

“We Made Them”: Degendered Play and Shifting Subjectivities in ABC's *Bluey*

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In 2013, Piers Akerman criticized BBC's animated television show for the preschool audience, *Peppa Pig*, saying it "pushes a weird feminist line that would be closer to the hearts of Labor's Handbag Hit Squad than the preschool audience it is aimed at" (Smith). This is not the first right-wing pundit to accuse public television of having a left-wing agenda. Akerman's critique was met with mockery and satiric responses, illustrating that his accusation feels overblown and unfounded to many. Yet Michelle Smith notes in her response article published on *The Conversation* that Akerman is "right to recognize that children's books, television and films are not politically meaningless simply because they are produced for young people", but that these forms of media ostensibly "socialize children into the accepted beliefs of a particular time and place" (Smith).

The Australian animated television series *Bluey* is often referred to as Australia's *Peppa Pig*. While its contents are subversive, *Bluey* has not yet fallen under the same sort of fire as *Peppa Pig*, possibly due to its newness. Each episode of *Bluey* highlights imaginary play that acts to guide a central theme, realistically depicting family life with young children while transforming everyday schedules into opportunities for excitement and imaginative storytelling. The show follows the Heelers, a family of anthropomorphized Australian cattle dogs with parents, Bandit and Chili, and sisters, Bluey and Bingo. *Bluey* first aired on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation in 2018 and was instantly popular. Disney, seeing an opportunity, contracted the show to its junior network before adding it to their streaming service, Disney+, just a year later in the fall of 2019 creating its global acclaim (Keast). The show's palatability captures viewers long enough to break down and reconstruct traditional notions of gender. *Bluey* positions imaginative play as a space that need not conform to traditional views of masculine and feminine and encourages the blurring of boundaries. This can be mirrored by young viewers as they use play to construct their ideas of self, disrupting the perpetuation of fixed gender roles.

Before understanding how narrative play can disrupt and construct children's ideas of self, it is essential to understand how the self is constructed at all and reject the notion of a fixed, natural, or intrinsic identity. In her book, *Waking Sleeping Beauty*, Roberta Trites describes subjectivity as fundamental to understanding poststructuralist feminist theory. To Trites, the subject is constructed by sociolinguistic forces asserting themselves on the individual. Jacques Lacan, and other constructivists, hold that language has an immense impact on what "determines the subject as being" (165). In

this way, subjectivities can change and shift just as those very systems and cultural forces that control language do.

John Stephens and Robyn McAllum state that a subject is formed by the discourse they are situated in through "interpellation," or the "summoning of individuals into a place within a structure and an identity in which they seem to recognize themselves" (131). This recognition within the structures surrounding an individual causes the internalization of their identity and thus constructs it through the language surrounding them.

This recognition of self is revealed through a text's Dialogics, which Mikhail Bakhtin describes as made up of the competing dialogues within a text, formed by cultural and institutional influences, that work together to create the text's meaning and the reader's understanding of it (273-275). A feminist subject, negotiating the dialogues within a text and the culture the reader positions it in, emerges as an active participant and gains autonomy.

This complex relationship between identification and internalization drives the disruptive potential of *Bluey's* storylines. Preschool viewers undergo this process alongside the characters, allowing them to begin to process their constructions. For as Jennifer Earles points out, the combination of feminist theory and poststructuralist scholarship reveals that children are not solely "reflexive" but that they "are active meaning-makers who can position themselves in the literature in order to resist, rupture and exceed the discourse" (371-72).

In *Bluey*, characters engage in play simultaneously as entertainment and in a way that helps them make sense of their world and decide who they want to be. In this way, *Bluey* models play as a means of self-formation that does not constrict characters by giving them rigid roles but reveals how creating new characters can become a path to self-creation. As children construct their identities by internalizing cultural messages, play becomes incendiary, allowing children to create positionalities that evade the guidelines they were originally given. Instead of perpetuating the same static and problematic gender roles, imaginative play allows children to create a space for themselves to practice new ways of being and reconfigure the status quo for future generations.

