Claiming a Place in the Magic Kingdom: A Queer Analysis of Disney Movies from 2010 to 2020

Jessica Lynn King

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Beth M. Waggenspack, Chair
Nneka Logan
Adrienne Ivory

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Disney movies are a vehicle for American culture; however, Disney has lagged behind in representing queer people in their films as protagonists. For this reason, critical scholarship is necessary to understand Disney’s role in building, replicating or changing culture. Although some critical work on Disney has focused on gender or race, queer theory is underutilized to understand Disney films, especially in the field of communication. Though much research exists on movies from the Disney Renaissance, relatively few have examined the films released in the past decade in a systematic way, focusing on how the movies may be relatable to queer experiences. This analysis combines a queer theory lens and a grounded theory approach to examine where queer people can find their experiences reflected in the most recent Disney movies, even without openly queer protagonists. The study resulted in the formation of six categories that describe instances of queering and queerness in Disney movies: queering of Disney logic, queering of “appropriate” through mature themes, queering of power and violence, villainous queerness, heroic queerness and queer acceptance. Previous literature and the new categories from this study as a whole suggest that the Walt Disney Company is taking small steps to offer more diverse narratives and subvert expectations in ways that allow queer people to read their experiences in the characters on screen.
Disney movies are a multi-billion dollar industry (Vary, 2020), and the company has taken steps in recent years to feature more diverse storylines and characters in their animated movies. Despite this, there is yet to be an openly queer protagonist in a Disney animated film. With this fact in mind, this study seeks to find places where queer people can still see themselves and their experiences reflected in the Disney films release in the last decade. These instances range from ambiguity that allows audiences to read a character as similar to themselves to moments that question the power structures that push certain people to the margins of society in the first place. Six categories were created after analysis to describe these moments: the queering of Disney logic, the queering of “appropriate” through mature themes, the queering of power and violence, villainous queerness, heroic queerness and queer acceptance. Taken together, these findings and the previous research on Disney suggests the company is slowly moving to open up storylines to allow more people to see their experiences reflected in the movies.
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INTRODUCTION

For many Americans, the Walt Disney Company is synonymous with childhood memories, innocence and magic. Disney animated movies are a staple in many homes with small kids, and parents trust Disney as a safe, wholesome way to entertain their children. Although Disney movies have been a shared family experience for generations of children in America, some groups, including people of color and queer people, find themselves underrepresented in Disney movies. This analysis focuses on the queer community—a group that has yet to have overt representation as a protagonist in a Disney animated movie (Rude, 2019; Butler, 2019; Lang, 2017)—and seeks to understand where queer people can still find their place in Disney.

In this thesis, I will be using queer theory, a critical theory whose goal is to reveal culturally imposed structures and binaries (especially with regard to sex, gender and attraction). Since queer theory looks to question rules and binaries put into place by the dominant culture, any text—be it a speech, a book, a piece of artwork or a children’s movie—can “queered.” I will use the words queer or queer community instead of an acronym like LGBTQ throughout this analysis to be inclusive to people who identify outside of heterosexuality or the gender binary. There are a number of acronyms in use within the community that may include or exclude various groups such as asexual or intersex people, and there is debate about what certain letters stand for—for example, is Q for queer or questioning or both? Queer is selected as a term that describes the largest range of experiences that fall outside heteronormative expectations. On a similar note, this analysis refers to the LGBTQ movement—as discussed in O’Neill (2018)—as the
queer movement with the understanding that “gay rights” or marriage equality do not encompass the full range of rights for which queer activists have pushed.

The introduction will begin with a history of the Walt Disney Company, and then will discuss the justification for studying Disney movies queerly. The prospectus will then move to a review of the relevant Disney and queer theory literature, a discussion of the modified grounded theory method, which the analysis will employ, and then to an analysis of six recent Disney films. The analysis will seek to answer the question what messages do the movies communicate about queer people’s place in society? After the analysis, the implications of how Disney communicates queerness for queer people will be discussed, along with limitations of the study and directions for future research.

**A Brief History of the Walt Disney Company**

Walt Disney did not strike gold immediately in his animation career; he began his career along with Ub Iwerks with the Iwerks-Disney Commercial Artists, which produced several unprofitable works including adaptations of classic fairytales (Wills, 2017, p. 14). In 1923, Disney and his brother, Roy, created the Disney Brothers’ Animation Studio (p. 14) and continued to work with Ub Iwerks. Walt and Iwerks together created the character of Oswald the Lucky Rabbit (Oh My Disney Blog, 2016) whose rights he eventually lost in a fee renegotiation (Wills, 2017, p. 15). Interestingly, the rights to Oswald the Lucky Rabbit are now back with his original parent company—he was traded in 2006 back to Disney in exchange for ABC sports commentator Al Michaels to move from Disney-owned ESPN to NBC (Oh My Disney Blog, 2016). Oswald can now be seen on Disney race medals, in the video game Epic Mickey, in park merchandise, and as a character walking through the parks. Oswald the Lucky Rabbit was
an important character for Walt Disney’s development as an animator; Disney introduced
the idea of characters with their own personalities that carried over from short to short
and the negotiations that led to Walt losing the rights to Oswald led to Disney being
fiercely protective of his intellectual property rights (Oh My Disney Blog, 2016). Perhaps
Oswald’s biggest impact, as the legend goes, is that on the train ride home to Los Angeles
after the meeting in New York where the rights to Oswald were lost, Disney came up
with the character of Mickey Mouse (Oh My Disney Blog, 2016; Wills, 2017, p. 15).

Disney worked with Ub Iwerks to create three Mickey Mouse cartoons,
culminating in the showing of *Steamboat Willie* in a Los Angeles theater in 1928
(Bendazzi, 2016, p. 95). The film was an incredible success, kickstarting a Mickey
Mouse craze and the explosive growth of Disney’s studio. From there, Disney was able to
begin working on feature-length animations such as *Snow White, Pinocchio* and *Bambi*
(Wills, 2017, p. 16).

As John Wills discussed in *Disney Culture* (2017), Disney’s company soon began
to expand into a variety of other productions besides animated films including
propaganda films against the Nazis during the Second World War (p. 16), as well as
dipping into television, live-action movies, and the creation of Disneyland. Despite
Disney’s success, the Disney Company did not operate in profit, debt-free until 1961 (p.
19).

During his time, Walt Disney played a fundamental role in establishing the
culture and mystique of Disney as a company that is wholesome, educational, family-
friendly and American. Disney himself was involved in the national politics of his day,
helping in the aforementioned World War II war effort and testifying in the House Un-
American Activities Committee after the war (Wills, 2017, p. 18). The name “Disney” slowly became synonymous with safe for parents looking for entertainment for their children (Griffin, 2000, p. 3). Walt Disney provided the direction and leadership for the Walt Disney Company until his death from cancer in 1966 (Wills, 2017, p. 19; Griffin, 2000, p. 47). After Walt’s death, Roy Disney, along with Donn Tatum and Card Walker, ran the company and finished some of the projects that Walt had left behind, notably Walt Disney World in Orlando (Wills, 2017, p. 19). During this period the studio stagnated creatively, producing few noteworthy animated movies and generally suffering economically (Ostman, 1996).

The fate of the Walt Disney Company turned around with the hiring of Michael Eisner as CEO in 1984. Under Eisner’s direction, the company’s worth grew from $1.8 billion to $80 billion (Eisner, 2010, para. 2). The Eisner years, also called the Disney Renaissance (beginning by most estimates in 1989 with the release of *The Little Mermaid* and extending through approximately the turn of the century) represented a series of cultural shifts at Disney that helped align the movies being produced with how American culture at large was changing. Instead of relying on Disney’s “Nine Old Men” (the core group of animators with whom Walt worked closely) to create animated successes (Wills, 2017, p. 38), the Eisner years saw the introduction of new talent into the animation department—notably, an increase in women in leadership roles, including writers, lead animators and supervisors (Davis, 2007, p. 170). The Eisner era also saw the introduction of creative leaders that would be critical to Disney’s successful animated films during the period, including Howard Ashman and Alan Menken.
In 2006, Michael Eisner retired as CEO of Disney, and Robert Iger stepped into the role (Ahrens, 2005, A02), where he remains as of this writing. Iger’s vision for the company, per his bio on Disney’s website, is “generating the best creative content possible; fostering innovation and utilizing the latest technology; and expanding into new markets around the world.” (The Walt Disney Company, n.d.)

Since Iger’s appointment as CEO, the Walt Disney Company has continued to grow. Disney now owns a staggering amount of the media landscape, with ABC, ESPN, Touchstone Pictures, Marvel, Lucasfilm, and Pixar all calling Disney home, as well as brands like National Geographic and Hulu after the 2019 Disney-21st Century Fox merger (Schwartz, 2019). Disney has expanded its presence in China with the Shanghai Disney Resort and Disney’s animated films in the years since Eisner have been characterized by a shift to computer animation.

Why Study Queer Disney?

Disney has been around since the 1920s, and in that time, American culture has changed significantly, especially with regard to the visibility and greater mainstream acceptance of the queer community. Significant gains have been made for the queer community in the U.S. from the decriminalization of homosexuality, to the passing of marriage equality, and an increasing presence in media. The decision to study Disney movies through a queer lens may seem counterintuitive, since Disney has yet to feature an openly queer protagonist in an animated feature film; however, children’s media offers a rich opportunity to see what messages queer people are receiving from media about themselves and their role in society during their formative years, and often goes understudied due to the idea that children are “pure” with no concept of adult sexuality.
Although some analysis has been done on queerness in Disney animated films produced under the guidance of Walt Disney and Michael Eisner (Cuomo, 1995; Griffin, 2000; Perea, 2018), little scholarly attention has been paid to movies produced since 2000, and particularly movies whose protagonist is not a princess. This study seeks to fill that gap by analyzing the six original animated movies released from between 2010 and 2020, *Tangled* (2010), *Wreck-It Ralph* (2012), *Frozen* (2013), *Big Hero 6* (2014), *Zootopia* (2016), and *Moana* (2016). With no protagonists overtly like them, how can queer people find their place in Disney? This analysis will pair queer theory with a modified grounded theory approach to look for moments where queer people may see their experiences reflected. To conclude the analysis, suggestions for future research will be offered.
LITERATURE REVIEW

For the modern American child, Disney movies are a household name, but that status is a product of many years of history. This literature review will begin by splitting the history of the Walt Disney Company into four eras that correspond with company leadership and discuss the styles and trends in their animated movies during those years, as well as discussing the relevant concurrent events in the queer movement. The review will conclude with an overview of queer theory and grounded theory.

Disney Animation Eras and the Queer Movement

To trace the shifts in approaches and personalities of Disney animations throughout the company’s history, it is useful to split Disney’s history into four parts corresponding to shifts in leadership of the company. In this section, I will also highlight concurrent moments in queer history, especially in terms of representation in Hollywood or visibility and acceptance in mainstream culture.

The “Classic” Era (1924-1968). Films had been viewed in their early days as a form of cheap entertainment—these “cinemas of attraction” (Bendazzi, 2015, p. 21) eventually began to turn towards portraying extended narratives, and a “language of film” was developed (Bedazzi, 2015, p. 30). Around the 1930s, as Disney was experiencing the success of Steamboat Willie and its star Mickey Mouse, animation was enjoying a position of novelty among critics and theorists, as well as regular audience members (Bendazzi, 2015, p. 96-97). Early Mickey Mouse animations were characterized by a certain bawdiness and fascination with rebellion against the “received notions of morality, discipline and social order” that Griffin (2000) referred to as the “carnivalesque” (p. 7). Though the early Disney films are notable for their innovative use
of sound—especially sounds that do not reflect what is being shown on screen (called nonconcurrency) such as Mickey Mouse playing a cow’s teeth with little mallets while the audience hears xylophone sounds (Bendazzi, 2015, p. 96), they also rely on “lowlbrow” humor such as losing one’s pants (Griffin, 2000, p. 7), literal pain in the behind, or male characters flirting with (or even kissing) female characters (Griffin, 2000, p. 8).

While the Walt Disney Company and Mickey Mouse were heading towards becoming household names, the film industry was experiencing shakeups and suspicion in the USA. Certain religious organizations, particularly the Catholic Church, harbored concerns over “immoral” films, and advocated for censorship (Black, 1989, p. 167). Pressure from these groups on the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA) led its head, Will Hays, to create the Production Code Administration (PCA) to censor movies of unsavory content in 1934 (Black, 1989, p. 167).

While the PCA was active, movie studios had to submit scripts to the PCA for review before they were cleared to be produced (Black, 1989, p. 167). The PCA looked to eradicate violence and suggestive themes from movies produced during its active years (Simmons, 1997). Since his premiere in *Steamboat Willie* accompanying the film *Gang War* (Bendazzi, 2015, p. 96), Mickey Mouse captured the hearts of audiences around the world—but although animations at this time were not solely intended for children, Griffin (2000) pointed out how Mickey’s popularity with younger audiences was encouraged through merchandising and “Mickey Mouse Clubs” hosted by local theatres (p. 13). Perhaps because of his popularity with children, the censors scrutinized Mickey Mouse cartoons more carefully and cartoons thought to contain unsavory material that did not
align with PCA standards were banned in some states (Griffin, 2000, p. 13). Disney began to tame Mickey Mouse over subsequent years—after a few years, Mickey had become an upstanding citizen (Bendazzi, 2015, p. 99; Griffin, 2000, p. 21; Wills, 2017, p. 22-23), while his pals Donald Duck and Goofy were responsible for the majority of future questionable hijinks.

In addition to Mickey Mouse cartoons, the Walt Disney Company was also creating educational films for children. Some of these, such as *Education for Death: The Making of a Nazi* (1943), were propagandistic films to support the U.S. war effort during World War II; some promoted science education, like *Our Friend the Atom* (1956); others, like *Defense Against Invasion* (1943) or *The Story of Menstruation* (1946) were created to teach children about the body—again in a sanitized, non-offensive way amenable to the censors and standards of the time (Griffin, 2000, p. 34-35).

The 1960s brought with it a wave of social change and recognition for different social groups, and the same could be said for the Walt Disney Company. The Production Codes Administration was active from 1930-1968 (Simmons, 1992). In 1968, the MPPDA implemented the rating system familiar to audiences today, doing away with the Production Code and signaling increasing freedom for modern movie-makers (Jowett, 1990). However, by the time of Walt Disney’s death in 1966, the Walt Disney Company had cemented its image as the site for safe, educational, valuable entertainment for children. The carefully constructed, squeaky clean image of the Disney Company even reflects onto Walt Disney himself, who is seen as a pioneer and unfailingly benevolent, patriarchal figure in the popular imagination (Wills, 2017, p. 6). This constructed image can be clearly seen as soon as guests enter the Magic Kingdom in Walt Disney World in
Orlando in the Partners Statue, which shows Mickey Mouse, hand in hand with Walt Disney, who is pointing forward. Although the Walt Disney Company now had more artistic freedom from a regulatory standpoint, they now had two enormous reputations to uphold. With Walt’s death, the company had to figure out how to move forward without half of the famed duo.

**The In-Between (1966-1984).** The death of Walt Disney represented a hard time for the Walt Disney Company. Walt had been a huge driver of Disney’s creative success and played a large part in creating the company’s culture (Wills, 2017, p. 21). In the period between Walt’s death and the arrival of Michael Eisner in 1984, the studio produced only six animated movies—*The Jungle Book* (1967), *The Aristocats* (1970), *Robin Hood* (1973), *The Many Adventures of Winnie the Pooh* (1977), *The Rescuers* (1977) and *The Fox and the Hound* (1981) (IMDb, 2013). Many of these movies recycled previous animation from earlier movies—for example, Little John in *Robin Hood* is Baloo from *The Jungle Book* recolored, *The Jungle Book* borrows animations from *101 Dalmatians* and *The Sword in the Stone*, *The Fox and the Hound* uses a dog chase scene from *Bambi*, and the Heffalumps in *The Many Adventures of Winnie the Pooh* are suspiciously similar to the pink elephants that Dumbo saw almost 40 years earlier.

Alongside the Disney Company’s struggle for direction after Walt Disney’s passing, social activism was moving the queer community to greater visibility. Although queer people have existed with varying levels of visibility throughout the history of the United States, the queer movement is popularly said to have begun in 1969 in New York City with the Stonewall Riots (however, a number of scholars, such as Marcus (2019), and Mumford (2019) have pointed to a much earlier start date—even as early as the
The riots began after police attempted to raid the Stonewall Inn, a popular gay scene. At that point in time, being queer was still largely seen as a mental disorder (Landers & Kapadia, 2019, p. 849) and was criminalized in many states. As part of the moral push associated with McCarthyism in the United States, even consensual sex acts between two men were seen as degenerate and often conflated with being a child molester, leading to discrimination against gay people in courts and in society (Weinmeyer, 2014, para. 4). In 1973, the American Psychiatric Association stated that homosexuality was not in and of itself a disorder (Lyons, 1973), and the 1960s and 70s saw 18 states decriminalize consensual sex acts between adults of the same sex as a response to the Supreme Court ruling (ostensibly about contraception) that the Due Process clause protected the individual’s right to privacy in their own home (Weinmeyer, 2014, para. 6). Though some states decriminalized homosexuality, widespread decriminalization and acceptance were still many years away; however, the push for visibility, acceptance and rights was underway, and at Disney, positive change was right around the corner.


The studio experienced the arrival of individuals who would bring fresh energy to the studio, including a surge of women like Irene Mecchi and Susannah Grant working in the animation studios (Davis, 2007, p. 170). The animated films the company produced saw a return back to the narrative roots that had made them so successful. Many of the new arrivals, including Ron Clements, John Musker, Howard Ashman and Alan Menken, worked together on some of Disney’s most profitable and critically praised films of the era, including *The Little Mermaid*, *Beauty and the Beast*, and *Aladdin*. Howard Ashman’s employ at Disney is particularly significant, as he was openly gay in an era where few were. Menken credits Ashman with the success of the films they worked on—Ashman’s ideas brought in elements of musical theatre to push the animated movie’s narrative potential (Stadelman, 2019). Many of the elements we have come to expect from Disney movies (especially princess movies), from the order of songs—typically the hero(ine) sings an “I want” song where they express a desire for something different in their life; we learn about the villain and their motives for undermining the hero(ine); we have an introduction to a love interest, and frequently there is a song that either acts as a reprise or signals some kind of change in the hero(ine) that will enable them to triumph over the villain—to the sounds of the songs (the villain’s song, for instance, typically sounds very different from the rest of the songs in the movie, signaling that they are disrupting the established order (McGill, 2018, p. 33)) come from conventions Ashman and Menken helped establish. The Eisner era also saw daring uses of new computer technology in animation (such as the magic carpet escape scene in *Aladdin*) and a new emphasis on
celebrity power in vocals, such as Robin Williams’ dynamic performance as the Genie in *Aladdin* or Eddie Murphy’s comedic role as Mushu in *Mulan* to help drive the success of Disney movies (Pallant, 2011, p. 89-111; Davis, 2007, p. 170).

The Disney Renaissance coincided with a time of pain and of growth in the queer community. The AIDS crisis, which began with the discovery of the HIV virus in 1980 (Hombs, 1992, p. 28) had escalated. In 1983, Larry Kramer, AIDS activist, had published the essay *1,121 and Counting*, which said that about 1,121 cases of AIDS had been reported; 418 had died in the U.S. (Ocamb, 2011). Kramer pointed to the Reagan administration’s inaction on the crisis as a contributing factor to the disease’s death toll. By 1984, over 6,000 Americans had been diagnosed with AIDS, with that number nearly doubling to about 11,400 people in the U.S. by the next year (Hombs, 1992, p. 33-36).

Though the disease can be spread by blood (such as transfusions or sharing needles), the primary mode of transmission was sexually; additionally, the disease is most common in gay and bisexual men, who account for about two-thirds of all HIV diagnoses (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2018), which led to increased fear of the queer community among straight people and death of many members of the queer community, including prominent members such as Disney’s own Howard Ashman in 1991 (Robinson, 2017). The tragedy of the AIDS crisis helped rally the queer community and caused them to push for space in mainstream society, and for their health concerns to be taken seriously.

The years that marked the mid to late Eisner era were also a period of increased visibility for the queer community in media; in 1997, Ellen DeGeneres came out to much media fanfare (Griffin, 2000, p. 176-177). Television shows from *Seinfeld* to *Roseanne*
began featuring acknowledgement of the queer community (albeit in the form of jokes), paving the way for shows that handled queer plotlines more openly, such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Queer as Folk, Will and Grace*, and *The L Word* (Becker, 2006, p. 185). Some efforts were also being made to include queer people in society (though some might be seen as homophobic today)—for example, in 1993 President Bill Clinton enacted the controversial Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell policy to try and end the military’s ban on homosexuality (Connell, 2015, p. 1015). The groundwork laid by queer activists and openly gay people in the media environment during this period helped the queer movement gain momentum that led to several tipping points in the new millennium.

