"I'm gonna study everything!": Bisexual Orientations in Dana Terrace's *The Owl House*

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Figure 1. Luz, allowed to study everything, against a (bisexual) backdrop of blue, purple, and pink. Season 1, Episode 13.

When it comes to choosing a line of study, bisexuals apparently can't choose; and according to Dana Terrace's *The Owl House*, they don't have to. Near the end of "The First Day" (season 1, episode 13), the series's bisexual protagonist, Luz Noceda, receives permission to study every subject at her new school, Hexside School of Magic and Demonics. This permission was hard-won. In accordance with the stringent Coven System enforced by the magic world's fascist leader, Emperor Belos, the school had previously restricted students to single lines of study. Students could, for instance, choose the Illusion track (which specializes in deception and showmanship), the Abomination track (which specializes in ooze golems), or the Plant track (which specializes—

unsurprisingly—in plants). Students who dared to mix magic wound up on the detention track. Only after the ever-curious Luz, together with a trio of fellow magic-mixing delinquents, saves the school from a magic-sucking Greater Basilisk does their principal relent, admitting the worthiness of multidisciplinary pursuits. While the other former delinquents select two tracks each, Luz confesses, "I still can't choose. Maybe it's crazy, but I wish I could study a little bit of everything". Her wish comes true. After speaking these words, she finds herself suspended in space; magic adorns her in multicoloured garments, indicative of her intended multitrack endeavours, against an abstract backdrop of blue, purple, and pink—unmistakably, at least for this bisexual viewer, the colour of the bisexual flag. Viewers were still a couple of weeks away from watching the beloved "Enchanting Grom Fright" episode, in which Luz and Amity dance at their school's version of prom, and from receiving Terrace's confirmation of Luz's bisexuality on Twitter.[1] Nonetheless, we were already witnessing an unnamed but blatant association of bisexuality with boundary-defying, re-imaginative potential.

Blurring the cross-screen border between show and viewer, this association and its possibilities become incarnate before and within us. For Luz, and for us with her, it is a moment of coenaesthesia. Vivian Sobchack defines "coenaesthesia", in relation to the cinematic experience, as the "potential and perception of one's whole sensorial being", or else the "prelogical and nonhierarchical unity of the sensorium that exists as the carnal foundation for the later hierarchical arrangement of the senses achieved through cultural immersion and practice".[2] For Sobchack, coenaesthesia is a key component of the viewer's status as a "cinesthetic subject", a neologism that combines the terms "cinema", "synaesthesia", and "coenaesthesia". With the cinesthetic subject, off-screen and on-screen bodies comingle in such a way that "meaning, and where it is

made, does not have a discrete origin in either spectators' bodies or cinematic representation but emerges in their conjunction".[3] In this scene review, I will read the moment of Luz's ecstatic actualization as a multidisciplinary student as a moment of bisexual coenaesthesia, whereby, as we witness, Luz experiences the potential and perception of her whole sensorial being as a bisexual subject. For the cinesthetic subject, this coenaesthesia lends itself to an embodied understanding of bisexuality as multidirectional—not only in terms of interdisciplinarity, but also in terms of wide-ranging cultural, linguistic, and neurological orientations. Reading myself as part of this cinesthetic subject, I will also explore the varied temporal orientations that the scene affords. *The Owl House* is a show I wish I had watched as a tween and teenager; as I watch as an adult in the present, I always look back at my past self. Meanwhile Luz, with her joyful proclamation "I'm gonna study everything!" looks toward her future self. Given the legacy of bi-erasure that has positioned bisexuality in the past or future, but never in the present, I consider at last what it means to have this bisexual kid before us, here and now, in all her multi-oriented capacities.

As the senses most immediately impacted by film, sound and sight signal to me this scene's bisexual associations. The histories of bisexual stereotyping and bisexual culture inform my reading, precisely because the phenomena of experience and their meaning are "spatially and temporally embodied, lived, valued by an objective subject—and, as such, always already qualified by the mutable specificities and constraints of history and culture".[4] As bisexuals well know, society's misperception of them as greedy and indecisive has often led to the indignant mandate to "choose" or "pick a side". Thus, hearing Luz's "I still can't choose" signals in the bisexual viewer an all-too-common dilemma. Furthermore, her sad and shameful delivery of the

line—she drops her head and averts her eyes—evokes in the bisexual viewer the same remembered feelings. How can one, in all her multifaceted desires, fit into a regimented world?

