance of community in Pixar (representation on and behind the screen)

Family is a central theme in Pixar's (and Disney's) canon. Analyzing family dynamics and relationships can provide valuable insights into aspects related to diversity, such as prevalent gender roles within the family unit, representation in role models, and cultural and generational influences on inclusivity. As diverse as ideas of gender and sexuality can be, so can be ideas of family constellations and roles within the family, as well as the importance of friends and community in the absence of (supportive) family. But community is not limited to on-screen portrayals. Once again, paratexts on

production and development, as well as the influence of communal support and inclusion, are reviewed and interwoven throughout the analysis to answer the research question about the purpose of diverse relationships on and off-screen.

3.4.1 Non-traditional family constellations, child-parent relationships, and generational trauma

The analyses of *Lightyear* and *Luca* depict a number of nontraditional family constellations. *Lightyear*'s plot and cast of characters do not center on a family conflict but rather on a sci-fi problem that sends Buzz on a journey towards acceptance and community. The most prevalent family constellation depicted in *Lightyear* is the family of Alisha and Kiko, two mothers, raising their son, whose conception is assumed to have been aided by future technology due to limited resources on the unknown planet. Alternative readings of their son's conception, e.g., as the result of a donor or adoption, are unlikely, as Alisha is seen pregnant during Buzz's time travel sequences. A reading of their family as patchwork, with Alisha having had a relationship with a man, who might be the father, in between Buzz learning of her relationship and her pregnancy upon next hyper jump before returning to Kiko around the time their son is a toddler, is convoluted and also a demeaning assumption of Alisha's faithful character, and therefore disregarded. Since the audience and Buzz only catch glimpses of their family whenever Buzz returns from his time-traveling journeys, further insights into their family dynamic and, for instance, division of domestic tasks would be pure speculation. However, the presence of a non-nuclear family model, involving two loving mothers who successfully raised a son and appear to have a close relationship with their grandchildren, i.e., Izzy Hawthorne, does break new ground for the studio. Other relationships of note in *Lightyear* include Buzz's team, who become a tight-knit group akin to 'found family,' as there is no further information or mention of Buzz having left any living family behind for his mission.

By comparison, *Luca* offers a variety of family constellations. The protagonist is depicted as part of a traditional nuclear family, albeit as sea creatures. Luca's brief run-in with a human boat invites the audience to his family and their assigned roles. Luca's mother is introduced as a rather stereotypical mother concerned with her child's well-being. While the parents are bickering over an acquaintance, Luca's grandmother appears to be the only one attentive enough to inquire about Luca's worries, having noticed his absent-minded facial expression. Upon the euphemistic question of "where

do boats come from” (*Luca*, 00:07:35–00:07:39), the child’s father does a spit-take, whereas Luca’s grandmother rather unceremoniously attempts to answer the question before Luca’s mother intervenes. In a later scene, Luca’s forbidden trips to the surface have been revealed to his parents, and in the confrontation with souvenirs from the human world, i.e., a playing card and a clock, Luca’s father can be seen reluctantly taking the lead of the conversation by clumsily declaring Luca to be in trouble after deferring to his wife about the necessity of this conversation. The scene is lit almost in an interrogation-like fashion while Luca’s mother takes the backseat or position of the ‘cop’ behind the two-sided mirror, listening in and providing backup, when necessary, yet clearly the driving force. The conversation is predictably quickly taken over by Luca’s mother emerging from the shadows, visually emphasizing her tendency to underplay her matriarchal power, yet unable to fully let her husband be in charge. Later in the story, once the news of Luca’s departure from the human world has reached the parents’ attention, they set out together on a journey to find him, with Luca’s mother taking charge once again. Alberto presents a clear contrast to this nuclear, mostly traditional depiction of family and its gender roles. In the second half of the movie Alberto reveals to have been abandoned by his single-parent father when at first, he assures Luca that “[his father is] not really here a whole lot” (*Luca*, 00:14:03–00:14:06), allowing Alberto to do whatever he wants, which provides an example of Ruesink’s critique of Pixar’s high number of problematic fathers at the center of its stories, perpetuating the idea that men are incapable or unwilling of caring for their children (9–10), which is balanced out by the introduction to Giulia’s father, Massimo. After meeting Giulia in town, the two protagonists are taken in by her small family, consisting of only her disabled father and her cat. Pictures and story beats hint that Giulia’s mother lives in the city of Geneva, where Giulia’s school is located, separated from her father, Massimo, while her daughter spends the school term with her mother there. It is unclear whether Giulia’s parents are separated only by distance due to work or by divorce, and only share custody of their daughter, as the family arrangement is phrased rather vaguely, with her living with her mother during the school term and with her father every summer.

In consideration of traditional gender roles in family constellations, Massimo appears visually like an alpha male yet consistently displays behaviors traditionally associated with motherhood, such as being emotionally available to his daughter, sharing open conversation, providing food, and applying Pixar’s New Man model,

evidently favoring the creation of communal bonds. The latter is exemplified in *Luca*'s epilogue, in which Alberto has been taken in by Massimo and is wearing Massimo's cap while Giulia leaves for the city with Luca. Massimo's character ties into Ruesink's conclusion that Disney (and Pixar) aims to move toward a more androgynous representation of gender roles within family constellations (5). His characterization adds to Wooden and Gillam's findings on similarities in Pixar's presentation of single-father households as not nearly as damaging as households led by a single mother (140). Their foster-father son relationship seems to also heal what Alberto's father has broken, Alberto's hope not to be alone, which is revealed in a touching confession to Luca after finding Alberto's marks counting the days he had been left to his own devices on the walls of his hideout:

ALBERTO: I just stopped counting after a while. He said I was old enough to be on my own. I just thought that... maybe he'd change his mind. Honestly, though, I get it. He's better off without me. You are too.

