

A Bi Witch in the House of Mouse: A Look at Disney's Most Queer Inclusive Animation Yet

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ABSTRACT

This essay analyzes the methods used to attain diversity within Disney's *The Owl House* as well as explores their significance in US popular culture. In developing the essay's argument, two primary methods of diversity, conceptualized as Active Inclusivity and Passive Inclusivity, are identified, analyzed, and explained through a lens of the semiotics of popular culture. The essay concludes that an active process of cultural shifting within the USA in respects to the acceptance and normalcy of the LGBTQ+ community and the struggles for a more just society, account for the emergence of newer, more inclusive methods of storytelling in media and popular culture today.

INTRODUCTION

A young teenage girl, seemingly about 14, clad in tights, jean shorts, and a purple and white hoodie, sits upon a wooden staff. She hovers high above the clouds, her legs hanging down towards the world below her. Except the world below isn't our own, and it's not hers either. Off towards the horizon, blocking the fading view of a setting sun, sits the skull of a massive humanoid creature. The body of this "Titan" stretches beyond the view of the naked eye, and upon it has formed a great landscape of forests and hills, its bones forming mountains dotted across the landscape. A landscape filled with strange creatures and magic-wielding inhabitants. These are the Boiling Isles, and the girl we view this scene with, Luz Noceda, has found herself in this magical "Demon Realm," a place seemingly unknown to human eyes, until now.

Dana Terrace's *The Owl House* is a Disney animated TV series following the physical and emotional journey of Luz Noceda, a Latina middle school girl and social outcast, as she ends up spending her summer living and learning magic in the Demon Realm. Despite its seemingly colorful magical exterior, and despite many commonly held beliefs that cartoon animation should be relegated to "kid's shows," *The Owl House* explores themes of mental illness, social belonging, poverty, and even oppression. However, this essay will be taking a closer look at a different aspect of this show, and a powerful one at that: its inclusivity. *The Owl House* is by far the most LGBTQ+ inclusive piece of media to come out of the drawing boards of Disney. With countless examples of implied LGBTQ+ characters, a lesbian love-interest, and now a main character confirmed to be bisexual, the show's inclusivity is plain to see for anyone tuning in to watch on one of Disney's or their partners' many TV channels and streaming services.

But *The Owl House*, first airing in January of 2020, has achieved this with a major change in perspective from many other "inclusive" pieces of media of the day. Instead of making a major story-lead or plot-point about certain characters' identities and orientations, as many shows and movies do today, Dana Terrace made a story that utilizes what I would like to refer to as "Passive Inclusivity," in opposition to most modern media's common use of "Active Inclusivity." The story her team works to tell paints representation in a new and modern light. I also believe that this method of Passive Inclusivity within *The Owl House* shines light on the progression of our own society today, and its interpretation and inclusion of minorities within the "social contract." These aspects of one of Disney's most popular recent shows are those which this essay will analyze.

I previously mentioned methods of representation referred to as Active Inclusivity and Passive Inclusivity. These processes will be mentioned later, so perhaps it is best to define them. To do this, we will have to look at the common understanding of inclusivity in modern media, and *The Owl House*'s subversion of it.

Most media nowadays, when they attempt to be inclusive, can be easily accused of doing it half-heartedly. LGBTQ+ characters and themes are mostly relegated to the background of their stories and expressions. Most people can recall a time that they have seen this play out: a side character that is the epitome of the gay stereotype, a same-sex duo of monster-of-the-week side characters with clear romantic tension, a clearly female soldier that is implied to have once been a man, none of which are given serious character development or complex personalities that the wider audience is meant to resonate with. Then there are times when these characters are allowed to be in primary roles within the story. At first, this seems to be a great step towards acceptance and normalization, but usually such obvious boastful focus is put on these character's sexualities and identities that it once again highlights these people as different or "outside of the norm."

