

BURDENED WITH GLORIOUS QUEERNESS: LOKI'S QUEER IDENTITY AND
ERASURE IN COMIC BOOKS AND FILM

by

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Bachelor of Arts, 2020
Texas Christian University
Fort Worth, Texas

A Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty of
AddRan College of Liberal Arts
Texas Christian University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts



May

2022

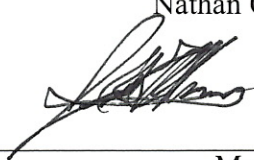
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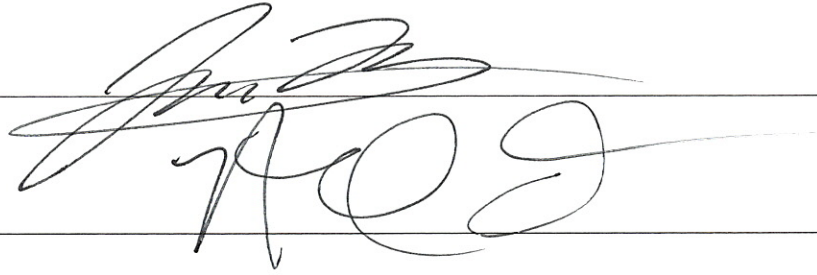
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Major Professor



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Foremost, I would like to give my warmest thanks to my advisor, Dr. Joddy Murray, who has made this work possible. His guidance helped me through every step of researching and writing this thesis, and I could not have accomplished this much without him.

Besides my advisor, I would like to thank the rest of my thesis committee, Dr. Jason Helms and Dr. Nino Testa. I would like express my sincere gratitude for their help and guidance throughout this project, as well as their patience, enthusiasm, and encouragement.

My sincere thanks also goes out to my family and friends, who have supported me throughout my entire life and have made these achievements possible. I thank them not only for their encouragement, but also for their ability to continue to put up with me while I talked passionately about niche superhero scholarship throughout my research for this project.

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ABSTRACT

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Loki is one of the most influential Marvel characters of all time, and his relevance continues to soar as he is continuously included in new comic book storylines and within the Marvel Cinematic Universe. The character's long history within Marvel has allowed for a continuous process of change and development, one of the more recent and prominent changes being the increasingly out identification of Loki as queer. Loki's history displays an always queered identity, but as Loki's queerness became more pertinent to the character's identity, there has been a shift away from harmful queer-coded stereotypes portrayed on the character. Across mediums Loki has frequently practiced a gender non-conforming performance and the explicit inclusion of Loki's queer identity has mediated some of the harmful portrayal written into Loki's character.

INTRODUCTION

My first interaction with Loki happened in the video game *Marvel: Ultimate Alliance* when I was 8 years old. I was raised by two parents who loved and read comic books, so by this time I had already consumed every piece of superhero media that I could get my hands on and a video game was simply the next step in this evolution. I loved the character. Not only was he interesting to battle in the world of the game, but he wore a ridiculous costume and made grandiose speeches without every seeming to take himself too seriously.

Loki always interested me, but I largely forgot about his existence until several years later when he reappeared in the *Thor* films as the Marvel Cinematic Universe was first starting. I enjoyed the character again in this new medium, and I continue to praise the way in which Tom Hiddleston portrays the character on screen. It is no doubt why Loki quickly became a fan favorite character of the MCU, and his reappearance on the screen for me developed into a desire to read the comic books that Loki appeared in.

At this time in my life, I was beginning to form my understanding of my own gender and sexuality, realizing that I was a queer man as I was passing from adolescence into my teenage years and into young adulthood. Comic books and film were foundational to my developing understanding of myself. I grew up in a very small town, where the possibilities of being were truncated; I was not exposed to positive representations of gender or sexuality that were not hegemonically masculine and straight. Through all my readings and viewings of different texts, I always felt a sheet of glass between me and the characters, never quite being able to connect in totality to the people on page or screen. I could never find someone exactly like me. It was revolutionary for me when Iceman came out as gay, as he was always one of my favorite X-Men, and I could relate to him as a queer man even if other aspects of my identity like my Mexican

heritage or neurodivergence were not included. There's a feeling in your chest, akin to relief, the feeling of finally seeing someone in a comic book or on a movie screen that you relate to, the feeling of finally being seen, of being understood in a way that you simply weren't before.

Loki's sexuality and gender identity became increasingly prevalent in mainstream continuity as I was discovering my own sexual and gender identities. They occurred nearly concurrently and it was revolutionary to see someone who was unapologetically themselves and unapologetically queer in this sense. Loki's queerness allowed me to see ways in which identities could be formed differently than the very narrow and very limiting options that had been represented and discussed in the small country town I grew up in.

Eventually I understood that I appreciated the character Loki for his queerness long before I ever would have given myself that label. Loki's relatability to me started because he was being queer-coded and this became amplified when he was officially identified as a queer character. As I now have an education through which to analyze this development of fictional queerness as a scholar, I find myself eager to pursue this avenue of exploration in an effort to better understand the concepts of gender and sexuality in a different and equally important way. Loki was foundational in my queer journey, and I believe analyzing his queerness can help the examination of queer representation and enculturation in various mediums through which society engages and develops cultural ideas around queerness.

I find this work, and other similar works, to be invaluable within the cultural moment that we find ourselves in. We continue to see discussions about diversity and inclusion, and along with this we are beginning to see serious talks about the representation of oppressed identities across many forms of media. Simultaneously, we find ourselves in a time period where voices, and especially relevant to this thesis, queer voices are being silenced, as queer books are pulled off the shelves in libraries across the United States. It is more important than ever to stand in

opposition to those who want to silence us. I am at a unique place within the university that I am allowed to speak of and read about these topics, an opportunity that not many people have and that seems to be in jeopardy. I use this thesis as a means through which to add another queer voice, another queer topic into the cultural realm and in defiance of those who wish to eradicate these discussions. Although the discussion of queer comic book characters may seem innocuous, I hope that it allows for more space in which to engage with the queer sphere and it will, if nothing else, create one more work for these lawmakers to become upset about.

MAIN BODY

The Shaping Power of the Media

Hegemonic power¹ exists all around us and acts as a regulating force through which societal expectations are set and individual perceptions of others are manipulated and formed. This power exists as a shaping and regulating means through which we learn social interaction, and the purpose of such power is to reify and perpetuate the already established hegemony (Foucault; Downing 94). Hegemonic power enforces this hierarchy through a system of surveillance and through the regulation of identities, not only by the governing state but also by outside factors, such as businesses, schools, mass media, and individuals (Rawlinson 55). Institutions, such as the media, are responsible for the monitoring, teaching, and maintenance of social identities, such as sexual and gender identity.

Media, then, is foundational to our understanding of the culture in which we find ourselves and how the embodiment of power and oppression are taught to society largely. In their book, *Composing (Media) = Composing (Embodiment)*, Kristin Arola and Anne Wysocki say,

Our relations with our technologies and media are not one way, however. Not only does a hammer or a piece of writing, for example, enable us to extend our reach but it also modifies our sense of engagement: it shifts how we feel what is around or how we sense those with whom we communicate; our sense reflex and shift in response to these mediated engagements, and in further response we then modify our media toward our shifting ends. (4)

¹ Hegemony and hegemonic power refers to and can be defined by “the ways in which dominant classes are enabled to maintain their ascendancy by convincing oppressed members of society that the established order is in the latter's interests, backed up by the ever-present possibility of coercive force” (Paechter, “Rethinking the Possibilities”).

Media shapes how we interpret and interact with the world and people around us. The media brings an awareness to what is around, and it develops a sense through which interpretation and communication become possible. It exposes the audience to the possibilities of the world and can modify engagement with this newly created sphere. Further, the media can shape our own identity formation (Davis and Dickinson). The media, including film, television, and comic books, teaches us how to interact with society, but also about our own place within it.

The superhero genre, whether it be in the form of comic books or film, directly creates this type of cyclical engagement process, through which those engaging with the material are impacted by the social ideals set by the superhero genre and the superhero genre continues to shift to maximize consumer engagement and profit. In the introduction to *Comic Books and American Cultural History: An Anthology*, Matthew Pustz engages with this idea in the superhero genre through what he calls casual learning. Casual learning is a secondary aspect of the original text, and not its intended purpose; however, it comes from the idea that information can be learned as you engage with a text primarily designed for entertainment (Pustz 2). This can be something simple, such as learning about World War II tactical equipment when reading Captain America comic books. Casual learning can be extended past simple examples of fact and can engage with the social and embodied composition that Arola and Wysocki engage with in *Composing (Media) = Composing (Embodiment)*.

When reading comic books and watching movies, casual learning teaches gender roles, queer perception, LGBTQ+ terminology, and other societal idealizations centered around queerness. For example, queer, gender non-conforming² boys develop a new understanding of

² Gender non-conforming refers to someone who “does not conform to Western society’s notions of what a male or female is” (Teich 117). This can mean someone who is assigned male at birth who engages in societally-ascribed women behavior or someone who is assigned female at birth who participates in societally-ascribed men behavior. Although gender non-conforming is typically defined under the umbrella of transgenderism, it is usually seen as distinct from trans-people.

possible masculinities during a counterhegemonic wave of superhero masculinity with the New Teen Titans (B. Johnson 135). Consumers of these types of media are being taught that good triumphs over evil and children are internalizing the moral behaviors of the heroes as both good and the key to success, while simultaneously being taught that morality is intrinsically tied with gendered roles (LaPointe and Li-Vollmer). As many of these stories recycle the same themes and plots, the repetition of these ideas, then, continue to reify the societal expectations of gender and queerness.

As concepts of gender and sexuality are socially created, we have to learn them through interaction with society, such as through entertainment products designed for and by a specific cultural environment. Gender is a socially constructed concept, rather than something biologically predetermined by an imagined, and yet socially enforced, binary of sex (Butler, *Gender Trouble*). Gender identity is, therefore, inherently unstable, as gender has no one true state of being, but rather is a site of multiplicities and truths. It is instead an example of performativity, in which, it is fully formed and functioned within the aspects of outward performance, including but not limited to dress, speech, and vocation (Butler, *Gender Trouble*). The way in which we understand gender is through this sense of outward performance, and therefore, this is similarly how gender is taught to us—through the performances that we see play out in media, such as comic books and superhero films. Gendered performance sometimes isn't a conscious or deliberate act of the performer (Butler, *Undoing Gender*). Instead, we as a society are so ingrained in the norms of our own culture that we create within ourselves a desire for certain identities and aspects of being.

Queerness can similarly be understood through this type of social construction, especially as we understand and regulate sexuality to uphold hegemonic cisheteropatriarchal³ ideals. Queerness is conceptualized as the Other, the people who do resist the compulsory heterosexuality⁴ which is often mandated by Western society and through which people understand sexual identity (Rich 13). Further, Eve Sedgwick conceptualizes queerness as a perpetual fight against compulsory heterosexuality (Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*). One way in which the closet is conceptualized is through the forced use of the closet and she argues that closeted-ness is a performance and that this performance is engaged with “the speech act of a silence—not a particular silence, but a silence that accrues particularity by fits and starts, in relation to the discourse that surrounds and differentially constitutes it” (Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* 3). The production of the closet is created because of the uneven power dynamics seen by forcing sexuality into the false binary of heterosexual and non-heterosexual, which can restrict the subordinated group, non-heterosexual, into a forced silence. Acts of outward queerness, such as the creation of queer superheroes, then become ways in which the audience can understand queerness explicitly, as queerness is most visible when the forced veil of silence is removed.

As Butler and Sedgwick articulated, gender and sexuality are fabricated and produced by the larger surrounding society, and therefore our surrounding environments, including the media, and can directly impact the perception of queerness, both queered sexuality and queered gender identity. Educators, peers, and family teach these behaviors in schools, at home, and practically any other time that interaction happens between two or more people with others (Pascoe 18).

³ The cisheteropatriarchy is defined as a system which creates and maintains a normative view and perception that privileges cisgender and heterosexual (cishet) men and marginalizes womxn, femininity, and queerness (Alim et al. 293; King 5).

⁴ Compulsory heterosexuality describes the hegemonic system which prioritizes heterosexuality and assumes heterosexuality to be the default sexual preference for most people (Rich 13).

While this learning can pave the way for social acceptance and empathy, in a world in which the cisheteropatriarchy reigns supreme, it can also become problematic when depicted in popularized media. Engagement with various types of media, such as television, social media, porn, and even movie posters demonstrates real-world impact on societal views of gender/queer expectations and roles (Aley and Hahn; Butkowski et al.; Gill; Miller). “The way we think about gender, and about so many other features of our lives, is both reflected in and produced by the images that surround us in our culture. Popular conceptions are vitally concerned with popular culture” (MacKinnon 23). The understanding of queerness and gender is directly impacted by the media consumed and that media teaches its audience how to interpret these larger and more abstract social constructs.