LUCA: That's not true.

ALBERTO (gently): Yes, it is. You're not like me. You're the good kid. And I'm just the kid that ruins everything.

LUCA: SILENZIO BRUNO! That's just a dumb voice in your head. You taught me that. And getting a Vespa, seeing the world, your ideas are the best!

ALBERTO (exploding): Just let it go! Okay? You and I should have never have been friends in the first place.

LUCA (pleading): Don't say that. (Alberto turns away) (*Luca*, 01:08:15–01:08:57)

The exchange reveals not only Alberto's resignation after being abandoned but also the conclusion he has drawn. He sees himself as the problem, the cause of being left behind, and justifies others' abandonment of him due to his diminished self-worth. By the end of the movie, however, through his experiences at the race and acceptance from the townsfolk, as outlined in the chapter on sexuality, he parts from Luca at the train station, saying, "Massimo asked if I wanted to stick around, move in maybe, and I just thought that I ... I think he needs me (laughs), you know?" (*Luca*, 01:22:42–01:22:53). Massimo is seen standing farther back, though his presence evokes a clear sense of support, visually positioned right behind Alberto, having his back. Giulia and Alberto's rivalry also ends at the station, as the three embrace at the same time, with the latter promising to race Giulia the next summer.

In stark contrast, *Red* depicts a household led by a matriarch who controls her family. In several instances, Mei's parents exhibit a clear family hierarchy or power dynamic, with Ming in charge of care and disciplinary actions. Ming can be characterized as overbearing, dutiful, and culturally set in her ideals, whereas Mei's father, Jin, tends to display a calm, laid-back attitude towards child-rearing, yet

appears involved in his role as a provider of care and emotional safety. Jin shares similarities with Massimo in the typical theme of Pixar fatherhood entailing worry regarding the safety and/or well-being of their own family, more emotionally involved and expressive than traditional fathers, which enables them to not only express their fear but also talk about their concerns. Instead of selfish reasons, the expression of concern is not due to a fear of dominance or authority over Mei (although a case can be made for Ming's worries in this regard), as Jin's main concern appears to be the happiness of his own daughter, displaying a selfless type of paternal love and care, in contrast to Ming's fear of control. Therefore, in *Red*, the dominant parent trope and parental fears are subverted as Ming embodies fears previously ascribed to masculinities. With Ming in the more dominant role, Jin takes on the role of a quiet, yet dependable man, deferring to his wife in matters of the household, cooking and taking care of the emotional needs of his daughter, which Ming is unable to prioritize due to her own trauma, perpetuating the cycle. The cycle is broken by Jin's interference in providing emotional support and guidance before the panda banishing ceremony, which continues a trend laid out in Ruesink's findings of Pixar making efforts to "open up a space for men to show vulnerability and dependency without being ridiculed" (16). How parents react to their children breaking with tradition has a significant impact on the family's integrity and offers audiences different reactions to children's acts of defiance to learn from (Decker). In Pixar, parental authority over decisions that affect the whole family, effectively placing the child's needs in second place, is commonly reinforced, as in Mei and Ming's relationship. This parent-child dynamic and cultural expectations of obedience and filial piety is at the forefront of *Red*, as the movie's initial scene has Mei proudly proclaims the first rule of their family: "Honor. Your. Parents. They are the supreme being who gave you life. The least you can do in return is every single thing they ask" (*Red*, 00:22:21–00:22:33). Almost ironically, Mei's main act of defiance involves leaving this culturally ingrained perspective behind, which leads to the main conflict of the movie, breaking open the intergenerational family conflict. Once Mei decides to leave the banishing ritual in favor of attending the band's concert. The female members of her family present for the ritual are left in clear disbelief, and Mei's grandmother immediately finds the cause of Mei's unfilial and outrageous behavior in Ming's failure as a mother, despite not knowing the influence of Jin's caring conversation earlier on.