Too often, though, the representation of non-normative identities remains confined within the boundaries of an exclusive heterosexual, cisgender framework. Media analyst Marissa Connolly addresses similar dynamics in "Homosexuality on Television: The Heterosexualization of Will and Grace." Writing a few years after the show first debuted, Connolly writes, on the one hand, that "[t]he show has been one of NBC's most successful since its debut [in 1998], garnering both critical and public praise for its portrayal of homosexuality as just another aspect of the lives of the four main characters" (316). On the other hand, Connolly's main critique is that "in order to make a show with such controversial subject matter palatable for the masses, both scriptwriters and the mainstream media have taken to talking about the show's two leads [one of whom, Will, is gay, and the other, Grace, is straight] more like a romantic couple rather than a pair of best friends" (316). This, Connolly argues, leads to the heterosexualization of the lead gay character and the infantilization of another gay character on the show. Consequently, characters who do not fit traditional norms of sexuality and gender expression are made other in a show intended to be inclusive.

All these attempts are what could be described as Active Inclusivity. For the purposes of this essay, let us further define Active Inclusivity as "The use and/or writing of a minority group within a story by obvious and/or obligatory means." Many label the characters spawned from this method not as boastful, but as having pride in their identity, and this is by all accounts very sound reasoning. A character that is exuberantly confident in their identity is a powerful symbol, a beacon for those who identify themselves similarly. However, within this method, I believe there is a hidden danger to estrange and other the people of this identity in the eyes of those outside of it. While self-acceptance is incredibly important, especially for those within the LGBTQ+ community, major backlash has resulted in the past decades from people who actively characterize this community as other, and therefore dangerous, however inaccurate such an assumption may be. Therefore, while its benefits are substantial over simply not having diversity in a story, I believe that there is a better method for storytellers to utilize.

Having described the Active Inclusivity method of achieving diversity, we can move on to describing its counterpart and alternative, Passive Inclusivity. Now, if Active Inclusivity can be defined as an obvious representation of minority characters, then we can define Passive Inclusivity, in parallel, as "The use and/or writing of a minority group within a story through subtle means." In truth, there are few media sources today that use this method of representation, but when it is used, there is great power in its results.

SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS

One of the best examples of the strength of Passive Inclusivity can be seen in *The Owl House*. The best way to explain the example is for one to watch the show itself, but for the purposes of this essay, I will attempt to develop this concept through analysis of a few key scenes. As previously stated, *The Owl House* utilizes this method of Passive Inclusivity within its story. There are many characters, both side characters and well-developed main characters alike, that can be described as part of or representative of the LGBTQ+ community. The difference however is how these identities are handled in-universe. While Dana Terrace's team makes a major attempt towards representation, they make almost no outright claims within their story as to the personal identities of the characters. They instead use subtle hints and context clues that allow the audience to decipher these traits for themselves.

Allow me to explain using the work of Sonia Maasik and Jack Solomon, who are most well-known for their work in the fields of writing and semiotic analysis. Together these authors wrote *Signs of Life in the U.S.A.*, a text that explores the methods of modern textual and media analysis. A primary focus of Maasik and Solomon's work is the concept of "sign," and they define it as "[s]omething, anything, that carries a meaning" (Maasik and Solomon, 7). Going further the two use the following example to explain how a sign carries not just direct but indirect cultural meanings: "The familiar red sign at an intersection, for instance, means exactly what it says: 'stop.' But it also carries the implied message 'or risk getting a ticket or into an accident'" (Maasik and Solomon, 7). From a semiotic perspective, both the denotative or direct meaning of a sign as well as its more indirect or connotative meanings exist within systems of meaning or "codes." They write:

For example, in the traffic code, being able to distinguish the difference between green, red, and amber lights is essential to understanding the meaning of a traffic signal. But that's not all there is to it, because it is only within the code that green, red and amber signify 'go,' 'stop,' and 'caution' So, to interpret a traffic signal correctly, you need to be able to associate any particular red light you see with all other traffic lights under the concept 'stop' that the code assigns to it, and any green light with all other greenlights under the concept, 'go', and so on. Situating signs in systems of association and difference accordingly constitutes the essence of semiotic interpretation. (9)

From a semiotic perspective, meaning is cultural and changeable, not natural or fixed. People come to "interpret a traffic signal correctly" through familiarity with the colors of "system" or "code" of traffic. "But outside the traffic code," Maasik and Solomon continue, "the same colors can have very different meanings, always depending upon the system in which they appear." (9). Within the American political system of meaning today, for instance, "red" signifies conservative politics, and "green" is associated with environmental movements. In both cases the sign systems are learned culturally, and the meaning of "red" in different systems is a product of social change. Just as significant, Maasik and Solomon argue that the deeper cultural and political meanings of popular culture emerge through a semiotic analysis.