The film industry is one such type of media that teaches society how to interact with queerness, and has a controversial relationship with queerness for its history in erasure and the perpetuation of harmful stereotypes. Movies have been around for over a century now, and in these hundred years of cinema “homosexuality has only rarely been depicted on the screen. When it did appear, it was there as something to laugh at, or something to pity or even something to fear. These were fleeting images but they were unforgettable and they left a lasting legacy” (Epstein and Friedman). While queerness was often absent in films, the few glimpses of queerness became of magnified importance. With so little representation, the entirety of focus on queerness in film centered around these few adaptations, which allowed them to become foundational in the audience’s learning and understanding of queerness, often through the continuation of harmful stereotypes. Queerness was often treated as ridicule or spectacle, and these views shaped generations of people’s concepts surrounding queerness. In his book, *The Celluloid Closet*, Vito Russo discusses how queerness is hidden away in Hollywood cinema, most often through absolute exclusion of queer characters in any shape or form and how the

queer characters who did exist seemed to be trapped in the closet (Russo 126). And although this book is a dated example, it does highlight the trend of creating queer characters who are continuously reduced into caricatures of actual people, both for seemingly subtextual understanding of stereotypes and in a blatant disregard for queer individuals as people. It allows us to draw parallels to current American cinema's treatment of queer people. Queerness in Hollywood is often portrayed through a heterosexual lens, which causes it to lack a deeper relationship to the community that it supposedly portrays (Poole 280). This leaves the queer audience alienated from the piece of media and the queer character open to flatness and stereotype.

In more recent years, queer representation has developed and permeated into more and more genres of movie and television. These depictions of queerness often uphold institutions of heteronormativity⁵, as they are frequently entangled with concepts of the closet and how queer individuals are often only allowed to escape the closet through a type of social death (Chambers 41). Queer couples are often forced into unrealistic binaries; they are shown to be entirely sexless, making them supposedly more palatable for cishet viewers, or they are depicted as sex-obsessed, reinforcing beliefs of sexual deviancy (Chan 31). Queer couples rarely get the same nuance that heterosexual couples do, in which they get to balance romantic sensuality with displays of sexuality. In adaptational works, queerness is frequently de-emphasized with the transition to film or television, replaced with a false sense of morality through a twisted version of the American Dream, in which heteronormativity is privileged and justice is absolute, presumably in an effort to appeal to a broader and non-queer audience (Stoddart 229). This shift

⁵ "Heteronormativity designates a regime that organizes sex, gender, and sexuality in order to match heterosexual norms" (Varela 35).

away from queerness and toward an upstanding sense of heteropatriarchal justice also reinforces the negative stereotype that queerness is equivalent to deviancy.

Similarly, comic books, and the superhero genre in general, have a controversial past regarding LGBT+ characters, as the superhero genre often erased any hint of queerness. Historically, several of mainstream comics' most popular characters have been interpreted (and depending on the time period, accused) of being gay. The most (in)famous accusations against comic books came from Frederic Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent*, in which he alleged comic books to be central causes of many childhood psychological issues, notions which have since been disproven (Tilley 383). In the book, Wertham alleges that comic books inspire queer behavior in children, especially through the relationship between Batman and Robin. In fact, DC comics found the accusation to be so profound and damaging to the character's representation that the comic books created a female romantic interest for Batman in the character Kathy Kane, or Batwoman—a character who ironically came out as a lesbian in 2006 (Jenkins and Cart 183). While this trend of queer erasure within comic books has lessened to some degree and queer characters may now don brightly colored spandex, this type of queer erasure continues to persist within the superhero genre as a whole and with Loki specifically.

Ultimately gay content in comic books was hindered in mainstream comics through the use of the Comics Code Authority, which was similar in function to the Hays Code used in films. While the Comics Code Authority was entirely voluntary—meaning there was no law requiring its use—many mainstream comic book companies used the code because many advertisers, retailers, and customers looked to it for guidance in a twisted sense of ethics (Sommers 26). The Comics Code Authority banned “sexual abnormalities” and “sex perversion,” which meant the prevention of the direct mention of homosexuality (and other queer identities) within comic books (Kistler, “How the ‘Code Authority’”). The Comics Code Authority slowed the inclusion

of queer characters within comic books, and along with *Seduction of the Innocent*, gave comic books the reputation for being a source of corruption for children. Combined, these instances of queer exclusionary practices perpetuated the ideas that queerness was deviant and wrong.

Queerness within comic books began to change, slowly, and frequently with problematic messages attached to them. Marvel Comics' first foray into queer characters were with Bruce Banner's would-be rapists in a 1979 Hulk comic book (Yezipitelok, "Marvel's Embarrassing History"). Despite this, Marvel comics had an alleged ban on queer characters mandated while Jim Shooter was editor-in-chief (Kistler, "How the 'Code Authority'"). Again, Marvel comics continued to rarely include queer characters, and often to villainize queerness when these characters were shown.

Eventually, Marvel Comics began including other queer-coded⁶ characters into their comic books and the representation shifted from non-existent to vaguely problematic. Many of these queer-coded characters were depicted as two members of the same gender living together as friends for their entire lives, such as Arnie Roth, Mystique, and Destiny. In 1989 with the introduction of the Marvel superhero team, Alpha Flight, and specifically with writer John Byrne, the creation of Northstar would eventually pave the way for the first identified queer character in mainstream comics. This came with its controversial and problematic viewpoints, such as Northstar's transformation into a literal fairy, his odd relationship with AIDS, and his eventual death (Bolling). Even as Marvel began to introduce queer and queer-coded characters, they continued to reinforce these harmful stereotypes associated with queerness.

In recent years, Marvel Comics has continuously increased its out queer characters and has begun taking strides in showing more diversity in queer characters, in background,

⁶ Queer-coding refers to a system of signifiers that act to protect the creator of a particular work from explicitly or openly expressing a queer identity. This coding can, then, be interpreted by the audience who both understands these signals and wants to decode them. (Greenhill 112)

personality, and embodiment. The *Rawhide Kid* debuted in 2002 and was the first queer Marvel character who starred in their own comic book series. The first queer wedding in mainstream comic books happened between Northstar and his longtime partner Kyle Jinadu in 2012. Other well-known queer Marvel comics characters are Wiccan, Hulkling, Iceman, Angela, Karolina Dean, Nico Minoru, Korg, Hercules, America Chavez, Mystique, Valkyrie, Shatterstar, Ayo, Aneka, and Deadpool (Jenkins and Cart 188). Although some of these characters are new, many have long-standing history in Marvel before their queerness was written into their storylines. Marvel's initiative to increase diversity in sexuality is attempting to address this problem by allowing for many different types of queerness in many different types of characters.

Loki is a queer Marvel character who has been in the Marvel comic book multiverse longer than all of the aforementioned characters and has one of the most notable and prominent presences in the current pop culture climate. Further, Loki has extended presences in both the comic book universe and within the Marvel Cinematic Universe. With this continued development in the superhero genre, Loki's queerness becomes an integral part of his identity, in terms of both his genderfluidity and his bisexuality.

From this point forward, the terms bisexual⁷ and genderfluid⁸ will be used in reference to Loki's sexual and gender identities, respectively. Loki's character never uses a certain term or phrase from which he identifies his sexuality and gender identity, instead referencing his attraction to both men and women. This leaves the possibility for Loki to be bisexual, pansexual,

⁷ Bisexuality is a "term commonly used to describe an individual who is physically, romantically, emotionally, and/or spiritually attracted to more than one gender. These people need not have had equal sexual or romantic experience with multiple genders; in fact, they need not have had any sexual experience at all to identify as this. Historically framed as being attracted to 'both' genders, bisexuality has been reframed as referring to people who are attracted to one's own and other genders, including those outside the gender binary" ("Bisexuality").

⁸ Genderfluidity refers to "change over time in a person's gender expression or gender identity, or both. That change might be in expression, but not identity, or in identity, but not expression. Or both expression and identity might change together" (Katz-Wise). This identity can "change with time and/or a given situation" ("Genderfluid").

omnisexual, genderqueer, agender or any other identifications across the spectrums of gender and sexuality⁹, if the fictional Asgardian cultural viewpoints even see gender and sexuality in a comparable way to how we articulate and identify with it and if Loki chooses to identify with such terminology at all. For simplicity and clarity of argument, the terms used in this thesis will be confined to “genderfluid” and “bisexual,” however, please note that this may not be the most accurate term and the writers of Loki in comics or film may come out using different identifications.

Understanding Loki’s sexuality and gender identity leads the way to understanding how queerness is displayed in mainstream media, and in turn, how queerness is interpreted against societal expectations of compulsory heteronormativity. Loki is a character whose existence greatly predates his openly expressed queer identity. Despite this, Loki continuously established a queered gender and sexual identity through his subversion of societal expectations associated with the hegemonic masculinity and heterosexuality often associated with superheroes and with the superhero genre as a whole. These subversions allow Loki to represent different possibilities of existence along the spectrums of gender and sexuality. Although, the character occasionally has some issues with regressive or stereotypical representation, Loki is becoming a unique and significant queer character. With the prominence of Loki as a character in the current pop culture sphere, he has the potential to become one of the most prominent queer fiction characters in the world.

⁹ For more information about sexual and gender identities, for support, or to donate visit The Trevor Project website at <https://www.thetrevorproject.org/>.

Loki in the Panels of Comic Books

To understand Loki's queerness and the significance of his character, it is vital to look at a brief history of the character. A version of the character Loki first appeared in *Venus #8* (Lee and Powell), but the iteration that has lasted the test of time first appeared in *Journey into Mystery #85* (Lieber et al.). Loki has become a mainstay in Marvel Comics, appearing frequently as an adversary and archnemesis of Thor, but also fighting other superheroes, such as Spider-man, and some superhero teams, such as the Avengers or the X-Men. He is the catalyst for the formation of the Avengers, whom he fights in *Avengers #1* (Lee and Kirby). Loki has continued his relevancy throughout his history and has been central to some of Marvel Comic's most famous storylines, such as their version of Ragnarok or Loki's infamous trick of turning Thor into a frog. In recent times, Loki's appearance and pertinence has only continued to grow, in part thanks to the success of the character within the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Loki's comic book journey has gone through many iterations of the character, with him appearing as Lady Loki, Kid Loki, and President Loki, among other seemingly distinct facets of the same character.

In his sixty-year run, Loki has had countless artists and writers creating the character known today, all of which have unique takes on Loki as a character, but who all combine to create the Loki of Marvel Comics. When talking about comic books, it is paramount to point out that they are a beautiful blend of discursive and non-discursive elements, text and images (Langer). Both are vital to the understanding of narratives and characters in comic books. Both the writers and artists of Loki in comic books create the character central to this thesis. Any preferences given to the writers over the artists in this thesis are either the result of the incorrect assumption that the writing is more impactful in terms of narrative and character arcs, or as a result of my English literature background and training which prioritized discursive elements. And any preference given to the artists over the writers in this thesis may be the result of the

societal emphasis of visibility—including body and fashion—in identifying and distinguishing between genders and sexualities. In truth, the two elements of this medium, the discursive and the non-discursive, work in tandem to create such characters.

Comic books continue to get more and more socially progressive as attitudes toward certain social groups shift and change in the current cultural climate of the United States. In recent times, queer visibility and acceptance continues to increase within the pages of comic books, and Loki becomes no exception. His queerness was confirmed on Tumblr by writer Al Ewing, who said, “Loki is bi and I’ll be touching on that. He’ll shift between genders occasionally as well” (Armitage, “Al Ewing will explore”). This quotation only confirmed what fans had been speculating for years, given how Loki was portrayed in the comics for decades. This confirmation, however, is important as it creates an openly queer character and a distinct shift in the characterization of Loki.

An Open Display of Outed Queerness

Before Loki’s transition into an openly queer character, he had always been portrayed as a character who transgressed the rigid binary notions of gender, or at the very least brushed up against the strict guidelines set by the heteropatriarchy to control gender identity and performance. His costuming and actions were often marked with interruptive behavior against the regimen of masculinity most often portrayed within comic books. Already Loki pushed against gender norms and behaved as a villain, both qualities often associated with queerness in mass media, so when Marvel comics portrayed a genderfluid and bisexual character a retrospective look at the character’s history aligns well with the current iterations of the character’s gender and sexual identities.

