Representational Queerness Within Marvel's Loki: Liminality through Identity, Genre,

and Medium

by

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Authorship Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including

any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

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Abstract

Loki, a prominent Norse god and more recently prominent Marvel character, is entwined with an understanding of liminal queerness. Part of the broader notion of liminal queerness is its relationship to questions of identity and the self. This paper explores two divergent texts, 2014-2015's *Loki: Agent of Asgard* and 2021's *Loki* streaming series, that take that concept in different directions, creating a broader understanding of liminal queerness and its place in narrative spaces. The broader natures of the respective texts' narrative, medium, and genre elements all frame and modify discussions of liminality and queerness around a given text. This modulation around the theme between two texts helps build a more complete image of how liminal queerness is entwined with Loki and what that means for liminally queer identities in broader structures.

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Chapter 1: Introduction, History of Loki, and Literature Review

This thesis is, in part, an analysis of queer identity and how that identity is constructed within genre and medium constraints, using Loki, a prominent god from Norse mythology and figure in recent popular media, as a case study. Looking specifically at the version of Loki depicted in the Marvel comics, predominantly in the series *Loki: Agent of Asgard*, and live action series *Loki*. It is this idea of constructed identity that leads to the main thrust of this thesis, that of liminal and queer identities, and how those two factors interrelate within and around the character of Loki across a few modern depictions. Liminal queerness is an understanding that queerness is, in and of itself, a liminal identity. Liminality, is a relativistic idea, created by the instability between dominant or normative expressions. The idea of liminal queerness is that of marginality, of discontinuity from a dominant or hegemonic structure. The general idea of a spectrum of identity embodied by the term queer (whether that be on grounds of partner selection or gender identity or both) contextualizes any individual queer person's identity partial in how it deviates from the cis-heteronormative construct of "normal". This itself structures liminality and queerness as , dependent upon a cultural norm to be considered as either liminal or queer, they both exist relative to boundaries they blur or reject entirely. A culture that exists without cis-heteronormative biases would not understand queerness as a form of deviance from a norm and would as a result does not frame it as abnormal through contrast. This is the liminal requirement of queerness to be "queerness": it requires a norm to be deviated from.

This is partially where my interest in Loki as a character stems from. Loki's fantastical origins allow for explorations of identity outside of our cis-heteronormative societal structure, but his predominant interaction is with people entwined with those structures. The key word in

that statement is "allow", since that opportunity is not always addressed or even acknowledged in many texts involving the character. The idea that liminal queerness is entwined with Loki; being present to some degree in many works, regardless of whether the text acknowledges that element or not, with the character, enables an exploration of what the notion means within various narrative contexts and how it impacts an understanding of the character and of identity as a construct. Loki's liminal queer status itself opens avenues of interpretation and recontextualization that the works themselves engage with, to varying results.

Methodology and Data

This project will predominantly be looking at two works: *Loki: Agent of Asgard*, written by Al Ewing with art by Lee Garbett, and *Loki*, the 2021 streaming series starring Tom Hiddleston. These works in particular, though not unique unto themselves, are clear instances where the engagement with ideas of queer identity and liminality start to be expressed through the character of Loki. The two works also help indicate how ideas of medium and genre impact these ideas. This allows for a clearer look at how the language of a specific medium or conventions of a genre expression are entwined with notions of liminality and queerness.

Since both of these works engage with previous portrayals of their respective Loki, this project will also address (though briefly) relevant depictions in *Young Avengers* on the comic front, and the first three *Thor* films. These other media examples provide a grounding of what Loki was before the recontextualizations and re-examinations of the works in question, standing as the texts that I engage with throughout this thesis. They function as a means of framing the discussion of liminality and queerness expressed in each text.