Figure 2. Luz, hesitant to tell her principal she wants to study every subject. Season 1, Episode 13.

Remembrance of this misfit status gives way to Luz's self-actualization; against a history of erasure and derision, she emerges as a present-tense bisexual subject on her own terms. She vocalizes her wish to study everything, and our acculturated vision reads the colours that appear behind her as those of the bisexual flag. Even though we don't receive verbal confirmation within the scene, we know that Luz's light is bisexual. And even though this scene has nothing to do with sexual attraction, we know it has everything to do with (bi)sexual orientation. We know it because it is birthed right before our eyes.

Luz's coenaesthesia, which viewers feel too (or at least I did; the moment excited me with an understanding I could not at first put into language), points her and us in multiple directions. This multiplicity both grounds itself in and stretches beyond Luz's bisexual identity. Asking what it means to occupy a queer way of being-in-the-world, Katharina Lindner has observed that "orientations toward sexual objects affect other things that we do, such that different orientations and different ways of directing one's desire means inhabiting different worlds".[5] Through Luz, we can explore what it means to occupy a particularly bisexual way of being-in-the-world. In her moment of educational affirmation, her bisexuality provides a backdrop not only for her multidisciplinary pursuits but also for her several other multidirectional capacities. Her bisexual way of being-in-the-world is also bilingual (she speaks English and Spanish, and we might also consider her magical glyphs as a language). It is multiracial and multicultural (she is Dominican-American, and she forms communities with members not only of various races but also of various species, especially witches and demons). It is cross-world (she traverses both Earth and the Demon Realm). And last but not least, it is neurodivergent (she has ADHD[6]). Given the recent turn in feminist and queer film criticism, in Lindner's words, to attend to the lived body as "capable of embodying curiously twisted habits, tendencies, orientations, directions, leanings and possibilities",[7] we can read Luz's "I'm gonna study everything!" as an invitation to consider together all of Luz's varied points of identification, including their innovative potential, both within the magic world and across the screen into our own.

