

Rainbows Have Nothing to Hide:
Representations of Gender and Sexuality in *The Muppet Show* (1976-1981)

By

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ABSTRACT

As an inherently conservative medium, children's television has long been shaped by heteronormative ideals, with queerness either absent or subtly coded in ways that preserve the dominance of traditional gender roles and romantic narratives. While recent shows like *The Owl House* (2020-2023) and *Andi Mack* (2017-2019) have made strides in introducing queer characters to young audiences, such portrayals often remain constrained by censorship or are limited to releases on streaming platforms, restricting their accessibility to larger audiences. In contrast, Jim Henson's *The Muppet Show* (1976-1981) stands as an early example of a queer-positive space within mainstream children's media. By presenting characters who defy conventional gender and romantic norms, the Muppets offer a world where difference is not only accepted but celebrated. Through an analysis of cognitive theory, queer coding, and the cultural context of the 1970s, this research argues that Henson's show provides an invaluable model of inclusivity, fostering empathy and understanding for diverse expressions of gender and sexuality.

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*I dedicate this work to Carrie Mydlak,
a tremendous mother, wife, and party thrower.*

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“I think that television is such a huge influence on children and as an industry we don’t generally face up to that responsibility and I think we need to be a great deal more responsible about what we put in the media.” – Jim Henson

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Children's media from the 2000s and the 2010s seemed to be plagued by heteronormativity, as girls were feminine, boys were masculine, and the only appropriate romantic formation was between man and woman. The few shows that dared to present queerness on screen, such as *Good Luck Charlie* (2010–2014), only introduced queer characters when the network had scrapped the show (Bacardi), while other shows, like *Wizards of Waverly Place* (2007–2012), faced threats of cancellation if they pursued plots involving queer love stories (Galiz-Rowe). In this particular case, unable to explicitly state that the main character, Alex and her new friend Stevie were romantically involved, the relationship between the two became oddly charged as their interactions were more comparable to the amorous relationships Alex had previously had with male characters Dean and Mason than with her relations with other female friends. In a measure to reaffirm the heteronormativity of *Waverly Place*, the show had to distance the pair forcefully by revealing that Stevie was a villain, forcing Alex to overthrow the forming wizard revolution Stevie had begun ("The Good, the Bad, and the Alex.")

While contemporary efforts have seen the introduction of queer characters in shows like *Andi Mack* (2017–2019), *Kipo and the Age of the Wonderbeasts* (2020), and *The Owl House* (2020–2023), these representations are still often short-lived or restricted to private streaming services, making them less accessible to diverse young audiences. Showrunners for children's networks also receive major notes regarding the inclusion of queer identities in their programs, with the Disney Channel often coming under fire for demanding creators stay away from explicitly queer narratives. Showrunner Alex Hirsh even claimed in a tweet, post the completion of his animated series *Gravity Falls* (2012–2016), that the curation of the happiest

place on earth meant that only the straightest representations could make their way to screens, while queer characters could, at best, only be implied (O'Brien 2).

As someone who was able to see parts of their identity represented in culturally and ethnically diverse characters like Rocky Blue in *Shake It Up* (2010–2013) and Chyna Parks in *A.N.T. Farm* (2011–2014), it is disheartening to see that such vital representations of queerness continue to be deliberately kept off children's screens, not only disallowing young queer audiences from feeling represented but also removing these representations from audiences who rarely get to engage with positive representations of queer identities, subconsciously reinforcing the heteronormative belief that queerness is odd, unnatural and dangerous (Li-Vollmer and LaPointe 90). However, it should be noted that this invisibility of queerness is not solely a fault of contemporary children's television, as representations of queerness have often been reserved for adult television due to the conservative argument that presenting queerness in children's media is harmful, as it sexualizes children and the media they consume (Reitsma 129). This argument further suggests that queer narratives and characters are too mature a subject for young audiences to grapple with, claiming that introducing othered identities confuses their developing minds.

However, cognitive theory studies suggest that children utilize television as a socializing space, learning morals, values, and social etiquette, along with appropriate behaviours for identity expression through the programs they consume (Kelam and Stimac 3; Reinhard and Olson 5). Thus, by removing queer narratives, children are not provided with a vital space for developing empathy and tolerance towards those who engage in non-heteronormative representations of gender and sexuality, which over time can develop into a condemnation and fear of these othered identities (Kelam and Stimac 5).

Queer coding, both objective and subjective, has thus come to be vital in engaging with queer representations as it allows queer audiences to see themselves within popular characters and narratives without the content being flagged by conservative censorship. One franchise in particular that seems to be frequently linked to 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals is *The Muppets*, which presents a positive view of life through the way the characters care for and respect each other (Henson 91).

Broadcasted in 1976, *The Muppet Show* was intended to be a comedy variety show that addressed both adult and child audiences, starring felt-faced characters like Kermit the Frog, Fozzie Bear and Miss Piggy who performed in the fictional Muppet Theatre to a relatively sparse crowd. Using the camera as a puppet stage, the viewer was invited in as an audience member, experiencing non-traditional theatre performances where pigs sang, bears told jokes, and “whatevers” completed death-defying stunts. While the familiar Muppet form, along with the odd antics of the theatre team, appealed to young audiences who were familiar with *Sesame Street* (1969-), there was a seepage of adult content that Henson and his team were adamant about adding to the program to make puppetry more entertaining and philosophical to teens and adults (Foy and Dale 2). Based on the political turbulence of the 1960s and 70s, the Muppet characters became representations of the changing views regarding gender and sexuality, presenting binary-breaking characterizations that Henson refused to water down (Henson 5). However, despite its broad audience appeal, the show is often categorized as solely for children, presenting an interesting lack of censorship that is customary for children's shows.

Built on the basis that television could be used as a positive influence on both children and adults (Henson 108), this lack of censorship allowed the Muppets to present alternative expressions of gender and sexuality positively, countering the more prominent use of coding in

children's media to vilify and condemn otherness. Not only did this allow young queer audiences to find representations of themselves on screen, but it also allowed them to engage with diverse representations that are vital in their construction of acceptable identity expressions (Mahesh 47).

While much can be said about the space of tolerance and inclusivity that the Muppets space has created for marginalized groups, this research focuses on Henson's show as one of the few spaces for positive representations of queerness in children's media through its engagement with non-traditional representations of gender and sexuality, which queered the characters through their consistent refusal to adhere to heteronormative standards of femininity and masculinity. In other words, Henson's *The Muppet Show* serves as a rare queer-positive space on television that allows for the development of empathy for the queered other and the queered self by presenting a space where queer identities are not only the majority, but also respected, appreciated and loved.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

While scholarship more generally regarding the analysis of Henson's work has been published in anthologies like *Kermit Culture: Critical Perspectives on Jim Henson's Muppets*, *Jim Henson and Philosophy: Imagination and the Magic of Mayhem* and *The Wider Worlds of Jim Henson*, this research distinguishes itself by more heavily focusing on the positive constructions of queerness available in Henson's Muppets, an argument that has, to date, only been briefly alluded to in texts like Gideon Haberkorn's "The Muppets as a Metaphor for the Self", Maryanne Fisher and Anthony Cox's "The Uniquely Strong but Feminine Miss Piggy" and Timothy M. Dale's "Muppets, Monsters, and Misfits." This review consists of three parts and will examine the literature available on the main approaches towards building positive representations of queerness in children's media to foster the formation of empathy within the

young viewer. The first focuses on the use of puppetry throughout the 1960s and 70s, more specifically, political puppetry that presented alternative utopic worlds where peace was assumed rather than wished for, relating to Henson's formation of the Muppet Theatre. The second focuses on children's development of tolerance, empathy and understanding of the self through media consumption, discussing how heteronormativity is constantly presented as the standard and that diversity in gender and sexuality can aid in fostering compassion for othered identities. Finally, the third looks more specifically at queer representations within visual media, particularly how queerness has often been coded within film and television and how it is incorporated into children's media.

Puppetry as Political Communication

Puppetry has long served as a representational space through its near-uncanny storytelling that conveys messages through movement, colour, texture and language. As Berntsen notes in their article "The Muppetry of Nightmares: Figures of Fear, Danger and Terror in The Cosby Show, Chappelle's Show and Saturday Night Live", the malleability of the puppet form comes to stand in for the human subject, individually or communally, in a way that facilitates universal communication regarding issues that plague the human experience (208). While Berntsen's article more directly focuses on how Muppets, and their puppet parodies, have been used to create nightmarish landscapes that reflect on human mortality and the dangers of drug abuse, more generally speaking, puppets have long served as messengers within the cultural forum. During the Renaissance, for example, after the church banned the performance of religious plays, wooden puppets began to replace human actors, directly standing in for the human subject. Puppets have also been used to replicate figures, such as religious deities and governmental authorities, reflecting and commenting on social and political issues that human

actors were often unable to engage with directly due to censorship rules from the state and the church (Blumenthal 15).