As for methodology, the predominant method is a form of textual analysis focused on close reading and visual analysis. Across the texts, I look at how understanding of liminality,

gender, and identity are reflected through the visual and linguistic elements of the given text. The idea that liminality, gender, and identity are all, unto themselves, contextually defined means that addressing any element in isolation of the larger text creates a loss of nuance and accuracy from the base text. As a result of this, this analysis will be looking at how the broader narrative structure of a given work impacts these elements as a result of their presence. Beyond the narrative structure are the broader notions of genre and medium and how the differing technologics and genre conventions influence those same elements. Each text will be looked at in partial isolation for its respective chapter and then the conclusion shall put the two texts in general conversation for how notions of liminality and queerness vary between the two texts.

A Brief History of Loki

Loki, along with many other characters from early *Thor*[1] comics, is derived from a pop culture understanding of Norse Mythology. Understandings of Norse Mythology now generally hampered by a lack of surviving primary sources, with most of the written mythology being from the various Nordic Eddas, with the most prominent being *The Poetic Edda* and *The Prose Edda* (Lindow 10-14). Loki's depiction in these Eddas is explored by Helena Bassil-Morozow in her work "Loki Then and Now: The Trickster Against Civilization.". Part of Bassil-Morozow's work here is a contrasting of Loki's narrative presence and framing within the Eddas with similar narratives in the mythological and cultural traditions of other cultures with similar "trickster" figures. "Trickster" itself is a broad notion, often applied to mythological and folkloric figures who exist outside of a broader cultural framework. Trickster characters appear across many cultural traditions, with examples like Loki in Norse Mythology, Anansi in West African and African Diaspora communities, and Coyote from North American[2] indigenous cultures. In

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drawing from the Eddas, Bassil-Morozow identifies that Loki occupies multiple physical and social forms within the mythos, including gender identity.

One prominent instance involved Loki becoming a woman and mother for several years. Bassil-Morozow describes this sequence as follows:

> In a failed attempt to shame Loki, Odin recalls a story of the god of mischief living as a woman for eight years and bearing children[...] This exchange of insults mirrors the fixed gender positions and related expectations: a woman is a woman, and a man is a man. He is valiant and she is patient and stays true to her husband. No transgender tales, no 'cock-craving' which results from 'liking poetry', 'beating the drum like a lady-prophet' (an insult aimed by Loki at Odin) and suchlike killers of manliness. (Bassil-Morozow, 93)

The fluidity comes into play not by Loki's actions, but in how the other gods try to insult him for violating gender norms. Loki becoming a woman is "wrong" in the eyes of the other gods because it violates Loki's assumed natural state, but in rejecting their mockery, Loki rejects rigidity.

This is partially to say that the Loki depicted in the mythology is narratively and thematically distant from the one depicted in the comics. The mythological Loki is grounded heavily within the Norse cultural landscape, specifically as an opposition to it, a framework that was required for the understanding in the Eddas. One could say that this was simply cultural drift, that the narratives and framing around Loki the god did not and does not fit within a modern, western socio-cultural landscape. However, this would neglect that Loki has been continually reimagined and reinterpreted since the Eddas, with the Marvel version being just one of these iterations. Within the comics adaptation process, Loki and Thor, along with other

Asgardian characters, are decontextualized from their original cultural framework and placed within a fantastical version of a contemporary (to time of writing) real world.

The adaptation of characters revolved around having them fit within the new genre. For Loki this mostly manifested as situating him within the role of the supervillain to Thor's superhero. Early appearances of Loki in the Thor comics utilised the same structure as comics featuring other Thor villains: Loki would appear, cause some kind of trouble either for Thor or to non-superhero population, Thor and Loki would fight, Thor would win, and Loki would either be captured or escape to cause problems at a later date. This simple narrative structure worked to create a simple version of Loki. Loki became entwined with notions of villainy mostly due to the need for an antagonist for these narratives. Loki's first appearance as a Marvel character in *Journey into Mystery* #85 in 1962 depicted Loki in this simple format. This structure would be repeated in most early appearances of Loki, including *Avengers* #1 in 1963.