Although acts of defiance are a core theme of children's animation, Kern argues that parental, authoritative decisions tend to end in reconciliation, regardless, placing the child back within the family unit by trading a piece of their autonomy (e.g., Riley returns to her family home in *Inside Out* and *Brave*'s Merida foregoes true emancipation in light of her mother's near-fatal bodily sacrifice by protecting Merida from an angry mob, willingly facing a permanent life as a bear). *Brave* is initially driven by an empowering message of female bodily autonomy and choice, but it "only allows for adolescent empowerment at the expense of female adult sacrifice" (Viswanath 19), while the kingly father figure takes a postfeminist and progressive position. This inevitably places the mother in the role of antagonist in the story, calling into question whether women have a place outside the patriarchal or symbolic order. Correspondingly, I find that Mei and Ming's relationship follows a trajectory notably similar to that of the caring but overbearing mother and the daughter's initially perceived 'betrayal'. The betrayal comes in the form of breaking tradition by Mei not following in her ancestors' and, ultimately, her mother's footsteps in her acceptance of the panda and subsequent refusal to banish it. This rejection causes not only a loss of face for Ming's mother in front of other female family members, but also causes Ming's ritual necklace, containing her red panda after banishment, to crack and release the panda once again. The release culminates in a gigantic, transformed Ming, or what Shi calls a "Godzilla red panda" (Shi). According to Kern's thesis on family in Pixar universes such as *The Incredibles* (2004), family structures in which the father loses control, but the mother does not, are commonly normalized (31). This also holds true for *Luca*, as it is the mother who took charge of the search for their son. *Red*, however, subverts this trend since it is the father who stays level-headed and in control after Ming's loss of face in front of her family. In fact, it is the very loss of control over her daughter's life, emphasized by Mei's refusal to banish her own panda as her ancestors did, which spirals into Ming losing the careful control she had exercised thus far. For *Brave*, Viswanath claims that "unlike traditional Disney-Pixar films, it is the *mother*, not the father, who is flawed and allowed to grow" (18, italics in original). The outlined plot progression and analysis of *Red*'s climax clearly show that Ming is given the same opportunity. In a fit of rage, the gigantic, transformed Ming tries to retrieve her daughter and get rid of the symbol of Mei's defiance, the band 4*Town, at their concert. During the showdown, several things become apparent that clearly had been left unsaid for much too long. Mei confronts her mother by stating, "I'm not your little Mei-Mei

anymore! I lied, Mom! [...] It was my idea to hustle the panda. My idea to go to Tyler's party! It was all ME! I like boys! I like loud music! I like gyrating! I'M 13, DEAL WITH IT!" (*Red*, 01:01:12–01:16:33). First, Mei takes ownership of her decisions, essentially demanding emancipation and unapologetically professing her budding sexuality and attraction to boys, while defying her mother's expectation of modesty.

The second revelation concerns the high expectations Ming places on Mei, which her own mother had previously imposed on Ming, perpetuating a cycle of generational hurt. While fighting against the ritual, Ming laments that she too never went to concerts, as she put her family first by trying to be a good daughter. Mei aggressively rejects her by apologizing for not being "good enough, and sorry, I'll NEVER BE LIKE YOU." (*Red*, 01:18:19–01:18:24), while headbutting her mother into unconsciousness, unfortunately too far outside the banishing circle Jin had set up in the meantime. Yet, Mei cannot save her mother by herself. In another female sacrifice, Ming's mother and other present family members break their own banishing trinkets, unleashing their pandas once again to use their strength. However, it is only due to the combined efforts of Mei's transformed family chanting the banishing incantation and that of her friends, as well as, in the end, all members of 4*Town, and ultimately even the fans/concert goers singing the lines of 4*Town's song "Nobody Like U" in support of their band's efforts, amplifying the chant's power enough to affect Ming. The use of 4*Town's song makes sense, as its lyrics express the sentiment of being by someone's side and not letting them down, which captures the power of the teamwork and community central to the movie's climax. Mei awakens to the sound of her mother crying in a dreamlike space. She has been there before, as it is the space which the panda spirit inhabits, once banished. Mei finds a teenage version of her mother crying "It's all my fault. [...] I hurt her. [...] My mom! I got so angry, and I lost control. I'm just so sick of being perfect! I'm never gonna be good enough for her. Or anyone." (*Red*, 01:22:08–01:22:33) A sympathetic Mei takes her mother's hand and leads her through a forest scenery, Ming gradually aging the further they go until she is her own age once again. They meet the rest of Mei's family, who are one by one presented with the opportunity to banish their panda once more, which is taken by every family member but Mei, who informs her mother:

MEI: I'm changing, mom. I'm finally figuring out who I am. But...I'm scared it'll take me away from you.

MING: Me too. I see you, Mei-Mei. You try to make everyone happy, but are so hard on yourself. And if I taught you that...I'm sorry. So, don't hold back. For anyone. The farther

you go, the prouder I'll be. (*Red*, 01:25:19–01:26:05)

In a momentous act of healing, the generational trauma is unraveled as Ming accepts Mei's decision to keep her panda and acknowledges the gendered expectations she had placed upon her. Mei not only receives her mother's blessing, but also her understanding, releasing her from her mother's control, allowing her age-appropriate emancipation and greater freedom to express her own growing self and identity.

The movie's direction and messages are heavily inspired by director Domee Shi's own struggles to process her relationship with her mother. As revealed by the literature review, it is not uncommon for Pixar storytellers to draw on their own experiences and lived realities, which largely inform their work. However, in consideration of previous paratexts on the production of Pixar films (feature-length or short-form content), I exercise the criticism that some stories and narratives based on lived experiences seem more considered and palatable than others. Storytellers such as Steven Clay Hunter, Adrian Molina, and Brenda Chapman are openly redirected to other projects, or their projects are handed over to other creatives for reworking beyond recognition. Stories about a gendered experience, such as *Red*, have expanded to allow space for messy and diverse ideas of what girls and femininity can look like, but queer storylines, such as *Luca*, still do not seem to receive the same grace and consideration to be discussed more openly, rather than through allegory and ambiguity.