"Puppets are inveterate political animals", writes Blumenthal, "and like many politicians, they can play on both sides of the fence" (163). Both Bohlmeier and Blumenthal discuss how governments have utilized the puppet form as a propaganda tool to uphold political regimes and ideals. One of the most well-known instances of puppetry born of governmental control comes from the Reichsinstitut für Puppenspiel, a puppetry institute founded by the German National Socialist organizations Hitlerjugend and Kraft durch Freude, which aimed to promote the glorification of the Aryan "race" and the Nazi regime through politically charged puppet shows. As the Second World War commenced, this institute was shoved aside and abandoned by the regime. However, it had made a prominent impact on puppetry throughout Germany, as many puppets were reconstructed to fit the model of those produced for the organization, removing any unwanted Jewish attributes (Blumenthal 163; Bohlmeier). Communist regimes throughout Russia and China also took to puppetry as a tool for indoctrination, though in the 1970s, China destroyed these puppets (Blumenthal 164).

These kinds of political puppets, however, are considered to be the minority, as it is far more common for puppets to become interlaced with counter-cultural movements that aim to mock, satirize and critique government and religious authorities. One of the earliest examples of these counter-cultural puppet shows is the Punch show, which originated in England around 1662. While other European countries adopted their own versions of the Punch show, the format was relatively familiar among them all, as the mischievous Mr. Punch enacted physical violence against the secondary character in the performance. During moments of political unrest, the secondary characters take the form of authority figures such as Hitler, British prime ministers

and American lawmakers, whom Mr. Punch beats the snot out of with a large stick (Speaight and Felix). While Mr. Punch is a more overt representation of political puppetry, leaving little for the audience to misinterpret as he flogs authority figures, other political puppetry forms have utilized the puppet's unique communication skills to form more thought-provoking acts.

Radical Puppets

As a political art form, radical puppets of the 1960s and 70s aimed to engage audiences in conversations regarding the economic, governmental, and social forces at work in North America. Asher suggests that this art form was built upon the puppet's communicative abilities, allowing them to become salient vehicles of social and political communication that generated alternative views of life that challenged the status quo (6). While historical compilations such as *The New Radical Theatre Notebook* by Arthur Sainer and *Restaging the Sixties: Radical Theatres and Their Legacies*, edited by James Martin Harding and Cindy Rosenthal, discuss an array of theatre and puppetry companies that involved themselves in anti-war, anti-consumerist, and anti-bourgeois movements during this era, it is Peter Schumann's Bread and Puppet Theatre that stands out amongst the research, as one of the most highly praised and one of the few ongoing counter-cultural theatre companies.

John Bell, a former member of the company and a frequent article writer on its legacy, notes how the company's rejection of the superstructures of New York City's Broadway and Off-Broadway culture immediately defined the unique, expressionist approach of Schumann's puppetry, which combined high ideas for art with the lowest methods of execution. Taking inspiration from German expressionism, the company's puppets defied the rules of more commercial puppetry, aiming to create rough and deceptively simple builds through cardboard, papier-mâché, and other material waste found throughout New York City. Bell notes that

Schumann considered the company's puppets to be "cheap art", pieces of inexpensive and unstructured creativity that could still be considered good art, or high art, through their ability to communicate with audiences ("Bread and Puppet" 378).

Alternative Space

Bell's article "Something Beautiful and Powerful: Politics, Art and Bread and Puppet Theatre" is relatively dismissive of commercial puppetry, often claiming that Schumann's street puppetry was engaging with audiences in a more culturally significant way than commercial puppetry was through its experimentation with television as a puppet stage (35). However, many of the transitions that the radical puppet theatre made aligned very closely to the choices commercial puppeteer Jim Henson was making throughout the 1960s and 70s, including, but not limited to, the move away from the governmental hub of New York City.

In the mid-1970s, a significant movement within radical theatres transformed their narratives, shifting from downtrodden warnings about the effects of war and consumerism to lighter conceptualizations of worlds born from the counter-culture. Orenstein notes that these worlds pointed to the peace that could exist, but is just out of reach, in hopes of inspiring audiences to continue reaching for this idealized version of the world by holding their governments accountable for their part in the Vietnam War and capitalism (184). The San Francisco Mime Troupe utilized this narrative format by creating large, mobile, colourful sets to act as their peaceful landscapes. However, Bread and Puppet did not engage in these forms of narrative until they had moved to Vermont, Bell suggesting that the open landscapes inspired the company's change ("Something Beautiful and Powerful" 36). Henson made a similar move during the 1970s, relocating his Muppets from New York City to England in search of a space that would truly allow his vision of comedy variety puppet entertainment to thrive.

Throughout the 1970s, Henson's Muppets struggled to find a place in our world. While *Sesame Street* (1969-) provided a supportive space for young Muppets who, like their audience, were determined to learn basic literacy skills and become global citizens, Henson's Muppets existed in an odd space that was too edgy for children's television but too sweet for adult audiences. Trying his hand at adult entertainment, Henson appeared on the first season of the counter-cultural live variety program *Saturday Night Live* (1976-), using lizard-like Muppets to deliver scripts written by the show's staff (Morrison 229). However, these skits often fell flat, as not only was it uncomfortable to watch the Muppets discuss sex and drugs (Hill and Weingrad 143-144), but the disconnect between writers and performers made these discussions only engaging on the surface, lacking any deeper resonance with audience members (Berntsen 210). To make the Muppets work, they needed an entirely new space, a place that they could conquer and reimagine into a self-sustaining counter-cultural landscape.

This space took the shape of a traditional theatre, an interesting choice as Orenstein notes that one of the goals of many radical theatres during the 60s and 70s was to counter the theatre by moving outdoors, as the theatre space had been deemed a place of entertainment only for the wealthy and well-educated (179). Henson, however, took his Muppets back into this space, allowing the characters to counter the traditional rigid boundaries of the theatre through their genre-defying performances, and used the television puppet stage as a way to bring audiences into the reimagined space where monsters, creatures, animals, and human guest stars could authentically be themselves.

The Role of Media in Identity Formation

"Seeing diversity in the public sphere is incredibly important for the acceptance and development of healthy attitudes about oneself for those who are part of the underrepresented

and marginalized groups" (47) writes Madhumia Mashesh in her article "Diverse Bodies: A Queer History of the Representation and Self-Representation of Children in Popular Media." She develops her point by bringing in references from American author bell hooks and academic Shawna Hudson, discussing how representation in media can determine how individuals or groups are understood by others, pointing specifically to representations of blackness and how the stereotypical representations of black women can reflect and distort the way others see them, and how they see themselves. Pulling in work from Alan Prout and Allison James, Mashesh links this ability for media to reflect and distort the construction of individual and community identity to how children come to understand their emerging identities and relationships, calling for media to engage in the normalization of the variance of bodies, cultures and experiences to help children develop a consciousness of the self (47-48).

Heteronormativity in Children's Programming

CarrieLynn Reinhard and Christopher Olson share a similar sentiment regarding children's media in *Heroes, Heroines, and Everything in Between*, describing it as a vital socializer that teaches young audiences morals and models of behaviour that are desirable and normalized within their social surroundings (5). The authors focus their introductory chapter on models of stereotypical traditional sex roles and the normalcy of heterosexual relationships within children's films, picture books and television programs, suggesting that within a North American context, binary representations of gender and sexuality are the "normal" and "appropriate" conditions of identity expression and relationship formation.

Content analyses of children's media point to the frequency with which children are repeatedly exposed to these binary roles. In Abigail Walsh and Campbell Leaper's "A Content Analysis of Gender Representations in Preschool Children's Television," for example, the

authors point to contemporary cognitive theories of development regarding how children interpret televisual information to form an understanding of gender categories. Building off of prior content analyses like Hunting, Grumbeing, and Cahill's "Watch and Learn: Gendered Discrepancies in Educational Messages on Television Channels Targeted at Boys versus Girls," Leaper, Breed and Pearlman's "Variations in the Gender-Stereotyped Content of Children's Television Cartoons Across Genres," and Thompson and Zerbinos' "Gender Roles in Animated Cartoons: Has the Picture Changed in 20 Years?", Walsh and Leaper's work focuses on North American content targeted towards preschool aged children, believing that binary models of gender present themselves early on in children's media, turning television into "one of the most pervasive influences on the development of gender stereotypes" (3).