**Neo-Disney (2005-Present).** I have borrowed Pallant’s (2011) name for the Iger era but extended the years to reflect the consistent leadership in the Walt Disney Company. Neo-Disney saw the company’s seemingly last foray into traditional, 2D animation (and first Black princess) with *The Princess and the Frog* (2009). Disney began reaching markets that were historically out of reach—for example, in addition to their European presence, Disney now has parks and is able to make Disney branded films in China, which had not been done before (Bloomberg, 2016). Neo-Disney movies are notable for how they invite the audience to remember that they are watching a movie by using self-aware comedy—such as the scene in *Frozen* where Kristoff asks the Princess Anna why she agreed to marry a guy (Prince Hans) she had just met that day, wondering “[if] her parents ever warn[ed her] about strangers,” (Buck, Lee & Lasseter, 2013) or in *Moana* where the demi-god Maui calls Moana a princess because “[she] wear[s] a dress and ha[s] an animal sidekick” (Clements, Musker & Lasseter, 2016). Another feature of Neo-Disney is the hard turn towards digital animation rather than the primarily two-

This focus on digital may have resulted from the success of Pixar as a leader in animation and from the new direction that Pixar leaders would bring to the Walt Disney Animation Studios. Pixar was founded in 1986 when Steve Jobs purchased the film software company The Computer Division from George Lucas. Shortly afterwards, Disney and Pixar began to collaborate on the Computer Animation Production System (CAPS) (Pixar, 2019), which allowed Disney to be technologically innovative during the later half of the Eisner era (Pallant, 2011, p. 95-102). Pixar and Disney released Pixar’s first full-length movie, *Toy Story*, in 1995. Over the next ten years, the studios collaborated closely, before Disney announced in 2006 that it would buy Pixar, and Ed Catmull and John Lasseter would become leaders in Walt Disney Animation Studios (Pixar, 2019).

As Disney was delving into new technology, the digital age meant new rights and more increased visibility for queer people. In 2003, the Supreme Court decision in *Lawrence v. Texas* struck down laws criminalizing homosexuality throughout the country, saying, “The state cannot demean [individuals’] existence or control their identity by making their private sexual conduct a crime” (Weinmeyer, 2014, para. 20). Clinton’s controversial Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell policy was repealed in 2011, (Department
of Defense, 2011) allowing queer service members to serve openly and entitling their partners to benefits. The queer community experienced another win in 2015 when the legal right for same-sex couples to marry was assured in all 50 states by the Supreme Court ruling in Obergefell v. Hodges (Margolin, 2015, para. 1). More mainstream television shows, and even ones aimed at teens, began featuring queer characters and storylines, such as Glee, Modern Family, or Brooklyn Nine-Nine, and the rise of streaming services like Netflix allowed for even more focus on queer storylines in shows like Orange is the New Black or Sense8. Shows aimed at children such as Adventure Time and Steven Universe began to feature openly queer characters. Even several Disney movies featured brief nods to the queer community. In 2017 it was announced to much fanfare that the character LeFou would be gay in the live-action adaptation of Beauty and the Beast. The announcement that LeFou would be gay created a lot of buzz—both positive and negative (Lawler, 2017; Petit, 2017); however, in the movie, the only acknowledgement of his sexuality is in a scene where LeFou dances with another man. Perhaps predictably, the response was not positive, with fans feeling that the “exclusively-gay moment” had been overhyped (Thompson, 2017; Houlihan, 2017; Lawler, 2017; Forani, 2017). The sequel to Disney-Pixar’s Finding Nemo (2003), Finding Dory (2016) featured another blink-and-you’ll-miss-it gay moment where two women (presumably a couple, since one grabs the other’s arm) stare in shock as sea creatures steal and take over a baby stroller. Despite how fleeting these moments are, they generated backlash from the portion of American society still opposed to the increase in queer rights—for example, a theater in Alabama refused to show the live-action Beauty and the Beast remake due to the rumored gay scene (Petit, 2017).
Additionally, under the Trump administration, there have been attempts to undercut the gains the queer community has made—for example, in 2017, Trump tweeted that transgender people would no longer be allowed to serve in the military (Diamond, 2017) and the Supreme Court is currently deciding a case that will determine whether the queer community is protected by the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Gessen, 2019). Although the queer community has made great strides over the past fifty years to fight for their rights and place in society, that place is not certain yet. For this reason, it is important to look at whether or not media—especially media that queer children may be seeing—offers motifs or themes relatable to the queer experience to help queer people feel like they have a place in society. In order to read the themes or motifs in Disney movies queerly, this analysis will use queer theory.

Theory

This study will use queer theory paired with modified grounded theory in an effort to understand what queer themes are present in modern Disney movies, by examining the six original Disney movies released since 2010.

The History of Queer Theory. The term “queer theory” was first popularly coined by Teresa de Lauretis in her 1991 introduction to an issue of the feminist journal, *differences*. The term “queer,” though once pejorative, was selected because of the multiple connotations it embodies: reclaiming pride in an identity outside the mainstream, thinking about society in a critical way that seeks to undo its structures, or “queer” it, and the umbrella of people it describes (Halperin, 2003, p. 339-340). The study of queer people, of course, long predates 1991, whether that be in gay studies departments dedicated to understanding the cultures that arise among gay and lesbian people, in
medical departments seeking to understand why homosexuality exists by looking for a “gay gene,” or psychoanalysis dating back to Freud, who viewed homosexuality and nonconforming gender identities as aberrant (Kirsch, 2000, p. 53).

Queer theory is commonly described as having two main groups of scholars with different academic and theoretical focuses. The first wave of queer theory scholars focused on deconstructing systems that create power imbalances between heterosexual and marginalized sexualities (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009, p. 818). The second wave of queer scholars including queer of color scholars like Roderick Ferguson, Emma Perez and Andrea Smith, critiqued initial scholars’ lack of attention to how the intersection of different identities with queerness leads to very different experiences. The second wave of queer theory broadened its scope to embrace international politics and questions of globalization, racial, sexual and gender hierarchies, and war and terror (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009, p. 818). This analysis will use a first-wave focus because there are few characters of color to begin with in the six movies to be analyzed (only the characters in Big Hero 6 and Moana) and because as a white scholar, I do not want to speak to the meaning of characters of color without lived experience of being a person of color, thus foregrounding white perspectives on the experiences of people of color.

Queer theory is a critical theory and has roots in other critical approaches such as feminism and post-structuralism. Some theorists who provided the foundation for queer theory, such as Judith Butler, wrote from the lens of feminism. As such, there is a large overlap in how queer theory and other critical theories think of concepts such as gender, the self and society.
Queer Theory’s Assumptions. Queer theory’s theoretical origins are largely based in post-structuralist ideas of power, such as that of Michel Foucault (Jagose, 1996, p. 79). Foucault and other post-structuralists argue that there are no true “natural” categories—that is, pre-defined categories like gender and sexuality are more the result of discourse in society and power relations than they are reflections of any essential truth (Jagose, 1996, p. 80).

Queer theory assumes that power imbalances exist in society, and that these imbalances stem from a system of power that normalizes heterosexuality and stigmatizes what falls outside heterosexuality (Kirsch, 2000, p. 97). This group is necessarily broad, as heterosexuality stipulates not just attraction, but also sex and gender identity. This so-called heteronormativity creates a societal binary assumption that everyone is born with one of two possible biological sexes, male or female, and that one’s gender derives from one’s sex, and that one is attracted to others of the opposite sex. Queer theory seeks to trouble (or “queer”) the binaries of sex, gender and attraction (and the societal structures that arise from them) by destabilizing the distinctions between genders and the connection between sex, gender and attraction.

Judith Butler (1999) in her book, Gender Trouble, for example, suggested that we should think of gender not as an essential quality of a person. Rather, Butler conceptualized gender as a constant performance (p. 173)—that is, gender is created and understood through certain actions, be they dress, movement, speech style, or thoughts articulated, rather than some concrete aspect of the self.

One of the key aspects of queer theory is that it defies strict categorization and universal claims (Halperin, 2003). Instead, queer theory is constantly challenging society,
other academic disciplines, and itself. The goal of “queering” a text is to expose the assumptions society places on certain bodies and then challenge those assumptions from subversions in the text—for example, a person categorized as female in a narrative might subvert the societal assumptions placed on her by being attracted to other women or by eschewing a romantic partnership as the end goal of her story. Queer theory asks us to consider the ways in which we (and the media we consume) put ourselves in boxes and where the cracks are in those boxes. This Socratic spirit of challenging assumptions, norms and power distributions is a hallmark of queer theory (Jagose, 1996, p. 1).

**Queer Theory’s Approach to Communication.** Since the goal of queer theory is to question binaries and to trouble social categories that create power imbalances, the act of discourse is of the utmost importance. Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick both emphasized linguistic differentiation as key to social understanding in their work. This might mean emphasizing a distinction between sex and gender, and then arguing that gender is not binary and is in fact created in the act of discourse as feminist scholar Condit (1997) does, or that gender is a performative act (Butler, 1999). Queer theory draws on the ideas of Ferdinand de Saussure, arguing that language constructs the reality we inhabit and the way we can think about the world (Jagose, 1996, p. 79). Also important to the queer theory is the work of Jacques Lacan, who argued that the “self” is a taught concept. Even the idea of identity (also called subjectivity) is not inherent, but rather delivered to us through the vehicle of culture, and so is an ongoing, performative act (Jagose, 1996, p. 79). Queer theory examines communication as a means by which society (and societal differences) are created and maintained. Expectations are delivered to us from messages we receive in our families, in school, and in media, and we reflect
our acceptance or rejection of those expectations in our communication, whether that be through the actual words we say, our style of dress, our nonverbal behaviors and postures or our behaviors. Queer theory is useful as a critical theory because any act of communication can be read through a queer lens to expose structures and the ways those structures are upheld or broken down. This flexibility allows even texts that seem devoid of sexuality to be queered—including children’s media.

**Children’s Media and Queer Theory.** Because of childhood’s role as a liminal state of being—troubling the boundary between agency and lack thereof, of a stable self or identity and growth—queer theorists are often interested in studying children’s literature (Robinson, 2014). Owen (2010) pointed out that the child as a category is inherently troublesome and queer because we experience and understand childhood, as it were, retroactively through memories for most of our lives (p. 256). When we are children, we are typically not waxing poetic about the nature of children—that comes in adulthood. As adults we do not grant children full agency because we perceive them as flexible and incomplete as people—for example, think of children being told they are “too young” to know if they are gay or transgender—and so we when we write about children, we are writing about a category that we once inhabited but are no longer a part of, and through the lens of received cultural structures and ideas that we may not have accepted as children. If we attempt to understand a child as “a powerful, unpredictable, desiring agent… when we grant the child this kind of personhood, we no longer see a child” (Owen, 2010, p. 256). Children’s position as yet not fully educated in social structures and norms allow queer theorists the opportunity to imagine what new realities might be
created if the “naturalness” of heterosexuality were not taught as natural at all (Owen, 2010).

Scholars have sought to queer and theorize the concept of child. Miller (2014), along the lines of Owen (2010), pointed out the instability inherent in the definitional category of child, specifically as it relates to innocence. Children are considered naïve and innocent, unsullied by adult knowledge, meaning the adult’s role in protecting the child from the wickedness of the world is of the utmost importance (p. 125). At the same time, however, children are expected to learn about adult sexuality at some point—though numerous scandals have arisen due to the publishing of books aimed at children that feature homosexuality such as *Heather Has Two Mommies* (1989) or *And Tango Makes Three* (2005) (Miller, 2014, p. 121). As much anxiety as children with knowledge of adult sexuality, particularly as it falls outside of heterosexuality, seems to create, Miller asserted that young adults with such knowledge are even more culturally threatening (p. 132); however, these anxieties about sex do not translate into anxiety about “normative gender constructs” (p. 136). Children and young adults occupy a destabilizing space between being encouraged to uphold the societal norms while still being shielded from them. This tension led Owen (2015) to theorize adolescence as a moment of “in-between, neither subject [like the adult] nor object [like the child]” (p. 121). Owen noted the potential in adolescence as a site of resistance (particularly given the reputation of adolescence as a time of rebellion) to “disrupt the very systems that create the inside and the outside in hierarchical relation” (p. 130). Queer theorists see childhood and children’s media as ripe with theoretical possibility.
When queer theory has examined children’s media, it sometimes does so with an eye towards how gender and sexuality are presented. This research may stem from (or be combined with) feminist research on gender construction, which seeks answers to questions such as: What does it mean to be a woman or a man in our world? How does one learn about these roles? Queer theory assumes that media have an effect on our attitudes and behavior. This causal stance, especially as it relates to children, is supported by social learning theory (also called social cognitive theory), which says that children learn about cultural expectations for them from watching models such as parents or characters in media and then mimicking their behaviors. Children are then rewarded by those around them to the extent that they perform gender-appropriate behaviors (Coyne et al., 2019, p. 431; Bem, 1983, p. 599-601). This theory has been used to explain how children learn gender and sexuality; for example, Coyne, Linder, Rasmussen, Nelson and Birkbeck (2016) found that for kindergarten and preschool children, watching Disney princess movies increased female-stereotypical behavior in both girls and boys, but it seemed to have little effect on body esteem or prosocial behaviors unless parents were engaged in discussing the media with their children. This finding implies that although children are not just passive recipients of media, and family plays an important role in their behavioral development (Goldberg & Garcia, 2016), they do learn from what they see modeled in media. If children are watching media and in the process learning about sex and gender, what is being modeled for them?

Queer characters have increasingly been featured in mainstream media, but they tend to largely be white, male, cisgender (meaning their gender identity aligns with the gender they were assigned at birth based on their physical characteristics) and their
experiences may not represent the lived experiences of queer people (Floegel & Costello, 2019). Additionally, though there is still plenty of room to grow, media representations of men and women are changing; for example, Hine et al. (2018) reported similar findings after examining the gendered portrayals of several Disney princesses in movies from 2009-2016. The princesses in those movies showed more egalitarian traits (taking on the role of “rescuer,” or being assertive) and the princes tended to exhibit more feminine behaviors than in previous years. Given this, it is important to note that some historical signifiers of queerness by disrupting gender norms may not resonate with a modern audience. Other signifiers of queerness may still remain, such as the sense of “camp” as defined by Susan Sontag in Notes on Camp (1964) that many queer performance artists (like drag artists) still exhibit: a “mode of aestheticism…of seeing the world…not in terms of beauty, but in terms of degree of artifice, of stylization” (p. 2). Sweeney (2013) points to campiness as a signifier that allows Timon and Pumbaa in The Lion King to be read as a gay couple.

Ryan and Hermann-Wilmarth (2013) related queer theory’s roots as a literary theory (p. 147) to its utility as a way of reading and interpreting children’s media. As an example, they read Maurice Sendak’s Where the Wild Things Are with attention to destabilized gender categories, the creation of new worlds and spaces when everyday, dominant ones do not fit (p. 152), finding a new community (p. 153) and the ultimate realization that one can move between those two worlds and still maintain one’s identity (p. 154).

**Disney and Queer Theory.** As a driver of culture both in the USA and around the world, and as a way of transmitting cultural norms and values to children, Disney is a
worthy topic of academic study. From how Disney movies set expectations for what the
workplace will be like (Griffin, Piper, & Learmonth, 2018; Griffin, Harding, &
Learmonth, 2017), to analyses of the musicality of Disney movies (McGill, 2018) to
racial representation in Disney movies (Willetts, 2013; Goldman, 2013; Parasher, 2013;
Akita & Kenney, 2013; Barnd, 2013; Turner, 2013), fields ranging from film studies to
sociology to feminist studies to racial studies have scrutinized the movies that make up
the Magic Kingdom. Queer theory, by comparison, is relatively underutilized to study
Disney, and particularly so within the field of communication.

The choice to study Disney with regards to queerness (anything falling outside of
hegemonic heterosexuality) can seem an unusual choice, as Disney tries hard to appear
completely pure, without any sexuality inherent in their movies (Griffin, 2000, p. 3).
Numerous scholars have already looked at how Disney characters perform gender in a
traditional, conservative way (Do Rozario, 2004; Davis, 2007; Griffin, Harding &
Learmonth, 2017; Zarranz, 2007; Putnam, 2013; Primo, 2018; Sells, 1995) or in the
instance of Hine et al (2018) how they perform gender in new ways, with an almost
exclusive focus on Disney princess movies. By studying gender, these studies handle an
important topic in queer theory; however, they typically use a feminist perspective.

There are some studies that critically and thematically examine Disney movies
from the “classic” and “in-between” eras, (Byrne & McQuillan, 1999; Perea, 2018;
Griffin, Piper, and Learmonth, 2018; Guinta, 2018). Cuomo (1995), for example, wrote
an interesting analysis suggesting that the live-action, witchy, “spinsters” characters of
Mary Poppins and Eglantine Price (from Bedknobs and Broomsticks) can be read queerly,
but much of the scholarship looking at Disney has focused on movies from the Eisner era
with *Mulan* being a popular choice for queer analysis, due to the protagonist’s gender-bending (Law, 2018; Guinta, 2018; Key, 2015; Limbach, 2013).

Chris Pallant (2011) wrote an in-depth look at Disney animation through 2011 in his book *Demystifying Disney*; similarly, in his book, *Tinker Belles and Evil Queens*, Griffin (2000) examined how Disney and the queer community interact and overlap from the time of Walt Disney through the Eisner era. While both of these books offer rich perspectives on Disney (and Griffin’s particularly, through a queer lens), both are limited by their age. Much has changed in queer visibility between the early 2000s and the writing of this thesis. This creates a gap in the literature for queer analyses of more recent Disney animated movies.

Some recent analyses have focused on movies from the Neo-Disney era, such as Perea (2018) analyzing *Lilo and Stitch* from the perspective of a queer outsider, or Streiff and Dundes’ (2017) analysis of gender stereotypes in *Moana*. Resene (2017) examined Disney’s blockbuster, *Frozen*, as a metaphor for disability; however, the newest era of Disney remains understudied. Additionally, there has been very little study of Disney from a queer perspective in the field of communication. Lastly, a gap exists in the literature on Disney movies outside of princess movies. This study seeks to extend the literature by analyzing the six Disney films released in the last decade (2010-2020) through a queer lens. The movies to be analyzed are *Moana* (2016), *Zootopia* (2016), *Big Hero 6* (2014), *Frozen* (2013), *Wreck-It Ralph* (2012) and *Tangled* (2010). This selection features several princess movies (*Frozen, Tangled* and *Moana*) as well as non-princess
movies, and includes Disney’s recent turn to digital animation. This study will pair queer theory with modified grounded theory to conduct the analysis.

**Grounded Theory.** Grounded theory was first used and articulated by sociologists Barney Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss in their book *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research* (1967). Grounded theory, also called comparative analysis, is a method of building theory that is grounded in the data collected. Using the data, the scholar “generates conceptual categories or their properties… Then the evidence from which the category emerged is used to illustrate the concept” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 23). Though grounded theory’s roots are in sociology and anthropology (p. 22), it is also used in psychology and in communication as a means to develop theory. It has been applied to study advertising (Goulding, 2017), analyze stalking behaviors online (Huber & DeGroot, 2017) and study communication about the challenges of military life (Knobloch et al, 2018).

In communication, grounded theory has been used in the areas of impression management in computer-mediated communication environments (Becker & Stamp, 2005), how clients and analysts in the information systems field communicate (Urquhart, 1997) and crisis management communications for construction projects (Loosemore, 1999). Foster (2017) used a modified grounded theory approach to study how Target used bloggers and influencers in a swimwear campaign, and Einstein (2018) used grounded theory to understand how parenting blogs conform to gender stereotypes. Grounded theory is a means of looking for new relationships that may exist in the data by remaining open to discovery and using the researcher’s ontological position and experiences as an advantage for research. Traditionally, grounded theory also attempts to form a theory
based on the data; however, due to the limited scope of the data, this analysis will use a
modified grounded theory approach and not attempt to draw broad theoretical
conclusions based on six movies. Instead, overarching themes will be discussed with an
eye to what it may signify about future Disney movies.

Many different tropes or experiences may be relatable for queer folks; modified
grounded theory is a way to read movies with a “queer eye” and look for what instances
might arise without relying on common, perhaps degrading or stereotypical
representations of what it means to be queer or preconceived typologies of queerness in
movies (of which there are few in the queer Disney literature to even draw upon). Instead
of trying to impose a preconceived heuristic on the text (which would be against the spirit
of queer analysis to begin with), a modified grounded theory approach allows the text to
present itself and allows for more innovation in research.
METHOD

The goal of this study is to extend the literature on queerness and Disney in the communication field by using a queer lens and modified grounded theory to understand how modern Disney movies may reflect queer experiences. To select movies for this study, I looked only at movies released since 2000, since there has been some scholarly work done on movies prior to 2000. I used the Disney Animated Canon as the basis for this choice. Griffin, Piper and Learmonth (2018) used this list to decide which animated films Disney considers its masterpieces (p. 9). From this list, I looked for every Disney film released since 2010. The six films that will be examined are Tangled (2010), Wreck-It Ralph (2012), Frozen (2013), Big Hero 6 (2014), Zootopia (2016), and Moana (2016).