To sum up, the analysis reveals *Red* and *Luca* allow its protagonists, Mei and Luca, to stray from excessive parental control stemming from generational traumas of persecution and conformity to cultural expectations (e.g., filial piety, gender roles of women in Asian households), in Mei's case, banishing the red panda and thus, removing a piece of Mei's identity as a girl coming of age, thereby also allowing Ming to heal her relationship with her own mother, resolving a generational conflict affecting family dynamics. In *Luca*, Luca's ultimate wish for the freedom to live and remain in the human world is granted, the prize being his initial dream of joining Alberto rather than his parents' cage of life amongst the sea creatures. As both Luca and Mei are permitted to make their own choices without notable parental interference, they deviate from the recent Pixar formula and can be deemed a step forward in the allowance of autonomy.

3.4.2 Friendship, kinship, and the power of change

In Finklea's research, teamwork and friendship are key aspects of Pixar's film plot structure and are generally portrayed positively. *Luca* and *Red* provide great examples of friendship, providing safety and support in times when family does not.

When *Red*'s Mei struggles with her transformation, the first people she reveals herself to willingly are her close-knit group of friends, whom she lovingly refers to as her "dork squad" (*Red*, 00:34:42). They are indubitably shown as accepting her come what may, supporting her in her journey of finding the confidence to do uncomfortable things. In fact, as Mei's panda first emerges, she struggles to control the transformation when she feels intense emotions (e.g., potent anger or even 'cuteness aggression'). Once the secret is revealed to her parents, they start testing Mei's control with pictures of deforestation, sad animals, her placing second place in a spelling competition), the latter of which received the strongest reaction and has Mei think of her friend group, who verbally express their support and sit around her, with Abby eventually hugging her as well, putting her in a state of safety and support. Her final challenge involves a box full of cute kittens, which she visibly struggles to suppress a strong emotional reaction of adoration to. Once more, she withdraws into herself and continues her previous imagined scenario of her friends, this time all of them tightly hugging her before all three reassure her with the words "we love you, girl" (*Red*, 00:37:15–00:37:19), and Miriam adding "panda or no panda" (*Red*, 00:37:20–00:37:21), ensuring their bond, regardless of Mei's capabilities. What helps Mei control herself is not her family's effort, but rather the unconditional friendship she receives from her closest circle of girls. Mei's parents are quite surprised and wonder about her technique, to which Mei responds that "when I start to get emotional, all I do is imagine the people I love most in the whole world" (*Red*, 00:37:37–00:37:43), which her mother interprets as referring to them as parents. As Mei realizes this, she quickly lies, confirming the mistaken assumption. The scene is powerful in its positioning of friendship over family, which sets a precedent, as far as the literature review suggests.

After a brief fallout between Mei and the girls due to Ming accusing her friends of having a bad influence on her based on a lie of omission by Mei, she meets her friends again after choosing to keep the panda, rejoining them at the concert and confessing:

MEI: I couldn't do it. The panda's a part of me, and you guys are too.
MIRIAM: Mei, you threw us under the bus.

MEI: I know, and I'm sorry. I've been, like, obsessed with my mom's approval my whole life. I couldn't take losing it, but losing you guys feels even worse. (*Red*, 01:11:54–01:12:12)

The scene doubles down on the importance of friendship for identity formation and places friendship over family once again. By accepting her panda, she also reflects on her need for maternal approval and rejects it in favor of her bond with her friends.

The importance of friendship in response to the absence of parental support is also exemplified in *Luca*. Alberto used to be on his own for a long time before meeting Luca, so Giulia's ability to teach Luca about what lies beyond Portorosso threatens his claim on Luca. Upon returning from helping Massimo with the fishnets, Alberto stumbles across the laughing pair in Giulia's room and asks Luca to follow. When Luca takes too long, Alberto returns with an angry shout of his name, narrowing his eyes and pursing his lips disapprovingly at a clueless Giulia. Their (not quite mutual) rivalry over Luca's attention comes to a head during the training of going downhill for the race:

GIULIA: I know it looks scary. But here's what you need to know-

ALBERTO (interrupts): Would you stop bossing him around?

GIULIA: WHAT is your problem?!

ALBERTO: I'm his friend! I know what he needs!

GIULIA: Oh yeah? Then what does he need? (Alberto gets on the bike seat, Luca on the back)

ALBERTO: ME. We'll just ride it like we did on the island: together. ANDIAMO!

GIULIA: No! (Alberto kicks them off.) (*Luca*, 01:01:30–01:01:44)

Alberto's growing fear of losing the one friend (or potential crush) manifests in him lashing out, which eventually puts both him and Luca at risk, as explained in the chapter on sexuality. Additionally, his fixation on Luca as the person who needs him clouds his judgment of Giulia's intentions and renders him unable to even consider that, rather than fighting over Luca's attention, Alberto has a potential friend and ally in Giulia, who could be an addition to his lack of a support system.

Regardless of the support from at least one doting parent, Giulia shares similarities with Alberto since she does not appear to have friends in Portorosso. Reading Giulia's need for friendship in her father's doubt of the boys being her classmates from the city, her ongoing rivalry with Ercole and his lackeys, and her awkward introduction of bringing them into the fold as fellow 'underdogs', Giulia's insecurity and tendency to instinctively apologize after bursts of energy or self-declared moments of being 'too much' is indicative of a lonely and insecure life. It is understandable that she feels the need to offer up her world once Luca denies that she is, in fact, not too much by stating, "No way, not for me." (*Luca*, 00:53:25). Giulia thanks Luca by showing him and teaching him about the world, human inventions, and

more specifically the universe full of galaxies, which expands Luca's worldview from going beyond the shoreline, to the surface and further on a Vespa with Alberto, to wanting even more by thinking of joining Giulia in school in the city. In this manner, friendship is once again a catalyst for significant change in the established norms and limiting experiences that these young characters draw on as they navigate the world.