In their hypothesis, they suggest that programming on Disney Jr., Nick Jr., and PBS draws divides between appropriate behaviour for boys and girls via the activities the characters engage in, their outward appearance and their attributes. In the context of children's media, girls are considered to be talkative and gossipy, pursuers of artistic activities such as singing and dancing due to their grace and beauty and are expected to take on the role of caregiver either as a mother or through their supportive nature. By contrast, though boys take up more screentime, they are considered to be quieter, or at least their conversations are more of "value" compared to those of female characters. They are also expected to pursue physical activities and are often more aggressive or simply confident in the way they speak or act (Walsh and Leaper 4-7).

These social constructions of gender roles harken back to the definitions of femininity and masculinity provided by Sandra Bem, Lina Ricciardelli and Robert Williams, all of whom Maryanne Fisher and Anthony Cox draw from in their essay "The Uniquely Strong but Feminine Miss Piggy." "Femininity," writes Fisher and Cox, "[is] composed of positive traits such as

patience, sensitivity, devotion, responsibility, and appreciation, and negative traits such as timidity, weakness, need for approval, dependence, and nervousness, [while] [m]asculinity [is] composed of positive values such as strength, confidence, firmness, forcefulness, and feeling carefree, and negative values like aggressiveness, bossiness, sarcasm, rudeness and feeling superior" (185).

The Need for Diverse and Inclusive Representations

As Alan Prout notes, children take these models of gender and actively apprehend and use them to generate an understanding of themselves and their peers (Mashesh 47-48), however, this often limits their willingness to experiment with their identity as they resist wearing specific colours or participating in certain activities in favour of maintaining the gender roles they encounter early in their development. This also becomes a problem when children then encounter others who do not abide by these binary roles, as it fosters the development of moral condemnation and fear of this otherness they have never encountered (Kelam and Stimac 5). Featuring diverse identities and relationships on screen allows children to broaden their understanding of LGBTQ+ identities, creating not only a media space that will enable children to empathize with queer members of their communities but also foster resilience through representation.

Queer-Coding and Performativity

Edited by professors Steven Seidman, Nancy Fischer, and the late Chet Meeks, *Introducing the New Sexuality Studies* features seventy-seven articles that discuss how political, religious and social powers have formed a fundamental understanding of sexuality and gender that favours heteronormativity and adheres to the privilege of heterosexual, cisgender white men. While these essays cover a variety of relevant subjects, such as the femininization of romantic

love, gay rights and feminist movements of the 1970s and the formation of families outside of heteronormative reproduction, there are also brief discussions regarding media representations of queerness, both through how it can champion images of gays and lesbians, and how it promotes queer stereotypes (Seidman, et al. 29) allowing media to be considered a social institution that regulates the way sexuality and gender is presented to audiences (Seidman, et al. 136).

While books more centrally focused on television like Ron Becker's *Gay TV and Straight America*, Samuel A. Chambers' *The Queer Politics of Television* and Glyn Davis and Gary Needham's *Queer TV: Theories, Histories, Politics* were consulted in the formation of this section, these texts were often limited to television produced after the 1990s, making it essential to consult books that dealt with film analysis from the 1960s and 1970s which offered more information regarding the general timeline that overlapped with the changing feminist and queer political climate that was influencing television's engagement with gender and sexuality.

Although the research on queer-coding and gender performativity is extensive, one primary resource that informs this section is American LGBT activist and film historian Vito Russo's book *The Celluloid Closet*. First published in 1981, this book examines the representations of gay and lesbian characters throughout American film history, criticizing Hollywood for continually representing homosexuality as an inferior state of existence compared to heteronormativity. Russo builds their argument through discussions of the feminization of gays, the masculinization of lesbians, and the victimization and villainization of queerness, along with discussions of how queer characters have long been coded through these problematic, stereotypical representations, especially during times of increased invisibility (i.e. the era of the Hayes Code). Two chapters that particularly stick out are "Frightening the Horses" and "Struggle," which focus more heavily on representations of queerness throughout the 1960s and

70s. These representations were more implicit in their depictions, often allowing the characters to be "out" to the audience. However, Russo notes that these films nonetheless engage with queer stereotypes that led to many characters still taking on the role of criminals, punching bags, victims of self-hatred, and promiscuous sexual deviants (156).

These representations are not too dissimilar from those represented in children's media, as articles like Meredith Li-Vollmer and Mark E. LaPointe's "Gender Transgression and Villainy in Animated Film" point to the queering of villains like Cruella, Jafar and Ursula, as a means to subconsciously inform children to beware of those that engage in gender and sexual deviance (104). Connecting back to the previous section, by presenting queerness negatively, children's media encourages the dismissal and condemnation of queerness. It is thus important to find media forms that provide counter-narratives that humanize and empathize with queer communities so that young audiences can develop a positive understanding of queer identities.

CHAPTER THREE: REPRESENTATIONS OF FEMININITY

“Cause I’m a woman, W O M A N.

I’ll say it again. Cause I’m a woman, W O P I G.

That’s All.”- Miss Piggy and Raquel Welch

The 1960s brought a resurgence to the feminist movement, now known as the second wave of feminism, which focused on issues of equality and discrimination. There was a significant focus on women's roles in the workforce, as many women began choosing career paths away from the home. Campaigns focused on creating equality within the workforce by giving women the same pay as men, along with providing women access to education and job opportunities that were frequently reserved for men. Other issues feminist groups campaigned for included reproductive rights, which were crucial for providing women with autonomy and

control over their bodies, along with raising awareness around domestic violence and sexual assault, advocating for further legal protections and support for survivors. Overall, the movement aimed to counter the traditional gender roles and expectations of women throughout the 1960s to 80s, recognizing women as more than homemakers and mothers through the amplification of their social, monetary and physical autonomy.

Feminists brought their campaigns from street demonstrations to broader forums during the 1970s with television broadcasts such as *In Her Own Right* (1970), *Woman Alive* (1974) and *Woman* (1972-1977), focusing on the feminist movement's efforts through "panel discussions, filmed reports, and on-set interviews with prominent writers, artists and activists" (Kelley). Women were not only front facing in these broadcasts, but were also employed behind the scenes as producers, camera operators and writers, a move that was considered imperative to gaining control over how women were represented within the media. American Archive of Public Broadcasting media historian and curator, Michelle Kelley, further notes in her article "Feminism on the Air: Women and Public Broadcasting in the 1970s" that these broadcasts aimed to reconstruct ideas surrounding what constituted women's television, allowing for more critically and politically charged discussions regarding women's rights and representations than what had previously been available through traditionally feminine soap opera, cooking and game show programs.

At the same time, the ideals of the second-wave feminist movement had begun to be reflected in television programming throughout North America in sitcoms and drama series like *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970-1977) and *Police Woman* (1974-1978). The former, as Harley Steward notes in their research paper "Mary Tyler Moore & Her Role in the Feminist Movement," is considered to be one of the first female-dominated sitcoms, as main characters

Mary, Rhoda, and Phyllis embody feminist values regarding workplace equality and women's sexuality. Mary, in particular, exemplified the values of the movement through her openness in dating and her focus on her career, countering the traditional view that women should marry young to devote their lives to homemaking (Steward 3-5). *Police Woman* similarly focused on Sergeant "Pepper" Anderson and her career as a female undercover police officer. Though some have criticized the show for the sexualization of the detective, as she often dresses "skimpier" in her undercover roles, it ultimately was a show that inspired women to take on more dangerous, traditionally male work like policing. Stilwell, former US Air Force combat photographer and current writer with degrees in television and film, and journalism, notes in his 2022 article for *Coffee or Die Magazine* that during the show's airing, there was a dramatic increase in women applying to the police force, raising the number of female police officers from 1.4% in 1971 to 5% by 1980, showing that representation in media can affect the way people come to understand their place within the workforce.

Feminism in Children's Media

Second-wave feminism prompted discussions surrounding the sexism of children's films, books and television, with criticism stating that existing children's media pushed stereotypical representations of femininity and needed to be replaced with more inclusive, diverse narratives. This prompted the release of series like *Elektra Woman and Dyna Girl* (1976), *Jana of the Jungle* (1978-1979), *Josie and the Pussycats* (1970-1972) and *Spider-Woman* (1979-1980), which pushed female characters into the central role as superheroes, warriors and rock stars. While these shows rarely made it past a year on air, due to combined factors such as censorship, copyright issues, or simply the end of the production contract, the fact that these shows highlighted female autonomy is not lost in the potential factors that led to their cancellation or

failed renewal. Going further, the later release dates of many of these programs, bordering on the end of the 70s, coincided with what the National Women's History Museum notes as the decline of the movement, as feminist sub-groups formed conflicting ideas primarily concerning women's sexuality. By the 1980s, the second wave lost its steam and would not be reinvigorated until the 1990s.