The first major shift toward queerness in Loki's characterization occurs in the 2008 comic book arc centered around the results of Ragnarok. For context, Ragnarok occurs in a *Thor* comic book, during which many of the Marvel comic book characters associated with Thor, and Asgard in general, are killed; two of the characters killed during these events are Loki and Lady Sif, a long time compatriot and sometimes love interest of Thor (Oeming et al.). Several years later, the characters who had been killed start being reincarnated in new bodies (Straczynski and Coipel). Loki, acting as the trickster that he is, steals the female body which was originally intended for Lady Sif, possessing it with the intent to use Lady Sif's body as an instrument for his nefarious scheming. While this instance does mark the begin of Loki's genderfluid identity in comic books, it unfortunately perpetuates harmful trans stereotypes.

Despite the many differences between trans identities and trans people, popular media tends to homogenize trans experiences and identity, typically depicting male-to-female transsexuals who seek idealized femininity. One of the major trans archetypes often depicted in the media is the "deceiver," which is when trans characters are "positioned as 'fake' women, and their 'secret' trans status is revealed in a dramatic moment of 'truth'. At this moment the 'deceiver's appearance (her femaleness) is reduced to mere illusion, and her secret (her maleness) becomes the real identity" (Serano 36). This stereotype bolsters both misogyny and transphobia, as it plays into women as unsuspecting and queer individuals as sexual predators, who prey upon the unwitting men they are trying to ensnare. Similarly, this anti-trans archetype delegitimizes the trans identity of these characters as they're presented gender identity is equated to falsehood.

Despite these harmful stereotypes, Loki begins to consistently show a queer identity from this point forward. This marks a staggering shift away from Loki's earlier shapeshifting across sexes. First, Loki maintains his new body for a considerably longer duration than in previous

story arcs—Loki as Lady Loki remains in comic books for several issues and she reappears as a cameo in other storylines, most notably in the *Loki: Agent of Asgard* story arc. Further, we see a change in the way that Loki is described, which was not previously seen in comic books in which Loki shifted sexes. The most notable and prominent of these changes comes in the form of gendered pronouns when other characters are talking about Loki. This difference in pronouns is wildly important, as pronouns are often linked with gender identity formation, perception, and performance (Conley; Hetzel and Mann; MacNamara et al.). While pronouns are not the end-all-be-all of understanding gender and trans identity, they are a quick and foundational way of referencing gender identity. Given the gendered expectations of society, the usage of gendered or gender-neutral pronouns gives immediate insight into performed gender identity. Over and over again, other characters refer to Loki with she/her pronouns when Loki is in his Lady Loki form, which seems to suggest that Loki's gender has shifted along with his sex. This simple change of word choice has large ramifications for this character's identity as it seems to imply fluidity in Loki's gender along with his sexed form.

The next stepping stone in the journey of Loki's queerness, occurs in the *Original Sin* storyline. In *Original Sin Vol 1 #2* (2014), Thor comments upon an encounter with a women-lead society by saying, "These are fair maidens," to which Loki responds by saying, "Well, so am I, sometimes. It doesn't mean I'm safe to talk to" (Aaron and Deodato). Loki's confirmation of his occasional maidenhood allows for an understanding of Loki's gender beyond that which we physically see in the pages of the comic book. Loki proclaims that he is sometimes a woman. Later in the same story arc, Odin is reflecting on his children and he says, "My son, my daughter, and my child who is both" (Aaron et. al). Here, Odin is referring to his three children, his son Thor, his daughter Angela, and his child who is both son and daughter, Loki. Odin refers to Loki

in this way because of his acceptance of Loki's genderfluidity. Loki is both his son and his daughter as Loki shifts between genders.

But perhaps the most valuable moment in comic books that allows for an understanding of Loki's queer identity is in the *Loki: Agent of Asgard* series, specifically in #16 (2015). Loki again confirms his gender when he says, "But I'm still me. I'm always me" (Ewing and Garbett). This seems to reveal that Loki is not in a disguise. He is not play-acting a character with the help of shapeshifting abilities, but performing his own gender how he feels to be the most true to himself. This also seems to combat the anti-trans stereotypes made nearly a decade earlier when Loki attempts to use the form of Lady Sif to trick Thor. Instead, Loki is not trying to trick anybody as he shifts between sexes and genders. He says that he is always himself, no matter the form he takes. Loki is always Loki.

In addition to Loki's genderfluid identity, Loki exists as bisexual within the Marvel universe, even though Loki's bisexuality is not confirmed within comic panels so much as hinted at. The most stable representation of Loki's sexual identity occurs in an interview with comic book writer Al Ewing who stated that Loki was bisexual (Armitage, "Al Ewing will explore"). While this sexual identity was not baseless, it simply wasn't seen up until this point in the comic books. Loki has had several relationships with women through his decades long run within the comic books. In *Thor Annual Vol. 1 #14* (1989), Loki fell in love with fellow Asgardian goddess, Sigyn, and tricked her into marrying him (Thomas and Milgrom). Similarly, when Loki comes back as a younger version of himself he has romantic attraction with Hela's handmaiden, Leah (Gillan and Elson). And there have been several iterations of Loki's relationship with Amora the Enchantress that hint toward a possible romantic attraction between the two, but mostly Loki and Amora remain friends and teammates in an attempt to destroy Thor. Regardless, all of these possible romances remain at the very least heterosexual-passing.

Although, Loki has had several women love interests while in a male form, there have not been strong instances of this identity displayed with the comics. Loki shows the most prominent signs of his bisexuality during his stint as a Young Avenger. In *Young Avengers Vol 2 #15* (2014), Loki flirts with another Young Avenger, Prodigy, and although Prodigy rebuffs his advances Loki has a potential romantic interest in him. Prodigy asks Loki if he is being serious in his flirtation and his possible queer identity to which Loki replies, “I could be. My culture doesn’t really share your concept of sexual identity. There are sexual acts, that’s it” (Gillan et al.). In this admission from Loki, he states that Asgard does not define sexual identity in the same way that humans do, and therefore he does not give himself a label through which he can be defined by human standards. However, in his flirtation with Prodigy, Loki is acting in a way that is non-heterosexual, at least through the standards in which defined on Earth. With this and the interjection of Loki writer, Al Ewing, who discusses Loki’s bisexuality, it is easy to understand Loki through a queer lens. While terminology may be up for debate and differences in culture should be accounted for when discussing identity, even if the culture is made up, Loki sits at an odd cross-section of displaying queer identifiers, not having comparable views on sexual identity, and being confirmed bisexual by the writers who create him.

All this is to say, that Loki’s queer identity is complicated, and until Marvel Comics is more explicit in its renditions of the characters across the many stories Loki finds himself in, it will remain complicated. Perhaps bisexual is not the correct term to use when discussing Loki—it will continue to be used here for simplicity—but he clearly demonstrates a non-heterosexual identity, and is queer by any standards through which we understand sexual identity in the United States at this time.

These newer depictions of Loki within Marvel Comics give the reader a clearer understanding of Loki’s queer identity. The confirmation of Loki’s queerness, through close

readings of the texts and through creators' explicit statement thereof, shifts the understanding of the past Loki when looking retrospectively throughout the course of his comic book history. Loki had a more stereotypically feminine presentation, through his clothes and his hair, from his inception within comic books, which could have been one way Loki subverted gender expectations. Additionally, Loki has changed sex repeatedly throughout his course in Marvel Comic books, and while at the time these seemingly queer acts may not have been explicitly stated as queer, a retrospective glance allows the reader to see a queered Loki throughout time.

Idle Queerness is Queerness Nonetheless

Long before Loki began openly expressing a queer identity, he displayed gender expression that was disruptive to the heteronormative views of society. While these interruptions of traditional superhero masculinity may not themselves be considered a queer identity, they lend themselves to queerness and are instrumental in the understanding of Loki's current out queer identity. Loki's refusal to perform within the expected hypermasculine institutions of superheroes acts as a preamble for his queerness. Through a retrospective lens enabled by Loki's queer identity, the time before Loki's explicit outing of queer identity becomes a space of closeted queerness. In this time frame, Loki is an idle queer character—queered, but not openly expressing such identities.

Before being able to understand all the ways in which Loki subverts the hegemonic masculinity associated in comic books, this type of masculinity needs to be defined. This becomes an issue as masculinity itself is difficult to define (Paechter, "Masculine Femininities"). Gender is unstable, and as masculinity is constantly being defined by other men and for the approval of other men, it becomes a site of constantly shifting expectations (Butler; Kimmel 33; Pascoe 6). Homosocial relationships allow for men to create a standardized set of approved

behaviors which can then constitute masculinity. In this system of the hegemonic cisheteropatriarchy, masculinity defines itself by what it is not, and specifically it defines itself as what is not feminine and not queer (Jewkes et al. 113; Paechter, “Masculine Femininities”; Shamir and Travis 3). This makes masculinity inherently unstable, as not only is it tied to the approval of others, but it does not have its own foundation or attributes. It, then, gains power through its subordination of other identities, and it articulates itself to others along this line of subordination (Brown 26; Fagenson 210; Klein; Vescio et al. 670). This type of hegemonic masculinity can then be defined by a state of being that is not queer and not feminine, and that which is used to oppress others and maintained by this system of oppression, as masculinity becomes associated with those in power.

One of the most easily recognizable aspects of Loki’s potential queerness within early depictions of the character is his appearance and dress. In early comics, particularly around his creation, Loki wears particularly flamboyant clothing in odd textures and bright colors. Many accessories often adorn his costume—brightly colored belts, gloves, boots, and most notably his iconic helmet with two large curling horns. Depending on time period, Loki’s hair changes from blonde to black, but it typically depicted as long and flowing. Now, it is easy to write off the flamboyancy of Loki’s costume in the Silver Age¹⁰ of comics when looking at other superhero outfits of the same time period, and even beyond. Superheroes in comics have always worn flamboyant and impractical outfits, in part for genre formation and in part because of printing capabilities within the early days of comic books (*Legion of Andy*). The campiness is part of the fun of superheroes. Looking deeper, there is historical precedent in understanding and interpreting queerness through clothing. Clothing becomes an important part of gender formation

¹⁰ The Silver Age of Comics refers to comics produced from roughly 1956 to 1970 (Smith 104).

and “the popular genre of the superhero comic book presents a well-known example of the construction of masculinity through the use of different costumes” (Weltzien 230). Further, dress becomes a subversive act for queer folks and becomes adapted as a subtle system of codification in an effort to display and interpret queerness (Medhurst; Rule and Alaei; Snaith; Tan). In this system, clothing acts as a quick and convenient way to understand the safety of seeing and approaching another person as a member of the same oppressed community. While this type of signaling when not performed by queer individuals can be reductive and invoking of stereotypes, it is used nonetheless as a quick way of identification or as a way to identify a queer character when institutional systems like the Comic Code Authority prevent this outright. Therefore, the examination of Loki’s appearance becomes vital to the understanding of Loki’s anti-hegemonic masculinity.

Since masculinity is understood and formed through comparison to other men, it is important to rationalize Loki’s gender-nonconforming practices against the more common aspects of hypermasculinity within comic books. For example, Thor also had an outrageous and campy outfit, with vibrant clothing and fun patterns. And even today, Thor’s luscious golden hair is second to none. But when compared with Loki, the physical appearances of the two characters make it easy to understand who the more traditionally masculine of the two is intended to be. Thor’s hair, while longer than Tony Stark’s or Steve Roger’s during this time, is noticeably shorter than Loki’s. Comic books use differences, such as these, in costuming and appearance to straighten protagonists by queering sidekicks and villains (Easthope; Shyminsky 290). In this way, Loki is understood as intrinsically less masculine than many of his comic book counterparts, and becomes queered through his resistance to hypermasculinity.

Even as character appearances change, Loki maintains this anti-hegemonic masculine performance. Character appearances in comic books are constantly being adapted, whether this is

artistic difference, updated printing techniques, or shifts in culture. In recent years, comic book characters' images are also changed to reflect the increased popularity of comic book films (D. Johnson 79). And yet, despite countless reasons for character design changes and a cultural shift in aforementioned concepts, we continue to see a Loki who is depicted as more traditionally feminine. Thor's image, for example, shifts drastically. The display of his body is lessened, and his color scheme loses most of its vibrance. In some story arcs, Thor is even displayed with a beard. In contrast, Loki's appearance and costuming stays relatively consistent with his early comparative femininity. His clothing begins to reflect more modern style, but maintains traditionally feminine elements such as fur accents, fingerless gloves, and painted nails. Loki continues to defy the expected display of gender markers throughout most of his 60-year run within Marvel comics.