The work *Bluey* is doing, undermining as it may be of a gender binary, is nevertheless firmly rooted in depictions of heteronormativity. The fluidity with which *Bluey* navigates gender does not depart from the framework of heterosexual, middle-class representations of family life. Jody Norton critiques the consumer and publisher relationship involving children's literature, and the same limitations can be applied here. She notes that the relationship between author, publisher, and consumer confines alternative depictions from straying too far from straight society (418). It may be *Bluey's* unwillingness, at this point, to expand depictions of family life that gives it the ability to undermine culture's accepted view of male and female while remaining highly popular.

Television's Effects on Children's Play

Before analyzing *Bluey's* contents and storylines, it is key to understand the show's position as one designed for preschool audiences. Preschool television cannot be separated from specific qualities, without which a show will likely never survive live television or secure a place on ever-monopolizing streaming platforms. In her book, *Children, Media, and Culture*, Máire Davies outlines expectations for a show targeted to viewers aged two to seven, including but not limited to, a surreal and detailed setting, educational programming, a team of characters, and the ability to extend content online and to phone applications. These must be present for marketing executives to use a show to drive merchandise sales and maximize profits (161). The cyclical relationship between creator, viewer, and product consumer means that children are not only consuming a show's content while watching. As Kelli McCoy points out in her article, "What Does a Prince Do?" preschool television infiltrates children's play and shapes their imagination through the toys making up their imaginary worlds, apart from the show itself (111). This principal aim is to ensure children, or rather their parents, spend money on toys, clothing, books, and other products. In his study on *Consumption*, Robert Bocock highlights how

Consumption has emerged as a fundamental part of the process by which infants enter western capitalist cultures and their symbolic systems of meanings. Foods, drinks, toys, clothes and television are part of the early experiences of consumption of young children in western societies. Infants and children are being socialised into being consumers during the very early stages of development. (85)

Analyzing the problematic nature of this relationship between viewers and material consumption exceeds the scope of this paper. But it is important to note that children's media intrinsically operates in a neoliberal culture designed to drive sales at all costs. Within this consumer driven system, *Bluey's* ancillary products disrupt the highly gendered world of character merchandise by the small, but not insignificant fact, that the title character Bluey, a girl, is blue. Bluey's animation is not only color coded incorrectly by industry standards but is not overtly feminine, lacking exaggerated eyelashes or gendered clothing. Most of the show's characters are drawn similarly, with a few exceptions. The show's diverse depictions of masculinity and femininity allow a much broader demographic to identify with the characters, sowing allegiance to maintain a hold on the toy market.

Because merchandise is not straightforwardly targeted to one gender, fandom is also not gendered. In the world of preschool television, it does not matter whether the toy or show comes first; the goal is for the characters to become enmeshed in children's lives in a way that drives further viewing and purchasing. This means the characters directly affect the imagination of the show's young viewers, and messages regarding identity become a part of the child's lens to view themselves. Content combined with its

merchandise brings the innovative stories of Bluey into the living rooms of viewers when televisions and tablets are powered off. This shapes preschool play and influences children's ideas of their own gender identity and its possible expressions, as the products they play with become part of the stories they tell about themselves.

Metafiction in *Bluey*

The episode “Flat Pack” reveals the writer’s understanding of this reflexive relationship with the viewer. The episode starts with Bandit and Chili, self-proclaimed as unhandy, working to put together a porch swing. They pull out directions, and Chili reads them, listing what the “cartoon dog says.” “I am not taking advice from a cartoon dog!” Bandit scoffs (a self-reflexive nod to the viewer watching cartoon dogs, leaving them to choose whether they in turn want to follow their lead). As the couple works, they argue, and each continues to make mistakes. Bluey and Bingo begin constructing their own world with the unused cardboard and packing foam their parents throw off the porch. Bluey is the Mama, and Bingo is the baby. As more cardboard piles up, the girls’ personas evolve. Bingo transitions from a baby fish to a toddler frog, to a big girl bird, and finally to a cave-dog teenager, shifting her positions as their narrative changes and grows. They draw a hieroglyphic history to catalog all their evolutions and end their story with their parents fighting on the porch.

