

Introduction

Media can give a glimpse into the inner workings of a society; whether it be TV, movies, or books, one can often gauge what a society is interested in through its popular media. Looking at media can also shed light on social roles, as popular media often portrays the normative. Those inner workings are often centered around themes of gender, sexuality, and race, but can also include ideas of dis/ability and mental health. Oftentimes, when characters are portrayed with any of these non-normative identities, they are the butt of a joke, or are misrepresented entirely; Black male characters may play into stereotypes that cast them as hypersexual and violent, and women may be viewed as money-focused and hyper-emotional.

The invisibility—or hypervisibility of negative stereotyping—for these characters may often lead individuals from these marginalized groups to look for more independent forms of media where they can find themselves more accurately represented and seek community. Though popular media is still incredibly prevalent, smaller forms of media exist perhaps now more than ever, whether it be a podcast, an independent streaming platform, or a creator on YouTube.

Through these forms of alternative media, narratives about queerness and its intersections with other identities, such as race and ability, are often more realistic and representational; they are made with the intent of embracing these communities, rather than checking off a “diversity and inclusion” box. However, many of these more inclusive queer portrayals are either about coming out, or exist in a world where sexuality is either so accepted or irrelevant that queerness is never acknowledged or referred to. While this is not necessarily a bad thing, for many, such as myself, representation is most impactful when it is contextually accepted, but also

acknowledged: perhaps the story is not *about* someone's identity, but the characters still recognize their identity in a way that makes this difference both accepted and apparent.

Context

A fantastic example of this exists in Dimension 20's *Fantasy High* and *Fantasy High: Sophomore Year*. *Fantasy High* is a Dungeons & Dragons (D&D) actual play show run by CollegeHumor; this actual play show (a show where people play D&D) was launched in 2018 with its first season, *Fantasy High* and went on to have many more seasons, including *Fantasy High*'s second season *Fantasy High: Sophomore Year*, which ran from 2019 to 2020. *Sophomore Year* aired live weekly on a streaming platform called Twitch, which was unique due to the fact that all prior and following seasons of Dimension 20 have been pre-recorded and aired weekly.

Put most simply, Dungeons & Dragons is a collective storytelling experience between players and Dungeon Master (DM) in which people get to improvise and create characters. They are guided by the preset rules of the game, as well as the DM, who sets up the terms of the world (high or low fantasy, location, time period, conflict, etc.). Because D&D is a collective improvised storytelling experience, it cannot be entirely prewritten; much of the fate of the fantasy world is entirely determined by its players.

Fantasy High's two seasons—freshman and sophomore year—follow a group of six teen adventurers, The Bad Kids: Figueroth “Fig” Faeth, a tiefling bard (Emily Axford); Gorgug Thistlespring, a half-orc barbarian (Zac Oyama); Adaine Abernant, an elven wizard (Siobhan Thompson); Fabian Aramais Seacaster, a half-elf fighter (Lou Wilson); Kristen Applebees, a human cleric (Ally Beardsley); and Riz “The Ball” Gukgak, a goblin rogue (Brian Murphy). The game is DM'd by Brennan Lee Mulligan, who

creates and acts as all non-player characters (NPCs). The Bad Kids attend Aguefort Adventuring Academy, the world of Spyre's premier high school for (future) heroes. In the first season, their freshman year of high school, The Bad Kids are tasked with finding seven missing girls, some of which go missing during their time at Aguefort. They eventually find out that the girls were taken for a ritual by their Vice Principal, Goldenhoard, who then turns into the dragon Kalvaxus, which they defeat. The second season follows The Bad Kids as they track down the Crown of the Nightmare King, as tasked by their principal, Arthur Aguefort (for which the academy is named). After traveling to many different locations, their adventure comes to a head at the Forest of the Nightmare King, also known as the forest of Sylvaire. They fight many agents of the Nightmare King, before Kristen Applebees, the party's cleric, is able to interact with a more passive part of the deity, transforming Nightmare King into Cassandra, the Deity of Mystery, Night, and Magic. Both seasons are coming-of-age stories which deal heavily with religion and sexuality; the second season deals with disability as well. Due to the way identity is constructed in *Fantasy High*, it allows viewers to interact and engage with characters in a way that makes it feel more real; the stories are not inherently about coming out, but they still acknowledge identity in a constructive way.