In selecting movies for this analysis, Pixar movies, live-action movies and sequels or remakes were not considered. Live-action movies by Disney span titles that immediately come to mind, like Mary Poppins or Pirates of the Caribbean to movies from subsidiaries owned by Disney, such as Miramax’s Pulp Fiction (Key, 2015, p. 279) so looking at them not only presents a genre challenge, but also does not get to the heart of what the average person associates with Disney, given that Disney built its success largely on animated movies. Additionally, the most important focus for this study is trying to understand how queer people might find their place in Disney, so I want to look at animated movies as the type of movie most closely associated with the Disney Company. These movies are important in part because of the powerful cultural teaching role that Disney plays; however, since I am not a child, I will not be attempting to look through the eyes of a child, and instead will be focusing on how queer people may see themselves or their experiences in Disney movies.
In the past few years, Disney has released a number of remakes or sequels; however, I am interested in looking at what Disney does with original storylines. Original storylines present an opportunity to examine how Disney is adjusting to a changing world, whereas remakes or sequels have an original text to which they are expected to stay loyal to a certain extent—for example, Disney recently announced that the character Ariel would be played by Black actress and singer Halle Bailey in their upcoming live-action remake and received backlash from audiences who expected a white Ariel (“Halle Bailey”, 2019; Kroll, 2019; Chiu, 2019). Looking at the ways in which Disney extends and perhaps modifies our understanding of existing characters through live-action remakes and sequels to animated movies would be a compelling area for future analysis. Similarly, in order to limit the scope of this analysis, movies created with Pixar have been excluded, but Disney-Pixar movies do offer a lot in the way of original stories and profit for the company, so they could be subjects for future study.

I will be using modified grounded theory to view Disney’s recent movies through a queer lens. As a Disney fan, I have seen all six movies prior to this writing. I will be watching the movies and looking for additional, perhaps novel instances where Disney “queers” a norm or an expectation in a way that (given that Disney has yet to feature an openly queer protagonist in an animated movie) queer people may see their lived experiences reflected on the silver screen. I will let these categories arise organically from the actual content of the films, and provide an explanation of why they stand out. I will watch the films until no new “queer” instances arise, at which point I will synthesize the recorded instances, looking for relationships or patterns.
Because queer theory is continually questioning itself and the texts it critiques, I will be using a modified grounded theory approach and, instead of attempting to create a systematic, theoretical explanation for the instances, I will move to a critique of the queer moments in the films. To conclude this thesis, I will discuss what the takeaways from these movies are for queer people who may be watching. What messages do these movies communicate about queer people’s place in society?
PLOT SUMMARIES

A brief plot synopsis of each of the six films is provided here for readers who may be unfamiliar with the movies in order to set the stage for the analysis. After the plot synopses, the analysis of instances of queerness will begin.

Tangled

In the kingdom of Corona, a drop of sunlight fell from the sky to create a magical flower with the power to give anyone who sang to it eternal youth. Its power is originally only known by the witch, Mother Goethel, who uses it to stay young and conceals it from others, but when the pregnant queen of Corona falls deathly ill, palace guards find the flower and take it. The flower is made into a healing drink for the queen, and she gives birth to a baby with long, blond hair. Mother Goethel sneaks into the castle nursery at night and discovers that the baby’s hair has the same youth restoring powers as the flower, but when it is cut the hair turns brown and loses its power.

Mother Goethel kidnaps the baby Rapunzel and hides her away in a tower, raising her there as her own for 18 years, using Rapunzel’s hair to keep herself young. The king and queen of Corona, meanwhile, have a lantern ceremony every year where the whole kingdom sends up paper lanterns as a sign for the lost princess to come home. Little Rapunzel notices these lanterns growing up, but she does not know what they are.

Rapunzel grows up with no one but her pet chameleon, Pascal, to keep her company. On her 18th birthday, she asks Mother Goethel to take her to the kingdom to see the floating lanterns. Goethel refuses, saying the outside world is too dangerous for Rapunzel and that the lights are only stars. Goethel leaves for the day, and in the meantime, the thief Flynn Rider, who is running from the palace guards and a particularly
diligent palace horse named Maximus, climbs Rapunzel’s tower. Rapunzel knocks him out with a frying pan and hides him in her wardrobe, hoping to use her triumph to prove to Mother Goethel that she can handle herself in the outside world. Mother Goethel yells at Rapunzel to stop asking about the lights, so Rapunzel requests paints for her birthday, knowing it is a three day journey. Goethel agrees, and after she leaves, Rapunzel revives Flynn Rider and negotiates a deal for him to take her to the kingdom in exchange for her telling him where she hid the crown he had stolen from the palace.

Flynn Rider and Rapunzel start out on their journey. In a bid to scare Rapunzel, who is naïve and jumpy, Flynn takes her to the thug tavern, The Snuggly Duckling. Rapunzel ends up befriending the ruffians, who help her and Flynn escape when palace guards come looking for Flynn Rider. In the meantime, Mother Goethel discovers Rapunzel is missing and strikes a deal with two twin thugs Flynn Rider had betrayed to help her reclaim Rapunzel and get revenge on Flynn Rider.

Escaping the palace guards takes Flynn and Rapunzel into a cave, which begins flooding. Rapunzel uses her hair’s powers to create light to allow the two to find a path to escape, and the near-death experience brings the two closer. Flynn reveals that his real name is Eugene Fitzherbert and tells Rapunzel about his childhood, and Rapunzel opens up about her life with Mother Goethel. When Flynn leaves to collect some firewood, Mother Goethel (who was hiding in the woods) tries to convince Rapunzel once more to come back to the tower with her. Rapunzel refuses again, and Goethel vanishes.

Rapunzel and Flynn continue to the palace, where they take place in lantern festival activities and then head to boats to get a good view of the lanterns. Flynn spots the twin thugs on the shore and goes to try and settle things with them, assuring Rapunzel
he will be right back. The twin thugs overpower Flynn and tie him up in a boat to trick Rapunzel into thinking he abandoned her. The thugs try to kidnap Rapunzel, when Mother Goethel appears and knocks them out, helping Rapunzel escape back to the tower.

Initially, Rapunzel is sad about Flynn leaving her, but she begins to piece together that she is the lost princess. She confronts Mother Goethel and tries to leave, leading Mother Goethel to chain her up to hold her prisoner. Meanwhile at the kingdom, Flynn is discovered on the boat and taken to be hanged at dawn for stealing the crown. The thugs from The Snuggly Duckling help him break out to rescue Rapunzel.

Flynn climbs Rapunzel’s tower and is stabbed upon climbing through the window by Mother Goethel. Rapunzel begs for the chance to heal Flynn, promising to stay with Goethel if she lets her heal him. Goethel relents, and as Rapunzel leans in to heal Flynn with her hair, Flynn takes a piece of broken glass and cuts Rapunzel’s hair, rendering it powerless and causing Goethel’s youth to fade quickly. As Goethel backs up and clutches her face in agony, Pascal pulls on a piece of fabric to trip her. Goethel falls out the window and when her cape hits the ground, she is only dust.

Rapunzel cries over Flynn, who seems to be dead. Her tears still have the power from the sunlight, and she is able to heal him. They head to the kingdom where Rapunzel is reunited with her biological parents and takes on her role as princess. Flynn and the thugs are forgiven their crimes, and Flynn and Rapunzel get engaged. Everyone lives happily ever after.
**Wreck-It Ralph**

*Wreck-It Ralph* is set in the video game consoles in an arcade. Ralph is the “bad guy” of the game Fix-It Felix Jr. Ralph has done his job for thirty years, but he is getting tired of living in the dump and being treated with fear and mistrust by the Nicelanders. He even goes to Bad Guys Anonymous to try and resolve his frustration about being a bad guy. The other video game villains encourage him to accept his place as a villain and not to “go Turbo” (referring to a video game character who was so jealous of another racing game that he game-jumped into the other game, ultimately crashing it, resulting in both games being unplugged). Ralph is still dissatisfied; this melancholy is amplified when he returns to his game and sees the Nicelander residents of his game having a thirtieth anniversary party without inviting him. Ralph confronts them, and they say if Ralph could earn a medal, they would let him into their society.

Ralph begins to think about how he can earn a medal and learns it is possible in a game called *Hero’s Duty*. The game’s main threats are cybugs, mechanical bugs who do not know they are in a game. They are programmed only to consume and take on the characteristics of whatever they consume. Ralph tries to join the game, but after determining the game is too scary, he uses the reset between gamers to climb the tower and claim the medal. Ralph grabs the medal and exits Hero’s Duty in an escape pod, unwittingly bringing a cybug along with him. The pod blasts through the arcade and crash-lands in the candy-themed racing game, *Sugar Rush*. In the crash, Ralph loses his medal, which is claimed by Vanelope von Schweetz, who believes it is a gold coin that will allow her to race. Ralph tries to steal his medal back, disrupting *Sugar Rush*’s race and drawing the ire of the game’s leader, King Candy.
Meanwhile, Fix-It Felix Jr. is having a crisis without Ralph. The gamers are confused about Ralph’s disappearance and tell the arcade owner the game is broken. The owner puts an out-of-order sign on the game and says if it is not working in the morning, he will unplug the game. Felix goes out to hunt for Ralph. On the way, he meets Calhoun, the female sergeant from Hero’s Duty, who is trying to track down the missing cybug. The two team up and make their way into Sugar Rush.

Ralph escapes King Candy’s castle and hides out. After seeing Vanellope bullied by the other Sugar Rush residents for being a “glitch” (an unintended, faulty part of the game), Ralph takes pity on her, agreeing to help her race, reset the game, make her a playable character and get his medal back. They create a car and practice driving. En route to the race, Ralph encounters King Candy, who convinces him it would be dangerous for everyone (including Vanellope) to allow her to race. Once Vanellope returns, Ralph tries to persuade her not to race. When Vanellope is unconvinced, Ralph destroys her car and returns to his own game.

Back in Fix-It Felix Jr., Nicelander Gene is the only resident. He tells Ralph the other Nicelanders have left in order to ensure they are not deleted forever when the game is unplugged, and gives Ralph the key to the penthouse. Ralph throws his medal at the game’s glass, where it knocks the out-of-order sign askew, allowing him to see an image of Vanellope on the side of the Sugar Rush console.

Meanwhile, Calhoun and Felix are bonding; however, after Felix inadvertently gives Calhoun a PTSD flashback, they split up and Calhoun discovers that the cybug in Sugar Rush has multiplied and has thousands of eggs.
Ralph re-enters *Sugar Rush* and finds King Candy’s assistant, Sour Bill. He learns the residents of *Sugar Rush* cannot remember why Vanellope is considered a glitch because King Candy locked up their memories. He also learns Felix and Vanellope are being held prisoner. Ralph breaks Felix out of jail and they team up to fix the problems.

Felix repairs Vanellope’s car and Ralph breaks her out of jail. She heads to the race. During the race, King Candy (who is in second place) begins to glitch and reveals he is actually Turbo. Vanellope is able to use her glitch to maintain her lead and escape King Candy, who is eaten by a cybug. The cybugs begin destroying the game and Calhoun orders everyone to leave for the safety of the arcade. The problem is that, as a glitch, Vanellope cannot leave the game, and the finish line for the race was destroyed by the cybugs. Calhoun explains without without a beacon to attract and burn the cybugs, there is no way to stop them. Inspired, Ralph punches some Mentos into a distant mountain of diet cola to create a beacon.

After a confrontation with a half-cybug King Candy, Ralph escapes and creates a huge blast, attracting all the cybugs (including King Candy) and destroying them. Ralph makes his way back to his friends. Felix repairs the finish line, Vanellope crosses it and the game is reset.

When the game resets, Vanellope’s true identity, Princess Vanellope von Schweetz, is revealed. She rejects the title, eschewing her pink princess outfit for her racing garb and instituting a constitutional democracy with herself as president. Calhoun and Felix get married, and Ralph and Felix work together to bring justice to Fix-It Felix Jr., incorporating homeless characters whose games were unplugged into the game. Fix-It
Felix Jr. and *Sugar Rush* become more popular than ever and everyone lives happily ever after.

**Frozen**

In the Nordic kingdom of Arendelle, there are two princesses, Elsa, the older sister and Anna, the younger one. When they are children, the sisters are very close. They play in the castle using Elsa’s ice powers. One night, the play goes astray and Elsa accidentally strikes Anna in the head with ice. The king and queen rush the princesses to the woods where the trolls live to seek help for Anna. The head troll, Grandpabby, is able to fix the harm by removing all memories of magic and replacing them with memories of normal wintertime fun. He also warns Elsa that her powers will get stronger over time, and that they may cause people to fear her. This frightens Elsa, but her parents reassure the troll that she will be able to learn to control the powers, and that in the meantime they would isolate her.

Time passes and Elsa is isolated from everyone, including Anna, who does not understand why the change happened. As predicted, Elsa’s powers get stronger as she gets older. She begins wearing gloves all the time to conceal and control her powers. One day when Elsa is 18 and Anna is 15, their parents head on a boat voyage that is supposed to last two weeks, leaving the princesses at the castle. Their boat is destroyed in a storm, and the princesses are orphaned.

Elsa maintains her isolation for the next three years, until she comes of age and is to be crowned. The palace gates are opened, to Anna’s delight and Elsa’s dread, for one day in honor of the coronation. Nobles from around the world come in honor of Elsa’s coronation, and this is how Anna meets Hans. She and Hans hit it off at the party after the
coronation, and Hans asks Anna to marry him. Anna agrees and the newly engaged
couple go to Elsa to seek her blessing. Elsa refuses to bless the marriage because the
couple barely know each other, which leads to a fight between the sisters. Anna
complains that Elsa only knows how to shut others out and that she is tired of living in
isolation. Hurt, Elsa tells Anna to leave if she is so unhappy. She tells the guards to end
the party and shut the gates, and she moves to close the doors. Anna grabs Elsa’s glove as
she walks by and demands to know what Elsa is so afraid of. Elsa reacts angrily,
accidentally shooting ice and revealing her powers. No one is hurt, but attendees at the
party are shocked and scared.

Elsa flees the scene and heads up the North Mountain to avoid being around
anyone. Meanwhile, the fjord and all of Arendelle freeze over in the middle of summer
and a heavy layer of snow falls. Elsa feels a new sense of freedom as she escapes the
constraints of her life in Arendelle, and she builds an ice palace for herself on the North
Mountain.

Anna sets out after her sister to get her to restore the summer, leaving Hans in
charge of Arendelle. Anna’s horse bucks her off and runs away, so she is forced to take
shelter at Wandering Oaken’s Trading Post and Sauna, where she meets the ice-seller,
Kristoff and his reindeer Sven. Anna pays for supplies in exchange for Kristoff’s
assistance going up the mountain. On the way, they meet Olaf the snowman that Elsa
unknowingly brought to life. Olaf helps guide them to Elsa’s palace.

At the ice palace, Anna tries to bring Elsa back to Arendelle, but Elsa refuses,
saying it is safer for everyone if she stays where she is. Anna points out that all of
Arendelle is covered in snow and that they need Elsa to fix it. In an emotional outburst at
this news, Elsa puts ice in Anna’s heart and she and Kristoff leave, chased by an enormous snow monster that Elsa creates. After escaping the snow monster, Anna’s hair begins to turn white because of the magic at work in her heart. Kristoff promises to take her to his friends who can fix the situation.

Back in Arendelle, Anna’s horse returns without her. This causes the Duke of Weselton, a man who was suspicious of Elsa the time her powers were revealed, to assume the worst. Hans also begins to worry and saddles up to follow Anna. The Duke sends two of his men along under orders to kill Elsa, should they find her. The rescue party makes it up the North Mountain, past the snow monster and to Queen Elsa. They fight, and Elsa is taken captive.

Meanwhile, Kristoff has taken Anna to see the trolls who raised him and Sven. The trolls are excited, thinking Kristoff has brought Anna back to get married; however, the mood is dampened after Anna becomes very weak. Grandpabby is unable to remove the magic because it is in Anna’s heart, but he does share that the solution to the problem is an act of true love. The other trolls immediately suggest a true love’s kiss, so Kristoff, Anna and Olaf set off to Arendelle so Anna can kiss Hans. Kristoff gets Anna safely to Arendelle’s gates and heads back out with Sven.

Anna is taken in to Hans, and the two are left alone. Anna explains the situation, but rather than kissing her, Hans leaves her alone while revealing his true motive to marry into power in Arendelle and kill Elsa. He goes to convince the other nobles that Anna is dead and that Elsa is responsible.

When the nobles move to convict Elsa and punish her with death, they discover that she has broken out of her cell and that the snowstorm has intensified. Meanwhile in a
different part of the castle, Olaf is able to find Anna and help keep her warm when he spots Kristoff coming down the mountain, alarmed by the increase in bad weather. Anna begins to make her way across the frozen fjord to Kristoff for a true love’s kiss. Along the way, she spots Hans, who has told Elsa that Anna is dead because of her. Elsa collapses in grief and all of the flurries in the air are frozen in place—Anna sees Hans raise a sword to strike Elsa and forgoes her kiss to place herself between her sister and Hans. Anna’s heart completely freezes, and she is turned to ice just as Hans brings his sword down. Hans’s sword shatters, causing him to be knocked backwards and unconscious on the ice. Elsa, Olaf and Kristoff, who can all see the frozen Anna begin to grieve.

Anna slowly begins to thaw and everyone is relieved. Elsa is shocked that Anna would sacrifice herself for her, to which Anna responds that she loves her. Olaf points out that this was the act of true love that thawed a frozen heart. Elsa is inspired and channels love in order to thaw Arendelle. The nobles, watching this from the palace balcony cheer as summer is restored. One of the nobles takes Hans in the brig of his ship back to his home kingdom for punishment, Arendelle ceases trade with Weselton, and Kristoff is made the official ice master of Arendelle. Kristoff and Anna kiss, Elsa is reaccepted back into Arendelle and everyone lives happily ever after.

**Big Hero 6**

In the futuristic city of San Fransokyo, 14-year-old genius Hiro uses his spare time to build robots for betting on illegal bot fights. His older brother Tadashi gets him out of a close call where Hiro is almost beaten up by thugs after winning big against a crime boss. This narrow escape prompts Tadashi to try and convince his brother to use
his brain for something productive and enroll at the college Tadashi attends. Hiro is
dismissive of this idea at first, but after being taken along to Tadashi’s lab and meeting
his friends, Wasabi, Honey Lemon, Go-go, and Fred, as well as Tadashi’s mentor,
Professor Callaghan, a well-known robotics professor, Hiro is inspired to apply.

In order to gain acceptance at the college, potential students have to develop a
cool new technology to show off at a student showcase. Hiro is inspired to adapt a
technology he had been using in his fighter bots to create microbots for the showcase. His
presentation is wildly successful, and the technology billionaire Alistair Krei offers to
purchase Hiro’s technology. Professor Callaghan offers Hiro a place at the college but
warns him not to take Krei’s offer. Hiro listens to Callaghan and turns down Krei’s offer.
As Krei walks away, Tadashi notices that he almost took Hiro’s microbot, which he
returns.

After the showcase, Tadashi shares how proud he is of Hiro, but their heartfelt
moment is cut short when a fire breaks out in the convention center. Tadashi runs back
into the building to try and help Callaghan, who is still inside, and he is killed in the fire.
After Tadashi’s death, Hiro sinks into a depression, refusing to eat or see anyone and
getting back into bot-fighting.

One day Hiro accidentally activates Tadashi’s project, a personal healthcare robot
named Baymax. Baymax tries to treat Hiro, noticing that he is in a bad mood. He also
notices that Hiro’s only remaining microbot is pushing against the wall of the glass
container it is in. He asks Hiro about it, who says it is broken. Baymax asks if knowing
where the microbot wishes to go will help Hiro’s mood. Hiro sarcastically agrees, but
Baymax takes it as sincere and leaves, prompting Hiro to chase after him. They wind up
at an abandoned factory where they see that Hiro’s microbots are being mass-produced by a man in a kabuki mask, who chases them away. Hiro and Baymax get no help from the police, so Hiro decides to take justice into his own hands.

Hiro upgrades Baymax with fighting skills and they set out again to find the masked man. Unbeknownst to Hiro, his friends were called by Baymax and are able to follow them in Wasabi’s car to the pier where Hiro and Baymax are trying to confront the masked man. After the interaction goes south, Hiro and Baymax hop into the car with Wasabi and his other friends to try and make a getaway. The man in the kabuki mask chases the group over the edge of the pier where the car falls into the water and the man walks away, assuming his work is done. The teens are saved by Baymax’s flotation abilities.