Lightyear's crew and Alisha's granddaughter, Izzy, have a similar impact on Buzz's idea of relationships. Once an alpha male, humbled through his transformation into a New Man, teamwork and his connection to Izzy negate the common negative effects of isolation on Pixar males, saving Buzz from going down the same path as OB, whose isolation from non-mechanic others leads to a strong, excessive longing for changing his mistake to the detriment of all those around him, as outlined in more detail in the section on masculinities and teamwork. Similarly, Izzy is able to confront her fear of space to save Buzz from OB's clutches. During a low point in the movie, Izzy's insecurities resurface as she explains, "I'm supposed to be as good as my grandma, I'm supposed to be a Hawthorne, but I'm not." (*Lightyear*, 01:10:59–01:11:08). Her admiration of and friendship with Buzz additionally enable her to overcome what had previously seemed debilitating. During the team's daring rescue mission for Buzz, Izzy apologizes for not measuring up to her grandmother. Coincidentally, Buzz's recognition of his need for others and a brief moment of emasculation simultaneously shatters Izzy's paralyzing self-doubt by stating, "No, I can't do it alone, I need help [...] Izzy, I don't need your grandma, I need you." (*Lightyear*, 01:21:00–01:21:10)

All in all, Pixar breaks familiar ground in explicitly placing platonic bonds over familial ones in several instances of key scenes in all three movies. Alberto's separation from his people and family only strengthens his wish to keep Luca as a companion. By prioritizing his relationship with Luca, he gains community and a foster father in Massimo, in what almost reads as an award. *Lightyear's* Buzz and Izzy similarly center around the finding of community. *Red* provides the strongest case for friendship (e.g., in Mei's group of friends and their unwavering support), being seemingly placed above family in the face of familial expectations that do not provide safety and reassurance. The overarching message supports the idea that Pixar's themes of family slightly shift away from taking away children's autonomy. Instead, their stories focus on breaking free from excessive parental control and tell tales of emancipation through the power of community and friendship. Still, by the end, all

protagonists are part of their own family (whether biological or not), with healthier boundaries and expectations, often not just for the child protagonists but also for their parents, who learn to let go of their control over their children. This development does place family as a priority on the same level as friendship and platonic relationships, such as those among teammates, where there is no family left to return to (e.g., in Buzz's case).

3.4.3 In-/Visible diversity in background characters

To conclude the extensive discussion of findings, this chapter aims to briefly shift the focus of the analysis from the central characters and those supporting them during their journey, to the population hiding in the background of each movie, to discuss the dichotomy of being erasable or unnoticeable by design, yet littered throughout the movie's universe in a form of subtle but authentic representation of diversity. Diversity is still understood here as inclusive and representative of various diversity markers, such as sex, age, sexuality, disability, and race. While reviewing each movie, special attention has been paid to what happens in the background and what the depiction of these non-speaking roles adds to the discussion of diverse representation in children's animated films.

Starting with *Red*, the chapter on disability briefly introduces a wheelchair user, using subtle representation that does not draw attention to itself unless addressed by the speaking roles. To add depth to the scene originally introduced in the chapter on disability, the circumstances surrounding this disabled character open room for conversation about accessibility in daily life for PWD, especially wheelchair users. By paying closer attention to how this character is lifted onto the waiting tram, one might find that they do not need support from any other passengers or the tram conductor, as they are lifted into the vehicle by what appears to be an automatic lift or ramp system. The use of an automated system confirms that the production crew took time to pay attention to inclusivity by adding public accessibility accommodations to the transit system, or at least trams, in the fictional version of Toronto in the 2000s, which is in line with current accessibility standards of the entire Toronto streetcars fleet, according to the TTC website (Toronto Transit Commission). Mei's neighborhood and living area, as well as the school demographics, show a wide variety of residents and inhabitants with diverse markers, some of whom meet intersectional diversity criteria by displaying more than one marker at a time (e.g., a female POC student wearing a

headscarf in the school hallway). In several significant scenes, such as Ming's confrontation with the Daisy Mart clerk or at the concert showdown, a diverse group of onlookers or citizens is present. Some diverse features include the characters wearing religious garments (e.g., a female onlooker at the supermarket wearing a hijab, the school's security head, Malik, who wears a turban), POC representation, people sporting culturally significant hairstyles such as dreadlocks, different body types across different age groups, as well as, for instance, persons who are Asian in appearance. Mei's school population appears significantly diverse, as almost every naturally occurring hair color is present, with some characters even having dyed strands or fully dyed hairdos. There are several students wearing glasses, a boy at school named Carter who wears smudged eyeliner in a gender-stereotype-defying use of makeup and whose appearance makes Mei's heart beat a little faster, and a girl Mei encounters in the women's bathroom who wears an insulin pump patch. None of these characters are tokenized but rather feel like a diverse crowd of people, who constantly appear in the background of densely populated scenes. According to the notes, there has not been a single scene involving larger groups of background characters that did not include a character wearing a religious head garment or who can be considered a person of color. In an interview with director Domee Shi, she addresses receiving comments such as "you made your movie so diverse. How did you do that? Why did you do that?" And I'd be like, well, that's just reality." (Shi) The perspective of development, ensuring animated locations and populations reflect reality, adds to a more authentic sense of Toronto's population. In terms of the ethnicities living in the city, the age groups represented, the physical disabilities portrayed, and the religious beliefs visually expressed through clothing in Mei's hometown, these elements show progress in prioritizing authenticity. In an interview with Sarah El-Mahmoud for *CinemaBlend*, Domee Shi addressed how this level of authenticity certainly did not go unnoticed: "For example, in one of the trailers, we feature a background character with an Insulin [sic] pump, and that was from the crowds team and it was huge. People really responded well to that." (El-Mahmoud) Beyond audience responses, spending time on diversifying background characters during production has shifted from a more subjective approach, which risked falling victim to the production team's inherent biases, toward the use of "new technology that got introduced on this film where we were even able to, in any frame of a scene, do an analysis of what the representation was on the screen" (El-Mahmoud), making adjustments not just possible but easier.