The Formation of Identity in *Fantasy High* Season 1

The ways in which identity is constructed in *Fantasy High* largely have to do with Kristen Applebees, the party's human cleric. She is played by Ally Beardsley, who is nonbinary and queer; though their characters do not always share the same identity, they are usually queer and/or trans, and therefore, their stories are united in that theme. Of all of Beardsley's characters, Kristen likely has the most influence over how identity is

constructed in a season—likely partially because *Fantasy High* was Dimension 20’s first season ever, but also because other seasons are less focused on coming-of-age. In the beginning of the first season of *Fantasy High*, Kristen is a follower of Helio, the Corn God; his religion bears an intentional resemblance to conservative Evangelical Christianity. Kristen’s parents are very close-minded about other races and the world in general, and people are expected to be heterosexual; The Bad Kids are even dubbed as such by Kristen, claiming that she wants to “go with the bad kids” in order to defy her parents’ close mindedness about other races, but also to help them rectify their misdeeds as she sees them on their way to detention (“The Beginning Begins”). (“Races” in D&D are not the same as real life; they are not judged by skin color, but rather by species of humanoid.) As a loyal follower of this religion, Kristen has been chosen by Helio, which is where her healing clerical powers come from. In their first battle Kristen dies, and before she is brought back to life, she has a chance to meet Helio. Upon meeting him, she finds out that his behavior is similar to that of an uncaring frat boy, and is deeply disturbed by this. This meeting leads her on a journey to question her belief in her religion; due to this, as well as a kiss with her future girlfriend, Tracker O’Shaughnessey, she realizes that she is a lesbian. She comes out to her friends and they are immediately accepting; however, since she has many times given reference to her queerness, her character engages with the trope of everyone knowing that she is gay before she comes out (“Brawl at the Black Pit”).

This setup of Kristen’s acknowledgement of identity allows for non-player characters (NPCs), such as Ragh Barkrock, to have their identity become a part of their narrative. Ragh Barkrock is a half-orc barbarian (who are characteristically large and adept at fighting) that embodies the trope of a jock/high school bully. One of his first

introductions to the series involves him shoving Riz into a trash can, dubbing him “The Ball,” due to his small size as a goblin.

Ragh’s best friend is another jock named Dayne Blade. Through combat in “Battle of the Bloodrush Brethren,” we learn that Ragh appears to have repressed feelings toward Dayne. These feelings appear to be confirmed when Adaine, taking advantage of Ragh’s low intelligence, uses telepathy to say “Dude, I think you’re gay.” Ragh appears to think these are his own thoughts, as he outwardly attempts to swat them away. In the epilogue of the season, we see Ragh come to terms with his identity as he becomes friends with Kristen and Tracker and joins the school’s LGBTQ+ club.

Through a crisis of faith and identity, Kristen acknowledges her lesbianism, setting the stage for characters like her girlfriend, Tracker, to act as a foil of someone who is comfortable with their identity. Later in the season, Kristen becomes much more comfortable with her identity, but still often references her gayness, with Ragh doing the same. This framework of identity also continues in season two, *Sophomore Year*, where Ragh, when talking to Tracker, says “Check it out, I’m gay,” and Kristen says “When you’re here you’re family: it’s called being gay,” in reference to finding out that one of the party’s allies, Ayda Aguefort, has begun dating Fig—neither of whom were previously confirmed to be outwardly queer (“Mirror Madness,” “Daddies & Demons”). This way of navigating identity allows for a comedic, but realistic representation of a queer person who exists in our society; while their life may not be *about* coming out or being queer, it still likely has pertinence with regard to their mindset and how they make choices about their life. It also creates a world in which acknowledging the characters’ identity is normal, setting the stage for concrete representation of characters whose

identity *needs* to be acknowledged in order for them to fully represent a certain audience.