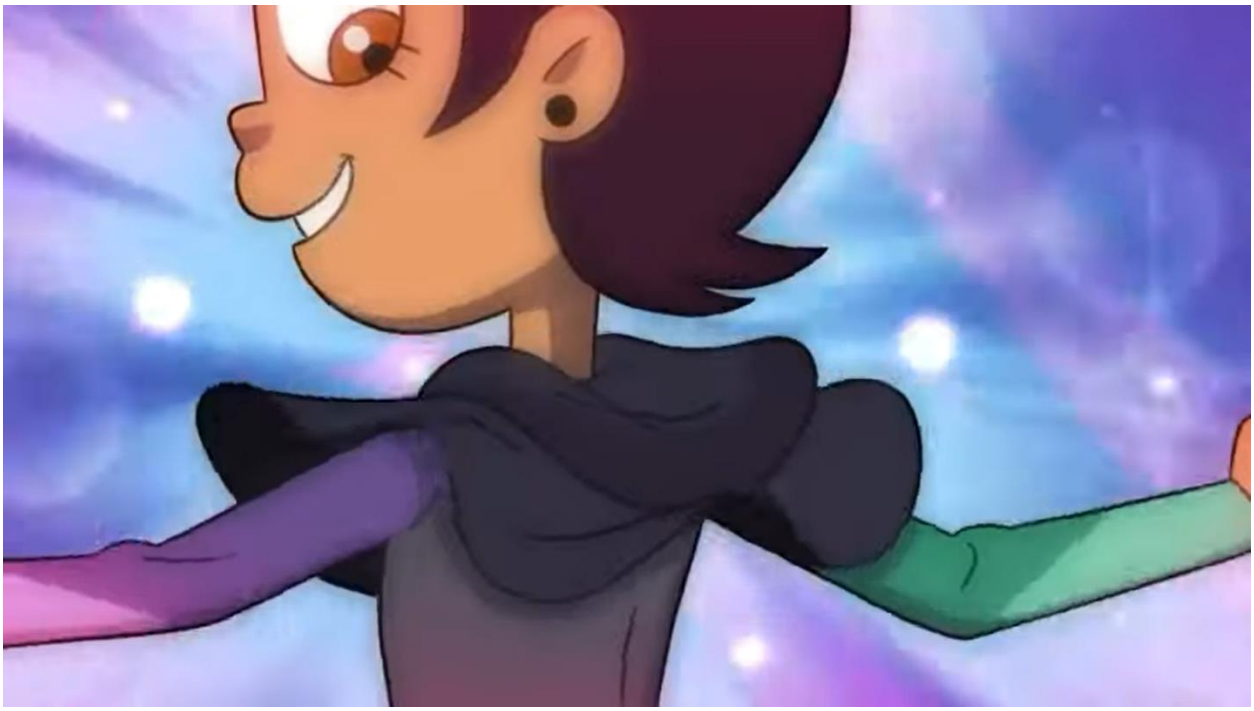

Figure 3. Luz's garments transform to represent her multitrack pursuits. Season 1, Episode 13.

It is worth mentioning that this rendering of a bisexual way of being-in-the-world does have some critical-historical basis. For instance, in the 1990s, June Jordan and Michael du Plessis linked bisexuality to other heterogeneous identities. In an essay adapted from a 1991 speech at Stanford University, Jordan posits, "I do believe that the analogy for bisexuality is a multicultural, multi-ethnic, multiracial worldview. Bisexuality follows from such a perspective and leads to it, as well".[8] In a similar spirit, du Plessis asserts, "We are not predictable; we are not uniform. . . .We run off to the horizon and leave behind the borders on which monosexual, non-transgender theories, edifices, and institutions have been built".[9] Bisexuality, at least according to these two theorists, has the potential to "move the world".[10] And viewers of *The Owl House* receive this world-changing potential through the ecstatic body of Luz before us.

This on-screen birth of Luz and her multifaceted possibilities has the curious effect of pointing me backwards, toward the past. In line with Sobchack's assessment that a viewer "shares cinematic space with the film but must also negotiate it, contribute to and perform the constitution of its experiential significance",[11] the specificity of my own experience as a viewer, past and present, informs my understanding of the scene. When I grew up in the 1990s and early 2000s, I had neither *The Owl House* nor a show that had any explicit bisexual representation (at least, none of which I was aware). Watching *The Owl House* now, in my late 20s, I think about not only what I see on screen but also *when* I see it. I experience what we might call a time-travelling spectatorship: as I watch the show in the present, I simultaneously imagine myself watching it in the past. Without losing sight of who I am now, I also automatically become my younger self, mis–remembering her as one who watched the show and—within and through it—saw, heard, and felt her identity affirmed.

Film, television, and all digital media have the capacity not only to affirm but also to create our identities. Focusing on classical Hollywood cinema, Patricia White argues that "the cinema as an institution did indeed contribute to the social construction of what we recognize today as lesbian identity".[12] Taking up White's stance, Lindner agrees that "films might not only speak to, touch, or move already-formed identities, but that they might play a part in their formation and their 'becoming'".[13] We get precisely a bisexual becoming in Luz's on-screen coenaesthesia. Curiously for me—again as a viewer in her late 20s—this bisexual becoming is retrospective. I mis–remember or imagine my younger self watching the scene and, together with Luz, stepping into and claiming the identity that feels true to me. At the same time, I know I did not have this experience. I suspect that for this reason I remained somewhat abstracted from myself throughout

my most formative years, and I imagine that most LGBT individuals (and most marginalized individuals generally) have a similar history of self-alienation. Kathryn Bond Stockton argues that the category "gay child" is a ghostly identity that we may only apply retrospectively.[14] For me, the category "bisexual child" is even more ghostly. Throughout my teen years and even into my 20s, I did not believe in bisexuality's existence. In those days, it never even crossed my mind as a possibility.