Through this semiotic lens, just about every aspect of modern and even pre-modern culture can be broken down into understandable signs, unveiling the cultural meanings behind them, and (most importantly for this paper), revealing changes within society. But popular culture is particularly important to analyze semiotically, as Maasik and Solomon argue, because it is one of the most influential spaces in which signs circulate; in "reading" these signs we "decode" their meaning, often *unconsciously*. This is important because popular culture, in its deeper connotative dimension, conveys cultural and political values and ideals that can be absorbed by viewers without consciously thinking about them. Semiotic analysis is a means of *consciously* decoding the cultural assumptions and implications of popular culture.

As an example, the show's main character, the previously mentioned Luz Noceda, is shown to be attracted to both men and women throughout the series, visible through subtle signs within the code of the fictional universe, as well as our own. During the show's second episode, *Witches Before Wizards*, after several shenanigans that I won't be getting into, Luz ends up traveling with one Nevereth Bladestrife. Nevereth is best described as an obvious stab at the stereotypical, overly masculine, fantasy love interest, equipped with a large muscular frame, tragic backstory, and a sarcastic, cold, somewhat egotistical personality. Through coding, the audience is meant to recognize him as incredibly masculine. When first meeting him, Luz is questioning if going on this "quest," as she calls it, was a smart idea, as it involved her leaving behind her primary protector in this unknown world. When Nevereth bursts out of a fountain in the middle of town, and the spraying water and vivid sunlight work to highlight his masculine features, Luz makes the following comment in an awestruck, whimsied voice; "Yes, yes I *did* make the right choice" (*"Witches Before Wizards"* 15:13). This sentence houses clear verbal clues that what she is seeing has reinforced her interest in the scenario she finds herself in. This codes her as having an attraction to Nevereth. Further, Luz's body language (eyes entranced and body leaning forward) are real subconscious signs of attraction in real human beings, which also works to code her possible infatuation with him.

Then, in season two, Luz is continuously shown to be romantically interested in an intelligent, powerful female friend of hers, Amity Blight. In the first instance of this attraction, shown at the climax of the episode *Escaping Expulsion*, we find our hero amid a difficult battle at Blight Industries, a company run by Amity's parents, where she is about to be sliced in two by a hulking automaton. Suddenly, the machine's bladed arm stops mid-

swing, and is blown back. At that moment Luz's defender is revealed to us as none other than Amity Blight, swinging her way down to the battle, and positioning herself between the automaton and a helpless Luz. As she turns to our hero to check on her condition, care in her voice, shadow across her face, and determination in her eyes, she simply asks, "Luz, are you okay?" ("Escaping Expulsion" 17:57). Despite seeming a quite basic and unimportant exchange, it results in something we haven't seen from Luz up until now; it causes her to blush. Yet again, blushing is another subconscious reaction, used by the human body to signal many things, including romantic attraction towards another. On top of that, she produces wavering speech as she responds, a sign of nervousness on her part. Nervousness around a particular person, while being a sign of many possible relationships with that person, is an incredibly popular trait to apply to a potential romantic couple within modern movies and shows. This potentially points even more towards a coding of infatuation with the young green-haired witch.