Ayda Aguefort and Autistic Representation

Ayda Aguefort is an NPC who The Bad Kids meet on their sophomore year quest to retrieve the Crown of the Nightmare King. They travel to the pirate island of Leviathan, where they are sent to the Compass Points library to retrieve information for a spell that they need. The mistress of Leviathan's only library, Ayda is a half-phoenix, half-human wizard and the child of The Bad Kids' principal, Arthur Aguefort. There, she gives them the information for Adaine to learn the spell that she needs. One can immediately note that she is very direct and very loud, characteristics which are generally associated with autistic people. Though she stays at the library after this interaction, she later rejoins The Bad Kids in their mission to rescue Adaine, who has been captured.

Ayda initially becomes an ally of The Bad Kids at the library when Adaine asks if she wants to be friends, since they are both wizards and Adaine doesn't have any wizard friends. Ayda wonders why aloud, asking "Are you hard to be around?" Adaine replies "No," and returns the question, whereupon Ayda replies that she is hard to be around (a conclusion that she has likely come to due to her struggle to form relationships). Adaine asks her if she wants a friend, and she replies "Desperately," ("The Friendship Section"). When Ayda returns to help the party rescue Adaine, they note that their declaration of friendship was unusually formal, and Ayda asks what is formal about it. They tell her that people don't usually declare that they will be friends, and she dubs this mode of communication confusing. Many autistic people miss social cues and prefer directness,

as things that are not stated directly can become confusing. The Bad Kids are very genuine and sincere in their explanations of social cues and situations, as instances where Ayda misses subtext occur frequently. Through this genuineness, The Bad Kids disengage with tropes of neurodivergent people missing cues as the punchline of a joke. While the players do sometimes laugh at things Ayda says, it is clearly out of affection, rather than malice.

This relationship of affection becomes increasingly evident due to the growing relationship of Fig and Ayda. The party needs Ayda to stay with them, due to the fact that she is the only one who has the ability to teleport them to the Elven homeland of Fallinel, where Adaine is being held. After teleporting there, the group decides that they need to rest before rescuing Adaine, since not recharging themselves from their previous battle will leave them too tired to fight. Fig refers to herself as Adaine's best friend, and Ayda asks if that means she and Fig are also best friends, through a transitive property of friendship. After some further conversation, Fig asks Ayda if she wants to have a sleepover, and Ayda replies yes, but says that she will be taking her cues from Fig since she has never had one before. Ayda falls asleep right away, and Fig wakes her up, informing her that people usually stay up all night talking during sleepovers. Ayda notes that she has messed up, but will continue taking cues on what to do. The two girls stay up all night talking and become very close, with Fig complimenting Ayda's autistic traits: "I mean, you're really direct and analytical, and you kind of deconstruct things before my eyes and make me see them in a different way. And I really like that. A lot of things I take for granted, you really think through." Ayda immediately starts crying after this compliment, showing that she is emotional, though those emotions may be difficult to read ("The Dangerous Mind of Aelwyn Abernant").