Chili and Bandit pause to admire the free creativity coming from their girls, embracing as Chili gushes, “Look at them. We made them.” Pulling strength from this moment of clarity to try again without the bickering, they complete their project. Bluey puts the finishing touches on their Styrofoam city with an Alan wrench before turning to Bingo and declaring, “Teenager! The library is finished!” Bingo replies, “Wonderful Mama. But I am not a teenager anymore. I am all grown up,” before informing her that she built a spaceship to explore space. After saying their goodbyes, Bluey sits on the ground and takes a breath before asking, “now, what do I do?” Chili whispers from the porch for her to join them. The three sit on the completed porch swing, lovingly observing Bingo exploring space in her Styrofoam ship (“Flat Pack” 2020). The children’s proximity to their parents works to shift their story. Critically, it departs from what is modeled to create a new type of narrative. Not only are Bandit and Chili influenced by the play, but Bluey herself changes the story as she responds to the actions of her pretend daughter growing. This instance not only illustrates children’s robust imaginations but also that lived experience affects their play as much as their play influences the world surrounding them. This metafictional approach is key to *Bluey*’s influence on children’s identification and reconstruction of gender norms.

Trites explains that metafiction, or “fiction about fiction itself,” self-consciously investigates the relationship between fiction and reality and uses created narrative within a story to highlight fluid constructions of identity (“Metafiction...” 122). This understanding of subjectivity is enmeshed in what she calls the “Politics of Identity,” or

the ability to identify your positionality in your community and adopt the subject position (Trites, "Metafiction..."124). Common to coming-of-age narratives, a character defines their position without, or in rebellion to, parental authority. However, in *Bluey*, parents often guide this exploration to aid in the process at this young age.

The episode "Bingo," in which Bingo needs to learn how to play on her own as no one is around to entertain her, works to illustrate this concept. Bingo, well-acquainted with assuming the object position as the youngest and least powerful, moves through the story constructing her own narrative to arrive at a place of empowerment. When she pleads with Chili to end her boredom, her mother redirects her to find a solution independently ("Bingo" 2020). Not only does Bingo obtain agency through the story, but she begins to learn how to do so without a parent's dictation of her parameters and instead with her parent's encouragement to find them herself. Through her exploration she learns that her own interests and desires are powerful tools for play, shifting her position within her family. Children watching the show may follow suit, viewing their own curiosity as an agent of change. Bingo again practices asserting her agency in "Yoga Ball" as she must learn to use her "big girl bark" to tell her dad he plays too rough for her liking ("Yoga Ball" 2018). She begins the episode passively and unhappily playing, but by the end, she is the one directing the game after learning how to advocate for herself. These multilayered narratives reveal to the viewer how they might use imaginative play to claim agency in their own lives.

Critical Imagination and Intertextuality

Using fiction to reveal how fiction is crafted is only one facet, or pedagogical model, for viewers. *Bluey* plays on intertextual knowledge to help children deconstruct and reconstruct stories that they are already familiar with. In "Critical Imagination," Jill Golden explores narrative as "one of the primary ways of human knowing, both of the physical and social worlds and of the self" (323). She uses the term "critical imagination" to describe the intellectual, ethical, and imaginative deconstruction of texts so that children can then reconstruct stories in ways that widen subjectivities for boys and girls to inhabit (Golden 324). Golden deploys Roland Barthes' idea of *pleasure* and *bliss* to illustrate how this works. She defines *pleasure* as identification within hegemonic discourse and *bliss* as unsettling to "reader's historical, cultural, and psychological assumptions" (Golden 327). *Pleasure* and *bliss* are not in opposition, but "bliss arises at the edge of pleasure" and the evocation of *bliss* is what "seems to be a sudden awareness of new knowing" (Golden 327). It is this combination that allows for a reinterpretation of old texts to become tools of subversion. Golden's hope is that this allows stories to reveal the "most possible ways girls can exist" and make "desirable the widest range of positions "for both girls and boys" (Golden 331).