And yet that is the identity I know now. I feel this knowledge, and I give it a name; I have become a living manifestation of that identity-in-language. As Sobchack states, "the cinema makes visible and audible the primordial origins or language in the reversibility of embodied and enworlded perception and expression".[15] This scene in *The Owl House* gives me the language of myself, applied both now and retrospectively. Bisexual becoming, at least for me, involves a dialogue between my present and past selves. While watching this show as an adult, I also imagine myself watching as a child—though, of course, I did not do so. Nevertheless, as I watch now, I imaginatively witness the incarnation of my younger self's identity. This past self then speaks to my present self in the future perfect: *This is the identity you will have become*. Although I know my past self never, in fact, said such a thing, our conversation persists. Such is the confusion and joy of an altogether bisexual time-travelling spectatorship, whereby one witnesses the present and retrospective affirmation of an identity formerly erased.

This personal bisexual temporality has a broader social history rooted in bi-erasure, the systemic denial of bisexuality. In his work on the history of bisexuality,[16] Steven Angelides traces how psychologists and gay liberationists used the term "bisexual" to define and maintain the sexuality

binary before they then erased the possibility of its status as a present-tense identity. Sexologists and psychoanalysts, including Sigmund Freud, located bisexuality in the past tense; they used it to construct the heterosexual/homosexual binary (calling it an embryonic state from which hetero/homo identities emerge) and then erased it to maintain the binary and solidify the diagnosis of homosexuality as pathology. In contrast, the gay liberation movement positioned bisexuality in the future tense; the movement put forth a notion of universal bisexuality and looked toward it as a utopia, only to then erase it as unrealizable until society does away with binaries. Summarising this history of bi-erasure, Angelides concludes, "A particular temporal framing of sexuality has thus cast bisexuality in the past or future, but never in the *present tense*. In other words, bisexuality has been identified only as a prehistoric, precultural, infantile, or utopian state, and not as a distinct identity".[17] Bisexuality: an undifferentiated embryo, or else an unrealized utopia. As a present-tense identity, it does not exist.

Better to say that bisexuality *did* not presently exist. Made manifest in the ecstatic body of Luz before us, bisexuality is here and bisexuality is now. As cinesthetic subjects watching her on-screen coenaesthesia, we relocate bisexuality's *failure to exist in the present* into the past. At the same time, we do not forget bisexuality's past and future coordinates. After Luz's transformation, her principal reveals how a former student on the detention track—none other than Eda, Luz's mentor—wanted to study every track but "unfortunately . . . was never given the opportunity." Eda, whom we later learn loves Raine Whispers, Disney's first openly non-binary character, is also bi+ —an umbrella term that includes anyone who is non-monosexual. Eda's mentioning at this moment reminds us of identity restrictions that occurred not so long ago and still occur today. Luz, meanwhile, comes to the stage with future-oriented potential: "I'm gonna study everything!"

In the present, Luz uses the present progressive, a tense that describes action which began in the past and continues now. At the same time, the construction "going to" (condensed here as "gonna") points to the future; it is often used "when the speaker wishes to draw a connection between present events, situations, or intentions and expected future events or situations, i.e. to express the present relevance of the future occurrence".[18] In relation to Eda and through Luz's language, the present-tense moment of Luz's coenaesthesia points also to the past (what has been lost) and to the future (what will be done). Past and future collapse in on this kid in all her multifaceted, remembered potential.

Figure 4. Luz's mentor, Eda, revealed as a former member of the detention track after mixing magic. Season 1, Episode 13.

These coordinates collapse in on the viewer, too. Remembering past loss, I also look forward to a more equitable future. To be sure, queer kids today still face an uphill battle. But at the very least,

The Owl House and shows like it help them know that they can and do exist. Affirming and indeed creating queer ways of being-in-the-world (again, to use Lindner's terminology), such shows give them the means to climb that hill—together. *The Owl House* privileges community, and even with Luz at its centre, it deconstructs the notion of the solitary hero. Called "Luz the human", this protagonist helps characters realize and remember that they need each other and that only in the shared space of mutual trust and vulnerability may they succeed. For instance, near the end of the first season, former lone wolf Eda succumbs to capture to save Luz;[19] this sets a precedent in the show whereby a character's stubborn individualism is revealed as a defence mechanism against past trauma and replaced with an ethos of interpersonal care. Looking out for each other, Luz's friends and allies fight together against the Emperor's fascist regime. At one point near the end of the second season, when Luz's girlfriend, Amity, and her friend Willow mix magic for a greater attack against the Emperor's guards, Luz's bisexual backdrop of blue, purple, and pink appears behind them.[20] Luz's light is bisexual, multidisciplinary, and multicultural; in other words, it is interpersonal. Her presence reminds us that progress is relational and that, in order to look forward, we need to look sideways.