In transitioning Loki to pure villain in the adaptation process, the nuances of Loki's mythological depiction were excised. Loki was presented in exclusively masculine forms. His trickery was always antagonistically framed and overtly violent. Loki's initial depiction was not a liminal figure in most respects, embodying a standard notion of absolute and rigid morality and identity; However there was an added element to Loki's Marvel characterization, a liminal childhood.

Marvel's Loki would, after introduction, follow a fairly standard supervillain model of villainy, capture, and return for the first forty years of publication. This treatment was reworked consistently starting in 2004 in the "Thor: Disassembled" story from *The Mighty Thor* issues 82 through 85. This incited a series of events where, in quick succession, Loki would be killed (Oeming 84), reborn (Straczynski 5), killed again (Bendis 4), reborn again (Fraction 617), killed

by himself, be replaced by the self that killed him (Gillen 645), killed by himself again, and then reborn again (Ewing 13). While this description of events is a barebones retelling of the major events without context, this simplified outline of events provides a framework for understanding why Loki functions as a transitional or liminal figure. The clearest case of liminality is the orphic elements of Loki's narrative at that time. *Orphic* is a term derived from the Greek figure Orpheus, famed for his traversal into and out of the underworld, passing the liminal boundary of life and death. While the term orphic would be culturally incorrect to apply to the Norse god Loki (given its Greek cultural origin), this repetitive transition from life to death and back to life is definitively orphic.

However, Loki is not exclusively liminal because of these orphic elements but rather how those Orphic elements entwine with other factors of the character and the idea of change. After Loki's first death, the character's subsequent return marked both a physical and narrative change to the character. "Thor: Disassembled" was also Marvel's variation of the Ragnarok myth, the cleansing Armageddon and death of the Norse Gods present in the Poetic Edda. This distinction is important because Loki's role as instigator of the Ragnarok is maintained through both narratives. The return of Loki was the first major instance of Loki taking on a female form as her "normal" appearance. This shift in physical portrayal paired with a shift in how the character was treated, from villain to schemer. Lady Loki would be killed in the events of *Siege*, a multi-part crossover book in 2010, and be reborn as Young Loki within the year. Young Loki's defining features would be a reversion to a male default form, and also a lack of memories of his previous lives.

Young Loki was partially a reinvention of the Loki concept, following the character trying to make up for acts done by his past selves and rebuilding a relationship with Thor. This

idea of young Loki continued through the *Journey into Mystery* series until 2013, culminating in

the death of Young Loki by the ghost of the original Loki, who proceeded to take Young Loki's

body (Gillen 645). This reversion itself to a base form, the notion of the villainous Loki, is one of

the key themes being played with the versions of the Loki concept at Marvel.

The notion of change and reversion from change is foundational to understanding how

Marvel worked with Loki as a character in this period and going forward from it. While a creator

or team of creators, like Kieron Gillen for *Journey into Mystery* and *Young Avengers* or Al

Ewing in *Loki: Agent of Asgard*, had leverage to build the characters differently, there was

always an understanding that the classical depiction could be reasserted by the next creative

team. This is the double-edged sword of dealing with ongoing, multi-creator media like major

company comics, and why dealing with a singular work or understanding is critical. This process

was instigated with Loki after *Loki: Agent of Asgard* ended, only to have itself be reverted in the

2019 *Loki* series written by Daniel Kibblesmith. This chapter is, as a result, looking at a snapshot

of Loki's depiction, a single moment of recontextualization and reimagining that centre

simultaneously the liminal and the queer intrinsic to the character.

As for filmic adaptations, Loki started appearing in Marvels' filmic output with *Thor* in

2011, situating Loki in a villain role drawing explicitly from the earlier comics. Future films

would build off that base idea to create an understanding of Loki not dissimilar from that

developed in series of the time like *Journey into Mystery* and *Loki: Agent of Asgard*. These

developments themselves culminated in the filmic Loki's death at the start of *Avengers: Infinity*

War, only to have a second version of the character be introduced in the next film entirely

lacking development from that initially villainous depiction. This version would then be the one

depicted in and focused on in *Loki*. These leads to a broader discussion of the academic and theoretical research that informs this reading of Loki and of liminal queerness.