Together, provided the audience recognizes and analyzes the signs within them (normally subconsciously absorbed or interpreted), these two examples code Luz Noceda as an intendedly bisexual character, and a bisexual main character at that. But the most important detail for this analysis is something that may or may not surprise you; Until very recently, Luz Noceda was never actually confirmed in-story to be bisexual. She never makes it openly obvious or broadcasted, no secondary or side character ever asks her about it, and the fact that her significant other happens to be of the same gender as her is never central to the story. This method of representation expands further in-story to, obviously, Luz's lesbian friend-turned-girlfriend, Amity Blight. But they are by far not the only two queer coded (coded with activity and personality signs as to be perceived as queer) characters in this universe. Willow Park, Luz's friend and fellow major character, is shown to have two fathers, also coded as gay through body language towards each other. There is also Raine Whispers, the non-binary love interest of Eda Clawthorne, Luz's primary caregiver within the Demon Realm. Raine is shown on multiple occasions throughout the series to use and be referred to with they/them pronouns and is given an interesting coding that places them in the audience's eye as neither male nor female. There are many more examples of this within the show, but I would rather not list them all here. Notably, very few of these queer coded characters are outright designated or explained to be queer within this universe. By allowing the audience to analyze these scenes and decipher these characters' identities by themselves, this story utilizes, by our definition, the process of Passive Inclusivity.

CULTURAL EFFECTS

However, this knowledge is not very important if not utilized or understood in its deeper significance. Now that we have both defined Passive Inclusivity, and shown its use within Dana Terrace's story, we can speak of what its purpose is. It is my belief that this use of Passive Inclusivity works to normalize the commonly estranged aspects of these characters within their own story, and thereby to allow the audience to extrapolate that normalization to the real world.

In the case of Luz's reactions, her previously stated coding is that Luz is bisexual. But now I want to look at the series as a whole; Look at its plethora of queer coding, the large presence of LGBTQ+ characters. By being common within the story, an audience's reaction to their presence within this show perhaps becomes dulled. Perhaps one begins to expect such characters to show up more. In effect, the presence of so many of these characters and representations results in a world spanning code within the story. The story's setting is coded to show commonality and normality of these people within its culture.

Also, going back to the example of the scene between Luz and Amity, all the signs utilized within this scene to broadcast Luz's attraction are the same as those used for heterosexual couples within other modern stories, especially within content designed for older children. By using the same signs as are used for romantic coding between generic heterosexual couples, the audience is made to interpret this attraction in a similar light to the heterosexual romance. Most notably, perceiving the lesbian romantic attraction as similarly "within the norm" to a heterosexual one, applying a feeling of normalcy to an otherwise atypical relationship by many people's standards. Note, this is not to say that queer relationships are atypical, only that a large portion of the average audience, consciously or not, perceive it as such. Many may also note that, unlike in the example of Active Inclusivity, the Passive Inclusivity of *The Owl House* makes no major announcement or scene out of the fact that this relationship is a lesbian one. Obviously, it is, as both ends of the relationship are female, but the show doesn't go out of its way to praise or sensationalize this, thereby explaining to the audience that this should have been expected, and by proxy is normal within the world of The Boiling Isles.

And speaking of *The Boiling Isles*, while it is by far a fantasy world, it is by no measure coded to be much different than ours. In fact, I believe that this world fits effectively into the definition of “Urban Fantasy,” a genre of storytelling that augments a grounded, familiar setting with fantastical, foreign aspects. For example, while there is no doubt magic within *The Boiling Isles*, it’s used in very similar methods to our world’s technology. Teenagers still walk around with Smartphone parallels they call scrolls, using social media platforms and tuning into news and movie channels on television-like crystal balls. Workers still commute to their shifts every morning, and young witches and demons are enrolled at one of many public or private schools. All in all, the setting is very grounded, and the world feels only a few anomalies separated from our own.

With all of this, by showing so many LGBTQ+ characters with identities generally characterized as outside of the norm, and by giving the world around them a nonchalant reaction to their existence, this world treats them as within the norm. These identities are thereby infused within the audience’s understanding of “the norm” within *The Boiling Isles*. An effect that, similar to that of the cultural influences of social media or of modern advertisement, is extrapolated to the audience’s perceptions of the norm within the real world. Essentially, by depicting the LGBTQ+ community as normal and common within this emotionally grounded world of fiction, the series works to change or reinforce its audience’s perception of this community within our own world. A perception of “diversity as normality,” being the belief that, despite having crucial differences, all peoples of all groups and identities are just as human, and therefore just as deserving of acceptance, as each other. The framework of *The Boiling Isles* also shows us a world incredibly similar to our own, where these groups are integrated as a normal and accepted part of their society. This effectively gives the audience a wide-picture depiction of a world where LGBTQ+ acceptance is reality and shows that it’s not quite so different than our own, thereby giving the audience confirmation that “yes, this world is possible, if we just work to make it real.”