Analyzing the target demographic of superhero comic books illuminates the relationship between sexualization, masculinity, and comic book men. Studies have shown that comic book readership still skews male dominated with men making up 63% of comic book and graphic novels purchases, with comics in the superhero genre being purchased by men 78% of the time (Alverson, "NYCC Insider Sessions"). Additionally, it has been estimated that men make up 90% of people who work on comic books, including a survey of comic book writers, artists, editors, pencilers, and other behind the scenes jobs (Hickey, "Comic Books are Still"). Comic books are, and have always been, created by men for men to enjoy. Given this information and mainstream comics refusal of queer themes with the Comics Code, it is safe to say that the target demographic of Marvel comics, during the Silver Age and beyond, would primarily be cishet men; and so then, if the display of male bodies in comic books is about sexualizing the male body, who are the writers and illustrators sexualizing it for?

The answer is that the characters being sexualized in comic books, even the male characters, are being sexualized primarily by and for men, if they are being sexualized at all. While not all displays of hypermasculinized superheroes are inherently sexualized, some of them are. This allows for a space within comic books for homosocial desire to thrive, a site for men to engage in a continuum of relations with other men (Sedgwick, *Between Men*). Because of the blurred lines between homosociality and homoeroticism, there must be constant boundary building in order to maintain heteronormativity and the heteropatriarchy (Hammarén and Johansson). This boundary formation is built upon hegemonic masculinity and as such a character such as Thor, steeped in hypermasculinity, allows for the exploration of homosocial desire with the means to escape homosexual panic. The same comfortability is not expressed by Loki, a character who subverts gendered expectations and exhibits more overt queer behavior.

In addition to being a site of sexualization, the body becomes a key site through which this masculinizing process is understood and exemplified. In comic books, musculature is vital to the understanding of masculinity, and the perfectly toned body, reminiscent of the physical aestheticism of a body builder, becomes glorified as a symbol of masculinity (Klein; Nelson; Taylor). Thor is very clearly more muscular, with broad shoulders and thick thighs. The construction and display of Thor's musculature highlights his masculinity, whereas Loki, who is usually shown to be lithe and slender falls short within the masculine framework produced within the superhero genre.

Thor's embodied display of masculinity is reminiscent of the standard across Marvel comic books. Comic book men continuously flaunt their body from Luke Cage's low-cut shirt to Hercules' shirtlessness to the Incredible Hulk's constantly ripped clothing. And this trend is not limited to the heroes of the stories, but also appears amongst villains and the morally-grey, with Kraven the Hunter wearing no shirt underneath his vest and Namor the Submariner in only green

briefs and a belt. It is this distinction between the commonly defined masculine display among both heroes and villains that illuminate the queered, gender-nonconforming identity tied to Loki.

Loki's appearance and embodiment imbue him with his gender non-conformity and this, in turn, impacts the perception of his characterization. In his early days, Loki is undoubtedly a villain, and although this has become more nuanced, the character maintains a level of villainy, trickery, and distrust. As Loki is written within "a culture with firmly naturalized constructions of gender, gender transgression may also cast doubt on a person's competence, social acceptability, and morality" (Li-Vollmer and LaPointe 91). In such a culture, the display of gender non-conforming behaviors acts as an Othering practice, through which queer individuals are separated from the cisheteropatriarchy. This reflects a larger culture trend that often ties queerness to deviancy (Cover; Woods). The simple act of existing as queer suggests that the individual embodies a type of sexual and social deviance, as they reject the current cisheteropatriarchal order and could destabilize it. Loki can be understood as villain twice over, through his villainous deeds and through the act of transgressing cisheteronormativity. And the formation of deviancy through queerness could color both perceptions of Loki's villainy and act as a catalyst for the creation of his villainous acts.

Moreover, Loki-as-villain is used to emphasize the male hero's masculinity, as masculinity is tied with the morally upstanding, in opposition to queerness being tied with deviance. "The queered villains may, in fact, become even more feminized as a sort of countervailing presentation of gender that helps heroes maintain their masculinity and male standing" (Li-Vollmer and LaPointe 104). As the audience is asked to constantly compare the hero and the villain through the conflicts within the story, the feminization of the villain works to conserve the male hero's masculinity and by extension his morality. Take for example, the ever-cyclical battle of Loki and his brother Thor. Thor has to triumph over Loki, not only as a genre

convention but to uphold the societal expectation of good defeating evil. It is in an effort to demonstrate these moral expectations that Thor gets inevitably tied up in a heavy masculinization and Loki must therefore be less masculine than Thor.

While the majority of Loki's retrospective queerness culminates from subtle instances of queer transgressions against the cisheteropatriarchy, there are more overt performances of queerness, that seem to approach the border of outed queerness. Loki may not come out as genderfluid for several decades, but the first instance this identity is hinted at in the comic books is in *Journey Into Mystery #92* (1963). In the panel, Heimdall, a fellow Asgardian, is interrogating a young woman before allowing her to cross the portal into Earth, as he is suspicious of her even after she identifies herself. He says, "Aye! But you could also be that rogue son of Odin's...Loki. Who by magic can even transform himself into a lovely maiden like yourself!" (Bernstein et al). This hints at a larger framework of gender identity within the Marvel comic book universe, one in which Loki is able to shift between sexes and the Asgardian community knows about it. While this does not confirm or showcase a queer identity, yet, it begins the movements toward it.

The next distinct and overt push against the boundaries of the cisheteropatriarchy happen in *Thor Annual #18*, created by Ron Marz and Tom Grindberg in 1993, during which Loki takes on a female form. Although this is the first on-panel appearance of Loki shapeshifting into a woman's body, the storyline and the way that Loki is drawn seem to depict that Loki's shapeshifting in this instance has less to do with gender identity and more to do with his trickery and desire for power. For context, he is trying to persuade another superbeing, The Flame, into helping him defeat Thor. He offers up several things, "Is it the flesh after which you lust? Do you covet simple, brute power? Or is it for mighty Thor that you burn?" (Marz and Grindberg). As Loki speaks, he shapeshifts forms between a beautiful woman, a brutish monster, and Thor in

Loki's color scheme. Focusing on his sexed transformation, Loki becomes a beautiful woman who is designed to be sexy. He wears a green dress, which carefully shows off every curve of his new female form. His sexualization is emphasized by his asking of The Flame if he lusts after the flesh. Loki's transformation is not centered on his own gender identity but merely a manipulation tactic to entice The Flame. In this case, Loki utilizes the performance of feminine gender to trick and manipulate a man as a tool for his larger schemes. This plays into harmful anti-trans stereotypes often popularized by the media. In this way, Loki's shapeshifting and manipulation of The Flame through his transitioning sexed body perpetuates these harmful anti-trans stereotypes. Loki's true identity is shown to be male, regardless of the illusion of his appearance within these scenes. And as the "deceiver" is depicted as preying upon unsuspecting straight men, Loki is positioned within this comic to manipulate The Flame (Serano 37). Simultaneously he upholds the truth of his own masculinity by showcasing his female self as merely illusion.

The process of Abjection, then, becomes instrumental in the formation of comic books and character conventions within the genre as they relate to queerness and masculinity. As masculinity is formed on the basis of what is non-masculine, masculine characters need a polarizing other through which a comparison can be made to secure masculine and heterosexual identity for the protagonist. Costuming and morality are key conventions of this process. The simple proximity with a queered character also works toward the understanding of the heroes' cis het identity.

While the homosocial bond of hero and sidekick also seems to gesture toward the homosexual end of the continuum—that is, an ambiguously gay or asexual sidekick would seem to imply an ambiguously gay superhero—it is important to note that the hero is actually empowered through this scapegoating process and is therefore still recognizably and hegemonically masculine. (Shyminsky 297)

The male hero is constantly put into a comparative relationship with those around them and leverages this comparison to ensure their own hegemonic masculinity and heterosexuality, by imposing all queer panic onto those around him. Gender transgression can be used to emphasize a hero's morality and masculinity through comparison with the gender non-conforming villain, and the same process is happening here. The queerer and more non-heterosexual the villain, the more heterosexual and masculine the hero is in comparison. Shyminsky goes on to say, "Although the hero may have also been conflicted about his own sexual desire, he is nonetheless made to seem more potent, masculine, and unassailable—he is straightened—through this contrast with his sexually indeterminate or pathologized sidekick" (Shyminsky 298). This narrative gesture also extends to other characters in the comic book beside the sidekick, such as love interests and villains. Characters who hold up hegemonic masculinity and the cisheteropatriarchy need queer characters, or at least characters less masculine and less straight than them, because masculinity is not a stable identity within and of itself.

During this time period, Loki challenges the hypermasculine standard within superhero comic books, threatening to disable it, but without explicit follow through into queerness. Although Loki's queer identity has only recently been explicitly stated and Loki's status as an out queer character exists only within the last decade of comic books, looking back it becomes clear that he continuously expressed queer potentiality throughout his time in Marvel Comics. It is impossible to determine if every creator of Loki in comics intended for this idle queerness, but it exists within his history nonetheless. Because of this, it feels inaccurate to call Loki a closeted character, as the creators do not seem to be hiding his queer identity nor does Loki engage with "the speech act of silence" (Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* 3). Rather, Loki participates in idle queerness—queerness that is openly expressed, if not explicitly stated as an out identity. Idle queerness becomes clearer after transition into outed queerness, and the queer potentiality is seen

through a retrospective lens. Looking back from this moment, it appears as though Loki was always idly queer, an identity which was shifted into a labeled gear with the coming out of his character.

Loki on Screen Within the Marvel Cinematic Universe

The Marvel Cinematic Universe started with the *Iron Man* movie in 2008 and has continued expanding its reach across screen and into the depths of the comic book source material ever since. Currently, there are a total of 32 MCU productions, storylines that take place within the same universe through Marvel's television shows on Disney+ and through films. The MCU has easily become one of the biggest and most recognizable franchises in the world. It has several of the top highest grossing movies of all time, and it continues to produce blockbuster after blockbuster (Berninger et al. 31; McEniry et al. 3). Loki, himself, was adapted into the MCU early on within the franchise, and has since appeared in 8 of the Marvel productions. The most recent story about Loki being his own television show which aired on Disney+ (Waldron).

An interesting question that arises when considering an adaptation such as the Marvel Cinematic Universe is the tumultuous landscape of the source material for the on-screen plots and characters. As previously mentioned, the case of comic book canon is a long and complicated one; characters change and evolve through time and also through the many artists and authors who take up the mantle of writing different characters and story arcs. While all of these characters were created at a specific point in time by a specific person (or group of people), comic book characters are continuously reinterpreted as each new author and artists depicts the characters (Wucher 250). So while these characters are another adaptation, comic book characters are in continuous flux and adaptation. It is easy to see the ones in the MCU as an extension of this storied tradition in Marvel Comics. Is the MCU not simply another non-

discursive depiction of treasured Marvel characters? Composed and written by new authors and artists?

While the quality of the adaptation is outside the scope of this research, it is important to realize that the Marvel Cinematic Universe is an adaptation of Marvel Comics story arcs and characters. But while it is an adaptation, it is simultaneously its own work, its own universe within the Marvel multiverse, Universe 199999. While the filmmakers are pulling from source materials as inspiration, it is impossible to have a truly perfect adaptation (Wucher 253). The writers, directors, and actors are continuing the tradition that the writers and artists of Marvel Comics create within the comic book universes.

Therefore, creating a narrative or characterization for a character within the Marvel Cinematic Universe becomes a state of fanfiction. The queer-seeking audience may wish to see their favorite characters adapted in a certain way, but within the universal boundaries of the MCU, which is created for a much larger audience, this audience cannot expect perfect adaptations as they have to appeal to more people and establish unique stories. Instead, this places pre-determined boundaries onto fan-favorite characters, made from the understanding of character and narrative from elsewhere.

This phenomenon acts in a similar way to compulsory heterosexuality and the virtual space of the closet. Just as societal expectations and regulations craft and form the walls of the closet, the queer-seeking audience creates an imagined closet with their expectations surrounding Loki. Fans of the comic books, or fans of the franchise who want a bisexual and genderfluid Loki, see the character on the screen to be a queer character that is simply closeted—or perhaps even locked within the closet by the heteronormative filmmakers and producers at Marvel Studios. In this way, the queer-seeking audience creates and maintains a closet around Loki. They assume that Loki is queer, because of past source material, and is being forced to live with

a double-bind of compulsory heterosexuality which ensnares and limits his presumed queerness (Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*). However, there is little textual evidence when analyzing the Marvel Cinematic Universe as a whole entity rather than as a representation of Marvel Comics. This section analyzes Loki as he appears within the MCU, rather than comparing the two incarnations of the same character, as they should be viewed as two separate, albeit similar, entities. The journey within film and television that Loki makes with the concept of queerness is a tumultuous one as there are multiple ways in which Loki could be interpreted as queer before his eventual confirmed LGBTQ+ identity within his television show.