Muppet Femininity

In 1962, Jim Henson and Jerry Juhl wrote and shot *The Tales of the Tinkerdee*, a test pilot for a potential new fairytale-inspired program starring Henson's Kermit the Frog, along with new Muppet characters like King Goshposh and the Prime Minister. Two female characters took centre stage in this unaired pilot, as the narrative focuses on the preparations for Princess Gwendolinda's birthday, an event that the witch, Taminella Grinderdall, crashes in an attempt to steal the presents. While this show was never picked up by networks, even in its simplified 1964 *The Land of the Tinkerdee* format, the episode presents two contrasting forms of femininity that Henson's characters would continually rely on throughout the 1970s.

Princess Gwendolinda is a relatively small Muppet, decorated with a flowing gown, bouncy curly hair attached to a tiara, and long-lashed plastic eyes. She is soft spoken and kind, even going out of her way to be kind to Taminella's henchman, Charlie, when she spots him outside the castle (*The Tales of the Tinkerdee*, 17:10-17:31). An early version of Kermit acts as a narrative minstrel, further informing audiences about the princess's renowned beauty and kind nature through the song he has prepared for the pilots opening (*The Tales of the Tinkerdee*, 01:02-01:34). She is, in short, the loveliest woman in the entire kingdom, who contrasts the vile and wicked nature of Taminella. Through her beauty and kindness, the princess becomes a marker of soft femininity, which I define here as relating to the ideas that femininity lies

within upholding stereotypical beauty standards, along with harbouring the sweet, caring disposition that is often associated with the figures of mothers and wives. This category of femininity relies on the stereotypical concepts of women generated through popular media narratives, where they are sensitive, patient, weak, dependent, and devoted (Fisher and Cox 185), the most common depiction of femininity throughout children's media.

This soft femininity is extended into *The Muppet Show* through female-presenting Muppet characters like Miss Mousey, Mildred and Wanda, all of whom are highly feminized through their outward appearance and their amorous exchanges with their male-presenting co-stars. Beginning with Miss Mousey, who is constantly seen in her bonnet and apron, she is consistently represented as a soft-spoken, feminized object of affection. Making her debut in *The Muppets Valentine Show* (1974) as the apple of both Kermit the Frog and Big Mouse's eyes, she is fought over throughout a charming love song before being scooped up by Droop on his motorcycle (05:19-07:57). Though she does not make substantial appearances after this performance, she does appear twice more as an object of affection for Kermit in season two and Rowlf the Dog in season three. Similarly, Mildred is also introduced in the Valentine's special, though more information is provided regarding her character as she has tea with Mia Farrow (*The Muppets Valentine Show*, 08:25-10:33). The magenta, beak-nosed Muppet is not only highly educated, but also is mournful over the lack of love in her life and is deeply interested in aiding the pregnant guest star feel comfortable within the temporary Muppet space. While Mildred did not have a specific role within the theatre as the Muppets moved into their permanent space in 1976, she was often featured within the ballroom sketches, exchanging odd, amorous small talk with George the Janitor. Wanda, one half of Sam the Eagle's wholesome and decent singing duo, is perhaps more recognizable than Miss Mousey and Mildred, and

could possibly be considered the most traditional woman within the Muppet Theatre. Her wardrobe comprises several bonnets and opera gowns, and she is constantly with her mate, Wayne as they sing for their joint theatre performance. Sam the Eagle, the most conservative member of the Muppet group, clearly favours Wanda as she lacks any edge, firmly steering away from any characterization that could be masculinized, like aggression, strength, or firmness (Fisher and Cox 185), instead leaving Wayne and Sam to stand up for the duo as they are continually cut from the program.

Many of the female guest stars who visited the Muppet Theatre also embodied this softer, more traditional categorization of femininity, especially those who came from dancing and singing backgrounds. Continuing with *The Muppets Valentine Show*, guest star Mia Farrow kicks off this representation of femininity not only through her overly pink wardrobe and sets, but also through the focus on her pregnancy, which, as noted previously, Mildred becomes particularly interested in. The first episode of *The Muppet Show* further focuses on the femininity of guest star Juliet Prowse, who is continually referred to by the Muppet crew as a beautiful, lovely dancer, which is only amplified through her ballet routine, where her spins and turns are accentuated by draping pink fabric on her leotard (“Juliet Prowse”, 07:09-09:55).

By contrast, hard femininity, which I define here as femininity interlaced with traditionally male traits such as confidence, aggression, strength and firmness (Fisher and Cox 185), which was born out of the feminist movement, also prevails within *The Muppet Show*. This categorization of femininity relates to Russo's ideas regarding the "tomboy" and how often queer female characters took on more masculine-leaning traits, distinguishing themselves from straight women (4-5).

Returning to *The Tales of the Tinkerdee*, Taminella's Muppet form is about twice the size of the princess's and is largely hidden under a dark robe that covers all but her face and her hands. Dark, sunken eyes and a large, pointy snaggle tooth decorate her dreadful face, making her ugly to most of the Muppet characters, as well as the audience. Even when she disguises herself as the princess during her efforts to rob the castle, the King and the Prime Minister struggle to find compliments for her, suggesting that she looks ill and unkempt, perhaps the worst the princess has ever looked (*The Tales of the Tinkerdee*, 14:22-15:06). This, however, does not stop Taminella from holding pride in her appearance, a deep confidence radiating within her. As a hard, feminine Muppet, Taminella harbours physical strength, confidence, and this air of bossiness and aggression commonly associated with male categorizations of representation (Fisher and Cox 185), distinguishing her from the soft, feminine princess.

While hard feminized characters can be difficult to find within children's media in particular, the Muppets did not shy away from this conceptualization of femininity, allowing characters like Lydia the Pig and Zondra to embody the 1970s expansion of women's roles. Perhaps the most notable performances of hard femininity come from season one episodes four and five, starring Ruth Buzzi and Rita Moreno, respectively. In both of these episodes, the female guest star approaches tall, male-presenting Muppets to dance. In Ruth Buzzi's case, she continually attempts to dance with Sweetums. As he refuses her more gentle advances, she begins to jump on him, taking the role of the aggressive pursuer in their amorous exchange ("Ruth Buzzi", 09:00-11:52). Similarly, Rita Moreno overpowers her stereotypical French dance partner, lifting him and throwing him about when he upsets her, exhibiting hyperbolic levels of strength ("Rita Moreno", 01:50-04:51).

Regardless of whether the guest stars took on these more aggressive or sweet characterizations of femininity, they were all admired by the Muppet cast, and neither representation became more favoured than the other, as throughout the show, there continues to be a mix, validating all forms of femininity within the Muppets' space. What does become interesting, though, is that while there are not many female Muppet stars, a number of them harboured both characterizations of femininity, often leaning toward the soft femininity categorization until they are annoyed or challenged by their fellow Muppets.

This is perhaps best represented by Miss Piggy, who audiences have come to know for her diva attitude, karate chops, and deep attraction to her on-and-off-again amphibious lover, Kermit the Frog. Interestingly, when she was initially introduced on the *Herb Alpert & The Tijuana Brass* television special in 1974, she had yet to find the balance between her soft and hard feminine traits, being presented more so as an emerging singer with a sweet personality, a beautiful face, an attraction to men and an awful singing voice (27:00-29:03). Early renditions of Piggy continued to characterize her persona through her soft, feminine qualities and her voice, performed initially by Jerry Nelson and Fran Brill, was much higher and, for lack of better words, softer. However, when Frank Oz took over as both her primary puppeteer and voice, her character was pushed to overperform, as Oz knew this was Henson's preference for making a scene truly comedic (Finch 39). Under his wing, not only did Piggy's voice deepen, but she also began to exhibit more masculine traits throughout her performance, particularly when characters insulted her or harmed her lover. This is not to say that she lost her femininity, however, as she continued to pursue stardom through singing, acting, and modelling, and consistently appeared in high glam during her time at the Muppet Theatre. In fact, Piggy is perhaps the most hyper feminine Muppet to exist, which only amplifies her masculine qualities. Her contemporary

hybrid femininity is best paralleled with Candice Bergen's performance in the most overtly feminist sketch in *The Muppet Show* where after she is asked to perform "women's work" like cleaning and cooking by a lazing Muppet, she goes to the next room to change out of her bonnet and apron and into jeans and a shirt decorated with the women's gender symbol. She then shoots the door down with the gun that hangs atop the fireplace, her golden curls swaying from the recoil as she frees herself from the repressive space ("Candice Bergen", 05:27-07:32).

CHAPTER FOUR: REPRESENTATIONS OF MASCULINITY

"When green is all there is to be,

It could make you wonder why.

But why wonder? Why wonder?

I'm green, it'll do fine. It's beautiful.