The episode "Mums and Dads," focuses on two of *Bluey*'s friends, Indy and Rusty, trying to play "House" together. Children watching the show will have experience with

this game and how each gender is typically cast. Both Rusty and Indy are excited initially about their daughter Polly but collide as each wants to be the one to go to work while the other stays home with the baby. Rusty says, "Mums stay home and look after the kids." To which Indy replies, "No! Dads stay home and mow the lawn." Both are stuck in the model they experience at home, creating a competing narrative, and neither is willing to budge. Unable to reconcile, Rusty and Indy part to find other partners with whom to play mums and dads. After failed attempts to find different partners with similar parental ethics, they return to each other, willing to reconsider. Instead of arguing about who gets to go to work, they both insist they will be the one to stay home and take care of the baby. Still struggling to reach a resolution but wanting to play with each other, they ask, "What if it's the weekend?" before working together to care for Polly and their home ("Mums and Dads" 2019). Through the game, the characters are reworking their individual ideas of the role of parent and its gendered consequence. Their perceptions shift and widen with each new person they try to play the game with. Instead of one's will overpowering the other, they negotiate the story together to create positions satisfying to both. Their game gives them pleasure, and through narrative reconstruction, they end the scene in domestic bliss. Declaring it is the weekend may seem like an unrealistic solution to their problem, but the ability to move from old to new understandings of the societal constructions of parenthood is an invaluable tool for children who grow up and choose to be parents, reworking the traditional model to benefit themselves and their families. This type of restructuring has the potential to reframe the family model that defines who a mother and father can be, making child's play anything but neutral.

Critical imagination is a useful term to borrow for this repeated undertaking in *Bluey* and is illustrated by storylines that invoke traditional fairytales and stories with which children are familiar while presenting them with a unique spin. Stephens and McAllum point out that this intertextuality, or the referencing of the relationship between narratives in the overall cultural discourse, reveals to the reader the constructive nature of fiction and allows the viewer to reinterpret stories and seek "a more personally empowering subject position" (131). In the episode "The Beach," Bluey's mom goes on a solitary walk while the girls stay behind to bury Bluey in the sand, giving her a mermaid tail. Bluey finds a shell and wants to show her mom but does not know how she can get to her as she has no legs. Bingo becomes King Neptune and gives her legs so she can begin her quest on land. Along the straight line in the sand marked by Chili's paw prints, Bluey encounters obstacles frightening to her 6-year-old self: the distance of her mother, seagulls, crabs, a pelican, and finally, her mom's footprints being washed away by the water. Each time she wants to give up, she reminds herself she is the mermaid who got her legs and finds the strength to keep going ("The Beach" 2018). This tale invokes Hans Christian Andersen's fairytale, *The Little Mermaid*, as well as Disney's animated adaptation, which feminists have criticized as a narrative of a woman willingly losing her voice to gain a man's approval. Through

Bluey's identification with the protagonist, she transforms the tale into a narrative of empowerment through which she can reach her mom unaided. Bluey begins the episode unsure and timid but obtains agency and independence by recreating the story and giving herself control. Children are invited into this reimagining as Bluey signals to viewers that this type of play is a welcome and exciting disruption, encouraging them to project themselves into their favorite stories and disorder them.

Masculine and Feminine in Community

In her article, "' Let it go?'" Heike Steinhoff reminds us that animated features, Disney's in particular, work to pass on cultural values to their viewers, including those of gender and sexuality (3439). Disney's acquisition of *Bluey* in 2019 puts the show in direct conversation with the corporation's large body of media content. Feminists have long criticized Disney for portraying passive females and perpetuating the patriarchal gender hierarchy.

McCoy describes that post-millennium Disney has mostly defaulted to casting the post-feminist female, who is much more independent and complex than her previous renditions but still leaves viewers stuck in a gender binary. This girl, found in Disney Junior's *Sheriff Callie* and *Sofia the First*, is resourceful, intelligent, and nurturing to all. She saves the day wearing pink, glitter, and a tiara. Her capability is repeatedly reinforced as of her own making by being smarter, working harder, and not giving up, highlighting that the individual can transcend any limitations by themselves no matter the systems in place to prevent them from doing so. McCoy argues that this is directly undermined as this post-feminist gal is surrounded by stereotypical male characters who are brash, inept, and cause more problems than produce solutions. This gives the heroine a chance to show her stuff, but in the end, she saves the boys from themselves and usually shares the credit. McCoy's article sprung from her son asking her, "Mommy, what does a Prince do?" She took pride in his viewing of females in a complex and favorable light, but male representation left him lacking (112). *Bluey* is added to Disney's "technologies of gender," as Teresa De Lauretis calls it, and may point to the beginnings of progressive on-screen identification for McCoy's son (De Lauretis 2).