In the following episode, it becomes clear that Fig has a crush on Ayda after she lashes out at another kid for goading her about whatever is “going on with [her] and Ayda.” She tells him to “choke on grapes, bitch,” and tries to distract herself by focusing on the mystery at hand (“Revelations & Revivifications”). In the following episode, “Crustaceans & Crushes,” Ayda takes Fig off during a party to investigate something, whereupon she ends up learning more about Ayda. She learns that Ayda is reborn as a baby when she dies (due to her phoenix heritage) and keeps notes to guide herself when she grows up again. She tells Fig that she does not have much self confidence, (likely due to her social struggles caused by her autism) and that she trusts the versions of her that knew more. Fig tells her that she thinks Ayda is perfect the way she is. Ayda reveals that she has some “actionable information” to give to Fig, provided that she promises she will not make fun of her for it; Fig earnestly agrees and Ayda tells her that she wants to kiss her, and then the two kiss. The cast reacts quite favorably to this, cheering throughout the kissing scene, Lou referring to it as “the best kiss ever.” After this scene, Fig and Ayda’s romantic relationship develops, with both of them stating in crucial moments that the other helped them find good things in themselves that they didn’t know were there. In the epilogue of the final episode, Brennan narrates that Ayda is diagnosed with autism by the school’s therapist/counselor. Finding language for her experiences clearly brings her great relief, as she seems to finally have context for her place in the world.

Through this very detailed, but brief, account of Ayda’s behaviors, we are able to see that they are clearly that of an autistic person, as signs of autistic behaviors are described as “social impairment, withdrawal, difficulties in grasping emotions and understanding implicit rules and social conventions, as well as problems with generalization and poor adaptation to change” (274, Chamak et al.). Ayda experiences

all of these: she previously struggled to make friends, was secluded and only lived in the Compass Points, often asks if people are mad at her because she cannot tell, has problems reading social rules and conventions (including generalizing behavior), and does not reinvent herself from lifetime to lifetime because she does not trust change. *Fantasy High* often finds itself engaging with tropes, as all of *The Bad Kids* are based on high school tropes such as those represented in *The Breakfast Club*. Ayda's representation is particularly pertinent in this dialogue of tropes because her character was created with the intent of subverting those tropes. Even when autistic characters do exist in media, they are often made fun of for their traits; if they are not, they are often cishet white men who embody stereotypes about the interests of autistic people.

In the first episode of *Adventuring Party*, Dimension 20's talkback show, Brennan stated that he "wanted to model her after the Sherlock archetype," of a person who is "brilliant and goodhearted... but not necessarily existing on that social level," through a lens that audiences never get to see: a Black lesbian. She was not intended to be autistic initially, but soon after her creation, he realized—through the audience questioning if Ayda was autistic—that she was modeled after his friends with ASD who are also "very academic and intense in that way," and decided to do research to make her representation more accurate and nuanced ("Are the Dice Scripted?").

Ayda's autism is so monumental: not only is positive representation of someone who is a person of color, a woman, queer, and autistic, but she is all of those things and is received positively. Through her relationship with Fig and Brennan's declaration that he loves her as a character with his "whole dang heart," it is clear that her interactions with the players come from a place of affection ("Are the Dice Scripted?"). Her diagnosis as autistic also allows her to not be exclusively "autistic coded" where she is clearly given

the traits, but they are never named. This diagnosis is not only important for her as a character, but for audiences as well, who may be able to identify with her, and through that identification, have language for their own experiences. The monumentality of this identity, which exists not to reify categories, but to place itself within the context of existing narratives, is articulated by Tumblr user tentacle-therapissed perfectly:

I think Ayda Aguefort is genuinely the best autistic character rep I have ever seen. A black lesbian, clearly shown to be deeply emotional and caring despite her flat affect, hyper-aware and anxious of her social awkwardness (rather than being comically oblivious), never infantilized, capable of having strong friendships and relationships, who is also confirmed autistic in canon without it being an offhand joke? I cannot think of any other piece of media that was able to surpass this half bird pirate librarian from a College Humor actual play show[.]

Analysis of Ayda's Representation

Ayda's identity exists within contexts of disability, queerness and race. Although they are not as quite as common as they used to be, Ayda's representation as a wizard—a class for which intelligence is required, as it is based on studying—defies stereotypes of Black people as unintelligent and less than; she is direct and articulate, both being qualities which play into her identity as autistic.