The group heads to Fred’s mansion where they postulate that the man in the mask must be Krei, and they develop technology to help them fight him. During this process, Baymax notes that Hiro’s emotional state is improving and that he seems to be healing. The group track the man in the kabuki mask to a deserted island laboratory and learn that Krei was responsible for a pilot being lost in hyperspace when one of his projects failed during a demonstration for investors. They also run into the masked man and discover that he is actually Callaghan. This discovery throws Hiro into a rage because he blames Callaghan for not saving Tadashi, and he orders Baymax to kill Callaghan by removing Baymax’s healthcare chip that forbids him from injuring a human being. Just before Baymax can terminate Callaghan, Honey Lemon is able to restore his healthcare chip.

Hiro leaves the island with Baymax in a rage, and back in his garage, tries to upgrade Baymax more so that the next time he sees Callaghan, he will be able to kill him.
Baymax refuses to allow Hiro to access his chip port, and instead shows him footage of Tadashi. This reminder of Tadashi’s good heart breaks through Hiro’s anger, and he begins to cry. His friends return to the garage and tell Hiro why Callaghan was so mad at Krei and wanted the microbots—the pilot that was lost in the demonstration was his daughter.

The group formulates a plot to defeat Callaghan in a non-lethal way. They are able to stop Callaghan and turn him over to the police when Baymax notices a life sign coming from the portal that Callaghan had used Hiro’s microbots to reassemble. Hiro and Baymax head through the portal and find the lost pilot, still alive. On their way back out of the portal, Baymax’s thrusters are destroyed. He is able to push Hiro and the pilot out, but Baymax is lost to hyperspace.

This journey has helped Hiro heal. He spends time with friends, enrolls in college and is active with his aunt again. One day he notices Baymax’s healthcare chip was saved in the glove he used to push Hiro and the pilot out of the portal. Hiro rebuilds Baymax and restores his healthcare chip, and the two (along with Hiro’s friends) become San Fransokyo’s superheroes. They all live happily ever after.

**Zootopia**

*Zootopia* begins with a young Judy Hopps in the small town of Bunnyburrow explaining that in the past, the world was divided into predators and prey, but over time the two groups evolved to live together and that in the nearby city of Zootopia, anyone could be anything they want to be. To her parents’ chagrin and to the amusement and doubt of most of the predators in her life, Judy wants to be the first bunny cop. Despite her parents’ pleas for Judy to settle for a life as a carrot farmer, Judy goes through police
academy and learns how to use her strengths (such as big feet and small size) to her advantage. She graduates top of her class at the academy and is hired as Zootopia’s first bunny cop as part of Zootopia Mayor Lionheart’s Mammal Inclusion Initiative. Judy moves to Zootopia and lives in a tiny apartment next to loud neighbors, but she is excited to start her new cosmopolitan life.

On her first day at the ZPD, Judy is disappointed when she is assigned to parking duty. Eager to prove her worth as a “real cop” and not a meter maid, Judy completes her first day with gusto, but she is disappointed that the citizens of Zootopia only see her as a nuisance. While on duty, she notices a fox going into an elephant ice cream shop, seemingly with his small son. The fox tries to buy a jumbo pop for his son, but the elephant refuses him service, pointing to a sign that reads, “No foxes allowed.” Seeing this discrimination makes Judy mad, and she demands that the elephant serve the fox in order to avoid being shut down for a health code violation she has also noticed. The fox goes to pay for the jumbo pop but discovers he has forgotten his wallet at home, so Judy covers the cost of the treat. The older fox introduces himself as Nick Wilde, and the two part ways. Later that same day, Judy discovers she has inadvertently aided Nick in running a scam as he melts down the jumbo pop and resells various parts around Zootopia.

Judy video chats her parents when she gets home in the evening for support in her new role. Her parents are supportive, but not in the way that Judy had hoped—they are thrilled she is a meter maid and not a “real cop” because they perceive it as safe and have their doubts about the big city.
The next day, Judy is back on parking duty, when she witnesses a robbery in progress. Excited by the opportunity to prove her worth to her higher-ups, Judy gives chase. She tracks the criminal through Zootopia and is able to recover the stolen bag full seemingly of moldy onions. Her boss, Chief Bogo is not impressed and yells at Judy for abandoning her position. At this point the distressed Mrs. Otterton runs into Bogo’s office to plead for more resources to be put towards her husband’s disappearance case. Judy agrees to help her. After Mrs. Otterton leaves the room, Chief Bogo tells Judy she is fired and that she is to tell Otterton that she cannot take his case; however, as Judy is leaving the office, Assistant Mayor Bellwether is finishing a conversation with Mrs. Otterton about Judy’s promise, and texts the news to Mayor Lionheart. Trapped by political pressure, Bogo gives Judy 48 hours to solve the case or be fired.

Judy’s only lead is a photo of Mr. Otterton’s last known sighting, but spying Nick Wilde’s back in the picture, she goes to him for help. Nick is initially opposed to helping a cop, but after Judy threatens him with a recording of him admitting to tax fraud, he agrees to help her. They head throughout the city on the trail of Emmett Otterton. Eventually they discover that predators around the city seem to be reverting to their old predatory ways (“going savage”) and going missing. They discover all the missing predators, still in their savage state, in a top-secret lab. Nick and Judy sneak in and record Mayor Lionheart running the lab. With Judy’s evidence in hand, the ZPD arrests Mayor Lionheart, who insists he was not the one behind the predators going savage.

After the stunning arrest by a rookie cop, Judy is asked to give a media appearance. As she talks to the press, she suggests that the reason predators are going savage might be biological— which Nick takes offense to as small-minded thinking. The
press conference throws Zootopia into a panic, particularly as more predators continue to go savage.

The ZPD want to make Judy the face of the department, but after seeing the chaos that her press conference caused, Judy says she needs to take a step out of the limelight, so she returns to Bunnyburrow to farm carrots with her parents. In Bunnyburrow, Judy learns that her parents are working with her childhood bully, a fox named Gideon Grey, because Judy made them question their prejudices against foxes. She also learns that a certain variety of onions, similar to the ones she recovered in the robbery, cause animals regardless of species to go savage.

Judy returns to Zootopia and makes amends with Nick, and together they track down the robber who was stealing the onions. He directs them to a lab where the onions are being used. Nick and Judy sneak into the lab and overhear the ram that runs the lab discussing how he has been using a serum developed from the onions to dart targeted predators. Judy and Nick manage to steal some of the serum to take as evidence, but destroy the lab in the process. After they escape, they try to head directly to the ZPD by cutting through a building. They are intercepted by Assistant Mayor Bellwether, who has a suspicious amount of knowledge. Bellwether turns on the pair, instructing her cronies to dart Nick. As Nick chases Judy, Bellwether explains her plot to make the predators go savage and use fear to unite the prey in the city (90% of the Zootopia population) to keep herself in charge. It looks as though Nick has bit Judy; however, they were acting (Nick had switched out the paintball-esque darts earlier for blueberries from the Hopps’s farm), buying time for the ZPD to arrive. Judy had been recording Bellwether’s monologue, so Bellwether is arrested, Lionheart is released from jail and Judy is able to return to her
police work. Nick even goes through the police academy and becomes Zootopia’s first fox cop. Judy and Nick become partners and continue busting criminals together, and everyone lives happily ever after.

Moana

On the island of Motunui, things have been done the same way for generations. The most important rule is not to sail beyond the reef. Moana is posed to eventually take over her father’s role as chief on the island, but ever since she was a toddler, she has longed to be on the sea.

When Moana is little, she learns from her grandmother the story of how the demigod Maui stole the heart of the mother island, Te Fiti. The same day she has a magical experience where the ocean gives her a unique, green rock. As Moana gets older, she begins to think she dreamed the experience as she starts to learn about her role on the island. Moana begins to reluctantly accept her role as chief and starts practicing the kind of decision-making and leadership she will need to be in charge one day. When the coconuts on their island start turning black inside and the fishing nets turn up empty, Moana suggests that they start fishing past the reef. Her father gets angry at her and yells at her, thinking she was past her desire to go out to sea. Frustrated by her conviction that there is more opportunity beyond the reef and determined to prove her father wrong, Moana tries to set out on her own in a boat, but because she does not know how to sail, she is quickly almost drowned and returns to the safety of shore. Moana finds understanding with her grandmother, who tells her that she should listen to her heart. She takes Moana to a cave on the island where many large boats are stowed away, and Moana discovers that in the past, her people were voyagers.
Her grandmother shares that due to Maui stealing the heart of Te Fiti, the oceans became dangerous and their people stopped voyaging. However, the same sickness that spread throughout the ocean was bound to reach Motunui eventually, and so someone would need to find Maui and get him to restore the heart of Te Fiti. Moana’s grandmother also gives her the green rock, the heart of Te Fiti, and says that she was there watching the day the ocean gave it to Moana. The ocean chose Moana to take the journey to restore the heart.

Excited by this news, and eager to learn how to sail, Moana rushes to where her father is holding a meeting with the island council and announces that their people were voyagers and could voyage again. The chief becomes angered and takes Moana outside, dismisses the heart of Te Fiti as just a rock and seems poised to say more, when it is discovered that Moana’s grandmother is deathly ill.

Moana and her father rush to her grandmother’s side—her grandmother gives Moana her shell locket to hold the heart of Te Fiti and tells her to go, saying that she will be with her in spirit. Moana heads out, and as she leaves, she sees a spirit in the shape of a manta ray (which represents her grandmother) gliding through the ocean and guiding her past the reef.

At sea, Moana discovers that the very stupid chicken, Hei Hei, has stowed away on her boat. She struggles to sail, and asks the ocean for help. The weather soon turns to a storm and Moana and her boat are washed up on an island where Maui has been stranded for years. Maui tries to steal Moana’s boat, but the ocean ensures that Moana is returned to the boat each time Maui tries to avoid her. Moana explains that Maui has to return the heart to Te Fiti, but he is scared to. Their journey together across the sea is reluctant at
first, but through experiences like fighting Kakamora (coconut pirates) and the evil crab Tamatoa to reclaim Maui’s magical fishhook, the two become friends. Moana learns that Maui stole the heart as part of his ongoing quest to win the love of humans after his human parents had rejected him as a baby and threw him into the ocean, and Maui teaches Moana wayfinding. Together, the two try to defeat the lava monster, Te Kā, who guards the entrance to Te Fiti. In the battle, Maui’s fishhook is nearly destroyed completely, and he leaves Moana, telling her she should give up.

Moana is about to give up and head home when the spirit of her grandmother appears to her and reassures her. Moana goes to take on Te Kā one more time, going around her instead of trying to fight her. She succeeds with help from Maui, who had a change of heart and returned. As she passes Te Kā, Moana discovers that Te Fiti is missing. She realizes that Te Kā is Te Fiti in another form, and asks the ocean to allow Te Kā to come to her. Moana sings to calm Te Kā and restores the heart. Instantly, Te Kā’s lava exterior falls away, revealing a green goddess who immediately goes about restoring the original island. Maui apologizes for stealing the heart, and Te Fiti gifts him a new fishhook. She gives Moana a new boat, and Moana sails home. Moana leads her people as voyagers once again, and they all live happily ever after.
ANALYSIS

I watched the six original Disney movies released between 2010 and 2020, *Tangled, Wreck-It Ralph, Frozen, Big Hero 6, Zootopia* and *Moana* multiple times, taking notes about any moments that stood out to me as queer. I considered a movie “finished” when I did not notice anything new and began rewriting the same notes. For most movies, this took four viewings, but for *Big Hero 6* and *Zootopia* this happened after three viewings. From the notes I took, I was able to create six broad categories that describe the instances of queering in Disney movies—instances that expose the assumptions society places on certain bodies and challenge those assumptions, looking for preconceived ideas and categorizations present within the narrative and on the meta-narrative or societal scale, and where the cracks are in those. These categories are the queering of Disney logic, the queering of “appropriate” through adult themes, the queering of power and violence, villainous queerness, heroic queerness and queer acceptance. In this section, I will move through each category that was created based on the analysis, describing what each one means and the instances that fall in each category.

**The Queering of Disney Logic**

Since 2000 when the last major analysis of queerness in Disney movies was conducted (Griffin, 2000), Disney movies have changed in ways that subvert our expectations for “Disney movies” as part of a genre. This shift began during the Renaissance era with new leadership in Disney and active princesses with agency and continues through the Neo-Disney era. This category was created to describe moments in Disney movies that queer our understanding of what we can expect from a Disney movie, be it how princesses are depicted, how protagonists can achieve their goals or plot
devices like the “act of true love” or how villains are handled. The earliest movie in this group to begin queering Disney logic is *Wreck-It Ralph*.

In the world of Disney, being a princess is a prized social position, and even female protagonists in other movies who are not princesses through family or marriage are treated as a form of royalty by the Disney Company in their promotional materials. In *Tangled*, a crucial plot point involves Rapunzel discovering she is the kingdom of Corona’s lost princess. Additionally, Disney princesses are unfailingly kind and understanding. In *Wreck-It Ralph*, part of the resolution—after the villainous King Candy is killed and Vanellope von Schweetz drives her race car over the video game *Sugar Rush*’s finish line—is that the video game’s code is restored, revealing that Vanellope is actually princess Vanellope von Schweetz, complete with a frilly pink dress. The other game characters, who had spent much of the film bullying Vanellope for her status as a “glitch,” show some remorse after their memories are restored. Vanellope first queers our expectations for how a princess should act by stating that everyone who was mean to her while the game’s code was disrupted would be executed, leading to a horrified reaction from Fix-It Felix (the hero of Ralph’s game), an approving reaction from Calhoun, and tears from Vanellope’s fellow *Sugar Rush* residents. Eventually, Vanellope reveals that she is joking. Ralph comes around, saying, “Wow! So this is the real you… a princess.” (Moore, Johnston & Reardon, 2012), to which Vanellope replies, “Aw, Ralph, what are you, nuts? Come on, this isn’t me! THIS is me” (Moore, Johnston & Reardon, 2012) and glitches out of her princess garb into her racer clothes, a green hoodie with a black skirt, striped tights and tennis shoes. She rejects the expectations for princesses to be regal, refined, and gentle, as well as the hyper-feminine princess aesthetics. And unlike
previous Disney princesses (such as Princess Jasmine) who have struggled with their choices to reject their positions as princesses, Vanellope does not seem troubled: “Look, the code may say I’m a princess, but I know who I really am, Ralph I’m a racer with the coolest superpower ever!” (Moore, Johnston & Reardon, 2012).

Vanellope even goes a step further in queering Disney logic by rejecting the role of royalty entirely. A police officer asks who will lead the residents of Sugar Rush if not a princess, to which Vanellope responds that she is picturing a constitutional democracy with herself as the President. This is a further subversion of what is expected from Disney movies because it is a direct reference to the world that we live in and starts to queer the border that has previously been established where the world of Disney operates completely differently than our real world. An interesting note here is that even though she redesigns the power structure in Sugar Rush, Vanellope still puts herself at the top, reinforcing the element of Disney logic that good people will be rewarded and ultimately triumph over evil.

Moana also playfully challenges the notion of a princess in the boat scene with Maui described earlier, where she asserts she is not a princess but rather the chief’s daughter, and Maui responds that if someone wears a dress and has an animal sidekick, they are a princess (Clements, Musker & Lasseter, 2016). This instance of queering the idea of a princess has interesting cultural connotations, given that Moana is set in the Pacific Islands. Moana is an active, athletic, persistent protagonist who goes on to become a master wayfinder in addition to her role as the future leader of her people. The movie queers the expectations for young girls in the princess role by not introducing a love interest for Moana.
"Frozen" also queers the expectation that female royalty will end up married by not giving Elsa a love interest, which is especially noteworthy given that in the movie, Elsa is an adult and the queen of Arendelle. Elsa’s journey is not framed in terms of finding a partner like her sister, Anna, who acts as a foil to her. Even at the end of the movie when Elsa learns to control her powers and the central conflict of the movie ends, she is not shown meeting an attractive stranger, but is rather shown connecting with her sister and her friends and finding fulfillment in this. This is an important subversion of Disney logic both in terms of gender roles, where feminine characters find fulfillment and purpose outside of their romantic relationships, but also because, as will be discussed in more detail later, it strategically leaves the characters’ identities ambiguous. Along the same lines, Moana and Anna are responsible for the resolution of the conflicts in their respective movies, queering our expectations of princesses as passive recipients of heroism or at best sidekicks.

Another centerpiece of Disney logic that is queered in "Frozen" is the all-important “act of true love.” In many Disney movies, such as "Sleeping Beauty," "Snow White," and even more recently, movies like "The Little Mermaid," the act of true love specifies that a true love’s kiss is crucial. Acts of true love are heterosexual acts performed by a love interest, with the male character typically the agent of the action. In "Tangled," Flynn Rider cutting Rapunzel’s hair to free her from Mother Goethel instead of letting Rapunzel heal him could be construed as the act of true love that resolves the plot. In "Frozen," this logic initially seems to continue, where the trolls suggest that the act of true love that Anna needs to heal the ice in her heart that Elsa puts there is a true love’s kiss. In the early action of the movie, Anna becomes engaged to a man she met at a party, who she
assumes is her true love (despite multiple characters telling her this is unrealistic). Anna and Kristoff rush back to the kingdom of Arendelle so that Anna can kiss Hans. The first subversion of the true love’s kiss trope happens when Hans preys on Anna’s weakened state, saying “Oh Anna. If only there was someone out there who loved you” (Buck, Lee & Lasseter, 2013) before eliminating heat sources and locking her in a room so that he could enact machinations to take over Arendelle. At this point, the audience’s expectations that Hans (who, as will be discussed later, subverts our expectations for a villain) is Anna’s true love have been subverted, but the expectations for a true love’s kiss still stand. After this scene, Olaf finds Anna in her weakened state and helps revive her enough to seek her true love’s kiss from Kristoff, whose relationship with Anna progressed more naturally over the course of many days and time spent together. En route to kiss Kristoff, however, Anna notices that Hans is raising his sword to strike Elsa, who is crying because she believes Anna is already dead. At this point, Anna makes the choice to run to put herself between Hans and Elsa to save her sister. Anna turns to ice, Hans’ sword is broken and a shock wave reverberates out, knocking Hans aside. Anna has subverted the act of true love trope by sacrificing herself at the last moment to save her sister, and she is rewarded when she thaws, having broken the magic. Elsa is incredulous, asking “You sacrificed yourself for me?” to which Anna replies, “I love you” (Buck, Lee & Lasseter, 2013).

The act of queering the act of true love is powerful for several reasons. It shifts the core focus of the movie from heterosexual pairings to the love that exists among family and siblings. It also leaves room for women to have more agency in Disney movies. Lastly, it sanctions Elsa as a character worthy of saving and redemption, which is
important because (as will be discussed in the heroic queerness section of the analysis), Elsa can be easily read as queer.

In addition to queering the role of princess, several movies subvert Disney logic with the way the movies are resolved. Typically in Disney movies, the central conflict is resolved with violence, which usually ends in the villain getting killed. This is true in earlier films such as *Snow White, Sleeping Beauty, The Jungle Book, The Little Mermaid, Beauty and the Beast, Tarzan,* and *Mulan,* just to name a few. In more recent Disney movies analyzed here, several shifts occur. The first is the rise of movies where there is not necessarily a true villain that is responsible for the plot of the movie, but rather evil characters who only present minor obstacles to the heroes. In *Frozen,* for example, the main conflict in the movie is caused by Elsa, who is not portrayed as a villain, but rather a sympathetic and misunderstood person. Hans provides a catalyst for Anna’s self-sacrifice, but he is not responsible for the ice in Arendelle or in Anna’s heart. Similarly, in *Moana,* at the resolution of the movie, Te Kā is revealed to be Te Fiti, responding to the loss of identity and violence done to her. Tamatoa, the large crab who stole Maui’s fishhook, is the catalyst for Maui and Moana beginning to work together and becoming friends, but he does not play a crucial role in setting the events of the movie in motion. In both of these movies, the plot is resolved not through violence or killing the person who started the action, but rather through compassion, love, and understanding.

Even in movies such as *Big Hero 6* or *Zootopia* where there is a clear villain who is responsible for the events of the plot, they are ultimately shown being arrested and punished within the bounds of societal structure. *Big Hero 6* offers a particularly compelling example of this trope being queered, because the main character, Hiro,
initially wants the robot, Baymax to kill Professor Callaghan, the person responsible for letting his brother die in a fire. It is through the urging of his friends and Baymax that he is convinced to simply remove the technology allowing Callaghan to be evil and allow the police to handle justice. The queering of villains and the punishment of villainous characters offers an interesting advancement of lessons of compassion and rehabilitation rather than unilateral destruction.