Bluey's complex rendering of gender breaks with other shows on Disney Junior, as the show reveals the complexity of masculinity and femininity in relationship to build a nurturing and supportive community. Instead of a girl having to work harder than everyone and hopefully luck into subpar boys surrounding her, Bluey and Bingo are encouraged and strengthened by their male peers, who are undergoing the same process of self-formation as they are.

In "Redeeming Masculinity at the end of the Second Millennium," Beverly Pennell discusses male characters in children's fiction focusing on how the patriarchal restrictions of masculinity limit them. She proposes that male characters need a means of embracing new positionalities. For this to be achieved, the story, and discourse within

it, must reveal traditional masculine characteristics as a construct instead of natural and reject the notion that one type of masculinity exists. Instead, the story needs to include many masculine expressions not premised on the patriarchal power hierarchy of male dominance of the female (80-81). This is not intuitive, as Victoria Flanagan notes that many authors who undertake this task end up doing so by demonizing, intentionally or not, feminine subjectivities (28). How do we heed Judith Butler's warning "that feminism ought to be careful not to idealize certain expressions of gender that, in turn, produce new forms of hierarchy and exclusion" and create degendered stories instead? (viii).

Shifting male subjectivities are illustrated in the episode "Army," where Rusty plays army with Jack, the new kid at school. Jack shows many signs of neuro-divergence and is self-conscious about his forgetfulness and inability to follow through. With a title like "Army," one might expect to find boys engaging in combat or planning an invasion. But instead of the game being one of masculinity gone wild, Rusty and Jack go through a series of bootcamp style training activities. The obstacles and exercises teach both characters how to work together, take responsibility, and find strength in their group instead of the individual ("Army" 2020).

The children's reimagined play is strengthened by the adults they are surrounded by, and so much of *Bluey's* success in de-gendering content is achieved through the character of Bandit. The writers, clearly mindful of children's idea of masculinity, frequently have his daughters mimic him by flatulating and talking in a bro voice. Still, Bandit is not reduced to the show's bumbling idiot that McCoy finds problematic. For as many stereotypical depictions, more of him appear of Bandit engaged in meaningful emotional connections with his children, wife, and other male characters. As Bandit participates in games traditionally viewed as feminine, for example, wedding, fairies, and beauty salon, he makes room for his daughters to enter traditionally masculine roles. This gender-bending is never shamed but instead celebrated.

Bandit's active participation in his daughter's games takes traditional conceptions of mother and father and literally plays with them, which results in the blurring of the roles or redefinition in a way that empties them of their gendered construction. In the episode "Dad Baby," which is absent from Disney's platform, Bandit transforms into an expectant father, acting pregnant by carrying Bingo in a baby carrier. What starts as Bandit parodying a pregnant woman becomes his reality. His back begins to hurt, he forgets his size and knocks things over, and as Bingo begins to simulate baby kicks, Bandit yelps in pain and tries to get his baby out any way possible. Just as he is about to take off the carrier and end his discomfort, Bingo peaks her head from the bottom, and Bluey yells, "You are having a baby!" The scene changes to Bandit on his back in a kiddie pool, searching for support during the birthing process. Bluey, who was previously directing the plot, exclaims she doesn't know what to do because she works at a Petrol station and Chili, taking this opportunity of occupied children to get some work done, is unwilling to guide Bandit through the process. Finally, in desperation, Bandit calls out

to his neighbor Pat to help him. A laboring Bandit grasps Pat's hand as they try to push Bingo out as Bluey pulls. The tension builds as Bandit is in increasing pain caused by Bingo pulling his fur and tickling him. Bandit looks Pat in the eye and exclaims, "Sing to me!" a caricature of the delivery room. Pat does sing, and as his song builds, Bluey can finally pull Bingo from the carrier. An exhausted and disheveled Bandit rocks his baby as they stare at each other in wonder. His new baby bliss is cut short by Bluey asserting that it is her turn ("Dad Baby" 2020). Bandit becomes the mother, sacrificing his comfort for his child's joy.