The benefit appears to be less time spent actively trying to override one's own assumption about what a diverse group of random people may look like, while ensuring the normalization of small, everyday items people use that make them stand out in terms of diversity, such as an insulin pump or a hijab (El-Mahmoud). It goes to show that the little, thoughtful details in a well-populated city home to immigrants and natives alike allow filmmakers to visualize and celebrate diversity respectfully, without resorting to tokenizing specific identities or risking the loss of diversity because of unplanned camera movements or a lack of consultation. A combination of technology (i.e., *Character Linker*) and a conscious effort or openness from the production crew, which audiences respond to positively, seems to be a winning strategy, according to the analysis findings. In any case, new technology is actively developed and used on projects such as *Red* to reduce unconscious bias, ensure greater representation, and do so cost-effectively.

Luca presents a slightly different case. Although various age groups and body types are present, there are seemingly no black people in town, which might have been considered unusual for fictional Portorosso, located somewhere in the real-world equivalent of Cinque Terre, Italy, which is considered a tourist area (De Santi, Gabellieri, Mangano, and Piana). All background characters meet expectations of the average Italian townspeople in terms of race and skin color, suggesting natives, mostly with tanned skin but also some lighter tones and blond hair, for example, one of Ercole's lackeys has short blond curly hair. There are several mobility aids such as canes used by characters of old age and a younger person using crutches for what appears to be a leg injury. The marker of religion is a priest at the end of the race, which reads as authentic given Italy's connection to the Catholic Church.

Lastly, *Lightyear* continues the trend of diverse background characters, especially in categories such as ethnicity, body type, age, and sex. There seems to be equal representation of women and men in the space program across various professions. There are no discernible representations of people of different religions that show a visible sign of belonging to their denomination, such as headscarves, rosaries, or crosses, which mark them as different from *Luca* and *Red*.

To sum up, diversity markers such as sex, age, and disability are consistently present in varied forms in all three movies. Categories such as religion and ethnicity are not featured equally and prominently in each film. Among the three movies, *Red* stands out most for its significant range and variety of diversity embodied by the

Toronto populace, which may largely be due to the use of the *Character Linker* tool, the sole purpose of which is to ensure this level of authenticity and diversity by randomizing character models in the background (Rogez).

4 Conclusion

The aim of this study was to investigate Pixar's intended and actual representation of diversity by analyzing how identities are constructed and focusing on the three diversity markers of gender, sexuality, and disability, using *Luca* (2021), *Turning Red* (2022), and *Lightyear* (2022) as examples.

The key findings regarding RQ1a on identifiable characteristics of power dynamics on gender and representations of masculinity and femininity provide evidence that, overall, Pixar's New Man model holds true for all three films, as exemplified in Buzz Lightyear's journey towards a more emotionally expressive man, willing to ask for help, and part of a team rather than the lone wolf. It can also be seen in father figures such as Massimo and Jin, whose approach to fatherhood moves away from traditional ideas of childcare. The emotional well-being of their child is not primarily placed on the mother, with the notable exception of Luca's father, who mostly defers to his wife yet exhibits aspects of New Man fatherhood. These findings verify H1 and the New Man model as predominantly applicable. The second hypothesis considers Finklea's four themes of masculinity as guiding principles. All four principles were found expressed in various ways. *Lightyear* uses teamwork and bravery almost to the point of sacrifice, but moves away from the protagonist exhibiting heterosexual desire, and in fact, declares Buzz a non-romantic type of character, confirming this shift as deliberate. Themes of paternal anxiety are somewhat present in Buzz's care for Izzy. *Luca* also highlights teamwork and bravery in the face of adversity as exemplified by Alberto and Luca's willingness to sacrifice for each other, be that the safety of in-/visibility or a shared dream in favor of Luca's emancipation from this family. Heterosexual desire is only implied and almost placed on equal level with possible queer readings in terms of affection and interest. Paternal anxiety takes shape in the character of Massimo, whose paternal worry and care extend beyond his own daughter and ultimately include Alberto, *Red* presents an interesting shift as it features mostly women, but the same themes hold true, which opens avenues for femininity adopting these themes, affording female characters the same

characteristics as male characters. Teamwork is prominent and even part of female friendships. Mei shows incredible acts of bravery, as do her friends, who stick up for themselves in the face of traditional and parental expectations. Mei also expresses heterosexual attraction, which is breaking ground in showing female desire and budding pubescent sexuality on the big screen for the first time, presenting young female audiences with a story that does not shame them for their emerging wants and needs, cautioning parents not to fall victim to generational trauma at the expense of their children. Paternal anxiety is shown by Massimo in a subtle manner, but very potently exemplified in Jin, whose quiet reassurance and emotional intelligence allow Mei to fight for emancipation from her well-meaning but controlling mother. With all four themes present and key aspects of each film's character development, H2 is confirmed. Both *Luca* and *Red* allow their protagonists to truly emancipate themselves by honoring their wishes (e.g., keeping the panda rather than locking it away; letting Luca not only go to the surface but join Giulia in the city), relinquishing parental control to a degree, which subverts previous findings and expectations of H8.