Bisexuality, From the Grandmaster to Sylvie

For the majority of the films that Loki appears in, his queer sexual identity is relatively non-existent. There are not many hints of Loki's sexuality through any relationships that he may have in the films, and this is mostly due to the absence of a love interest for the beloved anti-hero. Therefore, it makes sense that the first instance that we see Loki's sexuality being referenced is when there is a possible love interest in the form of a wink between Loki and the Grandmaster in *Thor: Ragnarok*. In the film, Loki disappears in the Bifrost and appears later in the film on the world of Sakar in the good graces of the planet's dictator, the Grandmaster. It is discussed how quickly Loki came into the Grandmaster's favor: a couple of weeks. During this discussion the Grandmaster winks in Loki's direction, which many fans took to be an implication of how Loki gained the Grandmaster's favor, through sexually explicit means (Nabach, "Loki and the Grandmaster"). It's a barely there moment, but is it the first implication of a queer superbeing in the MCU? The answer is very debated amongst the fan community (Nabach, "Loki and the Grandmaster"), with some fans enjoying the wink and what it could represent in terms of Loki's sexuality and others condemning the wink as another instance of queer-baiting.

It is not known whether or not the creators of the film intended for a wink to hold such meaning for the fan community, but is quite possible that it is a definitive and intentional choice on the part of the actors and the director of *Thor: Ragnarok*, Taika Waititi. In the third installment of *Thor*, there are three characters in the film which are explicitly queer in the comic books, even if this interpretation of the characters appears nowhere in the film. Loki is one such character. The others are two newly introduced characters, Valkyrie and Korg, who are bisexual and gay respectively. The introduction of two new characters, both of whom are canonically queer in the comics, seems to imply that there was meant to be queer representation in this film, but that this seemingly falls short in post-production. There was even a scene in the movie that would have confirmed Valkyrie's bisexuality, but it was ultimately cut from the final version of the film (Richards, "Taika Waititi Wants to Explore"). Given this information, it seems entirely possible that the wink in question is meant to imply that Loki and the Grandmaster had a sexual relationship, which allowed Loki to rise in rank in the barbaric war-world fairly quickly and safely. But if it is supposed to be queer-representation, why not confirm the queerness of the character?

The moment in the film is reminiscent of queer-baiting, which defines the exploitative entertainment industry activity in which executives and creators entice viewers who seek out queer content without ever confirming a non-cisgender identity (Brennan). Queer-baiting is something that has become increasingly popular with companies who want to hint at a character's queerness without fully committing to this identity, and therefore dodging any of the presumed backlash for having a queer character and for supporting the queer community. And there is substantial backlash for having queer moments within films. In the *Eternals*, which had the Marvel Cinematic Universe's first openly gay couple and first gay kiss, the company received considerable backlash both domestically and abroad. *Eternals* was boycotted in several

places within the United States and many countries with strong political anti-queer viewpoints refused to show the movie altogether (Riley, “One Million Moms Calls for Boycott”; Sharf, “Eternals Banned in Saudi Arabia”). And while Marvel Studios refused to back down with the Eternals, four years earlier in *Thor: Ragnarok*, it seems as though the studio wasn’t quite ready to alienate its audience, either socially or monetarily.

While only hinting at Loki’s queer identity for years, the MCU eventually establishes Loki’s queerness in the *Loki* streaming show. In the third episode of the series, Loki and Sylvie, who is an alternate universe version of Loki, are having a tense conversation on a train. They are trying to escape a doomed planet, which they were accidentally transported to, and the characters are trying to build trust between one another. Eventually the conversation begins to shift over to romantic partners and Sylvie insinuates romantic/sexual entanglements for Loki by saying, “Must’ve been would-be-princesses or perhaps, another prince,” to which Loki replies, “A bit of both” (“Lamentis”). And in Loki’s brief admission he comes out as bisexual. Marvel finally has its first queer superbeing.

To further punctuate Loki’s bisexuality, the television show makes use of non-discursive elements to emphasize the character’s queer sexuality. The moon that the character’s find themselves on, Lamentis-1, is continuously bathed in pink, blue, and purple lighting. While the primary function of this color scheme is undoubtedly to make the moon seem extraterrestrial, people familiar with the LGBTQ+ community’s pride flags will immediately recognize the colors as those of the bisexual pride flag. Loki comes out as bisexual while being continuously bathed in bisexual light.

The presentation of Loki’s queer identity in the show is with its merits, but not without its problems. One of the most abundant and problematic of queer film and television issues is the popularized trope “Bury Your Gays”. The BYG trope is the observed and documented concept

that queer characters are considerably more likely to die in media than their straight counterparts.

The trope is defined by the website TV Tropes as:

the presentation of deaths of LGBT characters where these characters are nominally able to be viewed as more expendable than their heterosexual counterparts. In this way, the death is treated as exceptional in its circumstances... Indeed, it may be because they seem to have less purpose compared to straight characters, or that the supposed natural conclusion of their story is an early death. (“Bury Your Gays”)

This phenomenon is closely related to the idea of queerbaiting, which revolves around queer characters in texts being treated and hinted at being queer only in subtext to engage LGBT+ audiences or develop queer interest in the character presented. Typically, the BYG trope begins as soon as the queerbaiting ends. Once the character is confirmed to be queer, they are quickly killed off. The BYG trope is clearly seen in Lexa from *The 100*, Sara Lance from *Arrow*, and Castiel from *Supernatural*.

Both queerbaiting and the BYG trope are incredibly negative representations of queer individuals, who struggle for any representation at all as a population. Despite the perception of an increase in representation, the continued use of such harmful tropes continues to misrepresent and harm the already marginalized queer community (McDermott; Seymour; Waggoner). Queer individuals experience a raised sense of hope when finally being allowed representation, but these hopes of representation are quickly dashed through these tropes. According to Elizabeth Bridges,

the BYG trope punishes these characters by erasing them from the narrative entirely if the depiction indeed goes beyond subtext to include acknowledged queer identity. Both queerbaiting and BYG also punish queer audiences by the suggestion (or even promise) of quality LGBTQ representation, only to have their hopes dashed (Bridges 116).

The process of queerbaiting is to force the heteropatriarchal viewpoint that queerness has no place in society outside of the closet, and the BYG trope is to then punish the queer individuals who eventually escape the closet.

Of course, with the uniqueness of Loki, it begs the question, does the Bury Your Gays trope apply given that the character has had several on-screen deaths? The first death that we see of Loki is in *Thor*, when he falls from the rainbow bridge and into the darkness of the void of space, seemingly in an attempt to die by suicide. Loki is later revealed to be alive and working with Thanos. The second on-screen death for Loki is in *Thor: The Dark World*, in which Loki fakes his death and then impersonates Odin to rule Asgard for a time. These two deaths are fake. The third death that we see for Loki is in *Avengers: Infinity War*, when he tries to stop Thanos from acquiring the Tesseract, and subsequently the Space Stone, and Thanos strangles him before snapping his neck. This is the actual death of Loki.

The *Loki* streaming show is actually of an earlier version of Loki, the Loki from the 2012 invasion of New York during the first *Avengers* movie. This Loki has his path altered by time travel and breaks away from what we learn to be The Sacred Timeline; he is subsequently apprehended by the Time Variance Authority, who upholds The Sacred Timeline and arrests variants, or people who have stepped off of their prescribed destiny.

By the time Loki comes out as bisexual in the *Loki* show, the audience has seen him seemingly die three times. And yet, he stays alive after he comes out, which does subvert the Bury Your Gays trope, in which characters usually die after they are confirmed as queer rather than before. However, as the main consequence of the trope is to show the expendability of queer people, Loki does fall victim to the BYG trope, as the audience is shown over and over again how Loki is more expendable than his straight counterparts.

Another point of contention regarding the sexuality of Loki comes from the fact that Marvel's first official queer superbeing is a villain. While it is possible to argue Loki's status as a villain given recent movies, as he seems to be more of an antihero these days than an outright villain, it would be impossible to consider him wholly a good guy; he simply commits too much murder and betrayal. And while it is unsurprising, it complicates matters that Marvel's first queer superbeing is a villain, especially given the several opportunities for queer representation in other MCU characters, specifically with Valkyrie, Okoye, and Korg.

Villains have a difficult history with queer representation in film and television. It has been a common practice for antagonists to be queer-coded characters, in an effort to both demonize queerness and to demonstrate a possible reason for the antagonist's villainous ways. Queerness has often been associated with deviancy and the death of innocence (Edelman; Woods). Queerness or queer-coded behavior can be used to explain a villain's corrupt morals in this way as there is a history of utilizing queerness as a quick and stereotypical way to explain a villain's evil actions. Further, this queer-coding acts as a way to reinforce heteropatriarchal ideals and to highlight the heroes upstanding straightness. "If the bad guys are gay, the good guys must be straight" (Epstein and Friedman). It was predictable, and yet problematic, then that Marvel chose for its first queer superbeing to be a villainous identity. In this way, Marvel Studios upholds a decades long system in which queerness is prescribed to being less desirable and more immoral than heterosexuality.

While Loki's recent heroic stint, especially in his streaming show, certainly subverts the expectations of villains being queer-coded, it does not entirely erase this implication. And with other queer identities in the Marvel Cinematic Universe being so scarce at the moment, it is important to point out how this move does seemingly associate queerness with villainy, if only for the time being.

This is not to say that Loki should have never come out as bisexual. Quite the opposite. Loki's status as one of the longest running MCU characters and his position as a fan favorite of the franchise, make him a logical choice for Marvel's first queer character. Despite the problems, Loki's queer identity is revolutionary for Marvel Studios and the entire superhero genre. Loki is one of the most high-profile queer characters in a superhero text, and it is good to see Marvel Studios finally address some of the diversity issues that the company has had for fourteen years, now. Even though we have barely glimpsed the surface of Loki's queer identity, I have high hopes and high expectations for Loki's continued display and development of queer identities. Marvel Studios certainly has room to grow, but the inclusion of these identities is taking steps in the right direction. With Loki's continuation in the MCU, he will have more opportunity for love interests and the display of his sexuality, whether his partners be man, woman, trans or nonbinary. And he will, hopefully, have more opportunity to encompass an out queer identity.

The Potential for Genderfluidity

Again, in the *Loki* series is the first time that we see evidence of Loki's potential genderfluid identity. And while the presence of Sylvie is perhaps a nod to Loki's comic book established genderfluidity and his stint in the comics as Lady Loki, it falls short of queer representation. The problem begins to arise with the fact the character of Loki becomes increasingly distinct from the character of Sylvie rather than seeming to be extensions of each other. It is possible to argue that every Loki is different from the others given the very nature of their existence as variants. And it is important to note that Sylvie is the alternative version of Loki that gets the most screentime, so it is logical that Sylvie/Loki differences would be in a greater number, given the amount of screen time Sylvie has versus the other Lokis. Still, the specific instances of division chosen to highlight the differences between Sylvie and Loki are

more fundamental to their characters and their arcs than between Loki and the other Lokis in the void.

While something as mundane as the use of different names, Loki and Sylvie respectively, can easily be written off as a convention for audience understanding, it's a simple and effective tool to separate the characters; this is especially apparent in the fifth episode of the show, when other Loki variants are introduced into the show, all of whom go by a moniker with Loki still in it (Classic Loki, Kid Loki, Boastful Loki, etc.). Why do other male-presenting versions of Loki get to keep the name, when Sylvie chooses not to? Names are an important aspect of identity, and in transgender folks, both names and the process of re-naming can shape identity and help with gender affirmation (Obasi et al.; Pollitt et al.). It is possible then to interpret the differentiation of names between Sylvie and Loki as Sylvie's re-naming process of discovering her own gender identity, and in this scenario, Loki would be Sylvie's dead name. While I find this queer reading of Sylvie to be fruitful and abundant, I still argue the identity-making process of naming Loki and Sylvie different things should be interpreted as the show's creators molding the two characters into distinct and separate identities and characterizations. And throughout the course of the show, the characters seem to become less and less alike until it's hard to understand them as a centralized genderfluid identity.