In her essay, "Fictions About Fatherhood," Claudia Nelson analyzes children's literature contrasting its stark shift from the pre-industrial era, depicting the father as the moral authority, to the absent father of post-industrial literature. To Nelson, this is the cause of the 20th-century father's perception as a deadbeat, sexual predator, or being overall burdened by fatherhood. She argues that returning the father is imperative to changing culture's perception of his position, even if "redefining of fatherhood's boundaries may terrify us; it may also liberate us" (99). Bandit is not only integral to daily life, but his partnership with Chili blurs the edges of where the mother ends, and the father begins. The roles of mother and father become inconsequential to their behavior, rearranging the viewer's previous notions of the natural maternal and burdened paternal. Mothering and fathering are performed by both Bandit and Chili situationally. Both characters are mother-father and expand the definitions further through approaches to parenting that are less dependent on parental authority and more on parental guidance.

Adulthood and Childhood as Separate Places

Imaginative play functions as a space for children to experiment with their identity, and though Chili and Bandit participate in their games, the space is governed by children. Zejka Flegar explores childhood as separate from the adult world, saying "that the seemingly chaotic world of children possesses a clear and universal structure" set apart from adulthood (170). Flegar suggests that this is most represented by children's love of the carnivalesque, vulgarity, and inversion of dominant society. She asserts that "vulgarity" in the context of children's culture represents a deviation from or a conflict with the dominant ideology of adulthood and maturity and signals the position of children as "historically marginalized boundary crossers" (170). Episodes in *Bluey's* growing lexicon have faced censorship with U.S. audiences that they have not faced in Australia. "Dad Baby," is only one example of an episode left off, or edited, for U.S. platforms. In "The Family Meeting," Bandit is on trial for flatulating in his daughter's face and the episode did not originally air on Disney+ because it did not meet Disney Junior's Standards and Practices requirements. After fan backlash, Disney agreed to air the episode on its streaming service (Pratt). In "Markets," a unicorn who is seen defecating in the original, is edited to burping and in "Taxi" the episode is cut to leave

out a depiction of Bingo pretending to barf on her dad. These are only a few examples of vulgar moments swapped out for tamer ones (*Bluey Censorship Wiki*). The show's writers understand that vulgarity is crucial for children's identification with content, even if some audiences are not as receptive. The show doubles down, as to assert that this is children's space, not adults. In *Bluey*, imaginative play is designed to cross adults' boundaries.

This boundary crossing is not only relegated to blatant vulgarity, but in the ways the children use imaginative play to make sense of their world. In the episode "Muffin Cone," Muffin, Bluey's little cousin. Will not stop sucking her thumb. To teach her to stop, her mom, Trixie, puts a cone on her. Muffin will not promise to stop sucking her thumb, but Bluey and Bingo convince their Aunt Trixie to take it off. Upon release, Muffin instantly puts her thumb back in her mouth, refusing to conform. Trixie believes Muffin's thumb sucking, which can be read as a natural and compulsory behavior, must be conditioned out of her by an adult-informed cone. The episode shows a split in how children and adults handle these restrictions. As the adults sit in the kitchen discussing whether sucking her thumb is that bad for a three-year-old, we see Trixie unable to stop herself from eating chips. Through her weakness, she sees that maybe putting a cone around Muffin is unreasonable.

Nevertheless, the girls playing outside turn the cone into games they would not have imagined otherwise. Muffin becomes a wedding wife, a traffic cone, a ballerina, and a growing flower. The following week on her visit, Muffin defiantly sucks her thumb and asks her dad for the cone so the girls can play with it again. Upon seeing a coned Muffin and excited to play their new games, Bluey and Bingo exclaim, "cone of shame!" ("Muffin Cone" 2020). Muffin takes the device meant to restrict her through shaming her behavior, as her cousins point out, and transforms it to create a world of play that undermines the intention of the cone in the first place. She does not desire to stop sucking her thumb, taking a limitation imposed on her by the adult world and dissolving its meaning.

In offering children the tools with which to appropriate social pressures for their means, *Bluey* is inverting the viewer's idea of the adult social order and casting off its parameters for children. The relationship between the real, the actual setting of the show, and unreal, the characters created storylines, is carefully crafted in *Bluey's* narrative. This is seen as Bluey and Bingo jump in, and out, of the *imagined* and the *real* by asking if something is "for real life." This phrase acts as an assurance to the girls that what their parents are saying is *real* and not part of imaginary play (Brumm). This questioning in *Bluey* reveals how intertwined the *real* and *imagined* are as things that transpire in their games lead to change in the real world and vice versa.