And I think it's what I want to be"- Kermit the Frog

Much like contemporary media, masculine characters dominated narratives throughout the 1970s. Patriarchs, superheroes, soldiers, adventure seekers, and policemen became the central figures in sitcoms like *The Partridge Family* (1970-1974), *Starsky and Hutch* (1975-1979), and *The Incredible Hulk* (1977-1982). At the same time, television catered to male audiences through programs like *Wonder Woman* (1975-1979), *Three's Company* (1976-1984) and *Charlie's Angels* (1976-1981), in a genre defined as "jiggle television" which used the sexuality of female performers to engage male audienceship.

While some shows like *All in the Family* (1971-1979) explored feminist concepts by comparing older traditional male viewpoints to the emerging ideologies of the younger generation, there was very little room for gender subversion within male representations on television unless it was done under the guise of comedy. In other words, while female characters

in the 70s began to make room for themselves in traditionally male spaces, male characters hardly found themselves in women's spaces unless they were being made fun of, a concept that harkens back to the "sissy" characters that emerged in the 1930s. According to Russo, feminized masculinities were deemed unnatural both by traditionalists and feminists, with the latter hoping to raise their sons with feminist values but still wanting them to act like "men" (63). As a result, masculine characters were continually defined through their strength, aggression, and confidence, and often took the center stage throughout not just adult television, but children's television as well.

Masculinity in *The Muppet Show*

Though Jim Henson's first show *Sam and Friends* (1955-1961) has limited available episodes due to its live broadcast format, books like Craig Shemin's *Sam and Friends: The Story of Jim Henson's First Television Show* and Karen Falk's *Jim Henson's Imagination Illustrated* attempt to reconstruct the history of the program, so it does not become a lost piece of Henson's legacy. Starring recurring characters like Sam, Harry the Hipster, and an early Kermit the Frog, the show was primarily focused on male Muppets. While Shemin notes that there are three female characters that emerged in the program (47-53), the proof of their existence is incredibly rare, even more so than their male counterparts as they only featured as filler characters. This, however, did not mean that femininity had been stripped away from the show entirely, as many of the male Muppets would perform drag in order to stand in for female roles, primarily during lip-syncing sketches. Kermit, who became known under the drag name Kermina, was the most frequent lip-syncing performer and even took their talents to the *Ed Sullivan Show* in 1967 and again in 1968, both times performing to "I've Grown Accustomed to Your Face".

Taking on these more feminized roles allowed the *Sam and Friend* characters to begin experimenting with more complex iterations of masculinity that countered the popular depictions of men within television. Beyond these rugged, hard masculinities, the *Sam and Friends* characters embraced a softer masculinity that had often solely been reserved for stereotypical representations of queer men, and as Henson turned his attention to *The Muppet Show*, it was these softer masculinities that overtook the Muppet Theatre, marking hard masculinity as a rarity within the alternative space. Dom DeLuise is one of the chief examples of soft masculinity within the Muppet space, as during his episode he engages in a catty exchange with Miss Piggy regarding her fanmail and flower deliveries, finding it ridiculous that during HIS episode that someone would bother to send gifts to a pig (“Dom DeLuise”, 09:13-11:25). But what separates these representations of soft masculinity from popular narratives is that the sissy is not inherently more humorous than the traditional male figure, which can be seen in the how rare appearance from hard masculine figures like Sylvester Stallone and Christopher Reeve engage in humorous displays of strength that lead to them breaking items in their dressing rooms (“Christopher Reeve”, 16:31-17:20) and throwing a lion around a colosseum (“Sylvester Stallone” 05:13-08:26).

Oddly, the most problematic version of masculinity is represented in Link Hogthrob, who, like Piggy, is a semi-humanized pig puppet who stars alongside the diva in the Pigs in Space sketch. He has a habit of approaching the more traditionally masculine guest stars, as he believes he will find a sort of brotherhood amongst them, but they don't seem all that interested in befriending him and are often happy to make fun of him. As a problematic masculine figure, who often undermines Piggy simply due to her femininity, Link Hogthrob makes very few appearances in the show. In fact, he is one of the few aggressively masculine Muppets that are

allowed a space within the theatre, as other characters like J.P. Grosse and Fleet Scribber were entirely written off as they were deemed too abrasive for the Muppet Theatre (Finch 41).

CHAPTER FIVE: NONBINARY REPRESENTATIONS

"Now I don't have a coat of silk, but still, I have the sky.

Now I don't have a lady, but there goes a butterfly.

Now I don't have a house of stone, but I can see the sea.

Now, most of all, I know that I am happy to be me.

I'm happy to be me." – Gonzo the Great

As an umbrella term that describes gender identity that lies outside the stereotypical male and female gender binary, non-binary people are able to exist on a spectrum where some feel their identity comprises several gender associations, and others reject an association with gender altogether. Due to the relative newness of the term, which had not gained widespread use until the 2000s, notably through works like Haynes and McKenna's *Unseen Genders: Beyond the Binaries*, it often becomes conflated with other genderqueer terms, making it difficult to navigate which media representations are specifically produced to reflect non-binary identities, and which ones are more appropriately distinguished by their sibling terms. Online compilations often conflate non-binary characters with gender-fluid, ambiguous and androgynous ones, using the terms almost synonymously to describe those who do not fit within the rigid male and female binary. While it is important to note that these terms are not direct synonyms for one another, they do exist as sibling terms and are often adopted by those who identify as non-binary. Since genderfluidity, ambiguity, and androgyny can be used in queering characters in media, they will be briefly discussed here, though it is important to note that non-binary characters and people do not owe anyone ambiguity.

Books from the United Kingdom seemed to pick up on gender fluid, ambiguous and androgynous representations first, with books like *The Beetle* by Richard Marsh introducing shapeshifting villains who could appear both as male and female as early as 1897. North America did not lag too far behind, as by 1906, L. Frank Baum's *John Dough and the Cherub* introduced an ambiguous human child named Chick the Cherub, though further genderqueer representations would not appear until 1976, when Keith Maillard's *Two Strand River* introduced Alan and Leslie, two gender-fluid protagonists who find each other amongst a binary society.

Screen representations during the 1970s were far less common than literary ones, though certain online compilations will often note that there was a non-binary character featured in the 1970 film *Little Big Man*, however, when consulting resources like Professor Lisa Tatonetti's "Forced to Choose: Queer Indigeneity in Film" it is noted that rather than being non-binary, the character Little Horse is more accurately described as being two-spirit (Tatonetti 120). While Western countries have long held a strict male and female gender binary, other cultures have embraced third and fourth gender concepts that allow people in their communities to identify themselves neither as men nor women, but rather as existing within a third space that is often interlaced with their cultural background. The term "two-spirit" is recognized by many North American Indigenous groups to describe those who embody both male and female spirits, and while today it often gets conflated with the Western "non-binary" term due to its reduced connection to ceremony and community, it is important to acknowledge that these terms are not synonymous, and often when non-Indigenous people claim to be two-spirited it is seen as a form of cultural appropriation (Borresen). That being said, genderqueer representations rarely appeared before 1990, and canonically non-binary characters appeared even later in the mid-2000s.

Non-Binary Representations in *The Muppet Show*

Sesame Street aired throughout North America in 1969 and has long been recognized as a show created to teach children basic literacy skills, along with social skills that allow them to be kind towards their communities. The first episode of the series first introduces the humans that live on Sesame Street, such as Gordon, who will be the audience's guide throughout the episode as they become acquainted with his Muppet neighbours. Recognizable staple characters like Big Bird, Ernie, and Bert make their first appearances alongside intercut educational shorts about cleanliness, milk and the number three. However, there is one sketch in the middle of the show that focuses on a new application of the Muppet form that had been sparingly featured in Henson's previous variety show performances, which allowed for the characters to be constantly repurposed for sketches and change their physical characteristics on stage. The Anything Muppets, or as Gordon calls them, the Anything People, are briefly introduced when he is approached by a basic pink form in a checkered dress. He notes that they can be anything they want before he helps a large group of them transform by placing their desired features on their faces, some asking for little girl eyes, while others request a father's nose and mustache (“0001”, 27:58-33:30).

The Anything Muppets appear sporadically throughout the show, standing in for a variety of people within the neighbourhood and frequently allowing the humans of Sesame Street to aid them in their construction of self. Rather than being confined to a name, voice or occupation, many of the individual Muppets are referred to by their general form, an aspect which never changes regardless of their chosen outward appearance. While some have found more permanent features, such as Count von Count and Prairie Dawn, many of the Anything Muppets continue to be used in contemporary episodes of the series and are marked by their incredible fluidity and

versatility. As Muppets are able to take on female, male and indeterminate roles, the Anything Muppets become non-binary identities that do not fully adhere to the gender binaries that infiltrate children's media in general. What's more, they are non-binary identities that are not ostracized or alienated from their Sesame Street neighbours, as often it is through the help of others that they are able to express their fullest selves.