One distinction between Loki and Sylvie which effectively pushes the two characters away from a common identity is Sylvie's ability to use enchantment, whereas Loki seems unable to do so and actually impressed that Sylvie is even capable of it. Sylvie establishes that she taught herself magic, rather than being taught by Frigga like Loki was. While this seems like an obvious difference, given Sylvie's odd childhood of bouncing around between different apocalypses, it is an important distinction to consider. Not only does this imply that Loki's and Sylvie's magics would be wildly different from each other, but Loki's relationship with his

mother is important to understanding his character. His mother, Frigga, taught Loki magic and is the only one of Loki's friends or family who sought him out after his turn to villainy. And we see Loki mourn Frigga when she is killed at the hands of Malekith, a dark elf and the primary antagonist of *Thor: The Dark World*, and when he gets the news of his adopted mother's death, his grief usurps his control.

Most importantly, Frigga's relationship with Loki, as the softer and gentler parental figure, acts as a perfect foil for Loki's tumultuous relationship with his adopted father, Odin. In the Marvel Cinematic Universe, Odin is an inherently problematic character, but his role as a colonizer and manipulative father figure will not be unpacked here. For the purposes of this project, I focus on to the fact that Odin lied to Loki for hundreds of years, instead of telling him that he was actually adopted, a further dissimilarity to Sylvie as she admits that she always knew that she was an adopted Frost Giant. Odin also always intended to give the throne to Thor, but continued to allow Loki to believe that there was a possibility that he would be king of Asgard at some point, which cultivated a character-defining rivalry for both Loki and his adoptive brother Thor. In contrast, Sylvie never mentions a father, only a mother, and only in a passing comment, during which she admits that she barely remembers her mother. Sylvie is, then, shaped by the absence of any parental figures at all, while Loki gains much of his ambition, sensitivity, magic, and mischievousness from his adoptive parents.

To further highlight the difference between Sylvie and Loki through the use of their familial relations, the *Loki* show fails to give any evidence that Sylvie had a Thor. The importance of this cannot be understated, as Loki is a character defined by his relationship with Thor. Loki and Thor are close, as they were raised as brothers, and this is displayed especially in *Thor* and *Thor: Ragnarok* when the two correctly anticipate what the other is going to do and their comfortability in combat with one another. They both share grief when their mother dies,

which allows for *Thor: The Dark World's* climax to take place. The two adoptive brothers bring out the best and the worst in each other, and most of their growth as characters comes from the other. The importance of Thor in the life of a Loki is repeatedly shown in the show, with most Lokis having at least some reference to Thor. Kid Loki's nexus event occurred when he killed his version of Thor; Classic Loki discussed his motivations being about how he missed his brother; and Boastful Loki actually possessed a version of Mjolnir. The exception to this trend rests on Sylvie, who never mentions a brother in general or Thor specifically, and he is not mentioned through any imagistic or non-discursive means throughout the show in relation to Sylvie either. So because this relationship is paramount to the understanding of who Loki is, it further alienates Sylvie from the cinematic conception of who Loki is and highlights the two characters as being treated as entirely separate people, instead of versions of the same individual.

And perhaps the most confirming evidence of the differentiation and divide between Loki and Sylvie is the romantic relationship between the two that the show pursues. As much as Loki loves himself, being in love with himself would have been perhaps a bit too far. Throughout several episodes, Loki and Sylvie grow closer and the show continuously hints at a more intimate relationship between the two. This is the final divide between the two characters, and after the romantic interest it is difficult to reconcile them as one character with different pathways in their multiversal lives. This phenomenon is further explored in *Spiderman: No Way Home*, in which a similar multiversal event drags different variations of the same character into one storyline, with the movie centered on three variations of Peter Parker. In the film, Andrew Garfield's Peter Parker makes comments likening Tobey Maguire's and Tom Holland's Peter Parkers to his brothers; he creates and articulates a familial (and in this case fraternal) relationship between characters with the same core identity. In the *Loki* show, Loki and Sylvie break this concept of variational likeness and the familial bonds supposedly associated with it. Instead, the show

pursues a romantic relationship, which hinges on the audience's firm division of the two characters, which is not expected among other MCU characters in similar situations.

The differentiation in parental relationships, the lack of a character-defining Thor, and the inclusion of a romantic subplot all contribute to the separation of Loki and Sylvie away from a centralized character identity. With this separation, the show does not truly have a genderfluid Loki. It nods at the comic book interpretation of Loki's genderfluidity, but it does not actually provide this representation on the small screen. The show most assuredly acknowledges Loki's gender identity through Sylvie in a type of interpretation of Lady Loki, but it fails to actually cross the finish line again and again, despite the amazing opportunity to provide much needed non-conforming gender identity representation. Certainly, Sylvie can be interpreted as a trans identity, and the audience may use the instances of gender non-conformity to craft a fan-interpreted genderfluid Loki within the MCU; however, these interpretations rely heavily on subtext, fan will, and a predetermined expectation of Loki's queerness from an outside source, such as the comic books. While the show alludes to a transgender and gender non-conforming identity for Loki and his variants, it can and should be more explicit in its portrayal of these underrepresented identities.

The MCU versions of Loki should be viewed as entirely separate characters from the comic books, and therefore, Loki's lack of genderfluidity in the MCU should not be seen as a failing of the character. Still, the MCU seems to gesture and reference the queer identities seen in the comic books, which can be viewed as a sign of potential queer identity adaptation across media. Even with this knowledge, it is disheartening, for me, to acknowledge that the MCU has only barely scratched the surface of Loki's queer potentiality, but I hold out hope that this representation and identity will be explored in the second season of *Loki* or in the other Marvel productions that Loki will appear in.

Subversions of Supermasculinity

While Loki's queer identity remains a whisper of potential, throughout Loki's appearances within the Marvel Cinematic Universe he continuously performs a subversive act of gender. These non-conforming gendered practices occur before Loki's confirmed queerness within the MCU, but can also allow a queered perspective of the character. Loki is frequently put in contrast to the hypermasculine ideal that is often associated with superheroes and the superhero genre more broadly, and it is in these moments of transgression that a queered Loki resides. Perhaps, he does not represent or display the genderfluid identity as prominently as I had hoped going into this project (and as I hope he does one day in the future), but through the gender that we see demonstrated in the movies and show, Loki does battle the hegemonic heteropatriarchy through his refusal to participate in normative gender ideals.

The superhero genre is unique in its display of masculinity. The study of the phenomenon of masculinity, and even hypermasculinity, in the American media industry is nothing new. In Steve Neale's work *Masculinity as Spectacle*, he argues that movies inhabit and perpetuate the male fantasies of "power, omnipotence, mastery, and control" (5). Masculinity, in this way, becomes infused with power and control, and so the more power that someone possesses the more hegemonically masculine they are. Because masculinity is defined through the relationships that men have with other men, the masculine power displayed in films is often enacted along a system in which power can be accumulated into an ever-increasing form of masculinity.

When this power is used to oppress others through domination, aggression, or sexuality, this embodied masculinity becomes hypermasculinity.

Hypermasculinity is a specific form of masculinity characterized by a belief that violence is manly and danger exciting, paired with a callous attitude toward women and the

derision of anything considered feminine. Moreover, our society codes emotionality, cooperation, and negotiation as feminine traits, rendering them weaknesses within the hypermasculine ideology (Kvaran 226).

In its efforts to maintain equilibrium, hypermasculinity must codify a system of beliefs that anything counter-intuitive to its formation is a threat, and then labels these transgressions as weakness or moral unjustness. The hypermasculine ideal becomes threatened by performances of womanhood, transgenderism, queerness, and any non-conforming gender expression.

Hypermasculinity becomes defined by its ability to oppress and dominate.

Using this framework of American (hyper)masculinity in the media, the superhero genre has a brand of hypermasculinity that is entirely unique to its characterization and storytelling. Hypermasculinity is a fantastic umbrella term, but in a world in which people leap over buildings in a single bound, genre formation and specificity therein act as key factors to establish this vein of hypermasculinity in ways that are slightly different from real world examples. I borrow and slightly tweak a term used by Anthony Easthope: supermasculine. This new type of masculinity, supermasculinity, is built upon three foundational elements, which scholars have discussed separately, but rarely, if ever, in unison with each other. The three pillars of supermasculinity are:

1. The lack of vulnerable emotion, especially emotions associated with femininity, and the replacement of these emotions with powerful ones, such as anger, righteousness, or pride
2. The instinct toward violence as a way to solve or prevent most problems, particularly in contrast to negotiation, compromise, subterfuge, or trickery
3. The display of the male body as a center of power, often enhanced through the use of superpowers, magic, or technology

And while some superheroes, even within the Marvel Cinematic Universe, subvert the parameters outlined thusly, the majority of characters fall firmly within them. Further, if a character does displace these character expectations, it is usually only one of the three categories and it is commonly undone in the next iteration of the character, be that movie or streaming show.

Despite the adherence to these guidelines throughout the Marvel Cinematic Universe by both male heroes and villains, Loki almost consistently subverted and defied these expectations, and along with them he subverted the gendered roles prescribed upon him by both genre and society. Instead, Loki's existence upon screen and page seemed to invite transgressions against societal norms. For most of Loki's tenure in the MCU, he did not exhibit the supermasculine characteristics of his on-screen male counterparts. Loki is, of course, still a very masculine presence in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, however, there are clear differences between him and the other supermasculine super-beings (including heroes such as Thor and Captain America, and villains like Killmonger, Yon-Rogg, and Thanos) which seem to place Loki more into a realm of non-conforming gender identity, through his emotionality, use of trickery, and his embodiment.

Emotionality of men is heavily regulated, even within superhero films. This is not to say that male superheroes are entirely emotionless and apathetic, however, emotions become governed and ruled by heteronormative ideals in which men are expected to tamper and control the display of emotions. The regulation of emotions in men is started at an early age as "boys are forced by families, peer groups, schools, and the media to hide their 'true' emotions and develop a hard emotional shell that is what we know as masculinity" (Pascoe 17). These societal expectations then become internalized and demonstrated throughout adulthood. As masculinity is largely defined across media and in the larger culture, "it connotes total control of emotions, that

it mandates emotional inexpressivity, that it entraps in emotional isolation, that boys, in short, don't cry" (Shamir and Travis 1). So while men feel these emotions and audiences may expect these emotions to have an embodied reaction, men are not allowed to display these emotions for fear of destabilizing their own masculinity.

Supermasculinity is marked and created by this distinct brand of desired toughness, common amongst hypermasculine idealizations. An authentic masculinity is conceptualized as a man's ability to control his emotions and his mental psyche. While discussing hypermasculine television shows, Cox and DeCarvalho state, "Men's overt control over their emotions serves as a response to the crisis in masculinity, in such a way that it helps alleviate the anxiety created by a perceived lack of control" (822). Men's emotions have the ability to destabilize their own masculinity and the display of such emotions decreases the hypermasculine. Emotions then have constantly existed within a gendered binary where women's available emotions "have included 'powerless' emotions such as grief and fear and for men 'powerful' emotions such as anger and pride" (Pantti 361). Men cannot express the weakness associated with emotional vulnerability as it is associated with femininity, leading to a crisis of masculinity which is constantly defined by the approval of other men (Kimmel 33). In this system of hegemonic hypermasculinity, men are very rarely allowed to show any emotionality whatsoever, and even when appearance of such emotions is permitted, it is heavily controlled in what emotions are permitted and how these emotions can be enacted upon.

Loki differs from his supermasculine counterparts when it comes to emotional expression. The audience gets to see on-screen Loki's doubts, his frustration, his grief. One such instance is when Loki confronts Odin about his biological heritage. We see Loki's struggle with this. It is visibly displayed before us with an emotional resonance that the titular character does not show in his origin film. In *Thor: The Dark World*, Loki loses his mother, of whom he is

closest to in his adoptive family. Again, we see Loki's unquestionable grief in the film. Despite his initial illusionary bravado and deflection, Loki becomes a vulnerable character again. His hair is disheveled. He is pale, eyes drawn. And when Thor approaches him, Loki is sitting against the wall. This is a far cry from the brooding of most superheroes, who stand tall and strong.

It can be argued that the embodiment of his emotional abundance justifies Loki's villainous actions within the film and it is important to his villainous origin story. Loki's emotionality is often used as the catalyst for his villainy, such as in *Thor* when his hurt and betrayal lead him to usurp the throne from Thor or in *Thor: The Dark World* when Thor develops Loki's grief into anger which is then used to fight Malekith and fake his own death. Despite this, other villains are not awarded the same emotional development that Loki is. Marvel villains such as Darren Cross and Alexander Pierce are practically given no emotions other than pride and greed. It is Loki's emotional depth that allows the audience to connect with Loki on another level and make him a fan favorite. His complexities create intrigue and give the writers motivation to continuously bring the character back into the fold of the MCU, despite his many deaths. Simultaneously, it pushes Loki away from the idealizations of the supermasculine, and permits the character and interpretations of the character to play with gender in unique and exciting ways.