In the episode "Rug Island," Bluey and Bingo create an island from a rug they lay on the back lawn, which they imagine is water. Their fishing spears, food, and tent poles are made from multicolored felt pens. Bandit, wanting to play with his kids on an island where only children are allowed, pretends to be shipwrecked. He joins their *Lord of the*

Flies style social order, shedding his adult persona to participate and learn how the island functions. As the game progresses, their neighbors throw a football over the fence, and the girls declare it is a white chocolate egg. Bandit, wanting to give the ball back, is faced with his children's disappointment. "I told you Bingo, grownups don't belong on rug island," Bluey says, visibly protective of the childhood realm. The adult world and children's world collide, and Bandit, torn between real-world decorum and remaining in his children's sacred space, keeps the ball as an egg to the frustration of his neighbor, yelling, "get the grownup!" after throwing a felt pen snake onto him. Upon exiting the island, Bingo gives Bandit a felt pen wrapped in a leaf. Chili asks, "What did she give you" to which Bandit responds, "Everything" ("Rug Island" 2020). Bandit sheds adult social structures through imaginary play, and the result is an effect on the real relationship with his neighbor and an overall shift in his perception of his world. Only when he rejects the hierarchy of the adult world can he fully immerse himself into childhood, finding meaning and freedom in this rejection. Bandit's engagement with his daughter's play is not only a model for parents but points young viewers to the transformative power their play space holds with the potential to influence the world around them.

Queering *Bluey*

Beverly Wang wrote an article in 2021 as a self-declared "love letter to *Bluey*," but asking it to be more inclusive. The show's commitment to depictions of heteronormativity, while centering plotlines on childhood play as the core of self-discovery, allows its framing through heteronormativity to be an act of subversion itself. In her article, "I WANTED MY HEAD TO BE REMOVED': The Limits of Normativity," Soojin Pate defines queer as "not only that which is nonnormative but also that which is in excess to or a failure of the white heteronormative" (129). She further explains that queerness "signals a process of critique rather than an identity" (Pate 129). In this way, imaginative play within the narrative of *Bluey* can be associated with queerness instead of heteronormativity, as it rejects norms illustrated in the show's real world.

In the episode "Horse Ride," Bandit and Uncle Stripe oversee the kids while their wives are away playing hockey. The game of "Horse Ride" gets transformed into "Horse Wedding" under the girls' direction. Bandit and Stripe do not scoff at participating. Bandit throws himself into the game wholeheartedly as Stripe continuously tries to create scenarios for him to sneak away and watch a cricket match. Stripe, the bride, tells Bandit, the groom, "I don't want to marry him. He Smells." Bandit responds with mock hurt as Stripe tries to run, showing a hesitancy in marriage usually associated with the groom. As the children leave the ceremony site to chase down Stripe and bring him back for his forced union, Bandit remains alone, crying that the day he has been dreaming about since he was young is ruined, a trait often associated with the bride. When their wives return and ask what everyone was up to, Bandit responds, "Oh,

you know, just regular childhood games.” Bingo inserts, “Uncle Stripe married dad!” Instead of being embarrassed, Bandit says, “Well, who could blame him?” (“Horsey Ride” 2018). This is not an isolated incident. In “Muffin Cone,” Bingo and her female cousin Muffin marry each other, and in “The Sleepover,” Bluey and Bingo, as mom and dad, play “House” with their daughter Muffin (“Muffin Cone” 2020, “The Sleepover” 2019). The writers have repeatedly reiterated that in this show, children’s imagination is a space of potential subversion of the real world and its heteronormative parameters through imaginative play.