Even in scholarship, it is incredibly difficult to find representations of autistic people which do not infantilize and other them. The criteria for symptoms of autism are largely based on children, with the ICD-10 and DSM-IV in 1990 categorizing it to include “nonspeaking and mentally challenged children,... children of average or superior intelligence displaying many autistic characteristics but no speech delay.” This association of autism exclusively with children furthers a “families with an autistic child” narrative, one that portrays autistic people as burdensome, child-like, and

without agency; while some autistic individuals do need outside assistance, others do not. This “families with” narrative creates a hegemonic category of autistic people wherein all of them are infantilized. Autism was also falsely believed to be more common in boys than girls because girls and women (and AFAB people) are underdiagnosed; autism sometimes presents differently in women and AFAB people because it is largely social and they are held to different social standards than men. Though many of the characteristics are the same, women and AFAB people are often forced to mask them more often due to this socialization. The medical language of autistic characteristics often works to other those autistic people, as it frames struggles with social interactions as “deficits in relationships” (Chamak et al., 271).

Ayda’s refutation of these stereotypes allows for audiences to imagine a future for disabled people where their disabilities are loved and embraced rather than one where “disability is a future no one wants, and the figure of the disabled person, especially the disabled fetus or child, becomes the symbol of this undesired future” (Kafer, 2). This concept of a future for disabled people is incredibly prevalent in Alison Kafer’s *Feminist, Queer, Crip* wherein she dissects narratives about ability and disability. Disabled people are often plagued by a perception from able-bodied and/or able-minded people who assert that their futures will not be good due to their disability and that they should work to overcome said disability. Due to these stereotypes, Ayda’s representation also works to “[validate autistic people’s] autonomy as human beings with their own thinking, sensibilities and feelings” (Chamak, et al., 271). Ayda’s future is one which has not been determined, but has not been portrayed as eminently bad due to her disability; nor is it one that is figured by hyper-ability, where her autism is “fixed” or negated due to some future power. Adaine does make a spell for Ayda called “Ayda’s Comprehend

Subtext”; however, this spell is inherently for occasional use, wherein comprehension of subtext is overtly necessary, or in the event that Ayda is in a situation where someone will not explain subtext to her, as she often found herself in before meeting The Bad Kids. She is also overt about her queerness, stating, “Yes, I am gay,” in response to one of the characters mentioning her relationship with Fig (“Daddies & Demons”). Her autistic characteristics and lesbianism work in tandem within *Fantasy High*’s framework of identity: she is forthright about her queerness in a way that is inherently linked to her autism, and she is able to acknowledge her gayness because of the figuration that acknowledging identity is normal; without this figuration, she could *not* have been diagnosed as autistic in canon, because it would not have worked within the rules of the world. For autistic people in real life, they have communicated that an autism diagnosis helps them have “a better understanding of themselves, a better quality of life and self-acceptance, a wish to read and express themselves on autism”; from Ayda’s reaction to her diagnosis, we can assume the same is possible for her (Chamak et al., 274). Though she could have been revealed as autistic post-canon, it is undoubtedly *much* more powerful when in canon, especially due to the fact that other identities are acknowledged.

Specifically with Ayda’s representation, but also within the framework of identity in *Fantasy High* as a whole, we are able to observe explicitly queer and neurodivergent characters who are not exclusively queer or neurodivergent coded. Audiences of these marginalized groups are often aware when characters represent them only through subtext or metaphor; while this can also be positive representation, it leaves out a world in which characters are embraced through their identities. Overt representation, such as that of Kristen or Ayda, allows both characters and audiences to interact with these

characters in cultural or social ways that do not exist without these identity categories. People often group characters into these identity categories anyway; generally not for the purpose of reifying identity categories or politics, but rather as a mode of unification in identity. For Kafer, it is incredibly significant for her to name her identities:

[I]t feels important at this particular moment to identify explicitly as feminist, queer, crip—even as I want to trouble such identifications—and to explicitly practice feminist, queer, crip work. I’m calling attention to these shifting positions not to fix them in place, but to get them moving on the questions that face those of us committed to and invested in such positions (17, 18).