Literature Review

  A direct discussion of the present state of the literature around queerness and Loki in the superhero genre is perhaps a greater challenge than one might assume. This is because both topics exist in a nest of subjects still being examined and addressed within academic circles. There are scholars discussing queer theory and queer readings of comics (Anna Peppard, Ramzi Fawaz, Anthony Michael D'Agostino, Ross Murray, among others), but they are still a minority of voices that are working to scratch the surface of the genre. The research itself varies from focused character/series/issue case studies to looking at the medium itself as queer possibility space. Some research gaps include a significant lack of discussion of gender identity outside presumed binaristic norms.

  Survey texts are attempting to mitigate other gaps by dealing with broad swaths of the genre and medium (works like Tim Hanley's *Not All Supermen*), but even those have recency and popularity biases. Ramzi Fawaz outlined the issue here in discussing Hillary Chute's *Why Comics* in the article "A Queer Sequence: Comics as a Disruptive Medium." Fawaz's complaint was that biassing towards the prominent or popular reasserts notions of the canon and canonization into the medium, creating an unintentional hierarchy of works (589). The popularity bias does shift with recent developments, but Hanley's book, a survey text itself, does devote more sections to discussing Batman, Superman, and Wonder Woman than most other characters. This gives an exaggerated bias to the most prominent characters and concepts and as a result minimizes the developments made on the medium's margins .

This is not to say that good work in the genre is not being done and that the space is empty of quality and interesting analysis; but rather that the space is still being developed. This incites a look at the interplay between liminality and queer theory and queer existence. This itself drives a look at the nature of the comics medium as queer due to its often-marginal status and liminal effect of closure. Focusing on a genre-specific framing helps identify how the existing literature has explored the text/subtext relation with regards to queer representation and theory. Then, I will look more directly at notions of gendered depictions in the genre and how notions of identity are often placed in contrast with notions of exaggerated gender signifiers.

The Medium: On Comics, Queerness, and Liminal Possibility

When mentioning "medium" in academic circles the spectre of Marshall McLuhan is inevitably going to appear. His works set a broad foundation. McLuhan's ideas and framings, as explored in Sarah Sharma and Rianka Singh's edited collection *Re-understanding Media: Feminist Extensions of Marshall McLuhan*, were rooted in racist, sexist, and colonialist notions (Sharma 3). However, McLuhan's frameworks, particularly his power analysis, can and should be repurposed towards queer analytical means, as Sharma argues. In her reexamination of McLuhan's work, Sharma is dealing with this same question of how to recontextualize McLuhan's ideas without McLuhan's bigotries. In refocusing on a feminist version of McLuhan's "medium is the message" Sharma moves the idea away from a message centric system and towards an exploration of mediums as modifiers of social system (6), regardless of the message itself. It is this system that I situate my approach to comics studies, queer theory, and liminality.

Scott McCloud identifies, in a McLuhanist sense, how comics themselves work as a distinct medium. McCloud does have a significant focus on how the visual and rhetorical

language of comics functions uniquely to other mediums. The notion of closure can be situated as one of comic's dominant technologics. Closure uses the human brain's pattern recognition tendencies to create narrative flow out of otherwise disconnected images. McCloud outlines this as the "phenomenon of observing the parts but perceiving the whole" (McCloud, 63) and, though present in other artistic mediums to some degree, it is required for the medium to function as a medium. Closure is one of the ways comics try to enforce linear time upon a nonlinear medium. The pattern recognition being employed by comics through closure is that of connecting temporal dots and building the whole of a scene from component pieces of it. It is this imprecise discussion of closure that is important to this work.