Figure 5. Luz's girlfriend, Amity, and friend Willow, who mix their magic for greater effect, against a backdrop of Luz's (bisexual and multidisciplinary) light. Season 2, Episode 18.

We also need to look back—or to *feel* back, as Heather Love says, acknowledging histories of queer pain and shame,[21] which for bisexuals is also a history of erasure and non-being. I understand that the suggestion to look back could lend itself to the hostile notion that queer people are backward, as could my late-20s viewership of a Disney cartoon. ("It's for kids", some might say, clinging to the bias that animation is somehow less mature than its live-action counterpart). Well, maybe I am backward. I admit that this show, which spends a great deal of time on characters' backstories, prompts me to take an extended look at my own backstory. It also makes me remember my old suspicion, which is also my hope, that, with perhaps the exception of a select few, humans aren't born malicious; that we are at our best when in relation to each other; and that, if we can put

off the fearful conscription of each other into narrow containers of (mis)identification, we can at last grow sideways, as a community, into the future.

So call me naïve; call me backwards. I admit I do not know much. What I do know is, when I watch Luz transform on-screen before me, I somehow also watch my past self. And this past self, if she listens closely enough, can almost hear the words that we all say together: "I'm gonna".

Notes

[1] The episode "Enchanting Grom Fright" (season 1, episode 16) aired August 8, 2020 on Disney Channel. Terrace confirmed the character's orientation the following day on Twitter. See Daniel Gillespie, "Disney Confirms First Bisexual Lead Character In Owl House TV Show", Screen Rant, August 18, 2020, https://screenrant.com/disney-owl-house-show-luz-noceda-bisexual-confirmed/.
[2] Vivian Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2004), pp. 68-69.
[3] *Ibid*., p. 67.
[4] *Ibid*., p. 2.
[5] Katharina Lindner, "Questions of Embodied Difference: Film and Queer Phenomenology", *NECSUS. European Journal of Media Studies* 1, no. 2 (2012): 207, accessed February 9, 2022.
[6] Michele Kirichanskaya, "Brain Power: Cartoons Diversify the Face of Neurodivergence", Bitch Media, August 9, 2021, https://www.bitchmedia.org/article/animated-children-shows-celebrate-neurodivergence.
[7] Katharina Lindner, *Film Bodies: Queer Feminist Encounters with Gender and Sexuality in Cinema* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2017), p. 14.
[8] June Jordan, "A New Politics of Sexuality", in *Technical Difficulties: African-American Notes on the State of the Union* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1992), p. 440.
[9] Michael du Plessis, "Blatantly Bisexual; or, Unthinking Queer Theory", in *RePresenting Bisexualities: Subjects and Cultures of Fluid Desire*, ed. Donald E. Hall and Maria Pramaggiore (New York: New York University Press, 1996), p. 43.
[10] *Ibid*.
[11] Vivian Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 10.
[12] Patricia White, *Uninvited: Classical Hollywood Cinema and Lesbian Representability* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), p. 2.
[13] Lindner, "Questions," 213.
[14] Kathryn Bond Stockton, *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).
[15] Sobchack, *Address*, 4.
[16] Steven Angelides, *A History of Bisexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).
[17] *Ibid*., 194.
[18] "*Going-to* future", Wikipedia, accessed April 19, 2022, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Going-to_future.
[19] *The Owl House*, season 1, episode 18, "Agony of a Witch," aired August 22, 2022, on Disney Channel.
[20] The Owl House, season 2, episode 18, "Labyrinth Runners," aired May 7, 2022, on Disney Channel.
[21] Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009).

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