Findings on femininity indicate that Pixar noticeably moves away from traditional gender expectations in its young female protagonists. While there is an abundance of strong and intelligent female characters, Pixar largely shifts away from portraying them as needing protection and from making domesticity central to femininity. Instead, femininity is defined by headstrong, defiant characters willing to fight for themselves, sometimes even literally. A diverse range of female characters with traditionally masculine traits emerges without sacrificing their femininity in appearance or interests. Rather, femininity is expanding, allowing for less confining women and female behavior into neat boxes and more toward emancipation from controlling family dynamics, traditional gender roles, and expectations, only partially confirming H3 and H4 and veering toward more positive development. Despite leaving stereotypical portrayals of femininity behind, *Lightyear* still relies on a New Man vs. traditional-masculinity dichotomy and presents an older version of Buzz as a cautionary tale of failing to complete the New Man journey, thereby confirming H5 at least partially. In connection with emancipation, it is worth noting that, especially in *Red*, adolescent empowerment is commonly linked to adult female sacrifice.

My analysis of the depiction of sexuality for RQ2 shows that *Lightyear*, at first glance, breaks ground visually, textually, and narratively in depicting an unmistakable same-sex kiss and presenting a queer POC woman in a position of power. Pixar's

move reads as a daring and calculated risk for a moment of unambiguous queer joy, yet the presence of the overtly lesbian couple is short-lived. While their queer relationship cannot be removed easily without losing valuable scenes necessary for the development of key plot points and Buzz's New Man journey, the brief nature of Alisha's scenes in the first half of the movie and the fact that audiences are flash-forwarded through their relationship relegates them to the background once again. *Red* offers a blink-and-you'll-miss-it moment that remains ambiguous unless paratexts are considered, and the narrative message of *Luca* remains largely allegorical, thereby only partially verifying hypothesis 9. Hypothesis 10, however, may be confirmed, as Pixar generally still relies on allegory and the theme of transformation, particularly the story of the monster, to address the experiences of queer minorities, with *Lightyear* being the only exception. The monster allegory used in both *Luca* and *Red* parallels lived queer experiences of seeking self-discovery, freedom, and acceptance, and depicts anxieties about hypervisibility and the fear of societal persecution and rejection for breaking societal norms. Additionally, in *Red*, the theme of transformation into a panda destigmatizes the topic of the female body entering puberty and around the first menstruation. Also, identity-shaping experiences, such as the emergence of specifically female desire and feelings of shame and rejection in connection to it, have not been addressed to this degree in Pixar canon to date. The destigmatization of the topic sends a positive message about women's bodies and the changes they experience during puberty to a broader audience, which does not only consist of women and may therefore also serve an informative and socializing purpose.

Regarding family relationships, dynamics, and constellations, the analysis reveals that Pixar appears to be taking gradual steps toward normalizing alternative family models. In the present films, depictions of non-heteronormative, non-nuclear foster and found-family constellations were prominent, thereby confirming H6. In nuclear family constellations, power dynamics were notably shifted toward power-wielding matriarchs, with more subdued or subservient partners, somewhat linked to the New Man model. As the main father figures in all three films tended to still undergo or already be the result of the New Man process, they exhibited a higher sense of emotionality, were in tune with their children's needs and struggles, generally took on a significant portion of the domestic duties equal to the female members of the household, and were often seen in scenes involving food or emotional regulation. In fact, mothers were at the forefront of providing challenges, often serving as catalysts

for defiance in their children. In female-led movies with female protagonists, such as *Brave's* Merida and *Red's* Mei, mothers are depicted as caring yet controlling, and sometimes as upholding tradition to the detriment of their children as they find their own identities. Alberto's case in *Luca* is special, as he has been left to his own devices by both parents, with his father having abandoned him. Pixar clearly frames this decision as abhorrent and has Massimo take Alberto in, which shows the power of community to step in and support those suffering from isolation, only partially confirming H7, as Alberto's father is never redeemed, unlike, for instance, Mei's mother. Other alternative family relationships, especially *Lightyear's* queer couple, present not only queer desire as something joyful and worthy of celebration but also an ongoing fight for acceptance and representation behind the scenes through activism and the inclusion of queer and marginalized people in the production process.