In “A Little Queer,” Jennifer Miller highlights that showing same-sex parents in children’s media is not the most effective way to subvert compulsory heterosexuality. Queer representation of adults is vital for many reasons. However, the presence of queer parents themselves is not transformative on children’s ideas of self, as they are not yet in adulthood but make sense of the world through the lens of childhood. In this way, the children and imaginative play in *Bluey* exist in a space before the compulsory heterosexuality they will meet in the adult world, much like Flegar explained. In the children’s world, gender does not limit possible expressions. We see that “the hegemonic assumption of compulsory heterosexuality relies upon a very coherent notion of gender, which ascribes a certain causality and invariant logic to the relationship between biological sex, gender and heterosexuality” as described by Affrica Taylor and Carmel Richardson (Taylor 163). The children are left with a much wider range of subjectivities to inhabit, leaving the viewer to do the same. It is important to reiterate the transformative possibilities that bypassing heteronormative restrictions in young viewer’s play allows, but if *Bluey* included non-heteronormative representation of adults the freedom of subjectivities it offers to its viewers could be even wider, extending into adulthood. Regardless of future decisions to include queer parents, children can experiment with their own identities and gender expressions through the space *Bluey* claims for them as belonging to children.

Other Criticisms

Bluey has two completed seasons, with its third launched on ABC in November of 2021 with only the first half of the season added to Disney+ in August of 2022. In its brief tenure, the show’s creators have been receptive to audience critique. For example, the type of car seat Bingo was drawn using shifted from a seat belt to a five-point-harness as parents pointed out it would be unsafe for her to ride in a booster seat. In addition, two episodes, “Flat Pack” and “Teasing,” were pulled by the creators and re-edited as the characters babbled a word with racist connotations to Aboriginal people during scenes depicting gibberish (Knox). Similarly, calls for more diversity may influence the show moving forward.

While there has been response and redirection based on viewer feedback, the show’s writers have yet to respond to some important critiques. Returning to Beverly

Wang's criticism of the show, she asked for more dogs of color and disabled bodies to appear (Wang). Reddit and Twitter were alight with people laughing at the very idea of dogs of color, while others defended the show explaining that *Bluey* is representative of diversity as there are so many breeds of dogs. But what *Bluey* has in diverse breeds, it lacks in diverse socio-economic status. Race and economic status cannot be separated here, as the current state of the world is filled with income disparities that impose more significant obstacles for people of color.

Bluey is set in a middle-class suburb with large houses, nice cars, and disposable income.

The Heelers live in a gorgeous home that has spawned parodic conspiracy theories about what the couple has been doing to afford this type of lot with an archeologist and part-time airport security officer's salaries (Mander). The lack of economic diversity leaves a limited scope of representation. Only one voice actor is of Aboriginal descent for a show with 141 episodes. He appears as Maynard, a minor character in the episode "Granddad" (2020). The lack of ethnic diversity might point to the inability of Australia to reckon with its racist and colonial history. This paper, investigating atypical constructions of gender expressions, leaves little room to analyze a colonized country perpetuating the marginalization of indigenous people and people of color. However, this limitation must be stated with the hopes that further research will be conducted to shed light on this marginalization. Diversifying *Bluey*'s characters to include the most representations possible is essential in the equitable deconstruction of the gender binary.

Conclusion

Bluey breaks from the genre's status quo and shows what television can accomplish if it can give up reductive gender binaries, static representation, and simplistic meaning-making. Its commitment to depicting a middle-class heteronormativity may allow it to stay on the air and remain popular while still having subversive content. *Bluey*, like so many of the groundbreaking shows before it—*The Muppets*, *Sesame Street*, and *Peppa Pig*—is simultaneously upholding hegemonic beliefs while subverting them. Michelle Smith notes that "challenging or radical stories for children struggle to be made because they lack the mass appeal and profitability of narratives that we deem acceptable for children" (Smith). If popular television is a representation of our culture's values and acceptable ways of being, *Bluey* shows how far we have evolved in our acceptance of fluid gender expression while revealing culture's unwillingness to break with heteronormativity as our standard.

Even still, *Bluey* is a show that is working to disrupt and expand cultural boundaries, adding to the body of societal education consumed by children. Young viewers become active meaning makers through their engagement with *Bluey*'s content as they learn to draft their own disruptive stories. Critically assessing, deconstructing,

and reconstructing narratives is an act of subversion and boundary crossing as imaginative play allows children freedom from societal norms. Just as the Heelers use imagination to widen their perception and change the way they exist in their world, viewers may do the same as they engage in play and storytelling to define and rearrange their positions. With enough practice, they can carry this with them into adulthood. As a culture, we can engage with our children's play and give them the widest array of tools possible, look at their freedom and say, with adoration, *we made them*, or we can continue to limit their possibilities by reinforcing restrictive and static gender positions.

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