Here, her identification does not exist to reify categories, but to place herself within, and disrupt, existing and limiting narratives. Ayda’s identification as autistic, Black, and queer does the same thing, as her identity places her firmly within existing narratives of race, neurodivergency, and queerness. Though her representation may be more impactful were it in a piece of popular media, this fashion of representation is more suited for alternative media, specifically D&D. In the creation of Ayda, Brennan noted that he partially realized she was autistic due to audience feedback of her mannerisms. Had this been a more traditional form of media, the audience feedback would not have occurred in real-time with the airing of the show; had this been the case, it is possible that Ayda never would have been made canonically autistic. Along with this, because the format of Dungeons & Dragons is largely improvisational, it was clearly a choice on the part of the players to accept Ayda. Their storylines and dialogue are not prewritten, allowing for player characters to have agency in their choices. As such, it would have been very easy for Siobhan-as-Adaine not to ask Ayda to be friends, or Emily-as-Fig not to tell Ayda that she believes Ayda is perfect the way she is. Because scenes like the Fig/Ayda kiss scene were clearly a surprise to everyone involved,

including Emily-as-Fig, it is much more meaningful that Fig compliments Ayda's autistic characteristics and that she embraces her for her identity. It is much more meaningful because even though it is a snap decision, we know Emily has *chosen* to do this; she is not reading lines from a script written by someone else that tells her how to compliment Ayda. The cast oftentimes will say that they are simply making the choices that they believe that their character would make; however, it is evident that the ways in which their character says and does positive things leads to more character bleed than there would be if their character were making rash or dangerous decisions.

The Problem of Speaking for Others

Though I personally believe that Ayda's representation is fantastic, I cannot conclude this essay without noting that she, a Black autistic lesbian is played by Brennan, a cishet allistic white man. In Linda Alcoff's *The Problem with Speaking for Others*, she notes that those who are in a place of privilege within a dominant society should work to represent minorities while also not stepping on their toes. This is often a juggle, as determining where and when to speak for others is nearly always a matter of context. Brennan, as Dimension 20's Dungeon Master, is placed within a position of power, as evidenced by the title's name. Though he does not have as much power as the title may suggest, he is still in a position where he must be mindful about his portrayal of minorities; in the same token, he must not shy away from this role, as a speaker at a conference that Alcoff attended once did: "To our disappointment, he introduced his lecture by explaining that he could not cover the assigned topic, because as a white male he did not feel that he could speak for the feminist and postcolonial perspectives..." (Alcoff, 6). She notes that the ability for this man to not confront these issues *also* lies

within a position of privilege; for him to not talk about it further reiterates the idea that as someone who does not *have* to think about these issues due to their positionality within society, he also becomes someone who refuses to speak on the issues, therefore silencing potential conversation. Though Brennan does exist in a place of privilege through his title and social standing, “[o]ne cannot simply look at the location of the speaker or [their] credentials to speak, nor can one look merely at the propositional content of the speech; one must also look at where the speech goes and what it does there” (Alcoff, 26). Through his research of autism and representation of Ayda, as autistic people are an incredibly mis-and-underrepresented group, Brennan, in this case, is able to assist in the empowerment of oppressed peoples.

Conclusion

Through the setup of a religion which is bigoted, Ally-as-Kristen is able to contribute to the worldbuilding of both seasons of *Fantasy High* in a way which makes acknowledging queerness—and later, other identity categories—normal. This sets the stage for characters like Ayda to proudly find and acknowledge their identities, experiencing finding language in ways that are often reminiscent of real-life experiences. As this story is one of coming-of-age, this formation of identity also allows characters to interact with their identities socially in ways that don’t exist without identity categories. Ayda’s representation specifically allows for a framing of autism as “a different way of being rather than a disease to be eradicated” (Chamak et al., 274) and creates a fantastic example for types of representation that people like myself would like to see more of in the world.

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