Beyond queering visible, important elements of Disney movies, there are more subtle moments where the underlying logic and expectations for Disney movies are queered. In *Wreck-It Ralph*, when Ralph and Vanellope play the mini-game to make a cart for her to race in to become a “real racer,” they have a narrow escape from King Candy, who is determined to keep Vanellope from racing. In the escape scene, it is revealed that Vanellope does not know how to drive. This frustrates Ralph, who says “What’d you think, ‘Oh, I’ll just, I’ll just magically win the race because I really want to’?” (Moore, Johnston & Reardon, 2012) in a mocking voice. Achieving a goal solely through optimism or wishing on star happens in Disney movies all the time. Similarly, in *Zootopia*, when Judy tries to get assigned harder police work by catching a robber escaping from the scene of the crime, her boss Chief Bogo says, “Life isn’t some little musical where you sing a song and your insipid little dreams come true,” (Howard & Moore, 2016) which, again, is typically how the world functions in animated Disney musicals. In *Moana*, when Moana has a contemplative moment where she shares that she is unsure why the ocean chose her to restore the heart of Te Fiti, Maui says “If you start singing, I’m gonna throw up” (Clements, Musker & Lasseter, 2016). These instances continue the trend started in movies such as *The Emperor’s New Groove* of breaking the
fourth wall and contributing to the aforementioned queering of the line between our reality and the rules of the real world where people can try and fail even when they really want to and they do not spontaneously burst into song. Besides queering the logic of its own movies, in recent movies Disney also queers assumptions about the role of children’s movies by critiquing society and by not shying away from topics that are usually considered “adult”

**The Queering of “Appropriate” Through Mature Themes**

Disney movies are a favorite for families because they are considered “safe” for children—they are seen as upholding social rules and norms and reproducing American values. With this in mind, the six movies in this discussion offer interesting critiques of society, handling themes such as mental health, death, drinking and even puberty. Recent Disney movies queer our expectations for what themes are “too mature” for children by incorporating these concepts into worlds otherwise constructed to appeal to children. One major theme handled in-depth is mental health.

**Mental Health**

One of the clearest examples of the movies queering our expectations by not shying away from discussions of mental health is *Big Hero 6*. Hiro, the protagonist of the movie, is a 14-year-old genius who idolizes his big brother, Tadashi. After the death of Tadashi, who is killed trying to save his professor in a fire, Hiro falls into a depression. He is shown sitting in his room for days, not engaging with friends or family, not eating, and returning to illegal bot-fighting. It is ultimately the accidental activation of Baymax, the healthcare robot that Tadashi was working on, that begins the action that puts Hiro on the path to healing.
Hiro’s grief is shown in depth, with many different phases. He begins by being sad and listless and unmotivated to continue. When Tadashi’s friends (who are also Hiro’s friends) reach out to him, he ignores their messages. He speaks only briefly to his Aunt Cass, who tries to encourage him to leave his room and enroll in school. Hiro is only motivated to leave his room to chase Baymax, who is determined to find where Hiro’s nanobot is trying to go. After he discovers that someone is mass-producing his nanobots and he first discovers the man in the kabuki mask (the film’s villain), Hiro is thrown into a frenzied mission to find the man. Baymax forces Hiro to eventually reconnect with his friends, who tame his wilder impulses. Hiro’s grief comes to a head when he discovers that the man in the kabuki mask is not the billionaire Alistair Krei, as the group had assumed, but in fact Tadashi’s mentor and the professor he entered the burning building to save, Dr. Robert Callaghan. Hiro tries to make himself feel better by ordering Baymax to kill Dr. Callaghan. Baymax is stopped when Honey Lemon is able to restore the healthcare chip Tadashi initially programmed Baymax with, which forbids Baymax from hurting someone.

This leads Baymax to ask whether terminating Dr. Callaghan would help Hiro feel better. Hiro expresses anger and confusion about Dr. Callaghan; Baymax shows him a series of videos of Tadashi testing Baymax. This is where we finally see Hiro cry and resolve not to try to solve his grief by killing someone.

Mental health is also a prominent motif in Frozen. Elsa does not begin the movie hiding her ice powers; her sister is well aware of them, and the powers serve as a bonding point between the two until the night Elsa accidentally hurts Anna with ice.
Throughout the “Do You Want to Build a Snowman?” musical number, Elsa is shown being taught to suppress her powers, and becoming more and more fearful as they get stronger. After her parents are killed in a storm at sea, Elsa is shown in her bedroom in funeral clothes, head in her hands, with the entire room coated in ice and with snowflakes suspended in the air—a sign of her emotional distress.

Elsa’s fear and anxiety about her powers continue through her coronation. In the song “For the First Time in Forever,” Elsa’s dread at being forced to engage with people is contrasted with Anna’s joyful anticipation of opening the gates. There are several times during the party after the coronation where Elsa seems to be relaxing and having a good time; when Anna suggests that “it could be like [that] all the time” (Buck, Lee & Lasseter, 2013) with the gates open, Elsa agrees, but quickly says such a change was not possible. Later that night, Anna and Elsa get into a fight where Elsa’s powers are revealed, and after almost injuring guests at the party with her ice, Elsa flees.

“Let It Go” marks an important moment in Elsa pushing through her fear and resolving to be herself; however, when Anna finds her in the ice castle on the North Mountain, Elsa’s trauma is still evident—she has a flashback to the night she hurt Anna and forces Anna and Kristoff to leave the castle, hurting Anna in the process.

Trauma is also a crucial part of Calhoun’s character in Wreck-It Ralph. When Fix-It Felix first meets Calhoun, after she is out of earshot he asks a fellow soldier, “Is she always this intense?” The soldier replies “She can’t help it. She’s programmed with the most tragic backstory ever: the one day she didn’t do a perimeter check—her wedding day.” We see Calhoun and a handsome man standing at a wedding altar, when several cybugs smash through the window and gulp down the groom. Calhoun is shown
screaming and desperately firing a machine gun at the bugs (Moore, Johnston & Reardon, 2012).

Calhoun’s disposition throughout the movie is shown as tough and reluctant to get close with another person. When she and Felix are being pulled up from the Nesquik sand in Sugar Rush by the Laffy Taffy, the Taffy begin singing a cutesy song and Felix is shown as a robust rescuer, rather than a quaint gentleman. Calhoun begins to look impressed and the Taffy form a heart shape around the two, but when Calhoun notices this, her face goes blank and she shoots her gun in the air to make the Taffy stop.

Later, when she and Felix are flying to a different region of Sugar Rush to try and track down the cybug, Calhoun tells Felix to stop staring at her. He apologizes and says that he finds her to be a “dynamite gal.” This prompts Calhoun to have a flashback to dates with her previous flame, where he is shown always calling her a dynamite gal. Calhoun screams and nearly crashes the escape pod she is piloting. She manages to land and yells for Felix to leave, without explaining to him why.

In Tangled, the concept of mental health is handled through the lens of parental abuse. Mother Goethel is the only parent Rapunzel knows, and she is consistently shown making fun of Rapunzel, gas-lighting Rapunzel by making her question her own understanding of the world, and by keeping her isolated from the outside world.

From the first scene with Mother Goethel and Rapunzel together, we see that the relationship is unhealthy—Mother Goethel begins by saying “Oh Rapunzel, how you [let your hair down and lift me into the tower] day in and day out, it looks absolutely exhausting,” to which Rapunzel meekly laughs and assures her it is not. Goethel replies by saying “Then I don’t know why it takes so long! I’m just kidding, don’t be so serious,
you’re adorable, I love you.” When Rapunzel believes she is being complimented by Mother as they both look in the mirror (“I see a strong, confident, beautiful young lady”), Goethel undercuts it by making jokes (“Oh look, you’re here too,” implying she was originally talking about herself) (Greno & Howard, 2010). Rapunzel perseveres and asks to see the lights for her birthday. Mother Goethel insists that the lights are actually stars and launches into the song “Mother Knows Best,” trying to convince Rapunzel that she is not yet strong enough to handle herself in the outside world, and that to be safe she should stay inside the tower and listen to her mother.

Rapunzel is shown understanding how to navigate living with an abuser. She is aware that asking to leave was a risk. When Flynn Rider climbs the tower and Rapunzel traps him in her closet, she is prepared to use his capture as evidence that she is strong enough, but Goethel declares that she will never leave the tower. Goethel then collapses, rubs her head and says “Great, now I’m the bad guy.” (Greno & Howard, 2010). This causes Rapunzel to switch tactics. Once she is certain that reasoning with Goethel will not work, she keeps Flynn Rider hidden and says instead that she wants paints for her birthday. She knows that this request will be approved because she has gotten paints from Goethel before, and that it is far away, giving Rapunzel time to sneak out of the tower with Flynn Rider as her guide. When Goethel protests that to get the paints would be a long trip, Rapunzel adopts her abuser’s terminology, saying, “I just thought it was a better idea than the stars” (Greno & Howard, 2010).

Goethel’s impact on Rapunzel is shown when she first leaves the tower. She moves quickly between joy at her freedom, saying she is never going back, and intense feelings of guilt, saying she is a despicable human being and that she has to go back.
Even after Rapunzel manages to get over her initial hesitation, Goethel is emotionally abusive to her. When she runs into Rapunzel in the woods on the way to the kingdom, Rapunzel tries to reassure Goethel that her fears were misplaced. “I’ve come so far and learned so much. I’ve even met someone!” which Mother Goethel dismisses, saying “Yes, the wanted thief, I’m so proud” (Greno & Howard, 2010). She tries to convince Rapunzel to come back with her and when Rapunzel asserts herself, she tries to undermine Rapunzel’s confidence singing the reprise to “Mother Knows Best” asking “Why would [Flynn] like you, come on now, really? Look at you, you think that he’s impressed? Don’t be a dummy, come with mummy” (Greno & Howard, 2010). When Rapunzel refuses, Mother Goethel switches tacks, trying to cast doubt on Rapunzel’s own judgment and Flynn’s motives by insisting that once Flynn got the crown he stole back that he would leave Rapunzel immediately.

Despite Rapunzel’s confidence that Flynn Rider does actually care about her, it is obvious that Goethel’s words rattle her. She hides the crown from Flynn until after “At Last I See the Light.” When Flynn tries to return the crown to his accomplices to wash his hands of the matter, Rapunzel is distressed. She is tricked by Mother Goethel’s plan and is convinced that Mother Goethel rescued her from Rider’s accomplices. When they return to the tower, Goethel reasserts her worldview, saying, “I really did try, Rapunzel. I tried to warn you what was out there. The world is dark and selfish and cruel. If it finds even the slightest ray of sunshine, it destroys it” (Greno & Howard, 2010)—however, Rapunzel makes the connection that she is the kidnapped lost princess. She says “I am the lost princess, aren’t I? Did I mumble, Mother? Or should I even call you that?...I’ve spent my entire life hiding from people who would use me for my powers, when I should have
been hiding from you!” (Greno & Howard, 2010). She asserts that Goethel was wrong about the world and wrong about her, and that she will never let Goethel use her hair again.

Goethel is not ready to give up her control over Rapunzel so easily, muttering, “You want me to be the bad guy? Fine. Now I’m the bad guy” (Greno & Howard, 2010). She physically restrains Rapunzel and, when Flynn Rider tries to rescue her, stabs him with a dagger, then blames Rapunzel for causing her to injure Flynn.

Disney queers societal norms that push trauma and emotional abuse under the rug and offers viewers a framework to understand their own experiences. Critically, many characters model helpful behaviors for helping someone who is in a mental health crisis. In *Big Hero 6* and *Frozen*, Hiro’s friends and Anna, respectively, do not stop reaching out to the affected person, even through repeated attempts to push them away. In *Wreck-It Ralph* and *Tangled*, neither love interest push the issue or demand explanations for the traumatized person’s behavior. When he realizes the extent of the dysfunction in Rapunzel and Mother Goethel’s situation (actual danger rather than simply a strict mother) Flynn Rider does his best to help Rapunzel escape, eventually forgoing the chance to be healed from his stab wound in order to cut Rapunzel’s hair, making her safe from Mother Goethel.

By not shying away from depicting the mental health struggles that can arise from an abusive situation at home, from the loss of someone of great personal significance, and from being rejected and cast out of society, Disney offers queer people a lens to identify their experiences through their on-screen heroes. The portrayals of mental health are nuanced as well; in *Big Hero 6*, Hiro has to go through several stages of grief, sometimes
seeming to recover but also relapsing back into anger or sadness. Elsa’s progress is also shown as gradual—she has a big breakthrough in “Let It Go,” but ultimately it takes repeated assurances that there is a place for her in Arendelle and that she is safe to be close to people and let others in that finally lets her understand how to control her powers. Additionally, it takes some time for Arendelle’s society to accept Elsa—it is only when she is shown to be in control that they welcome her powers and unique abilities. In *Tangled*, Rapunzel has already made up her mind to leave Mother Goethel and understands that her childhood has been a series of lies, but she reaches out in vain to stop Goethel from falling out the window. By presenting heroes with mental health struggles, Disney works to normalize and de-stigmatize mental health problems, and even shows healthy routes for seeking support and recovery among family and friends.

**Drinking, Death and Puberty**

In addition to the critiques of society through the issue of mental health, Disney does not shy away from other mature themes, queering the idea that they are “adult,” such as drinking, death and puberty. Drinking and drunkenness (or an approximation thereof, such as when Baymax has low battery) appear in half of the movies (*Tangled, Wreck-It Ralph*, and *Big Hero 6*). Death is also a common theme in Disney movies, whether in a literal sense (such as Elsa and Anna’s parents, Moana’s grandmother, Mother Goethel, or Hiro’s older brother) or in a more metaphorical sense (such as Sonic the Hedgehog saying “If you die outside your game, you don’t respawn. Game over” in *Wreck-It Ralph* (Moore, Johnston & Reardon, 2012). In *Big Hero 6*, Baymax even begins to explain puberty and sexual development to Hiro, being stopped just short of a full explanation. Moments like drinking or explanations of puberty are likely designed as a
wink to the adults in the audience, and death—or the evasion of death—is a common plot
device. These specific themes are of course not unique to the lives of queer people;
however, it does detract from the idea that Disney movies are “pure” without being
informed by the adult world. Why then is queerness considered any more “adult” or
harmful to children than drunkenness or death?

**The Queering of Power and Violence**

Queer analyses do not just focus on the ways individuals defy categorization and
boundaries in their personal expression and desires, but also the way those who break
boundaries expose who has created the boundaries in the first place. The cracks in society
that are exposed by queering point to where power lies, whether overtly, such as
formalized government structures like laws, or in more subtle ways, such as who is
treated as “normal” and who is treated as other in social interactions. Power is an
inescapable dimension of media, and the Disney movies in this analysis were no
different. I will discuss power on several different levels: first on a spiritual or “higher
power” level; next, on a more societal level with regards to government structures, police
and punishment, and last on a symbolic level. I will also talk about violence and its
interaction with power.

**Higher Powers**

A trend that came up in several Disney movies was the sense that in the movie
universe there was a higher judge or authority that characters appealed to or refer to in
conversation. In several movies, the role these higher powers play mirror the arguments
queer people may encounter in real life. This occurred most visibly in *Wreck-It Ralph* and
*Moana*, but there is a hint of it in *Frozen* as well.
In *Wreck-It Ralph*, the higher powers were “the gamers” who would be playing the arcade games Ralph and Vanellope inhabit. The gamers decide who is allowed to stay plugged in (thus giving the characters a game to occupy and even life) because they can alert the arcade owner if a game is malfunctioning.

This capability is at the core of the argument between Ralph and King Candy, where King Candy asserts that by not allowing Vanellope to race, he is protecting his subjects (including her) from the whims of the gamers. He argues that society is safer if glitches are not allowed to be visible; Ralph pushes back, saying “The gamers could love her!” (Moore, Johnston & Reardon, 2012) to which King Candy responds “And if they don’t? Heroes have to make tough choices sometimes” (Moore, Johnston & Reardon, 2012). Originally, Ralph is taken in by this logic, destroying Vanellope’s car to keep her from racing. Eventually he notices that Vanellope is depicted on the side of the *Sugar Rush* machine, and wonders if Vanellope is truly a glitch in the game, why is she depicted as a racer on the side of the console? Eventually, when the game is reset, Vanellope is allowed to resume her true role as leader of *Sugar Rush* and to race, using her glitching as a special ability to give her an edge over the other racers. The gamers love her, and *Sugar Rush* becomes incredibly popular.

This argument over whether Vanellope’s differences were intended—and thus whether she should be allowed to live her life visibly and participate in *Sugar Rush* society the way that other racers like Candlehead or Taffyta or not—echoes the constant questioning of whether those who differ from the heteronormative standard should be allowed to live freely in society. Some argue that queer folks are confused or are corrupting or ruining society, and that allowing them to participate fully in society (like
through marriage, living their preferred gender identity or representation in media) that we will anger a higher power. Others express the view that queer people are born the way they are, and that if that is so, then a higher power has already condoned their existence. By showing that Vanellope was intended, and that her differences make her even more beloved by the gamers that arbitrate the arcade, Disney offers queer people a narrative of acceptance and welcome.

In *Moana*, the ocean acts as a higher power that the characters appeal to and respect. When she needs help, Moana asks the ocean; repeatedly it is also stated that the ocean chose Moana to restore the heart of Te Fiti. *Moana’s* portrayal of the ocean as a higher power is interesting because there are a range of beliefs regarding the ocean. Moana’s father seems to regard the ocean at best as a force of nature, and at worst as a threat to his people after the death of his best friend. He says that the only thing beyond the reef is storms and trouble and dismisses Moana’s assertion that the ocean chose her to restore the heart of Te Fiti, saying that the heart was just a rock. He does not seem to believe in anything mystical. Moana and her grandmother, by contrast, not only firmly believe that the ocean has a consciousness, but that it is a protector and helper. Maui seems to believe in the ocean’s power, but is dubious that the ocean is benevolent or helpful, saying “the ocean is straight-up kookydooks” (Clements, Musker & Lasseter, 2016).

Two particularly interesting scenes involving the ocean in its role as a higher power happen while Moana is at sea. The first is a conversation between Moana and Maui where Maui reveals that his human biological parents threw him into the ocean as a baby and the ocean delivered him to the gods, who gave him his magical fishhook and
made him the demigod Maui. Moana reasons that instead of looking at the incident as an act of rejection that should fuel a lifetime of trying to earn the approval and love of humans, that Maui should interpret it as an act of love from the ocean that he was saved. “Maybe the ocean saved you because it saw someone worth saving” (Clements, Musker & Lasseter, 2016). Similar to the gamers in Wreck-It Ralph, this positions the ocean as a unique higher authority that can see past the biases of the residents of a world to determine worthiness.

The next scene of note is after Maui abandons Moana at sea after their first (failed) attempt to get past Te Kā to get to Te Fiti. Moana breaks down in tears and asks why the ocean chose her. She begs the ocean to choose someone else, and when the ocean does not take the heart of Te Fiti from her hand, she throws it into the ocean. Moana is uniquely set apart, and that burden is hard to handle (especially after her only aid and ally has left her) and she prays for the ocean to take it away. From a queer perspective, this scene is reminiscent of how difficult it can be to accept one’s identity, and attempts to “get rid of it” by appealing to a higher power.

The scene resolves when the spirit of Moana’s deceased grandmother comes to visit her. Her grandmother offers acceptance and understanding, saying that Moana has come a long way and that she should never have put so much pressure on Moana. Her grandmother makes it safe for Moana to return home, saying that she will be with her the whole way if she wishes to turn back. However, when Moana hesitates, her grandmother is also supportive, and helps her reconnect with her identity, which gives Moana the strength and bravery to dive into the ocean, reclaim the heart and continue her journey to Te Fiti alone. The interaction of the ocean and Moana’s family in this scene is powerful.
Absent a sign from the ocean (or perhaps with only the sign that the ocean does not wish to take away Moana’s burden), it is Moana’s love and relationship with her grandmother that helps her through a trying time. Ultimately, Moana’s purpose (as decided by the ocean) is fulfilled, but the scene demonstrates the importance of unconditional support and love from family members as people work through their personal struggles with the powers that they believe govern their life.

In contrast to the crucial plot conflicts created by the higher power figures in *Wreck-It Ralph* or *Moana*, the higher power in *Frozen* is far less developed. When Elsa and Anna are taken to the trolls to heal Anna after Elsa strikes her head with ice in the beginning of the movie, the elder troll asks whether Elsa was “born with the power or cursed with it?” (Buck, Lee & Lasseter, 2013) This implies that a power exists in the universe of *Frozen* that could curse a child with magical ice abilities. Elsa’s father replies that Elsa was “born with it, and it’s getting stronger” (Buck, Lee & Lasseter, 2013)—or, put differently, she was born this way—but from there the topic is not developed further in this movie.