The results indicative of Passive Inclusivity, however, raises a different question; If this method is truly so effective at bringing about social acceptance, then why isn’t it utilized more frequently in the modern day? If the purpose of inclusivity is to cause sociocultural change, as so many activists state, why is this highly effective means of doing so not utilized to full potential? Why wasn’t it explored and used by storytellers until very recently? The answer is very probably to be expected by those who remember the America of the 20th century; This wasn’t always possible, and I believe that an insight by Columbia University’s Professor Halberstam can help in understanding why.

Jack Halberstam is an American professor, academic, and author who is currently working at Columbia University in the Institute for Research on Women, Gender, and Sexuality at Columbia University, and has published several books and pieces on topics around the LGBTQ+ community. In particular Halberstam wrote *Trans*: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability*, a book that addresses the history of the transgender community and its changing presence and perception in the modern day. In the first chapter, before going on to define the recent changes to wordage and classification, Halberstam writes the following;

If I had known the term “transgender” when I was a teenager in the 1970s, I’m sure I would have grabbed hold of it like a life jacket on rough seas, but there were no such words in my world. Changing sex for me and for many people my age was a fantasy, a dream, and because it had nothing to do with our realities, we had to work around this impossibility and create a home for ourselves in bodies that were not comfortable or right in terms of who we understood ourselves to be. The term “wrong body” was used often in the 1980s, even becoming the name of a BBC show about transsexuality, and offensive as the term might sound now, it at least harbored an explanation for how cross gendered people might experience embodiment. (Halberstam, 1-2)

The description explains a difference in this topic from the 80s to now, and thereby a change over that time span. More specifically, by invoking a belief that this previously common vernacular could be construed today as offensive, it speaks to a social evolution from the 80s to today. Think of this as a similar scenario, though admittedly not nearly as extreme, to the use of racial and cultural slurs in our modern culture. While some do still use such offensive lingo, they are labeled as either a fringe group, racists, or both. Our society has adapted since the time of widescale use of these terms, and therefore looks down upon their continued use. More importantly, however, if our society has adapted drastically enough in the last 40 years to change the common phrase “wrong body” into one of disgust in certain contexts, perhaps it’s reasonable to assume a shift in cultural perception and depiction of LGBTQ+ groups as the catalyst.

Many inclusive and even LGBTQ+ focused tv shows and movies have been released in the past decades, such as *Will and Grace* from 1998 to 2020, and more recently the 2022 gay rom-com *Bros*. And many advocates, with which I partially agree, claim these shows as important for the early depiction of these minority groups within media and cinema. However, there still seem to be negatives to the continuation of their method of attaining diversity, primarily the Active Inclusivity method. In mirror to our explanation of Passive Inclusivity's results from earlier, the tendency of Active Inclusivity to highlight a story's queer activities inadvertently depicts those activities to the audience as different and outside of the average viewer's initial perceptions. This results in a continued perception of these groups as different and separate from the greater average of their society.

PURPOSE AND REPROCUSSIONS

When it comes to the purpose of the Active Inclusivity method, the fact of the matter is that, until quite recently, the primary drive for many media outlets was not social reform. It was not to normalize the groups depicted in their 'inclusive' pieces. Rather, the primary purpose of these media outlet's LGBTQ+ representation was to retain their cultural relevance. Companies needed to retain and grow their viewer base to maintain and expand a source of income, and the best way to do so for such corporate media outlets is to remain connected to, and occasionally involved in, cultural and political shifts within the nation. Yet as America's sociocultural connections with its minority groups developed and grew, most of America's corporations and media outlets found themselves on the fence. Understandably so, as at the same time as support was growing in the United States for the LGBTQ+ community, there were also growing camps within the political and social field that could be described as "Queer Reactionary." In political science, "reactionary" is defined as "a person or set of views that are in opposition to political or social liberalization or reform." By proxy, Queer Reactionary is the label used for reactionary people or beliefs primarily against the LGBTQ+ community. By nature of their identities and beliefs, these groups have begun to clash in the political and cultural scenes, especially in the past few decades.