Still, Loki isn't without his supermasculine characteristics. As is consistent for the genre, strong emotions are released through instances of violence. It is rare in the world of superheroes for the characters to not react in this way. The men in the MCU tend to overcome obstacles with their fists, especially when other avenues of resolution are available. These instances pull from a larger cultural trend through which masculine identity has always had a strong correlation with violence as "violence is often the single most evident marker of manhood" (Kimmel 36). In

popular media, masculinity is likewise defined against this line, the willingness to assert dominance through violence, especially at the risk of creating more problems than the men solve (Cox and DeCarvalho 826; Stevens). Willingness and ability to assert dominance through violence becomes a recurring trend in the superhero genre, as villains often attack civilians and then are defeated through a marvelous fight sequence by the superhero. Like most men in the MCU, Loki is known to be violent, giving in to this supermasculine ideal by committing violent acts himself or by orchestrating violent acts against his enemies; however, Loki's approach to these violent ends is a disruption from the supermasculinity displayed by most of his super-peers.

Many of the other male superbeings achieve their goals through physical aggression and domination; they punch, kick, shoot guns, and throw magical hammers at their adversaries. Loki has been known to get into physical confrontation, utilizing his magically materializing daggers and butchering his enemies. However, Loki mostly accomplishes his goals through illusion magic and deception. His deceit is how he controls scientists and superheroes with his scepter, how he briefly rules Asgard, and how he rises to importance with the Grandmaster. Instead of fighting himself, he typically deploys illusions to trick his opponents into harming themselves or he commands a tertiary party, as he does with both the Frost Giants and the Chitauri. In fact, in Loki's most famous physical confrontation, he gets beaten almost immediately by the Hulk. Loki's approach to violence is rarely an outright confrontation, which supermasculinity seems to dictate when examining other super-beings within the MCU. Although, Loki gives into the supermasculine expectation of violence, he creates a slight disturbance in the hegemony by enacting violence through trickery and subversion.

Additionally, Loki does not adhere to the strict display of the body and gendered embodiment shown throughout superhero films. There are inherent gender differences in how bodies are seen and portrayed in superhero cinematography, especially the MCU. Characters like

Black Widow and Scarlet Witch are typically depicted in skin tight clothing that accentuates their feminine curves and breasts. Whereas with the men of the MCU, emphasis is often given to the rippling muscles of the hero's arms and chest. For the majority of his appearance in the MCU, Loki seemingly defies both categories, by neither being overtly sexualized the way women are nor having his embodied power displayed in the way that men do.

Physical embodiment becomes a pillar of supermasculinity, as the physicality of superheroes is integral to the understanding of their masculine standing. The physicality of superheroes is infinitely important to the belief in the actors as superbeings (Favara 183). As much as the audience can suspend belief and imagine something as fantastical as the Super Soldier Serum, this suspension of belief relies on the body of Chris Evans. How do we, as an audience, know that Chris Evans has taken a serum that gives him enhanced strength and speed if he does not fit within the cultural expectations that we have for strength and speed—namely well-defined muscles. This trend continues throughout all superheroes, for is it not the body of Chris Hemsworth that lets us see him as a Norse god, or the physicality of Chadwick Boseman that let us believe him to be enhanced by the Heart-shaped Herb? While technological or supernatural enhancements are used to advance the masculinity of these men, allowing them to accomplish supermasculinity, it hinges on the display of the (typically white) male body of the celebrities behind the masks (Favara 184). This often features within the MCU as a scene with a shirtless superhero, which are often unnecessary to the plot and during which the actor is flexed the entire time. The importance of this as a storytelling structure is evidenced by the fact that the male body is displayed in almost every MCU film and television show to date. This includes a shirtless male superbeing in *Iron Man*, *The Incredible Hulk*, *Iron Man 2*, *Thor*, *Captain America: The First Avenger*, *The Avengers*, *Iron Man 3*, *Thor: The Dark World*, *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*, *Guardians of the Galaxy*, *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, *Ant-Man*, *Doctor Strange*,

Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2, Spider-Man: Homecoming, Thor: Ragnarok, Black Panther, Avengers: Infinity War, Avengers: Endgame, Spider-Man: Far From Home, The Falcon and the Winter Soldier, Black Widow, Loki, Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings, What If?, Eternals, and Spider-Man: No Way Home. In all of the aforementioned installments, 27 out of 32 projects, there is at least one man who takes his shirt off at least once; however, in several of the films there are more than one shirtless men in more than one scene, and some characters such as Hulk or Drax, exist in a perpetual display of supermasculine embodiment.

Although the men in the Marvel Cinematic Universe can and are sexualized occasionally, the display of the men's bodies in this way are as mostly displays of power. The supermasculine, peak-physicality of these actors is used as a tool to help the audience suspend their disbelief in watching unrealistic films, but also they are used as a male power fantasy. Masculinity becomes inscribed on the body, and masculinity acts as an embodied extension of people who are able-bodied and physically fit. "The muscular body is a heavily inscribed sign: Nothing else so clearly marks an individual as a bearer of masculine power" (Brown 27). The more obvious signs of muscular superiority over another person, the more hegemonically masculine a man becomes and the more power this man possesses. In this same vein, the superhero genre uses muscles and the supermasculine body as a means through which to understand superiority over others, as it privileges these specific forms of power and masculinity (Klein; Landon). The privileged display of the supermasculine body also creates a sense of desirability among the masculine-presenting audience, who begin to want to emulate the increased power and privilege this hypermasculinity presents (Landon; Roberts et al.; Young). As societal expectations intrinsically tie up physical fitness with hegemonic masculinity, the superhero genre becomes a site to reify the concepts of hegemonic masculinity through the

creation of an ideological standard, albeit an unattainable one as these bodies are often further empowered the pseudo-scientific or supernatural means.

The supermasculinity embodied in the bodies of these superbeings is not limited to the display of the male actors bodies, but also in the superpowers. Superheroes achieve their supermasculinity, because of the advancements of their power through advanced technology, superpowers, or peak human athleticism (Gaine; Favara). It is these enhancements through superpowers and technology that largely differentiates supermasculinity from hypermasculinity, as this genre-defining characteristic changes and adapts the forms that masculinity can take. In addition to this encapsulation of power, there is an expectation of the male hero's absolute control over their powers, be they technological or supernatural (Mulder). The control over one's own body, and subsequently their power, is integral for masculinity—a lack of control over one's body or power results in a vulnerability not shown in stereotypical displays of masculinity, and therefore subverts supermasculinity.

In *Thor*, Loki struggles with his own body. In a battle with the Frost Giants of Jotunheim, it is discovered that the Frost Giant's touch causes severe frost burns to Asgardian skin. When Loki is touched, however, he does not suffer from any damage. Instead, his skin changes to match the Frost Giants. In this, Loki discovers that he is a Frost Giant by birth, stolen/adopted as an infant by Odin and raised as an Asgardian. Here, we see Loki struggle not only with control over his own body and powers, but in the difficulties of being ostracized because of his body as well. Ostracization through the use of bodies creates a vulnerability in the characters which disrupt the supermasculinity often seen in superhero films (Mulder). The inability to control his own superpowers creates an embodied vulnerability which causes superhero men to lose control over their own masculinity. If the loss or development of control is part of a superhero's story, such as it is in *Dr. Strange*, the superhero gains not only control, but often expertise, by the

climax of the story and uses this to defeat the villain. In contrast, Loki never regains control of his body, and this plotline is dropped from future Marvel installments. Therefore, Loki's embodiment takes a subversive turn away from supermasculinity through most of his cinematic run, by the absence of Loki's physical display and the lack of mastery over his own body, including his superpowers which appear to be less advanced than other superbeings who continue to best and beat Loki and his powers.

Loki's resistance to the supermasculine and divergence in heteronormative gender expression takes a sudden and dramatic departure in the *Loki* show. Through Sylvie, Loki gains a feminine counterpart and therefore Tom Hiddleston's Loki shifts toward the supermasculine. For the first time in a Marvel production, we see a shirtless and buff Tom Hiddleston on screen. The scene is ultimately unnecessary to the plot and could have been removed entirely with no changes other than the first episode being a few seconds shorter. Continuing with the trend of other male superbeings, the showcasing of Tom Hiddleston's body isn't for plot purposes, but to show the audience the character's physical power and to ultimately reinforce his supermasculinity. In the scene, Loki has his clothes forcibly removed by the villainous and authoritarian Time Variance Authority. He is stripped of his clothing, an action which could display a sense of vulnerability, but Loki shows no signs of vulnerability. Instead, every muscle in his body is tensed, not poised for a fight, but simply for aesthetic and dominant appreciation. This scene of physical prowess, which plays into the white male power fantasy, is the first shift of Loki's toward supermasculinity, and it happens within the first ten minutes of the show.

Another shift toward supermasculinity arises in the disruption away from Loki's typical fighting style before the show. Although Loki is known for his manipulative abilities, the Loki in the show fails to manipulate people again and again. He is forced, over and over, to actually be the one that fights on his own behalf, a definitive shift from previous movies. And instead, the

cunning and manipulative main character becomes none other than Sylvie, who is a master manipulator through both the use of her words and also through her enchantment ability. In no other movie is Loki portrayed as a physical fighter, instead using magic and illusion casting, but with the rise of Sylvie, Loki falls back to being a melee fighter. Sure, Sylvie also uses the power of her fists to get things done, particularly when her magic isn't working, but the contrast between Loki's and Sylvie's uses of magic, begin to mirror the differences between Loki's and Thor's uses of magic, through which Loki could be seen as the more effeminate in the latter, but certainly the more masculine in the former. The switch to a more corporal form of fighting again moves Loki to the supermasculine side of the spectrum.

Finally, we see the least amount of vulnerable emotions from Loki in the character's own television show. I had thought, before watching the show, that it would develop some of the fans' favorite aspects of Loki, particularly his emotional complexity. I expected to see Loki finally grappling with the trauma of being lied to about his true heritage, and perhaps to see him finally embracing aspects of it. I wanted to see Loki deal with the death of his mother, an event which provided a lot of grief for Loki that is almost immediately dismissed. And I assumed that the show would touch on the incredibly pain of the loss of his homeworld, his people's diaspora, and the tragic demise of most Asgardians by the hands of either Hela or Thanos.

These things did not happen.

It could be argued that the deaths of his mother and his people happened outside of this Loki variant's purview, as he was actually from the time of the Battle of New York and these events hadn't happened in his timeline, yet; however, the show addresses this when Mobius, a member of the TVA, shows Loki a distilled film of the most important parts of his life. From this point, Loki picks up the character development from the points in time that he had yet to experience. This move robs the audience of the emotional vulnerability that the MCU's fans

have come to love about Loki. We get one scene as Loki watches the playback reel of his life and grapples with the continued trauma of it during which he barely emotes and then concocts a plan of violent revenge, very reminiscent of the supermasculine counterparts previously described.

After watching his life's highlight reel, Loki picks up all of the character development that we have seen and that he has not yet gained as this variant is from 2012. However, it could be argued that Loki remains closer to his 2012 variation, instead of rapidly gaining his development from watching a short film about him. And while I do disagree with this sentiment, I don't believe it changes my overarching argument about Loki's relationship with his gender, and specifically with supermasculinity. As Loki watches these tragic events unfold, shouldn't he want to stop them? As he sits in the TVA, an organization founded by and centered on time travel, shouldn't he want to save his mother? Why does his immediate reaction go toward a coup of the organization, instead of at least trying to travel to any point where his life seems to go off the rails? And while the overthrowing of the TVA's leadership is arguably to gain control of The Sacred Timeline, Loki's values in these scenes, in this show, have shifted toward the supermasculine. Loki does not show the emotional intelligence necessary to grapple with his grief and want to save his mother and his people. His anger and desire for revenge immediately eclipses the potential of vulnerable emotion. The supermasculine idea of what emotions are acceptable (anger) and what actions can be taken therein (violence) are followed precisely within the course of the show and carried out by Loki. This isn't to say that he doesn't display vulnerability in the show, but that it is considerably less than he does in the movies, and that overall Loki has transitioned into a more supermasculine model of a superbeing.