**Societal Power**

**Governance.** Along with the power that exists on a higher plane to approve or disapprove of characters, the characters in Disney movies also interact with each other in societies governed by formal power structures and rules. Examining these power structures allows us insight into how the world of Disney characters work and how the characters push against the systems they are in (and the ways this may mirror or queer reality).
A number of Disney movies are based on fairy tales where the characters live in monarchies, which creates a certain societal hierarchy. An American audience is likely to be familiar with the rules of European monarchies regarding the succession of power and the role of men and women, if not from history classes then from older Disney movies, which nearly all revolve around European storylines and understandings of power (even in movies such as The Lion King, which is based on Hamlet). This is true of Tangled and Frozen; Moana does have a dynastic power structure with a chief and a princess-like character, though there are some differences. Big Hero 6 and Zootopia both take place in societies that largely mirror American society, and Wreck-It Ralph offers a blend of monarchy and American society.

Power in Moana is shown to pass from chief to chief through bloodline. During “Where You Are,” the chief takes Moana up the mountain on Motunui to show her the monument to past chiefs. He explains that one day she will place her own rock on top of the monument like he did and like his father did and his father before him, and that in doing so, she will raise the whole island higher.

What is interesting about power in Moana is that Moana seems to be the exception, but it is never discussed. She is the chief’s daughter, and the movie establishes that she will one day assume that power; however, the focus of the movie is not on Moana finding a partner in order to assume that power. This is more striking as the movie shows how power is arranged on the island. When Moana disrupts the council meeting, for example, all the councilors shown are men. Additionally, Moana’s paternal grandmother is alive at the beginning of the movie, but she does not hold power outside of the familial structure (although she does retain this power, as evidenced by the scene
where she discovers Moana’s injury from sailing past the reef and Moana asks if she will
tell her dad. Her grandmother replies, “I’m his mother. I don’t have to tell him anything”
(Clements, Musker & Lasseter, 2016).

Motunui is an island bound by tradition—this is clear from the song “Where You
Are” and the dialogue the chief has during the movie. Additionally, during “Where You
Are,” the viewer sees how the chores of daily life are split up—the men are mostly
responsible for fishing and boating, while the women are mostly responsible for weaving
baskets and clothing; only the task of farming seems to be shared. It is notable, then, that
Moana can break with tradition by being a female leader and not be questioned, but even
mentored and encouraged by others in the village. When Moana helps fix a roof and
directs the farmers to plant a new orchard to practice problem-solving as the chief, the
villagers are grateful and even tell her father that she is doing great. The fact that no one
questions Moana’s ability to lead and that no one discusses finding her a husband implies
that gender is not a salient characteristic for leaders on Motunui; this paired with the chief
consulting the council when the major issue of fish shortages and coconut blights arise
queers our expectations for power in a Disney monarchy. Power is shared and does not
appear to be gendered, although other roles do seem to be. It is also worth noting that
Moana is not set in a Eurocentric, white environment like many of Disney’s other
movies, and the governance shown in the movie queers white expectations for law and
order. Instead of a monarch with absolute power, as is the case in Frozen, when Elsa can
order the gates closed or Anna transfers power unilaterally to Hans in her absence or in
Tangled when Flynn Rider is sentenced to death without a trial, the chief in Moana seems
to act as a touch point and the main advisor for those on the island, but seeks advice and opinions when larger issues arise.

*Wreck-It Ralph* also works to queer our understanding of power in Disney movies. Each game in *Wreck-It Ralph* has its own governance structure. In *Fix-It Felix Jr.*, power is held socially (as will be discussed in the symbolic power and violence section of the analysis), whereas *Hero’s Duty* has a militaristic leadership structure and *Sugar Rush* has a monarchy. The games all are mediated by some type of authority, as evidenced by the TSA-like “surge protector” who stops Ralph as he leaves *Pac-Man* from his support group meeting to return to *Fix-It Felix Jr.* for a “random screening.” Ralph has to declare any items he is bringing from *Pac-Man*, much like crossing a national border. Characters also appear to be familiar with the other games and the characters in them after they have been in the arcade for a while, implying that after the arcade is closed, video game characters travel freely between games. Thus, we have a setting much like the real-life international arena where different ways of organizing governmental power exist, and though folks may travel between these arbitrary borders, these independent entities have relatively little impact on the structures of each other.

One interesting point for this analysis of power is that the governance structures in games appear given—they are written in the game’s code, as evidenced by the scene where King Candy goes into the code of *Sugar Rush* and manipulates it.

This is relevant because at the end of the movie, it is revealed that the game’s code has Vanellope von Schweetz as a princess. This reveal (as discussed earlier) is also in line with the viewer’s expectations for what happens to good characters who are treated poorly during the movie—they will have a secret power or “true” status that is
revealed, and thus they will have the power to protect themselves (similar to what happens in the end of Tangled). Vanellope challenges this assumption and the governing rules of her movie universe by declaring that instead of having a monarchy, she will institute a constitutional democracy with herself as president. This change prompts the Nicelanders in Fix-It Felix Jr. to realize that they can offer refuge to homeless video game characters (who could be thought of as refugees) whose game had been unplugged. This reveals the ultimately arbitrary nature of the game’s code. Additionally, it is interesting that Vanellope acted alone to change her government structure but still put herself at the top, when a constitutional democracy would normally require an election.

The switch to a democracy is shown as a positive change; taken one way, this move could be seen as queering the audience’s expectations for how governance is handled in a Disney movie. However, the Disney company has long upheld American society and ideals, so in this sense although Disney has queered its own cinematic logic (as discussed earlier) with this move, ultimately in the framework of the company reproducing American society and values, this change is not that radical.

More radical queering of governance take place in Big Hero 6 and Zootopia. The monarchies we are accustomed to seeing in Disney movies and the sense of borders (even within the bounds of an arcade) that Wreck-It Ralph shows are not present in Big Hero 6. Instead, the setting is a city called San Fransokyo, a futuristic city that blends elements of American and Japanese culture.

This queering of the boundaries of East and West is compelling; however, in the movie the blend is not fleshed out in detail. Laws exist, and there is a policing structure (as will be discussed in the police section later in the analysis), but that is as far as this
power structure is fleshed out. The design of the city, particularly the trolleys and the hills, imply that San Fransokyo is located in San Francisco (which has a large Japantown already), but there is no explanation of why the name changed or whether it is still part of the United States or not. In *Big Hero 6*, Disney presents an image of a future (or perhaps an alternate universe) that is characterized by high cultural blending, but does not take a strong stance on U.S. imperialism or other issues in American society.

*Zootopia*, by contrast, takes a stronger critical stance on American society, although the biggest discussions of power are between police and symbolic power. Zootopia’s governance mimics many towns in America, with a mayor who is in charge of several very different neighborhoods and residents who are marked by salient differences. As with many Disney villains, Assistant Mayor Bellwether is not interested in radically changing the governance structure, but rather changing her position within that structure. The political intrigue plotline of *Zootopia* presents a challenge to the idea that the existing power structure is effective, but ultimately this is walked back as the responsibility for societal change is pushed onto individuals who continue to operate in the same system rather than meaningfully changing it.

**Police.** One motif that recurred in multiple Disney movies that queers our understanding of the role of Disney movies in our real world was how police were portrayed as alternately helpful and on the side of the heroes, or as flawed structures of governance. If Disney movies play a role in educating children about American society and preparing them to take part in it when they are older, one would expect the police to be portrayed as competent and benevolent, not as disinterested or biased (even if that may reflect real life). The clearest instance of this is *Zootopia*. Judy Hopps is excited to
become the first bunny to become a cop; however, in her role she experiences a lack of support at the top outside of measures mandated for good public relations (such as the mayor’s “mammal inclusion initiative”). Her boss is uncaring and is quick to assume that Judy is too weak, fearful, or uppity to be a police officer. Bureaucracy is another hurdle at the Zootopia Police Department, with Judy being unable to track a license plate because she has not been fully finalized in the system.

The problems with the police in Zootopia are not just internal; Judy is shown engaging in problematic practices in her role as an officer—for example, when she first meets the fox, Nick Wilde, she “racially” profiles him, assuming he is up to no good because he is a fox. Later, when Judy has to give a press conference, she displays her own prejudices about predatory animals by saying the reason animals around the city are going savage is due to flaws in their DNA.

In the same movie, however, the police are also shown in sympathetic ways; civilians yell at Judy for doing her job when she writes traffic tickets (one baby hippo tells her that her mom wishes Judy were dead), and Judy struggles to be taken seriously as a real cop and not just a “meter maid.” Judy does her best to help solve injustice wherever she can, and learns to overcome her prejudice towards predators and the ways she is inadvertently causing harm. Eventually, even Nick, who is repeatedly shown doubting the police as an institution, gives up his criminal ways and becomes the first fox police officer in the end.

For all the nuance that Zootopia offers with its police portrayals, other movies offer less positive depictions. In Wreck-It Ralph for instance, the police are bumbling at best, and at worst are shown attacking Ralph before it is clear he has done anything
wrong, simply because he looks like a “bad guy.” When Hiro and Baymax go to the police for help finding the man in the kabuki mask in *Big Hero 6*, the officer treats them with derision and is unhelpful, prompting Hiro and Baymax to take matters into their own hands. These two movies differ, however, because while the police in *Wreck-It Ralph* are never really shown in an effective capacity, a big part of Hiro’s personal growth is moving away from his urge for violent, vigilante justice against Callaghan and toward letting the police apprehend him and punish him within the existing system.

The princess movies further queer the discussion of police. In *Frozen*, the equivalent of the police are the palace guards, who play a minimal role; the Duke of Weselton, however, brings his own guards whom he sends to kill Elsa. These guards act as free agents without accountability to the kingdom, and at the end of the movie are sent back with the Duke to their homeland. In *Tangled*, Flynn Rider is wanted for theft, and the police move to hang him in the second half of the movie. As the audience, we are meant to cheer for Flynn’s daring escape, and it is only when Flynn is recognized for his role in returning the lost princess that he is allowed to safely rejoin society. These portrayals, though not explicitly of police, show the justice system as flawed, targeting people before the full extent of their character or what good they are capable of is shown. *Moana* offers an interesting contrast to the other movies because it is the only movie without any kind of guard or police force. Moana’s people are not warriors, they are voyagers, and they are shown sharing, working collaboratively and settling differences through communication and community council.

The discussion of police is relevant to the queer experience because the queer community as a whole has faced persecution and policing, and different populations
within the queer community (such as trans women and particularly trans women of color) experience high rates of police violence (Tobin, Freedman-Gurspan & Mottet, 2015, p. 28; Signorile, 2016) and are less likely to report to the police if they experience violence (Rojas & Swales, 2019). The existence of queer people has been regulated and punished systematically for decades, so many queer folks may relate to the protagonists’ inability to get help within a system ostensibly designed to protect them.

Police forces in Disney movies are also relevant because of the monopoly on government-sanctioned violence that they hold (especially given that these movies do not depict war). Police are shown attacking characters, albeit typically in cartoonish ways, like doing battle with frying pans in Tangled or as donuts beating a candy-coated video game character with clubs in Wreck-It Ralph, but though characters like Flynn or Vanellope avoid the police, the officers are never challenged in their capacity to inflict violence on others. This has ramifications in the real world: even though the police are shown going after the “wrong” person based on their assumptions about them, the expectation is that officers will continue to keep their jobs and keep policing.

There are some challenges to the police’s power, such as in Zootopia when Judy is offered a promotion but turns it down, or in Big Hero 6 where Hiro and his friends act as vigilante justice, but ultimately power is restored to police (by Judy rejoining the force and Hiro turning over Callaghan to the authorities). The system of governance and problem solving in Moana queers the role of policing and state power by asking viewers to envision what a society where differences are settled in non-punitive ways might look like.
On the level of formal power structures, recent Disney movies queer our expectations for Disney movies (as acknowledged in the Disney logic section of this analysis), but often walk back the potentially powerful moments of queering our own society by reaffirming American ideals. Governance and policing are not the only way that power is wielded in society, however. Next I will discuss the role of symbolic violence and identity in Disney movies.

**Symbolic Violence and Identity**

In addition to the “real” forms of violence that can be enacted by state apparatuses like governance structures or through policing, there are also forms of violence that operate on the symbolic level. This is also true in the Disney movies analyzed here. Symbolic violence takes place in the forms of social categorization and microaggressions, which are “brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to certain individuals because of their group membership” (Sue, 2010, p. xvi). This category will conclude with an analysis of how individuals in Disney movies reclaim their social power through accepting their identity.

**Social categorization.** In addition to overt, formalized power structures like the form of governance or the role of police depicted in each movie, there is also a layer of power that operates at the social level, and this is where we also see socially constructed violence enacted. Examples of this would be discrimination based on social roles or microaggressions, which may not be explicitly codified but still act as a form of power over people.

This power is seen at play in a number of different ways. Some forms of power comes from the social roles that different characters occupy—for example, (as will be
elaborated in the family section of the queer acceptance category) the role of parent is a significant form of power held over the protagonists (at least initially) in *Tangled, Zootopia, Frozen* and *Moana*; however, there are also several instances of binary social categories being established in the movie worlds which leads to conflict for those who try to defy the binary.

*Wreck-It Ralph* explores the role of social categorization in the arcade. The reason Ralph is forced to live in the dump in his game is because he was categorized as a “bad guy.” He is stopped every time he goes between games, which does not happen to the “good guys.” He is ostracized and shut out from the Nicelanders’ social circle—and this exclusion is consistent for those categorized as “bad guys” throughout the arcade, to the point where they come together to express their experiences and understand how to find personal peace and acceptance in a world that celebrates “good guys” and demonizes “bad guys.” Even in games like *Sugar Rush* where there is no clear “bad guy” that the gamers have to defeat, aberrations from the system are socially rejected. The other racers call Vanellope a “glitch” to emphasize how she is “other than” them. Vanellope attempts to reframe her difference by saying she has a condition (“pixlexia”) and that her glitching is outside of her control. The other racers are not swayed, and the symbolic violence of being categorized and cast out turns into physical violence as the racers destroy Vanellope’s handmade cart by mocking her. King Candy also uses social categorization to maintain power by convincing Ralph that Vanellope should not be allowed to race. Vanellope is not present for that conversation and Ralph and King Candy use their (implied) status as “true” video game characters to make decisions for Vanellope that are against her wishes. This interaction mirrors the interaction with the other racers where
symbolic violence leads to physical violence as Ralph destroys the new car he and Vanellope had made together to maintain control.

Those who are ostracized in Wreck-It Ralph take it on good faith that those at the top of the power structure will follow their own rules and will willingly give them space in society if they can “fit in.” Ralph believes that the Nicelanders will start treating him differently if he earns a medal. This starts Ralph’s quest for a medal, but when he brings one back, Gene is the only Nicelander who has not moved out of Fix-It Felix Jr. entirely. Ralph apologizes for the trouble he caused, saying, “I was just tired of living alone in the garbage,” to which Gene responds, “Well now you can live alone in the penthouse” (Moore, Johnston & Reardon, 2012). This interaction makes it clear that Ralph will not be accepted on the merits of his own actions. It is only when Felix comes to understand Ralph better when he breaks Felix out of King Candy’s dungeon that Ralph’s social position changes. Felix says, “You don’t know what it’s like to be rejected and treated as a bad guy.” Ralph answers, “Yes I do. That’s every day of my life” (Moore, Johnston & Reardon, 2012). The sanction of a good guy is what allows Ralph to cross the boundary between good guys and bad guys to move up in Nicelander society. An interesting note here is that Ralph still chooses to live with homeless video game “outcasts” albeit in housing more similar to the Nicelanders’. When given the choice to move in, he chooses to remain distant on his own terms.

Vanellope similarly assumes that if she crosses the finish line and becomes a “real racer” that she will be accepted into society. She has accepted a narrative about herself (as have all of the citizens of Sugar Rush) that King Candy began because King Candy had the structural power to get into the code and lock citizens’ memories. Vanellope tries
to show off how similar she can be to the other racers when they gather around her handmade cart, but they affirm that she will never be a real racer. When Vanellope is able to play by their rules and becomes a “real racer” when the game resets, she also refuses to take part in the society that she (re)inherits. Although she does abstain from harming the other characters (outside of making them think they are going to die), she holds onto her identity as a racer and rejects the accepted role as princess and eliminates it entirely. Here again, a character that was previously cast out chooses not to integrate into the society that excluded her, but rather opts to dismantle it.

Social categorization is also a major way that power is distributed in Zootopia. In Zootopia there are two distinct categories of animal—predator and prey—which are visible simply by looking at the animal. Though the animals believe that they have moved beyond these social categories, the types of jobs seen as acceptable for certain species seem fixed—for example, other characters laugh at the notion of a bunny cop, and Nick is easily able to identify that Judy’s family are carrot farmers based on her species and hometown.

Initially, Judy assumes that small-mindedness is just a product of her small town; she believes that in Zootopia, anyone can be anything. Judy moves from Bunnyburrow where she is misunderstood to the city where she hopes to find likeminded, or at least open-minded people; this is an experience that is relatable for many queer people leaving the house or their hometown for the first time. In her hometown, everyone from Judy’s parents to the fox bully Gideon Gray believe that Judy will not be able to be anything “more” than a carrot farmer.
Despite Judy’s attempts to be open-minded, the movie shows how social categorization is a mutual interaction. Her parents have preconceived notions about predators, even though they have friendships with them, like the weasel Judy’s father plays cribbage with. They are the most concerned about foxes. The cracks in Judy’s philosophy start to show when she moves to Zootopia. She pushes back at her boss that she is “not just some token bunny” (Howard & Moore, 2016) and though Judy reassured her parents that Gideon Gray was simply a bully and not representative of foxes as a whole, she is quick to profile Nick as a low-life and assume he is up to no good when she sees him walking into the elephant ice cream store simply because he is a fox.

Not everyone in Zootopia shares Judy’s passionate belief that everyone can be who they want to be, regardless of how they were born. Early on, Nick tells Judy that an animal can only be what they are, and the godfather-like mob boss they encounter over the course of their adventure seems to agree, saying that despite their evolution, they are still animals at their core. Like many a person from a small town, Judy discovers that even in big cities where many types of individuals coexist, that does not mean that everyone is kind or understanding. At one point, Nick shares a story about how when he tried to join a scouting organization as a child (evidently a primarily prey activity), the other members muzzled him as a humiliating hazing ritual. He says “I learned two things that day: one, that I would never let anyone see that they got to me. If the world’s only gonna see a fox as shifty and untrustworthy, there is no point in trying to be anything else” (Howard & Moore, 2016).

As in Wreck-It Ralph, the social conditions of Judy’s world translate into material disadvantage for her at the ZPD. When she tries to show the jaguar that went savage to
the ZPD to prove animals are going savage and the jaguar is missing, Bogo immediately questions Judy’s competence as an officer. He pushes back when Judy and Nick insist they are telling the truth, suggesting that any predator might look savage to a bunny (Judy) and asking if they think he would believe a fox (Nick). Nick resents this treatment, and he protests that it was only because of the lack of ZPD support that Judy had to turn to support from a fox. This convinces Chief Bogo to give Judy more time to solve the case, but he still does not offer her any ZPD resources. She has to turn to Assistant Mayor Bellwether for the help she needs to complete her investigation.

**Microaggressions.** In addition to Judy’s naiveté about the merits of city life and how she will be treated at the ZPD, there are moments in the movie that parallel real-life experiences that marginalized people have. One example of this is microaggressions, which highlight the differences or gaps between marginalized people and those in the majority, and are typically invisible to the person saying it. Judy experiences a microaggression on her first day at the ZPD when the snow leopard that works the front desk calls her cute. She says, “Oh, you probably didn’t know, but a bunny can call another bunny cute, but when another animal does it, it’s…” (Howard & Moore, 2016). The leopard apologizes and tries to compare his experience with others making assumptions about him that he is a fat, donut-loving cop (which is shown to be true immediately afterward), but given the way that Judy is ignored and underestimated at work constantly, the viewer is left (like Judy) feeling that the leopard’s comparison is hollow and trivial. Judy also experiences intersectional jabs. Throughout the course of their friendship, Nick makes jokes about Judy being a bunny and a small-town hick, as well as addressing her femininity, calling her “emotional” and dismissing her with names
like “darling” and “sweetheart.” Although the movie does not address this specifically, it is relevant because many marginalized people are oppressed on multiple axes (be it gender, attraction, race, ability or socioeconomic status).

*Zootopia* shows how salient social categories can lead to discrimination and inequality; however (perhaps to avoid being too on the nose) *Zootopia* waffles about which group is dominant and which group acts as the oppressor. By muddying the distinction between oppressor and oppressed, Disney leaves the viewer with the message that discrimination goes both ways. Judy or Nick’s experiences as children and adults might be relatable to the queer viewer as a marginalized person in society; however, what could have been a powerful message—that social categories and stereotypes are deeply entrenched and the societal structures in place often uphold these, even when equal opportunity messaging is espoused—becomes watered down into a more individual level responsibility not to judge others.