Gonzo

The empathetic approach that the humans use to help the Anything Muppets passes through to *The Muppet Show* as the guest stars and Muppet characters find ways to include characters like Gonzo, who often have a difficult time understanding their place within the Muppet Theatre and coming to terms with their differences. Unlike the other Muppets that have been centred in this work, Gonzo was not introduced in any of Henson's early variety show appearances or in the experimental Muppets pilot episodes, but rather in a made-for-TV Christmas special Henson and his team prepared for CBS in 1970. Gonzo exists in an entirely different group of Muppets known as the Frackles, who live in a cave in the North Pole under Santa Claus' workshop. The Frackles seem to be a variety of monsters, as they all have fur that lines their bodies, and they come in a large variety of sizes and subspecies. Throughout the special, the only time the Frackles wear clothes is when they impersonate some of Santa's elves (*The Great Santa Claus Switch*, 25:47-28:07), but otherwise they are left alone and without these visual markers of male or female attire, the Frackles exist in a sort of ambiguity that is only removed when they are purposely gendered in the Muppet Theatre space. Some of them are given gender specific clothing so they can be part of the chorus line, and others, like Miss Kitty, are given names to emphasize their gender construction. Generally, though, many of

the Frackles wander in the background and are never fully given gender specificity, often continuing to live their lives in this state of ambiguity.

As a member of this smaller Muppet clan, Gonzo harbours a similar queered sensibility, though it is amplified through their inherent indescribability within the main Muppet cast. While Kermit is a frog, Fozzie is a bear, and Miss Piggy is, well, a pig, Gonzo is not quite anything. Though they seem to have a beak and find chickens attractive, they are not a bird. Though they are furry and blue, they are not quite a monster, and though they are humanized through their speech and movement, they are not quite human. This inability to locate a species for Gonzo raises several questions that the other Frackles are able to avoid through their adherence to gender performativity and monster features, cementing Gonzo as a sort of alienized being that exists beyond any forms of categorization. This inability to be reduced to a category allows Gonzo to exist in a unique state of fluidity where they can both engage in masculine and feminine qualities while also inhabiting a space that exists outside those binary categories. In other words, the Frackles exist as a gender queer found family where they are all able to engage in representations of genderfluidity, ambiguity and androgyny, but Gonzo is unique in that through an unwillingness to be categorized in any capacity, they are able to exist in a non-binary third space.

Though some viewers may reduce Gonzo's identity to fit within the popular soft masculine categorization that most of the male presenting Muppets adhere to due to their theatrics in love, need for support, affectionate nature and suit based attire, it is their contrasting drive for large explosions, aggression in romantic pursuits and need for adventure that veer them back into the middle space, both conforming and delineating from standard feminine and masculine traits (Fisher and Cox 185). Gonzo's solo acts, perhaps, are the best indication of their

dual engagement of femininity and masculinity. These acts often combined what Gonzo deemed to be artistic expressions with extreme stunts that pushed their physical limits, including demolishing a car to the tune of "Anvil Chorus" ("Joel Grey", 21:58-23:06) and eating a tire to the tune of "The Flight of the Bumblebee" ("Juliet Prowse", 05:26-06:04). While the value of these acts is rarely appreciated by the theatre audience who boo Gonzo off stage, they refuse to change their act to anything more recognizable or agreeable for the audience, coming back nearly every week to show the audience a new act. This determination to continually present an act so alien to the theatre audience is admirable. It not only stands to show Gonzo's confidence within their work and existence but also imbues this idea that simply because something is unrecognizable to current categorizations, it does not mean that it does not exist or will simply go away.

However, Gonzo can also have moments of self-consciousness that play against this confidence, and it is through their community that they are able to affirm their identity. The quote that begins this chapter, for example, comes from "The Wishing Song," which Gonzo performs in the ninth episode of season two. After learning that guest star Madeline Kahn does not wish to marry them, Gonzo sadly sings about things they wish they had or things they wish they could be. Hearing him from afar, Madeline comes down to apologize to Gonzo and inform them that, though marriage may not be a good idea, their friendship will always be valuable ("Madeline Kahn", 22:44-25:08). This apology and affirmation that they are cared for allow Gonzo to look beyond what they do not have and be content with who they are. The nature of the song opens up a space for audiences to empathize with Gonzo's otherness through a shared self-consciousness of not having or being enough, making the queered other relatable to any viewer, not just those with queer sensibilities.

CHAPTER SIX: TRANSGENDER REPRESENTATIONS

"Fact is, there's nothing out there you can't do.

Yeah, even Santa Claus believes in you.

Beat down the walls, begin, believe, behold, begat.

Be a better drummer, be an up and comer.

Can you picture that?""- Janice and the Electric Mayhem

The gay liberation movement emerged alongside the women's liberation movement at the end of the 1960s. Activists sought to end discrimination against gays and lesbians by promoting gay pride and advocating for the fair treatment of LGBTQ+ individuals. American activists held gay rights demonstrations as early as 1965 in Philadelphia and Washington, D.C. However, the riots at Stonewall bar in New York in 1969 sparked significant momentum within the larger LGBTQ+ rights movement and propelled political demonstrations throughout North America. While today, LGBTQ+ activists acknowledge the crucial role that trans women like Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera had during the Stonewall Uprising and the overall growth of the LGBTQ+ rights movement, post-Stonewall, many of the communities that the trans population had supported and protected began to disown them, focusing their efforts more directly on gay and lesbian issues.

Pushed away from the forefront of the movement, it was not until the mid-1970s that the transgender community began to see a large wave of representation through the release of Jan Morris's, Christine Jorgenson's and Mario Martino's autobiographies, which discuss not only their experiences of transitioning but also their involvement in transgender rights activism and insight into their personal lives, allowing them to be known beyond their transition. The 1970s also brought overt screen representations of trans people in films like *Dog Day Afternoon* (1975),

The Day of the Locust (1975) and *Desperate Living* (1977). Unfortunately, many of these screen representations would fall prey to the same doom as homosexual representations in the 1960s, turning transgender characters into violent criminals and self-loathing victims who had to choose between invisibility, assimilation, ostracism or death in favour of upholding heteronormative standards of existence (Russo 173). Due to these extreme conditions of media existence, soap operas and sitcoms became the primary home to a handful of transgender characters throughout the 70s.

The American drama series, *Medical Center* (1969-1976), was one of the first shows to introduce a transgender character on the small screen. Pat Caddison, played by the Brady Bunch's Robert Reed, appears in a two-part episode in 1975 that documents their coming out, as well as their sex-change operation. While Pat's on-screen transition was groundbreaking for its time, it now aligns with the most common, stereotypical representations of transgender women in media, as rather than challenging the gender binary, they develop gender-normative expressions and physicality through hormone therapy and surgery, reinforcing standard gender roles through their assimilation (Abbott 1065). Other criticisms of the episode deem the storyline as too scientifically inclined, as Pat explains the dosage of their hormonal treatment to their friend Dr. Gannon when they initially come out, and the same doctor approaches Pat's surgery as a "compassionate" cure for their "psychological condition" after Pat tries to kill themselves ("The Fourth Sex: Part 1" ; "The Fourth Sex: Part 2"). Focusing primarily on the impact Pat's decision to transition has on their family and friends, the storyline uses these medical explanations to try to "make sense" of the transgender subject, a common criticism of how people view transgender lives as something that needs to be justified to others (Mozer 30).

Two years later, the sitcom *Soap* (1977-1981), a comedic parody of daytime soap operas, introduced the first recurring gay character on American television. Jodie Dallas, played by stand-up comedian Billy Crystal, was the son of the central character, Mary Campbell, and his sexuality was often deemed a "problem", akin to his brother being in the mafia. In the first season, Jodie considers getting a sex-change operation so that he and his quarterback boyfriend, Dennis, can get married ("Episode 4"). However, before he can go through with the operation, his boyfriend breaks up with him in favour of marrying a cis gender woman to protect his image, and Jodie abandons the desire to transition altogether ("Episode 10"). Not only was Jodie's initial impulse to transition ridiculed by his family, who made little attempt to be supportive until he was already checked into the hospital for his surgery, but Jodie's attempted transition can also be considered an attempt to assimilate to heteronormative standards of romance, as his only motivation to transition lies within the need to solve the "problem of homosexuality" in his relationship. Going further, in researcher Steve Capsuto's book *Alternative Channels: The Uncensored Story of Gay and Lesbian Images in Radio and Television*, he notes that many gay groups were unhappy with Jodie's transition storyline as not only did it take away from his struggles with his sexuality, but it also conflated homosexuality with transgenderism, which they believed reflected negatively on gay people. These groups demanded that the sex change storyline be removed and that the show move away from the gay stereotypes in favour of creating a storyline for Jodie that more singularly focused on his struggles with his sexuality (Capsuto 140-142).