Results on the depiction of disability lead to a neutral verdict on H11. The assumption of the supercrip and pity-driven portrayals of disability remains dominant, with readings of *Red's* Mei and *Luca's* Uncle Ugo as prominent examples. Traditional, stereotypical ideas and models of mental disability are perpetuated in the portrayal of Uncle Ugo and serve as an example of objects subjected to violence and objects of ridicule, justifying his separation from society and othering, beyond the monster allegory, as he is othered from even his own family and species. In contrast, Giulia's father offers a more progressive alternative and imbues *Luca* with a nuanced portrayal of disability representation, in line with the Cultural Pluralism model, presenting Massimo as a well-rounded father and fisherman, not hindered by his disability. There is not enough evidence to draw a satisfying conclusion for H12, which is partially due to the difficulty of visualizing mental disabilities, as exemplified by the reliance on metaphor for depression in *Lightyear*. Ultimately, a closer look at the careless use of ableist language and the connection between ageism, disability, and gendered beauty standards in children's media is warranted.

Based on the findings from depictions of different markers of diversity in the selected Pixar films between 2021 and 2022, and the messages they convey to their audiences, several conclusions regarding H13 were drawn. First, there is a noticeable tendency toward diverse representation, as each movie either places a diversity element at the center of the narrative or features a plot that bears significant parallels to the realities experienced by several minority groups. For instance, apart from Buzz undergoing the New Man journey and adopting a more progressive perspective of

masculinity, *Lightyear*'s overt displays of queer love, embodied by a queer POC woman in power, open discussion about advocacy, visibility, and power. Whereas *Luca* presents a clear narrative ripe for queer reading, with themes of persecution through the allegory of the monster, it also offers moments of acceptance and underscores the importance of allyship and community to prevent othering. *Red* completes the picture by setting a precedent in its unapologetic depiction of femininity and budding desire, previously left unaddressed in Pixar's repertoire. According to several paratexts, such as interviews, magazine articles, and a documentary, these changes are in part due to a growing power and voice of marginalized groups not only in the audience but also behind the production wheel. The implications of these findings underscore that children's animated media have enormous power to shape our culture and how children learn to navigate the world. The messages presented, subliminally and overtly, teach young minds how to think about and perform gender in a way that aligns with societal norms, so diverse representations of identity markers such as sexuality, gender, and disability can either enforce ideas of social codes and acceptable responses to otherness or the practice of inclusion. They underline the urgent need for filmmakers to consult affected people from diverse groups, e.g., POC women and queer and trans voices, during production to ensure authentic portrayals not only on-screen but also beyond. In consideration of barriers such as politically motivated executives and global marketability, the use of techniques such as allegories, metaphors, and symbolic themes, such as transformation and the monstrous, is not unsurprising. All in all, it is undeniable that Pixar's animated movies do edge closer to diverse representation, mostly, as it appears, in pursuit of authenticity, thereby shedding light on issues such as representation and inclusion.

Despite these findings, the research acknowledges several limitations, including the small sample of selected movies analyzed and the time elapsed between the conception of this thesis's idea and its final submission, which may limit the generalizability of the findings regarding Pixar's recent progress in representation. Additionally, because animated movies were of particular interest, the results might not generalize to depictions in other children's animated studio films, such as productions from *DreamWorks* and *Laika*. Regardless, the sheer length of this thesis lays bare the rich material found in contemporary Pixar animated movies. Unfortunately, to avoid pushing the boundaries of this thesis's scope any further, several concessions had to be made to provide opportunities for future research. For

instance, investigations into femininity at the same level of detail as Finklea's work on masculinities would also enrich the current understanding of femininity in animation by building on this thesis's findings in *Red* compared with *Inside Out 1 and 2*. Further studies examining the effect of the contribution of POC, disabled people, and queer persons' voices on the quality of representation and the (re-)enforced stereotypes or dismantling of such could significantly contribute to future projects and production policies. The representations of race and ethnicity, or lack thereof, did not receive as much attention as initially hoped, but were addressed whenever possible to include intersectional insights. Further research could expand on the intersection of race and gender in *Luca* and *Red*, as the latter in particular offers a fairly rich basis for analysis on the influence of Western cultures on Asian-centered immigrant households. The analysis also revealed vulnerabilities in its focus on Western ideas of gender and sexuality, which could be expanded by considering constructed gender norms internationally and comparing international media, such as anime series, as briefly touched on in the analysis of *Red*. Potential avenues for future insight into the construction of racial narratives and themes include comparing *Red* and *Elemental* (narratively, an immigrant story) and, if possible, expanding to *Zootopia* (2016) and the racial bias and discrimination it depicts through its predator-and-prey allegory. Themes of Pixar fatherhood and matriarchal structures may be investigated by combining this study's findings on *Red* with *Onward*, *Soul*, and *Elio*, as all films depict single parents, patchwork families, and/or mothers ruling the household.

All in all, Pixar continues to open the door to more progressive and diverse representations of gender, disability, and sexuality, at least subliminally, presenting audiences with a multitude of gender performances and broader, more inclusive ideas of homosocial relationships that at least leave the possibility of a more inclusive future. There is hope in Pixar that effort, if not money, is 'put where their mouth is'. Considering the scathing letter of criticism and reprimand that inspired this thesis and the ongoing efforts by many marginalized Pixar employees, these glimpses of diversity, one allegory or subtext turned *text* at a time, refuse to listen to conservative calls similar to 'Silenzio Bruno!'. Instead of accepting being silenced, they prove that, given space and opportunity, more authentic and unapologetic representation is indeed emerging. This development may yet change children's animated spaces into a more open-minded and accepting world, in which every audience member, young or not, can find a piece of themselves or what they can be on the screen.

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