**Identity.** This section specifically handles personal identity as a function of power. Even when characters are not sorted into easily labeled, binary groups such as “good guys” and “bad guys” or “predators” and “prey,” they still feel social pressure and constraints that prevent them from living as their most authentic selves; when they are able to live comfortably as themselves, these characters regain their power. Elsa and Moana both follow this journey, and to a lesser extent so does Hiro.

As will be discussed on p. 91 much of Elsa’s struggle to find her place is already relatable to the queer experience. Elsa is told early on how her differences will scare people, and she spends her whole life trying to “be the good girl [she] always ha[s] to be,” (Buck, Lee & Lasseter, 2013) hiding her powers in order to gain acceptance in
Arendelle society. Elsa is correct that revealing her powers will cause Arendelle citizens to fear her. When Hans goes after Anna, he confronts Elsa in her palace. Elsa is angrily pushing the Duke of Weselton’s guards, who have just tried to kill her. Hans warns her not to be the monster others fear she is, and she calms down, which ultimately leads to her capture. By trying to fill the perfect princess identity that is laid out for her, Elsa literally and figuratively gives up her own power. People do literally try to kill her for living her true identity, and it is only when she leaves and is able to live her identity safely that she starts to see her difference as a beautiful gift and an opportunity for creation (as displayed during “Let It Go”). Through the repeated reassurances of love from her family, Elsa is able to occupy her identity comfortably. When she connects with her identity, she is able to reclaim her power as an individual, and her broader societal power as queen when she returns and is reaccepted into Arendelle.

Moana experiences a similar journey in the struggle to enact her power over her own identity. Although she does not have magical powers, Moana is poised to take over power from her father one day. This creates a situation where Moana has to negotiate between her relatively powerless role as a daughter and her more powerful role as the upcoming chief. She is also torn between the advice her grandmother gives her early on encouraging Moana to honor her inner voice, and her father’s declaration that she needs to honor her role as the people’s future leader and be who they need her to be.

Moana’s journey is one of reconnection to her roots and defying others’ expectations of her. She journeys past the reef of Motunui when her parents do not believe it is possible. She becomes a wayfinder when Maui says she never will. Eventually, she is able to bring her connection to her ancestors back with her to Motunui,
and as an act of marrying her true self with the needs of her role, she leaves a conch shell on the top of the stones of the past chiefs as she leads her people to start voyaging again. Like Elsa, in order to assume her power, Moana leaves her hometown and the expectations her people have of her, and becomes confident in herself.

Because Rapunzel lives most of her life locked in a tower with Mother Goethel as her only point of human contact, the power dynamics in Tangled revolve largely around the identities each character has built of mother and daughter. Rapunzel struggles to prove herself to Mother Goethel, but she is welcomed warmly and is able to adapt easily to other settings. The key difference between Rapunzel and the previous two princesses is that Rapunzel does not really give up her power at any point in the movie—she repeatedly refuses to return with Mother Goethel and uses deception or negotiation to get what she wants when necessary. Her journey to empowerment is more of a realization of the extent of her power because of her true identity as the lost princess rather than a reclamation of power.

Hiro’s experience with power and identity stands out from the other protagonists because he and his friends are the only protagonists in the movies in this analysis who use physical violence not sanctioned by the governance structure. Hiro and his friends develop high-tech tools to allow them to become vigilante crime-fighters, giving them power over the average citizen of San Fransokyo. However, Hiro struggles with the expectation that he will not use his power to inflict physical violence to kill. Others project the role of Tadashi onto Hiro, but he is grappling with his own loss of his brother and the expectation that he will be like his brother. At the end of the movie, he is able to find a way to be himself without abusing his capacity for violence.
In the Disney movies analyzed here, as in real life, there are many layers of power at work, and the power in social roles and expectations for the protagonists—often in conflict with their own identities—present challenges that are relatable to the queer experience. The struggle to fit into a binary system when you feel like you do not fit cleanly into the expectations for either one is queer by definition. Extending this further, many queer people are locked in an act of power negotiation where the desire to please others or to fit in can cause them to give up their own power and silence themselves. It is also worth noting that the layers of power are not mutually exclusive and do not act in isolation. Social layers of symbolic violence such as categorizations and microaggressions can lead to physical manifestations of violence, and the governance structures in place can perpetuate power differences. These interactions with power would be familiar to queer people as well as other marginalized groups. Although Disney does not always take the strongest stance to challenge or subvert dominant power structures that lead to marginalization, the movies do offer the individual a path to reclaim their own power by being who they are. By showing characters reclaiming power by being themselves and eventually being accepted and even celebrated for it, Disney celebrates difference and puts the locus of control for one’s happiness back with the individual.

**Villainous Queerness**

This category describes the villains in Disney movies who have a queer feel to them, whether that is through playing into queer stereotypes or through the sense of campiness (a sense of dramatic exaggeration and artifice) they evoke. The most striking example of villainous queerness is King Candy in *Wreck-It Ralph*. King Candy is a small,
limp-wristed man who speaks with a lisp and moves in exaggerated, flamboyant ways (particularly when compared to Ralph, Gene, Fix-It Felix, or the other men in the movie with speaking roles).

When Ralph is first introduced to King Candy, he mocks him, saying it is clear King Candy is a fan of pink. This causes King Candy to protest, insisting that the pink is clearly salmon. Ralph continues to treat King Candy with amusement and lack of respect, especially compared to how he talks to the Nicelanders in his own game, or to the soldiers in Hero’s Duty, calling him “your puffiness” (Moore, Johnston & Reardon, 2012) or “nilly wafer” (Moore, Johnston & Reardon, 2012). Even when King Candy is revealed as Turbo, he still has his lisping voice—and when he becomes half cybug, he maintains his ruffled King Candy costume rather than his Turbo design.

Not every instance of villainous queerness plays into stereotypes to the same extent that King Candy does; some villains (including King Candy) read queerly because of their melodrama and camp. Tangled’s Mother Goethel, for example, gives off almost drag queen vibes with her exaggerated femininity and theatricality. In “Mother Knows Best,” her performance of why the outside world should be scary and threatening to Rapunzel is campy, taking serious threats like cannibals and the plague and making them silly. Mother Goethel uses her dramatic sense and flair for performance throughout the course of the movie, flirting and pretending to be flattered by the advances of a drunkard at the Snuggly Duckling before pulling a knife on him, or making herself out to be a hero after she knocks out the twin thugs who try to kidnap Rapunzel (despite the fact that she herself put them up to the deed). Although neither Mother Goethel’s nor King Candy’s
sexuality is hinted at, as they are never given a love interest, those watching with a queer eye will note queerness in both characters.

Although not as critical in his role as a villain in *Moana* (as will be discussed in greater detail later), the giant crab Tamatoa exhibits a similar campiness to Mother Goethel. He is obsessed with shininess and his song is a vainglorious celebration of his own beauty while he mocks Maui (who, it is worth noting, is more typically masculine) for not being able to overpower him. He offers a running commentary of his interactions with Moana where he gives some clever wink-nod fourth-wall breaks to the viewer, such as when he openly acknowledges his awareness that Moana is just trying to get him to talk about himself and when he interrupts his own narrative to tell Moana to pick one eye to look into because her going back and forth is distracting to him. Although he is ostensibly evil because he lives in Lalotai, the realm of monsters, and because he has Maui’s fishhook and will not return it without a fight, Tamatoa is not particularly frightening or imposing due to his obsession with his own beauty and the ease with which the heroes manipulate him and trick him.

Tamatoa’s campiness specifically contributes to his depiction as a villain because it sets him apart from the heroes. His vanity is compared with Maui’s in Tamatoa’s song “Shiny” when he says “Well I have to give you credit for my start with your tattoos on the outside/for just like you, I made myself a work of art.” (Clements, Musker & Lasseter, 2016). It is also contrasted because Maui’s tattoos show up when he earns them, whereas Tamatoa’s decorations are a result of his hoarding and scavenging. The result is two characters with similar narcissism and flair for theatricality, but it is specifically the
queerness created by Tamatoa’s sense of camp that sets him apart and marks him as nefarious.

In some instances, however, it is not the villains themselves who read as queer, but rather the role of the villain that is queered in the movie. For example, in Moana, the opening sequence told by Moana’s grandmother implies that Maui is a villain—he is lit in ominous green and is shown causing the problem that sets the plot in motion by stealing the heart of Te Fiti. However, the movie does not frame Maui as a villain, but rather as a slightly narcissistic but ultimately benevolent character. In fact, Maui helps Moana restore the heart to Te Fiti, and he is ultimately rewarded by Te Fiti for his personal growth with a new magic fishhook.

Similarly, in Frozen, Elsa is the clear cause of the problems in the movie as her emotional outburst causes Arendelle to freeze over in the middle of summer. The citizens of Arendelle are shown fearing Elsa, with some thinking she is evil. However, Elsa is never treated as an antagonist by Anna, and Anna works to immediately correct or counter anyone who views Elsa as bad. Even after Elsa freezes Anna’s heart, Anna acts self-sacrificially to protect her sister. It is the love between sisters that allow the problem that set the plot in motion to be corrected. Both Frozen and Moana queer the notion of villainy by showing that even well-meaning people can cause unintended negative consequences through their actions. The message is taken a step further by showing sympathetic protagonists working with the person who caused the problem to correct it.

Another way Disney queers the category of villain is by challenging our expectations for who the villain is in Big Hero 6 and Zootopia. Unlike Frozen, where it is revealed at the end that Hans is using Anna for a power grab but that ultimately plays no
crucial role in the plot, in both *Zootopia* and *Big Hero 6*, the subversion of our expectation for who the villain is has large consequences for the plot.

In *Big Hero 6*, we are introduced to Alistair Krei, the technology billionaire who initially offers Hiro a large sum of money to develop his nanobots with Krei Tech. He seems to try to steal a prototype of the nanobot after Hiro refuses to sell his microbots, and it is clear that Tadashi does not trust Krei but does trust Dr. Callaghan. Hiro and his friends are quick to suspect Krei when they find out someone has been replicating Hiro’s microbots. Fred even declares “Rules don’t apply to a man like Krei” (Hall & Williams, 2014). This makes the later reveal that Dr. Callaghan let Tadashi die even more emotionally impactful for Hiro, who saw how much Tadashi respected him. This is not only significant for Hiro’s emotional development, but the broader queer implications of the billionaire tech developer occupying the role of victim to a professor driven to madness and revenge by the loss of his daughter are interesting, especially in light of Disney’s general support for scientific development.

*Zootopia* also initially sets up the audience to believe that Mayor Lionheart, the lion, is responsible for the predators who “went savage.” He is shown as an arrogant, self-important leader who treats his assistant rudely. It is easy to believe he is at the heart of the conspiracy; later when it is revealed that the sheep, Assistant Mayor Bellwether, is responsible for the predators going savage, the viewer is forced to assess their expectations for how predators act. The movie goes a step beyond *Big Hero 6* in queering our expectations for a villain by placing the viewer in the same situation Judy is in. Judy is forced to reckon with the fact that through her disastrous press conference, she contributed to the fear against predators and played into Bellwether’s plot.
Overall, it appears that as time passes, Disney moves away from coding villains as queer and moves toward queering and questioning the very notion of a villain. By subverting viewers’ expectations for who is a villain, Disney pulls the viewer out of the passive viewing experience and asks them to assess their preconceived notions of who villains are and how they act.

**Heroic Queerness**

*Queer Until Proven Otherwise*

Although Disney takes actions to queer the rules of the world around their protagonists and has villains that can be read queerly, one of the more positive ways a queer person can find their experiences reflected in Disney movies is through identification with protagonists or side characters. Several protagonists in the movies could be read as queer or have experiences that are relatable to the queer experience. Additionally, *Tangled, Frozen* and *Zootopia* both feature side characters who are presented ambiguously.

One of the characters whose arcs most clearly represents the queer experience is Elsa. She is born different than others in Arendelle, and her powers are obvious from the time she is little, but she is allowed to live openly and play with her sister. The scene with the trolls is telling, as her father assures them that Elsa can learn to control her powers. This is reminiscent of how parents sometimes assume queer children are going through a “phase” and will outgrow it.

Elsa is separated from her sister—who does not understand why—until she can learn to keep her powers a secret. Elsa wants to make her parents proud and tries to control her powers, but as she gets older, her difference gets stronger. Her father gives
her gloves and gives her the mantra to “conceal, don’t feel; don’t let it show” (Buck, Lee & Lasseter, 2013). Elsa’s powers is a family secret, and it is kept well from Arendelle, their trade partners and even Elsa’s younger sister.

Even when coronation day comes around, while Anna dreams of finding a (male) true love, Elsa is worrying about how she will keep her secret and continue to pass as “normal,” eschewing any romantic advances. Hans even later comments that “No one was getting anywhere with [Elsa],” (Buck, Lee & Lasseter, 2013) implying that she is uninterested in male suitors. Elsa is unsuccessful at hiding the powers that make her different, and ultimately it is her powers that carry her away from Arendelle to isolation where she can freely be herself and does not have to hide. The song “Let It Go,” when read queerly, is a coming-out song as much as it is a song about empowerment through individuality.

One of the major reasons that Elsa chooses to leave once her secret is revealed is that she does not want her powers to hurt the only family she has left. Anna is determined to be a good ally and get Elsa to return to Arendelle, and the interaction between the two at Elsa’s castle reads like a straight ally trying to help a queer person from a position of naiveté. In the reprise to “For the First Time in Forever” Anna sings, “For the first time in forever, I finally understand/for the first time in forever, we can fix this hand in hand…you don’t have to live in fear” and Elsa replies “I know you mean well/but leave me be/yes I’m alone, but I’m alone and free” (Buck, Lee & Lasseter, 2013). When Anna reveals that Elsa has accidentally frozen everything with her powers and that her impact was far greater than she initially realized, Anna suggests that Elsa can simply unfreeze it. When Elsa protests that she does not know how, Anna launches into song again, not
listening to Elsa. Elsa sings “I’m such a fool, I can’t be free/No escape from the storm inside of me/I can’t control the curse/Anna please, you’ll only make it worse” (Buck, Lee & Lasseter, 2013). Eventually, Elsa’s emotions come to a head and she accidentally launches some ice into Anna’s heart.

As the movie ends, Elsa realizes that love is the key to thawing Arendelle. Taken at face value, this does not make sense because Elsa’s motivation for hiding her powers was to avoid hurting Anna (or anyone else) out of a feeling of love. What may have been a more accurate way of stating it is that open, joyful love is the key—Elsa is able to thaw Arendelle, and her use of powers in the last bit of the movie to make an ice-skating rink mirrors the way she and Anna played openly together as children. Despite the fact that they initially feared her and just came out of a winter in the middle of summer, the citizens of Arendelle are excited by the skating rink and gladly partake. Indeed, several moments of personal progress for Elsa involve others realizing the beauty and joy of what she can offer and Elsa herself returning to the joyfulness of being a child. Even Elsa’s self-presentation changes as she becomes more comfortable with herself—when she metamorphoses during “Let It Go,” she removes her gloves and crown, and takes her hair out of the bun and lets it go into a braid, which she also wore when young. She even creates herself a more colorful dress to wear.

Elsa is afraid of the social consequences of what being different would mean. People do initially fear her, see her as a monster and even try to harm her; eventually through the (sometimes misguided) help and unwavering support of allies, Elsa is able to find a way to celebrate her difference, and Arendelle’s society is radically changed by her living her true identity. Her people love her, she can leave the gates open and she is able
to be closer with her sister than ever before. Elsa’s story is easily read queerly, and offers hope that family can act as a form of support and that society will be open to change and support everyone living as their truest selves.

Moana’s experience can also be read queerly, and in different ways than Elsa’s. Moana wants so badly to be on the sea, a longing that her father sees as fundamentally incompatible with her role as the future chief of Motunui. Her “I want” song, “How Far I’ll Go” expresses how out of step with the rest of the island she feels, and how she “wish[es] she could be the perfect daughter/but [she] come[s] back to the water no matter how hard [she] tries” (Clements, Musker & Lasseter, 2016). Like Elsa, she tries to suppress her difference, but unlike Elsa, her desire to be on the sea is not a secret. It causes her father anger and embarrassment when Moana suggests the fishermen fish beyond the reef. Moana tries to persuade him that he is just being old-fashioned, adhering to “an old rule, when there were fish” (Clements, Musker & Lasseter, 2016).

Her mother tries to act as the bridge between Moana and her father, saying that Moana’s father reacted so negatively not because he does not understand her, but because he also once wanted to go beyond the reef and lost his best friend doing so. Moana’s parents both seem to think Moana’s desire to be on the sea is a childish phase she will outgrow. Moana does have a supporter in her grandmother, who continually pushes Moana to look inside herself and see what she truly wants.

It is Moana’s grandmother who helps her connect with her people’s lost history. This sense of history helps Moana ground herself and understand better who she is. Discovering queer history and having an older queer person to look to for advice, support and mentorship can have the same impact in a queer person’s life. Moana’s grandmother
supports her during times of doubt, such as when she wants the ocean to take away the heart of Te Fiti and choose someone else. After talking with her grandmother’s spirit, Moana reminds herself of who she is and where she comes from in the reprise to “How Far I’ll Go,” ultimately declaring that “the call isn’t out there at all it’s inside me” (Clements, Musker & Lasseter, 2016). She owns her longing to be on the sea not just as something that results from her role to restore the heart of Te Fiti, but as an integral part of who she is. This gives her the confidence to use the skills she has developed on her voyage to complete her mission and return to her family and her people, comfortable and confident with who she is. In the final act of self-acceptance, instead of a stone representing groundedness, Moana places a conch shell on the top of the mountain, representing her role leading her people into their future.

Queer in the Margins

Other characters in the movies in this analysis can be read queerly but play less significant roles—these are blink-and-you’ll-miss it moments; for example, during the “I’ve Got a Dream” number in Tangled, a thug named Gunther is named as doing interior design. Gunther is a queer stereotype, wearing a vest and a snooty scowl, and straightening a portrait of a dog. He is shown among a number of thugs with stereotypically feminine hobbies, so a viewer not looking for queerness could easily miss him. Similarly, in Frozen, Anna stops to get supplies at Wandering Oaken’s Trading Post and Sauna. Oaken is a huge muscular man with a gentle way of talking and a German-esque accent. He is a goofy portrayal of Nordic stereotypes, such as when he offers Anna a quart of lutefisk to smooth things over after he kicks Kristoff out of his store. He also offers Anna a visit to his sauna and waves to his family. Most clearly central is another
adult male, surrounded by younger children and a character that is coded female of ambiguous age. This scene heavily implies that Oaken is gay, without outright saying it. In *Zootopia*, Judy meets her neighbors on her first night in Zootopia—two male gazelles of similar age who fight all night. Their relationship to each other is never specified, so they could be read as queer or as brothers or roommates who just do not get along. Go-go, one of Hiro’s friends in *Big Hero 6* with a need for speed could be read as the stereotypical angry lesbian feminist. She wears her hair short with a purple streak, is grumpy and fiercely independent (even refusing a simple hand up when she falls over during the training montage) and tells people to be tough by telling them to “woman up.” In her dress, Go-go contrasts her peer, Honey Lemon, who is hyper-feminine, wearing fingerless gloves, a cutoff leather jacket and shorts over tights.

An interesting contrast to this trend is Calhoun. Her presentation is queer (much like Go-go’s), and she eschews many gender norms, talking tough and showing a general distaste for men, calling them “pussywillows” and saying, “the selfish man is like a mangy dog chasing a cautionary tale” (Moore, Johnston & Reardon, 2012). The only instances where we see Calhoun presented in a typically feminine way are when she wears a dress on her wedding days. She could also easily read as an angry feminist lesbian, but she is shown marrying Felix at the end of the movie, and her previous fiancé was also a man. The implication here might be that Calhoun is forced to queer feminine gender norms in order to gain the respect of her male troops, but as a side character, this is not developed in detail.

A common thread among all of these side characters is that the main characters do not seem to care if they are queer. Rapunzel is delighted by the thugs, and they have a
merry atmosphere in the Snuggly Duckling until the palace guards arrive; Anna simply completes her purchase from Oaken and continues on her way; Judy reflects on her first night in Zootopia, mentioning her small apartment and crazy neighbors, but immediately follows with a declaration that she loves it. Go-go becomes one of Hiro’s closest friends, and Calhoun becomes closely tied to the characters in *Fix-It Felix Jr.*

**Queer Acceptance**

Another theme that was prevalent in the movies was that of acceptance of others. This presented itself in two main ways—characters struggling to find acceptance from their families, and the acceptance by main characters of those on the margin or otherwise cast out.