Further, Loki's masculinization correlates with him being the primary protagonist of the show and the slow degeneration of his villainhood. There exists a long history of associating villainous characters with queer-coded characteristics and appearances, both to disparage queer

identities and to uphold the glorification of the masculine (Epstein and Friedman). And upon this tradition, a system of identification has been built into place regarding the expression of queer identities and their interpreted meaning, particularly in relationship to how the queered villain's opposite, the cishet hero, is perceived by audiences. In this system, the rigid dichotomy of the hero/villain characterizations, then becomes a social paradigm through which heteropatriarchal ideals are associated with goodness and any form of queerness becomes associated with corrupt morals. This allows for queerness and non-conforming gender expression to "draw into question much more than their gender," with things such as corruption and deviancy being so closely linked to queerness (Li-Vollmer and LaPointe 91). Not only must the villain be queered to provide a contrast with the hero, but this queerness is then demonized.

In many of the MCU films, Loki is the primary villain, or at the very least an anti-hero rather than an outright superhero. To display the established hierarchy of heteropatriarchal principles, the heroes of the film—Thor, Iron Man, Hulk, etc.—demonstrate a supermasculine ideal. This supports the prescribed heteropatriarchal framework of society while simultaneously displaying to the audience how the heroes defeat the villains. Loki's defeat is inevitable because Thor is more supermasculine and therefore more heroic, as these concepts have become intertwined with each other in American cinema.

Loki's supermasculine identity has to be changed, however, when he is instead the protagonist. The dynamic of Loki has been adjusted. The audience understands that Loki is no longer associated with (or minimally associated with) the corrupt morality of his past self, so the showrunners and creators decided to separate Loki from the queered aspects of his characterizations, because Loki's queered identity and performance in the previous movies was counterintuitive to the new heroized Loki that the show was trying to present. Loki must be shown to be mostly good and also capable of overcoming the primary antagonist of the show.

Despite the tumultuous defeat of Loki during the show's climax, the creators push his character to supermasculine proportions in an effort to believe that Loki could win, and specifically that Loki could win because he sustains the supermasculine ideal of a hero. In past films, especially the first *Thor* film, Loki fights almost exclusively through deception. This is repeated through the movies, but changes drastically when you get to the show. Loki's magic is taken from him in the very first episode when the TVA prohibits the use of his magic when he is their prisoner. From this point onward, Loki is primarily a melee fighter. Even when he is outside of the TVA and regains his magical prowess, Loki remains a physical fighter. The best example of this is when on the train on Lamnetis-1. Up until this point in the episode, Loki demonstrates his magic and deceptive abilities again and again. He shapeshifts, first into a woman's husband and then into a guard on the train. He uses illusion magic to produce fireworks. And then, when thrust into a physical confrontation, Loki doesn't use his magic. He materializes his two daggers and begins hacking and slashing at his adversaries. Even in the first *Thor* film when we see Loki in a fight with the frost giants on Jotunheim, Loki uses his illusion-based magic to trick the giants into hurting themselves, by either stumbling off cliffs or by attacking their own comrades. This is because, although Loki is there to help, he is not meant to win that fight against the frost giants; Thor is. Therefore, when Loki is the protagonist and the hero of the show, it is understood that he is supposed to emerge victorious, and the writers and showrunners have displayed this by playing on the audience's understanding of the superhero genre to this point, and having Loki perform supermasculinity in ways he simply hasn't before.

Loki's shift toward supermasculinity can be, in part, attributed to the romantic subplot between Loki and Sylvie. The romance between Loki and Sylvie exists in a state of limbo, for the two superbeings are and are not the same person. Sylvie is Loki. She exists as an alternate form of Loki, a twist in the fabric of fate and originally in an alternate thread of reality. She is

also not Loki. She lacks the life experiences that Loki has. She does not share his motivations, his body, his powers, his relationships. Sylvie both is and isn't Loki. In an effort to distinguish the characters from each other and allow for a budding romance between them, Marvel transitioned Loki into having a stronger supermasculine identity. This shift toward the supermasculine, reinforces Loki's identity as cisgendered within the show, and undermines the queer potentiality with his hinted at genderfluidity.

Additionally, I find it unsurprising (and problematic) to find Loki embrace supermasculinity during the section of the MCU when he comes out as bisexual. Queer men are often relegated to pre-defined standards of masculinity, in which traditional masculinity is prioritized and gender non-conforming, transgendered, and feminine identities are then viewed as substandard. Heterosexual people, and specifically straight men, have continued to show less prejudice toward queer men who conform to societal expectations of masculinity over more effeminate queer men (Hunt et al.; Keiller). Queerness and queer acts can then be more easily detached from ideas of deviance given a sufficient adherence to idealizations of masculinity. Queer individuals are often more accepted when they conform to heteronormative notions of gender and sexual identity. And these heteronormative expectations are not isolated outside the queer community, but impact the queer desirability of queer men amongst other queer men. Queer men idealize homonormative¹¹ displays of masculinity, in much the same way that the non-queer community demonizes femininity in queer men. Queer embodiment gets filtered through this homonormative lens, which prioritizes the physically fit and able-bodied as it associates these concepts with desirable masculinity and oppresses effeminate, non-fit, and disabled bodies (Burke; Chow; Elund; Miller and Behm-Morawitz). In both queer and non-queer

¹¹ Homonormativity focuses on a depoliticized queerness that centers on domesticity and capitalistic consumption (Duggan 191). Further it refers to “the abandonment of progressive alliances in favour of conspicuous consumption, gym culture, neocolonial tourism, white male cisgender privileges and other gentrified practices” (Andersson 2996).

spaces, there is a privileging of hegemonically masculine queer men, who are seen as both more desirable and more palatable.

The media largely reflects the heteronormative and homonormative expectations of queer men to perpetuate and perform within traditional masculinity. These queer representations in the media often uphold homonormative ideals, especially those around gendered performances, beauty standards, and relationship expectations (Francis; Yep and Elia). As men position their own masculinity against queer sexual attraction as a demonstrative opposite, men similarly understand masculinity along the axis of femininity and define it through what is not feminine (Kimmel 33; Pascoe 6). In his article exploring gender and race in comic books, Jeffrey Brown extrapolates the idea that masculinity creates this boundary between itself and femininity through misogyny, homophobia and racism.

This myth of idealized masculinity which is still incredibly pervasive remains dependent upon the symbolic split between masculinity and femininity, between the hard male and the soft Other. And in the misogynistic, homophobic, and racist view of this ideology, the despised Other that masculinity defines itself against conventionally includes not just women but also feminized men. (Brown 27)

In this system, hegemonic masculinity is only able to remain in power, and in existence, through the act of oppressing women, queer individuals and other minorities. This tends to showcase itself in the media's portrayal of queer men as two ends of the spectrum, either tolerably masculine or extremely flamboyant and feminine.

Queer masculinity which is portrayed with hegemonic masculinity, and therefore hypermasculinity (and in the superhero genre, supermasculinity), is an unfortunate trend that surrounds the queer community in relation to their representation in cinema that far exceeds the limits of the MCU. It is seen in a variety of movies and television shows, including Jack Twist

and Ennis Del Mar from *Brokeback Mountain*, Rock Hudson from *Hollywood*, Kevin Keller from *Riverdale*, and Connor Walsh from *How to Get Away With Murder*. And Marvel is no stranger to this phenomenon either, due to its first explicitly queer comic book character Northstar becoming masculinized within the comics in exchange for his queer identity (Bolling). And these hypermasculine queer men become the standard depiction of queer masculinities within media. While not every queer individual aligns themselves within this hegemonically masculine mindset, it is a prevalent occurrence within the community and this hypermasculinity persists in both expectation and performance of masculine-presenting queer individuals (Kane; Ravenhill and de Visser). More accurate depictions of queer masculinity would allow for a multiplicity of masculinities, instead of this reduction to a single hegemonic one.

Specifically, Loki begins to collapse into these large societal trends of stereotypical masculine performance during the storyline in which he comes out. He could not exist as a bisexual and gender non-conforming character, existing within a cross-section and multiplication of identities that defied societal standards of cisnormativity and of heteronormativity. Instead, he had to fold into the confines of supermasculinity in exchange for the ability to step out of the closet. Loki played into this tradition of balancing queer-sexual behaviors with rigidly performed supermasculinity, in a way to uphold hegemonically masculine ideals of superiority over femininity and gender non-conforming identities.

In the future, I hope that Loki is more able to challenge these notions of homonormativity, heteronormativity, and cisnormativity. One of Loki's more interesting qualities was his ability to challenge and subvert the supermasculinity which persists throughout most men superheroes within the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Upcoming entries into the Marvel Cinematic Universe can extend gender identities into more diverse types of masculinities and can explore Loki's relationship with gender, through both non-conforming gender expression and

genderfluidity. Although, I understand that Loki within the MCU cannot and should not be equated to his comic book counterpart, I do believe that the inclusion of genderfluidity is an avenue worth pursuing within the movies and shows, and not solely within the comic books. Non-cisgender identities are vastly underrepresented within popular media, and Loki as a character already provides a framework and history with such an identity to make transition to the book screen relatively easy. Loki's genderfluidity would diversify and improve the MCU.

Conclusion

As popular media acts as a governing force for sociological ideas, depictions of Loki throughout comic books and the Marvel Cinematic Universe act as a teaching force about gender and sexuality. In this way, "representation provides evidence for what forms of existence are possible" (Shaw 4). Loki and his subversion of the traditional masculinity displayed in these forms of media demonstrate a possibility of existence outside hegemony. Loki performs in ways that are counter-hegemonic and allows for the queer entry into spaces that have historically been anti-queer.

In all types of media examined in this thesis, Loki begins as a character that is not explicitly queer, but throughout his continuity he becomes an out queer character. Although in each iteration, Loki is not a queer character initially a retroactive look into his characterization reveals a queer potential during all points of his creation. From this point in time, his history seems to provide a landscape for his idle queer identity, which gets shifted into outed queerness upon his coming out.

In comic books, Loki constantly exhibits anti-hegemonic gender expression and identity, even before becoming an out queer character; however, in this expression, his characterization has also depicted several anti-trans stereotypes. In recent years, Loki has become explicitly queer

in the comic books, with increased visibility into queer behaviors and the affirmation of the comic creators. In his blossoming from idle queerness to outed queerness in the comic book world, many of the negative stereotypes associated with Loki have been diminished which has allowed for a more embodied and multi-faceted queerness for the character. A similar trend exists within the Marvel Cinematic Universe, as Loki has historically shown subversive gender performance as compared to other men superbeings. Although he has come out as bisexual in his television show, Loki has since folded into the confines of supermasculinity and promoted both hegemonic masculinity and homonormativity.

It is no secret that the superhero genre has become increasingly diverse in its productions, and future plans for Marvel in particular seem to indicate a continuation of this trend. The superhero genre has always had a reach into the adolescent, teen, and young adult audiences, and kids need to see positive queer representation in the media that they consume (Ayoub and Garretson 1074; Meyer and Wood 444). Positive representations of queer characters is important, as it not only expresses the possibility of multiple existences, but it could also encourage these kids to be more accepting of themselves and others.

Loki's character has always transgressed gender boundaries and as acceptance to the LGBTQ+ community increases, it is good to see the correlation in the superhero genre. Transgender and genderfluid identities are often underrepresented in media, so Loki provides a much-needed space of representation for these identities. The MCU has the opportunity to address the problem of reducing Loki to a standardized masculinity upon the inclusion of his bisexuality, and popular culture more broadly should begin to include more diverse queer men, as there should be room allowed for a multiplicity of queer masculinities. More and more queer readers "have little tolerance for stereotypes and flat, one-dimensional [queer] characters, as they recognize the material and identity stakes at play when GLBT issues surface" (Palmer-Mehta

and Hay 394). Although queerness seems to be evolving in more niche markets, like comic books, more mainstream avenues, like the monolithic Marvel movie franchise, appear to fall into the same hegemonic patterns even as they branch out into increased representation. It is time for these underrepresented communities to have fully-rounded representations.

In a world in which queer works are being rapidly pulled from shelves across the country and anti-queer legislation is being put into place, the explicit queerness of characters in such mass-produced and viewed works as Marvel can be seen as a political statement against such anti-queer movements. I encourage creators of long-standing works, (such as television shows, book series, comic books, movie franchises) to consider taking a look at their characters for those who participate in idle queerness, queer-codedness, or even closetedness, and consider the benefits of making concrete what may have only existed in subtext before. The world is evolving. We have a pressing need for more well-rounded queer characters (such as Loki has the potential to be) as queer erasure seems to be increasing in vivacity and fierceness. I speak from experience as I say that characters such as superheroes can impact people's lives by helping them understand their own gender and sexual identities. The further development and creation of queer characters with diverse identities, backgrounds, personalities, and embodiments allows for a demonstration of identities and a growth of personal possibilities.

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