In a bid to remain relevant and accepted by both sides of this cultural divide, with a business smart but socially dubious ploy, many corporations and media outlets designed a compromise. A compromise that would later solidify the method of representation of many minority groups in our modern media. A compromise that works not as an agent of change, but as a symbol akin to that of a white banner in battle, waved as a call to cease hostilities. A compromise that we previously defined as Active Inclusivity. As previously stated, much of our modern media utilizes Active Inclusivity to make their representation obvious and use their inclusivity as a badge of honor to win over the hearts and minds of their more progressive consumers. While this is not an issue in and of itself, the problem arises that this use of Active Inclusivity has the primary purpose of profitability for the company in question, rather than working towards true social change. Because of this, it is much easier for such a company to shy away from further diversity in their stories, due to political and social situations arising that seem to threaten the bottom line of the company. If social change is only secondarily important, then the company will choose profits over backlash. Obviously, this is counterproductive towards said social change that the LGBTQ+ community and other such minority groups, as well as their allies and advocates, continuously call for from these corporations and media outlets. Thus, the problem of marketability vs diversity is revealed.

Now when viewing *The Owl House*, and its tendency to almost hide its representation by comparison, it appears as if the series itself could be the result of a major cultural shift. As of the previous decade, and possibly even within the previous five to six years, the LGBTQ+ community has grown in both size and strength on both cultural and political fronts. Members and allies of such communities have become major players in local and state politics, and more crucially for this topic, have become artists of major say in many entertainment companies, media corporations, and news outlets. Dana Terrace and her team are one such example, Terrace herself finding success as a storyboard artist for Disney's *Gravity Falls*, and as co-director of Disney's *Duck Tales*. These achievements were all during the term of another of these allies: Disney CEO Robert "Bob" Iger, who was reportedly very open to the concepts brought upon by *The Owl House* and signed it for an initial two seasons before the show was announced in 2018. Clearly, these social changes are finally making their way into the internal culture of America's major media companies, and this has led to a shift in their methods and motivations. Many of the writers making these stories now seek to use their representation to better society. No longer seen as a simple "badge of social valor," inclusivity and representation are now a tool of social progress. Thus, a new and more effective method of doing so is required, one that does not simply slap colorfully differentiated characters on a screen for the pleasing of the populous. A

method that doesn't reinforce and highlight the perceived oddities of these groups, but instead allows for a new interpretation of differing peoples and viewpoints. What is required is Passive Inclusivity, and so those writers and directors who advocate for such social change, such as Dana Terrace and the writers and artists of *The Owl House*, utilize Passive Inclusivity within their stories.

CONCLUSIONS

This essay began with a surface level viewing of an incredibly representative animation “coming out of the drawing boards of Disney,” to quote myself. We took a deep dive into the intentions of its writers, and how they utilized an incredibly powerful method of representation, which we defined as Passive Inclusivity. We concluded that what made Passive Inclusivity so effective is its process of merging the story's inclusive mindset with the worldly mindset of the audience. Then we delved even deeper, attempting to decipher the reason behind this intent. With a look back at social changes of the past decades, I have determined, and hopefully explained effectively to you, that Passive Inclusivity and its utilization are a more powerful method of growing unity and a culture of understanding within our society. Now I leave you with two simple requests. First, the less difficult: give *The Owl House* a watch. I don't need you to watch the entire series, though I do believe it deserves the love. I simply wish for you to view this show with your own eyes, and come to your own conclusions on it, whether they are akin to those so far described or against. Second, the difficult task: love thy neighbor. Our world is not a perfect one, and most likely never will be. But despite that, you can still make the difference in someone else's world. Both compassion and hate are contagious, and so I ask during these uncertain times, what contagion would you release? The Disease? Or the Cure?

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