1977 was a year of unprecedented representations of empathy towards transgender characters on television, spearheaded by producer Norman Lear. Though shows featuring these characters were sparingly aired, they are critical pieces of representation in televisual history.

Much like *Soap*, Norman Lear's *All That Glitters* (1977) spoofs the soap opera format by focusing on the trials and tribulations of the Globatron corporation employees. What set this show apart was its reversal of gender roles, making the women the primary breadwinners through their executive roles at Globatron, while their husbands stayed at home. This role reversal did not land with critics, as they found the sex roles cliché in their portrayals of feminine and masculine characteristics (Adler 25). While the show can be hard to find and is often considered a piece of lost media, it is a historical piece of American television, as it was the first series to introduce a recurring transgender character. Linda Murkland, a model working for the new Globatron campaign, is a trans woman who not only engages in conversations that reference the ongoing debate over trans female identity but is also celebrated and affirmed by other characters within the series (Abbott 1065). Though like Pat Caddison, Linda uploads transnormative representations of trans women, she was also a breakthrough in transgender representation through her romantic engagement. Abbott notes that there is a refusal for Linda's trans identity to become a conflict in her romantic life, as her monogamous relationship moves her away from the stereotype of promiscuity, her cisgender male partner does not leave her once they discover the "truth", nor does their partner engage in a personal conflict regarding their sexuality due to their attraction to her. There is a palpable sense of empathy that runs through the show, not only through Linda's romance but also through the way the Globatron executives stick up for her when she meets adversity within the workplace. It should also be noted that *All That Glitters* features the first on-screen marriage of a trans-woman, her friends and family coming to support and celebrate her on her big day (Abbott 1065).

While *All That Glitters* was cancelled after its 65-episode run due to a failure to garner an audience following, Lear continued to imbue this sense of empathy toward transgender identities

into his other productions. The most notable is perhaps the introduction of the black transgender character, Edie Stokes, who stars in the third episode of season four of *The Jeffersons* (1975-1985). After receiving a message from his old Navy buddy that they are in town, Mr. Jefferson goes down to the hotel to try to surprise them. What he does not expect to find is that his friend has undergone sex-reassignment surgery. Mr. Jefferson is highly unaccepting of his friend's identity, referring to her by her dead name, and jumping away from Edie when she goes to grab his shoulder. The rest of the episode revolves around Mrs. Jefferson thinking that her husband is lying to her about who he went to see at the hotel, since she heard a woman's voice over the phone when she called. The confusion is only solved when Edie arrives at their home, proving that she is real and was Mr. Jefferson's bunkmate in the Navy pre-transition. The episode ends on a higher note than it started, with both the Jeffersons referring to Edie by her chosen name and pronouns. Edie even pulls a prank on Mr. Jefferson to confirm that even if she has changed externally, she is still the same person inside ("Once a Friend"). While the episode begins with the familiar anger and trepidation of cis characters confronted with trans identities, it also engages with a touching moment of empathy where the Jeffersons can accept Edie's identity and acknowledge her as their friend (Abbott 1067). Unfortunately, Lear's more empathetic approach to transgender representations did not spend much time on air as *All That Glitters* was only syndicated throughout 1977, and Edie only made one appearance on *The Jeffersons* before its abrupt cancellation in 1985. Transgender representations were once again pushed to the background, American television lacking any confirmed transgender characters until 1984.

Trans-Coding in Children's Media

While it would be foolish to claim that no children had ever watched *Medical Center*, *All That Glitters*, *Soap*, and *The Jeffersons*, as they were all syndicated for broadcast television in

America, it is safe to claim that children were not considered the primary audience for these programs. Most of these shows contain mild uses of profanity, substance consumption, and violence, and even the more soap opera-based programs contain references to sex, marking most of these programs suitable for teens and adults, but not necessarily young children. Televisual narratives in the 1970s thus limit storylines featuring transgender characters to adult content, disallowing young audiences from engaging with transgender narratives that are beneficial in their development of empathy towards LGBTQ+ individuals, and in the understanding of their identity presentation.

This restriction of transgender narratives from children's media is not necessarily the fault of the times, however, as even in the growing age of streaming, it continues to be challenging to find overt, canon transgender representations. Scholars like Dr. Pauline Greenhill and University of Winnipeg alum Lou Lamari discuss *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power* (2018-2020) as potentially being one of the first North American shows to include transgender characters. However, when one truly examines the show, characters like Jewelstar are only confirmed to be transgender through viewers' interactions with the showrunners, never being explicitly acknowledged as transgender in the source content. The few genuine inclusions of transgender characters in children's media appear in the Netflix film *Rocko's Modern Life: Static Cling* (2019) with the introduction of Rachel Bighead and in the Netflix original series, *Dead End: Paranormal Park* (2022), whose main character, Barney Guttman, is canonically transgender. Yet, it may be debatable how many young children saw the former film, as the focus on the original *Rocko's Modern Life* (1993-1996) characters would be more appealing to older fans searching for a nostalgic reconnection to their youth than to new audiences.

As stated previously, children's television harbours a conservative idea that it must protect the youth from queer narratives, focusing its content primarily on heteronormative standards of gender and sexuality. This restriction has thus pushed many showrunners to imbue their characters with queer sensibilities that fly under the radar, allowing for representations that only queer individuals will truly appreciate and understand (Russo 153). Engaging in gender non-conforming behaviour, a visible discomfort in the roles of their assigned gender, and their connection to long-standing transgender stereotypes, are all ways that showrunners will trans-code their characters for audiences and are also markers that audiences use in their personal evaluation of a character as transgender representation.

Returning briefly to *She-Ra*, Jewelstar would be considered a purposefully trans-coded character, as not only are they voiced by trans actor Alex Blue Davis, but they masculinize their appearance by tucking their hair into a low ponytail, and wearing sharper, armour-like clothes that contrast with their sister's tighter, flatter suits. While it is difficult to say precisely which other characters have been purposely trans-coded and which have been trans-coded solely via audience perception due to conflicting online opinions, a few that are brought up repeatedly include Dipper Pines from *Gravity Falls*, who, on multiple occasions, struggles with feelings of not being manly enough, and multiple Spider-Man variations such as Marvel's Peter Parker and Sony's Gwen Stacy, as many view the fear associated with the reveal of their true identity beyond the mask as trans-allegory.

The Malleability of the Muppet Body

It takes a long time to develop a Muppet, as even after their initial fabrication, there is a period of exploration to determine how the puppet should dress, where their features would best be placed, and what personality suits them. These changes are evident throughout many of

Henson's programs, though *Sesame Street* perhaps features some of the earliest and most discussed transitions. Oscar the Grouch, for instance, begins the series with light orange fur that is recoloured green by the second season, a change that highlights Oscar's trashy environment by having his fur mimic slime and mould. Similarly, from season one to two, Big Bird's facial plumage changes from a more triangular shape to a rounded one, aiding in his personality shift from a simple-minded bird to a young and therefore more naïve bird who is trying to make sense of the world around him. These external changes helped solidify their characterization, using their exterior traits to emphasize the character that is hidden within the Muppet form.

Henson extends this ability to enhance a character through their shifting physical and personal characteristics through the creation of Muppets that are able to transform directly on screen. Much like the previously discussed Anything Muppets, Henson's Whatnots are often blank-slated beings within *The Muppet Show* that can stand in for any character the crew may need for a given sketch. However, what distinguishes Whatnots from the Anything Muppets is that instead of using their ability to transform to express their shifting exterior gender expression, Whatnots use transformation as a means to amplify their existing gender presentation. In other words, while Anything Muppets experience a gender fluidity that is represented through their costuming and features, Whatnots use the same elements to affirm and enhance their gender expression. The season one episode nine "I Feel Pretty" sketch is perhaps the most stark example of this exterior gender enhancement and affirmation as a blue female presenting Whatnot begins to replace her traditionally female features with monster pieces like sharp teeth, green spiked hair, and a purple body fur. This transition is amplified through the Whatnots' changing voice, which goes from a more melodic to a screeching tone as they continue to sing. While perhaps this transition is odd to viewers who are familiar with human standards of beauty, it is

clear that this transformation is deemed attractive for feminized monsters within the Muppet world as her date embraces her before the skit comes to a close (“Charles Aznavour”, 01:50-03:26).