**Within the Family**

Family plays a large role in the life of many of the protagonists in the six movies in this analysis. Moana, Judy Hopps, and Rapunzel have the privilege of having both parents alive and (by the end of the movie) involved in their lives. Hiro and Tadashi’s parents died when Hiro was three, but their Aunt Cass, who raised them since then, is alive for all of *Big Hero 6*. Ralph and the other characters in *Wreck-It Ralph* do not have any parents, but they are also video game characters, so this does not seem out of place. The only characters whose parents die during the course of the movie are Anna and Elsa’s. Their parents are shown throughout the “Do You Want to Build a Snowman?” number guiding Elsa and Anna, but in a move that hearkens back to older Disney movies, they die when Elsa and Anna are on the cusp of adulthood (18 and 15, respectively).

The more active role of parents in Disney movies offers new models for how families interact—and in these models, queer people may see their own experiences
reflected. Frequently, the protagonist’s parents do not understand the desires or motivations of the hero(ine). Moana finds more understanding from her grandmother than she does from her father, who is focused on training Moana to take over his role as chief one day. Her grandmother encourages Moana to listen to her internal voice, saying that is who she is.

The conflict between Moana and her father comes to a head when she suggests fishing beyond the reef, even though her father has said no one goes beyond the reef to keep their people safe. Although Moana’s mother tries to be sympathetic to Moana, she takes the chief’s side, saying, “Sometimes who we wish we were and what we wish we were meant to do is just not meant to be” (Clements, Musker & Lasseter, 2016). Her parents misunderstand her motivations and believe that they know Moana’s heart and role in the world better than Moana herself (in fact, the chief dedicates the whole song “Where You Are” trying to convince Moana to settle and see Motunui the way he does). When Moana’s grandmother dies and the infection on Motunui begins, Moana’s mother supports her daughter, realizing the gravity of the situation. She helps Moana pack and set sail before her father can realize what she is doing.

Ultimately, Moana understands that she has to defy her father’s wishes to help her people. She has a heavy burden on her shoulders and it weighs on her. The support of her grandmother, her mother and the knowledge of her people’s history give her strength to learn, find herself and assert her own identity. She helps her people reconnect with their own past, and by the end of her journey, her family is ready to welcome her—every part of her—and even learn from her and embrace new ways of living and connecting with their history. For queer people watching and reading the protagonist queerly, Moana’s
journey shows a model for family acceptance where family members may need time to adjust. There will be some people who are supportive from day one (especially if they are a bit different themselves), there will be some people who try to act as middle-men, and there may be hold-outs who are harder to bring around than the others. In Disney fashion, however, the ending is happy and the protagonist is able to find acceptance with her whole family and live as her authentic self.

Judy Hopps faces similar challenges from her parents in Zootopia—her parents have reservations about her becoming Zootopia’s first bunny cop. They even attribute their own happiness to settling, and settling hard for a quiet life in Bunnyburrow as carrot farmers. Unlike Moana, who is still a child when she sets out to save her island, Judy is an adult when she leaves Bunnyburrow for Zootopia, so she experiences less active resistance from her parents in achieving her goals. Judy’s parents consistently question her career and ability to succeed during the movie (for instance, by being overjoyed that Judy is assigned parking duty and is not a “real” cop), fearing for her safety. Before Judy leaves, there is a scene where Judy’s father gives her a bag full of self-defense items like fox repellent, citing how dangerous predators could be. Judy and her mother push back on this small-mindedness, reminding Judy’s dad that he plays cribbage with a weasel, but eventually even Judy’s mother agrees that foxes are inherently dangerous, and that Judy ought to at least have fox repellent. Judy’s optimism about the world outside of her hometown is influenced by this conversation with her parents (as evidenced when she grabs her fox repellent on her way out the door on her first day of work). Judy’s family are a support net for her when she needs a time-out from Zootopia to think, and it is her parents’ rural knowledge that ends up being the key to discovering the effect the onions
have on animals. Her parents demonstrate the impact that children educating their parents can have, because Judy inspires them to treat predators better in their community. Although Judy does not read as specifically queer (though definitely as a marginalized character), this takeaway is relevant to both allies and closeted queer people who may be watching. Sometimes our words which can feel futile do have effects we do not see, so the push to offer a new perspective is always worth it.

In *Frozen*, Elsa’s family is well-meaning, but often make the situation worse. Elsa’s parents react with fear and anger when she strikes Anna’s head with ice as a child, despite the fact that Elsa is clearly scared and upset and turned to them for reassurance. The king is also the one who suggests that isolating Elsa and hiding her away until she can learn to control her powers is an appropriate way to handle her. Although this decision is ostensibly to protect Anna, it ruins Elsa’s self-confidence and makes her incredibly fearful. Elsa’s relationship with her parents is more restrained than her sister’s, as evidenced by how Elsa curtsies to bid her parents goodbye, while Anna gives them hugs. It is clear that Elsa is worried about hurting (or disappointing) them.

Elsa’s parents do not give up on her, even if their attempts to help her are misguided, and Anna follows in their footsteps. Despite Elsa’s repeated attempts to push her away (and warnings that she does not want to hurt Anna), Anna persists in trying to bring Elsa back to Arendelle, confident that Elsa would never hurt her. The sister dynamic shown in the movie, of bickering and love, is a new emphasis for Disney, particularly in princess movies where the princess is usually an only child, or her siblings are cruel, like Cinderella’s stepsisters. Elsa and Anna have a strained relationship, certainly—Elsa thinks Anna is naïve for trying to marry Hans, and Anna thinks Elsa is
cold and distant—but they still care about each other deeply. Hans uses Elsa’s concern for her sister as a tool to manipulate Elsa. Ultimately, it is Anna’s unconditional love that helps Elsa learn to love herself. With her sister’s support, Elsa is able to be brave in being herself and find her place in Arendelle’s society.

In addition to parents and other family members who are trying to do what they think is best for their children, even if it is sometimes wrong, Disney also shows that some people have parents who are not well-intentioned in Tangled. As discussed in earlier sections, Rapunzel and Mother Goethel’s relationship is very dysfunctional. In true fairytale fashion, Rapunzel finds out that Mother Goethel is not her “real” mother, but rather a kidnapper who has raised her, and she is welcomed lovingly into her “real” family at the end of the movie. Although this movie does prioritize Rapunzel’s biological family, it is not clear that Rapunzel will go back to living with Goethel once her trip to see the floating lanterns is over. Flynn Rider is accepting of her decision either way, and he tries to help her escape her abuser. The lesson that sometimes the person who raised you is not a good person and that you are better off away from them is one that is not always portrayed in children’s movies with such depth. Additionally, when compared to princesses such as Cinderella or Snow White who come from abusive households, Rapunzel is unique in that she does not know for most of the movie that Mother Goethel is not her biological parent. She has no standard to compare it to. It is a powerful move to validate abuse victims’ experiences and their choice to leave their abuser, even if their abuser is “family.”
Finding Acceptance with Outcasts

Another element that many of the Disney movies were characterized by was the protagonist’s friendships with those society has cast out. In *Tangled*, Rapunzel finds support and understanding for her dream among the ruffians at the Snuggly Duckling. The atmosphere during “I’ve Got a Dream” is festive and celebrates vulnerability to defying society’s expectations—when Flynn sings that his dream is to be somewhere warm and sunny, alone with huge piles of money, the thugs say his dream stinks. They seemed to be hoping for a revealing dream that would counter their impression of Flynn Rider, wanted thief. This does not happen.

The friendship between Vanellope and Ralph in *Wreck-It Ralph* is two outcasts from different games finding each other. Vanellope and Ralph literally live in the garbage in their respective games, but they find understanding in each other. Their understanding and solidarity ultimately leads to other outcasts, like the homeless characters from *Qbert* being able to achieve better treatment in their societies. It is worth noting that the “bad guys” already had a welcoming community that Ralph could partake in, but Ralph’s desire to have what those in the “mainstream” take for granted leads him to Vanellope.

*Frozen* puts a twist on this trope because Elsa, despite being the queen of Arendelle, is an outcast of sorts. Anna proves to be the link between Kristoff and Sven (who live outside of Arendelle’s society in the more conventional sense) and Elsa. Instead of outcasts finding each other, in this movie we see side characters question Anna’s choice to continue to reach out to Elsa—even Kristoff asks Anna, “So you’re not afraid of her?” which Anna brushes off, “Why would I be?” (Buck, Lee & Lasseter, 2013). Anna’s friendship with Elsa helps Elsa to be accepted again into Arendelle
society; however, Anna also learns from her friendship with Kristoff. When the two visit Kristoff’s adoptive family of trolls, Anna is taught about love and given the answer to the problem of ice in her heart.

Although not outcasts in the social sense, Judy and the ZPD find valuable knowledge for their city problems outside the city when Judy’s farmer parents explain how the onions make animals go savage. Judy quite literally befriends those outside of society when she becomes close with Nick and even become friendly with the crime boss.

With the exception of Kristoff, just about every “outcast” the protagonist befriends is an enemy of the law or wanted in some way. Hiro twists this trend, because he is the outcast who is befriended. He is a criminal—he is nearly arrested for bot-fighting. It is implied that the only reason he is not arrested is that he is fairly young. When Tadashi confronts Hiro about it, Hiro protests that he had to turn to bot-fighting because the conventional path of going to college would not challenge him. In contrast, Tadashi’s friends are respectable young students who are using their brains and creative potential to develop technology to further their society. In Big Hero 6, the viewer sees the outsider being redeemed by the friendship of those inside society from the other perspective.

Maui queers the idea that outsiders are all criminals. In Moana, the outsider trope is more of a restoration of reputation for Maui, who has fallen from grace. He is already a part of Motunui’s folklore, but he is seen as devious and the reason for their problems. By helping Moana, he is able to restore his status to that of hero and be honored in human society even though he remains outside of it still. His status as an outsider serves as both
a punishment (when he is seen as the cause of trouble) and later as a reward (when he is set apart as a demigod with power to help humans). Moana is able to help Maui realize his potential because she does not give up on him or try to force him to be someone he is not or join human society.

The six Disney movies in this analysis present instances of queerness that can be understood according to six broad categories. The next section will discuss these categories within the context of the previous literature.
DISCUSSION

The aim of this study was to analyze the six original Disney animated movies released between 2010 and 2020 through a queer lens to understand where queer people might see themselves or their experiences reflected in the films, given that there are no openly queer protagonists (Rude, 2019; Butler, 2019; Lang, 2017). Queer theory is underutilized in communication, but is a useful mode of analysis because of how it challenges societal assumptions through the subversions that are presented in texts. It highlights the instabilities of socially constructed categories (Jagose, 1996; Halperin, 2003) and questions the power structures that prop them up. Even the word “queer” is used to highlight outsider status for people who do not fit into heteronormative structures (Halperin, 2003).

Through a modified grounded theory analysis, I was able to create six broad categories to describe the instances of queering present in Disney movies: queering Disney logic, queering the idea of “appropriate” through mature themes, queering power and violence, villainous queerness, heroic queerness, and queer acceptance. One consistent effect that these instances of queering have is to slowly make room for a broader variety of narratives.

The queering of the logic of Disney movies is a bold move from the standpoint of the company. Many of the common tropes of Disney movies have stemmed from the original movies that were helmed by Walt Disney and ones that Howard Ashman breathed life back into during the Disney Renaissance. The traditional princess movie with a predictable ending were part of what built Disney’s animated movie empire (Stadelman, 2019; McGill, 2018; Pallant, 2011); the creative departures present in more
recent movies are opportunities for the company to nod to audience’s expectations (and in some cases, likely nostalgia) while making space for characters who do not fit as neatly in these boxes. Additionally, rather than nearly exclusively European or American folktales, with movies like Wreck-It Ralph, Big Hero 6, Zootopia, and Moana, Disney expands its repertoire of stories to tell. With the embrace of other cultures and traditions will also necessarily come more diverse possibilities for tropes and endings.

One way to consider whether these changes are groundbreaking or a nod to what the company has determined is what audiences want would be to look at the dynamics of power and violence at play in Disney movies, which often mirror our own biases and understandings. To this end, previous scholarship has looked at how Disney movies with regards to gender and race (Do Rozario, 2004; Hine et al, 2018; Limbach, 2013; Barnd, 2013; Willets, 2013; Akita & Kenney, 2013). Although the movies in this analysis do not ultimately buck the status quo much when it comes to embedded power structures—for example, in Zootopia the overarching message is that discrimination can be solved on the individual level without structural change—there are instances of power being examined more closely than in the past. Instead of one individual being exceptional and being allowed to beat the odds while others continue their lives unchanged (as seen in older movies like Mulan, Aladdin or The Emperor’s New Groove), in movies like Wreck-It Ralph and Moana, some individuals question the structures of power and tradition in their movie worlds and successfully work to change it. Disney upholds the American value of individualism in many of its movies (Wills, 2017), but once the characters in the analyzed movies experience self-actualization, they are able to help others elevate themselves; this is true even in movies like Zootopia that may not seem that radical, as Judy helps Nick
become the first fox cop just like she was the first bunny cop. The core of queer analysis is looking for how society is structured and where the cracks appear, because that indicates who holds power and how. By showing characters pushing back at the dominant power structure, even if it is only on the individual level, Disney has begun to queer our understanding of power and the role of the individual in society.

Another significant societal marker of power (and particularly relevant in discussions of Disney) is what themes are considered “appropriate” for children, as one of the arguments against including openly queer characters in children’s animated movies has been that queerness is too “adult” for children. As discussed in the literature review, queer theorists have turned to children’s media as an area for analysis because of the inherent instability of the concept of “child” (Robinson, 2014; Owen, 2010; Miller, 2014) and have worked to queer children’s media (Earles, 2017; Crawley, 2017; Ryan & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2013). Disney undermines the notion of “appropriate” for children in the analyzed movies through the inclusion of themes that might normally be considered mature. Although Disney movies have a long history of portraying death and drinking (think of *Dumbo, Beauty and the Beast* or *Pinocchio*, to name a few), *Big Hero 6* extends mature themes by introducing puberty. In addition to quick gags that hint at elements of adult life, recent Disney movies also meaningfully challenge the idea of what concepts are too advanced for children to understand by taking in-depth looks at trauma. In the movies in this analysis, characters such as Elsa, Hiro, Rapunzel and Calhoun struggle with traumatic events with more depth and nuance than many older characters who, by all accounts, have experienced moments that would be scarring (such as Mulan, Belle or even Snow White). Disney makes movies that are seen and enjoyed by viewers of all
ages, and by discussing certain themes with care at a level that is relatable to adults and understandable for children, the company opens the door to future movies that tackle other “mature” subject matter, like queerness.

The next two categories, villainous and heroic queerness, are more in line with how previous queer scholars have analyzed Disney movies. As other scholars (Griffin, 2000; Putnam, 2013; McGill, 2018) have pointed out about older Disney movies, the villains in *Tangled* and *Wreck-It Ralph* (and the villainous side character in *Moana*) read as queer because of their mannerisms or campiness. The movies in this analysis also queer the concept of villainy by sharing narratives where there is no true villain. Instead, we see well-meaning people with good hearts who accidentally create problems and, with the support of friends and family, are able to correct them. This departure creates narratives that are less black-and-white and open doors for discussions of how society can be wrong (like Arendelle’s unfounded fear of Elsa or the arcade’s rejection of “bad guys” even after working hours) and what changes can be made to be more welcoming of every individual.

A nice complement to the shift away from clear-cut villains is the ambiguity that allows queer people to read themselves onto the heroes. Reading a hero as similar to oneself is not new, and has been a hallmark of queer analysis for previous Disney movies (Perea, 2018; Spencer, 2014; Griffin, 2000) and queer analysis of children’s media more generally (Ryan & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2013). Some trends in the most recent movies, such as protagonists not winding up with love interests at the end of the movie, allow more room for queer people to read their experiences in these characters. This is particularly significant as the queer movement works to shift its focus from marriage
equality to other fights—such as the protection of trans people—and given that, to date, queer representation on screen has been largely limited to gay white men (Floegel & Costello, 2019).

The acceptance category was the one that was most surprising to me personally. When I began my analysis, I anticipated finding instances of “found family” where a group of people who for one reason or another have been rejected by or lost their biological families come together to form their own new family. This assumption was based on Disney’s historical precedent of dead or absent parents (Haas, 1995). What I actually found was not only that found families were rare, but that parents and parental figures played more prominently in the six neo-Disney movies in this sample than in past Disney movies. The only dynamic that approached found family trope in the analysis was Hiro’s friendship with Tadashi’s friends from college in Big Hero 6. Given that it is not a rejection from Hiro’s family but Tadashi’s death that brings the group together, though, this group could be more accurately understood as a support group.

Although the found family was not as salient as expected, the family still played a significant role in most of the movies in this analysis because of the sway they hold over the protagonists in their respective movies. This creates new dynamics that queer people may relate to, showing the range of experiences they may have with their family both positive and negative. Additionally, the various family dynamics at work on screen open opportunities for parents to talk with their children about what they are seeing on screen, which research suggests is important to help children become critical media consumers (Coyne et al, 2016; Goldberg & Garcia, 2016; Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2005).
The friendship with outcasts was a trope I anticipated in the movies from my personal experience watching Disney movies (for example, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* has an entire musical number dedicated to honoring outcasts); however, Disney did some interesting moves to queer our understanding of margins and show the fluidity of who can be an outcast and who might not be (for example, with Hiro and Maui). The presence of outcasts at all also speaks to the power play at work in Disney movies, where structures cast out or punish people because of difference or rejecting a conventional path (Resene, 2017; Sweeney, 2013).

The categories that arose from this study, paired with previous literature (Griffin, 2000; Perea, 2018; Key, 2015; Hine et al, 2018) suggest that the landscape of queerness in Disney is moving in an exciting direction—although progress may be slow and may not be as immediately powerful as some audiences may hope, changes are slowly creeping into Disney movies that make way for queer people to more easily read themselves onto the big screen and hopefully in the future see themselves explicitly represented as heroes in Disney movies. A queer protagonist in an animated Disney movie would be a powerful affirmation of queer people’s visibility and place in mainstream society.
LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The current study fills a gap in the queer theory literature by looking at original Disney animated movies released between 2010 and 2020 to understand where queer people can find themselves and their experiences reflected, particularly in light of the fact that Disney has not had an openly queer character. As with any analysis, this study has limitations that future research could improve upon. First, only one person conducted the analysis, and the Socratic nature of queer theory means another researcher might come away with different impressions. Replication of this analysis with different scholars, especially queer of color scholars, would be a compelling way to flesh out how queerness presents itself in Disney movies to people with different perspectives. The decision to conduct a qualitative analysis also comes with the limitations inherent in the descriptive nature of qualitative research. Modifying this same study to be amenable to a quantitative analysis would allow for a different understanding of queerness in these movies. Additionally, the categories created from this analysis apply to the six movies released in the past ten years in order to fill a gap in the literature. It would be interesting to watch movies from older Disney eras to see if these categories apply or whether different categories present themselves.

With an oeuvre as large as Disney’s, chronologically is only one way the material could be divided for analysis. Future research might look at princess movies as a whole or (perhaps more groundbreaking) specifically non-princess movies; other lines for analysis might be by protagonist’s race or gender, or whether the movie is a musical or not. In the same way that society can be analyzed on a number of different axes, creative
decisions about how to distinguish Disney movies from each other might offer interesting points for comparative analysis.

On March 6th, 2020, during the writing of this study, the Disney-Pixar movie *Onward* was released featuring the Disney’s first openly queer side character. Although that movie was outside the criteria of this study, a queer analysis of Disney-Pixar movies would be a logical next step for future analyses. The change in creative leadership may lead to different categories depending on what tropes Pixar favors; for example, Pixar is not known for their musicals and their movies are rarely based on familiar fairytales.

Another development that occurred during the writing of this thesis was the release of *Frozen II*. This analysis excluded sequels to focus on original storylines with new characters. When a movie is created, a canon is created that puts constraints on future movies in that franchise. Audience members have expectations for how characters will behave; however, sequels would also be a compelling area for a future study as a way to see how the company adapts to changes in audience expectations, especially for sequels, such as the Disney-Pixar movie, *The Incredibles II* that are released many years after the original movie is released. The queer study of sequels presents the opportunity to analyze how Disney responds to fan readings of characters—whether that be supporting fan readings by keeping the attributes of a character that allow fans to read them as queer, or by doubling down to force those characters into heteronormative roles.

Lastly during this analysis, it was announced that Bob Iger would step down as Disney’s CEO and be replaced by Bob Chapek, though the exact date of this transition is unclear due to the coronavirus crisis as of April 2020. This change in leadership may
herald further changes in the company, so it will be exciting to see what changes may come in the Chapek era.

For many Americans and audiences around the world, Disney movies call to mind nostalgic memories of childhood and still bring joy as an adult, as well as teaching American cultural values. In a society that can be exclusionary to those who do not fit neatly into boxes, being able to find yourself in a cultural mainstay like Disney is a powerful way to affirm yourself and your identity. Queering Disney is a way to occupy the spaces between socially constructed boxes and push their limits with the hope that society will one day reflect those understandings.
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