This intrinsic malleability of the Muppet body allows characters to constantly be reinvented in order to exhibit the authentic character that is within them through costuming, personality shift, vocal changes, and physical feature placements. One particularly interesting case appears in the television special *Muppets Make Puppets*, where Henson notes that "you can make puppets almost as permanent or temporary as you want to" (05:43-05:46), before showing the audience how easy it is to create different characters with the same basic Muppet shape by experimenting with different eyes, noses, and headwear. The character shifts between a riverboat captain, a poet, a cowboy, a bank robber and an alien, though perhaps the most significant change Henson makes to this Muppet is when he places a blonde wig atop their head, accompanied by lashed eyes, and a patterned scarf before lifting their voice to feminize the Muppets speech. In a matter of thirty seconds, the male presenting Muppet has changed into a female presenting Muppet, and Henson confirms that "a lot of [the] boy puppets become girl puppets merely by putting a wig and a costume on" (*Muppets Make Puppets*, 25:35-26:25). Gender, thus, within the Muppet space, can be transformed through the same physical and personal traits other developing Muppets engage with to exhibit the true character hidden within their form.

Janice

Over the years, viewers have come to acknowledge Janice as one of the few transgender Muppets due to her constant physical and personal transformations. More die-hard fans support this theory through the extreme changes made to her initial design. As visible in Christopher

Finch's historical and archival book *Of Muppets & Men: The Making of the Muppet Show*, during early development for the Electric Mayhem's characters, the band was constructed as an all-male group. Drawings from the design sessions show each of the characters and feature related notes regarding which rock stars inspired their look or personality, along with special puppetry features or accessories they require. Dr. Teeth, for example, famously falls under the inspiration of Dr. John and Elton John, needing an opening mouth that would show off his large teeth, while Floyd was noted to have exaggerated sideburns and a unique ability to look directly at the camera during dramatic moments (Finch 54). Among these drawings is a bass-playing Muppet designed to resemble Mick Jagger, taking on the large, pouted lips of the Rolling Stones star. For their special puppetry features, they are given an animated Adam's apple, which was meant to bob as they sang, and are physically very thin, with large hands to ease their instrument playing. The blonde hair, closed eyes, and band position all point to this Muppet being a pre-Janice sketch, yet, by the time they appeared on screen, they had been entirely reconstructed with more feminine attributes, though they are recognizable through their large pout. While this transformation from male-presenting to female-presenting Muppet is not available on screen like with Pat Caddison's transition in *Medical Center*, fans who find kinship with Janice point to this as one of the major confirming pieces that Janice is an early representation of transgender identity within children's media.

Less seasoned fans have also been able to view Janice as a transgender woman, as much as the Whatnots, she is constantly evolving to be her most authentic self. The earliest screen depiction of Janice comes from *The Muppet Show: Sex and Violence* (1975) pilot, where she was a female presenting background Muppet voiced by Fran Brill, one of the few female puppeteers working for the Henson Company at the time. She is present throughout the episode as a dancer

in the ballroom, a spectator of the wrestling match, and as a member of the all Muppet band, Dr. Teeth and the Electric Mayhem. While her airtime is limited, her voice does come through as she calls to her partner Floyd from the sidelines (*The Muppet Show: Sex and Violence*, 04:35), though it is much higher than contemporary audiences are used to. This is the first factor of transformation that Janice goes through, as only a year later, her voice is taken over by Eren Ozker for the first season of *The Muppet Show*. Ozker's version of Janice exists at a much lower pitch, though there is a properness in her speech pattern that makes her voice more elegant, similar to early renditions of Miss Piggy and Mildred. These early voices are comparable to those of transnormative representations of trans women throughout the 1970s, as in an effort to remove any potentially masculine qualities from Janice, the puppeteers hyper-feminize her voice, though neither of these tones quite matches the bass player aesthetic that is central to her characterization.

Season two becomes a major era of transformation for Janice as her appearance and personality begin to take shape when Richard Hunt is given full rein over her portrayal. For starters, her voice once again deepens, but this time into the prominent valley-girl tone that Californian and Floridian fans especially came to love (Stein 91). This voice was extremely influential to Janice's personality, as in a similar vein to Frank Oz, Richard took liberties in her line delivery, often allowing her to talk about peace, love, and briefly refer to her sexual liberation. Physically, Janice's face became more rounded, and she was also given a darker orange complexion to highlight the supposed tan that she got from the time she spent on the beach. Overall, these transformations turned Janice from a chorus girl and ballroom dancer into a relaxed hippie who enjoyed lounging about the Muppet Theatre and playing music with her band. While Fran Brill and Eren Ozker's Janice limited her to highly feminine traits as a means

to fully assimilate her into traditional gender binaries, Hunt's Janice expands upon these existing traits by introducing more masculinized qualities, rounding out the more complex, born of the 1970s counter-culture woman that Janice is. This characterization is fairly similar to that of Piggy's, though rather than taking on masculinized qualities like aggression, strength and bossiness, Janice engages simply with the feeling of being carefree (Fisher and Cox 185), a trait women traditionally cannot often engage with due to their responsibilities as wives and mothers and a trait that transgender women specifically are often unable to engage with due to rampant transphobia within North America. As a character whose continuous transformations go unquestioned, Janice becomes a sympathetic view of transgender identity in children's media, as her existence does not need to be defined or explained to those around her (Mozer 30). Furthermore, in her refusal to stick to transnormative modes of expression, Janice also becomes a marker for transgender audiences that one does not need to adhere to strict gender binaries in order to be accepted and affirmed in their identity.

Going further, as a transgender woman, Janice experiences far more complex romantic affiliations than previous representations had. As noted earlier in this chapter, Linda Murkland's monogamous relationship is historically one of the most empathetic portrayals of transgender romance on television throughout the 1970s, as they refused to use Linda's identity as a source of conflict (Abbott 1065). That being said, Linda, along with the other transgender women portrayed on North American television in the era, was never given a chance to date around like the more progressive women in sitcoms and dramas like *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*. This could be due to the fact that more empathetic writers wanted to avoid the stereotype that queer individuals are more promiscuous, or that more conservative, transphobic writers could not

imagine romantic scenarios with transgender women, but either way, this limited the autonomy of transgender women during an era of sexual liberation, as they could only be single or wed.

Janice, however, is not limited in her dating life and is one of the Muppets that seems to be linked to multiple partners, embodying the free love movement of the 1960s and 1970s through her rejection of monogamy. In the first season of the series, Janice is frequently linked to the saxophonist Zoot, and they become regular dance partners within the ballroom sequences before her attention more fully turns towards another member of the band, Floyd Pepper. While these two began flirting with one another as early as *The Muppet Show: Sex and Violence* pilot, when Floyd refers to her as baby (04:39), the two are never officially linked to one another as boyfriend and girlfriend. Their romance is continually alluded to as they are seen together throughout the show, dancing in the ballroom, performing duets, and, in one of their cutest exchanges, when Janice, in an act of medieval courtship, places a handkerchief on Floyd's lance before he jousts with Gonzo ("Pearl Bailey", 23:22-23:31). While their love for one another is visible throughout the entire series, it is also clear that they are both open to dating other members of the Muppet crew and the guest stars, as Floyd and Janice are often depicted in the ballroom with alternative partners.

This philosophy of an open relationship is fairly common within the Muppet space, as characters will continually flirt and make amorous advances towards one another that are sometimes reciprocated and other times rejected. While all these relationships seem to have a central romantic affiliation, such as Janice with Floyd or Miss Piggy with Kermit, they have all found associations to other members within the Muppet space through dances, sketches and, mostly in Kermit's case, kisses. These open relationships not only allow for the Muppet characters to date around without the confines of monogamy, but in certain cases also allow

characters like Dr. Honeydew, Beaker and Waldorf to engage in homosexual relationships as they can be referred to briefly without the need to make a large proclamation regarding their sexuality (O'Brien 48), as they are simply freely experimenting with their sexuality like the rest of the Muppet cast. In short, not only does Janice through her openness in dating present a more sexually liberated representation of transgender characters on television, but through the general openness towards dating within the Muppet space audiences are able to see experimentation in dating outside of straight cisgender conventions, not only allowing them to encounter more diverse forms of relationships but also allowing them to see that all these relationships in a normalized, healthy environment where they are not vilified or condemned.

CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSION

This research highlights *The Muppet Show's* unique role in children's media in fostering a space of tolerance for all gender and sexual expressions by allowing its Muppet cast and guest stars to exist outside heteronormative binaries. Extending beyond television's general move to diversify portrayals of femininity during the second wave of feminism, *The Muppet Show*, becomes a politically fueled alternative space, where portrayals of masculinity, femininity, non-binary identities, and transgender expressions are part of the standard, not the exception, thereby allowing young audiences to encounter diverse identities while they develop their understandings of gender expression and relationship formation. In so doing, children are not restricted to representations of heteronormativity, allowing them to develop empathy and understanding not only towards the felt and foam characters on screen, but also for those who embody these queer sensibilities, even if it is themselves.

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