This notion of "closure" as outlined by McCloud actually helps create a liminal space within the pages of comics themselves, the often-white space between panels. The lines on a comic, dividing the panels on a page were also of interest to McCloud, drawing attention to how they functioned when used normally. Normal function has them function as frames and create the possibility of sequential narrative. Without the white space closure either ceases to function or must be addressed differently. McCloud calls this white space between panels "the gutter" (66) and specifically describes it as a liminal possibility space, saying of it:

> Here in the Limbo of the Gutter, Human Imagination takes two separate images and transforms them into a single idea. // Nothing is seen between the two panels but experience tells you that something must be there. (66-67)

McCloud's notion of the gutter as a limbo is critical to its liminal understanding of it, and even more important when writers start playing with assumptions of it. Starting with Grant Morrison's Animal Man, the motif of the Gutter, as McCloud called it, became a literal element of how more

experimental comics could tell their stories. This would start becoming connected with Loki in 2013's *Young Avengers* and 2014's *Loki: Agent of Asgard*.

McCloud also notes that comics, though functioning as a visual medium, try to incite the other dominant physical senses (120-124). The idea that the visual language of comics and subtle elements like font style, text box style, and other textual elements are used to invoke an understanding of the textual elements through the senses of hearing or touch to create a different impression on the reader. Ramzi Fawaz's "A Queer Sequence: Comics as a Disruptive Medium" outlines this simply by stating that "Comics is a medium in which anything that can be drawn can be believed" (Fawaz 589). While not directly using McCloud or McLuhan, Fawaz identifies one of the unique aspects of the comics medium, enabled by its unique technologics, as Sharma might put it. This notion of the comic as queer possibility space is interesting, but conflicts with how comics have been treated as a medium.

Bringing together medium-specificity and liminality, this is where a queer analysis of comic studies can begin. Queer analysis of the genre is fundamentally building upon the promises of the medium (Peppard, Fawaz and Scott). The opening line to Ramzi Fawaz and Darieck Scott's *Queer About Comics* special issue introduction for the *Journal of American Literature* perhaps says in few words what much of this section will try to explore. Their seemingly simple statement "there is something queer about comics" (Scott and Fawaz 197) belies a nuanced and underexplored field. It plays upon the numerous meanings of the word queer and means all of them. While "queer" as a term in academic circles has become linked to the theoretical discipline, as discussed above, it has also, as seen in Sasha Purcell's article on Cassandra Cain's version of Batgirl, "Law, Queer Performance and the Bat: Cassandra Cain as

Becoming More.", queer can also be understood as a form of normative deviance (Purcell 46-49).

Alongside the academic world is both the history of the term as slur and reclamation of it. This process itself revolved around both the intertwining of academics and activists (despite often both being the same people) (Butler, "Introduction" *Gender Trouble*). Before that was a more classical definition of "queer" meaning an oddness or out of the ordinary. When Fawaz and Scott identify the notion of what is "queer about comics", they are drawing upon all of these to a degree. Scott and Fawaz carry on identifying a few of the comic elements which convey a queer reading and none of them deal with explicit or textual queerness. It is a feeling or impression given off by the mise-en-scenes or generic tropes that entice a queer reading. It is the elements of found family and rejection of unjust or ineffective authority. It is the performance of identity, and the outcast or secondary nature of the medium itself. It is the historical connection to camp and "childishness" of the form. What Scott and Fawaz are acknowledging here is the queer possibility space that comics exist within (Scott and Fawaz 197). Though this does get to a differentiation point between queer text and queer subtext.

There is significant thought in the field that the implementation of the Comics Code Authority (CCA) in 1954 is partially responsible for the lack of queer representation in the superhero genre. The CCA functioned as a regulatory body for what was or was not appropriate to display to children, the then dominant market for comics. Heavily influenced, though often "caused" is the word used, by Fredrick Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent* and his subsequent address to congress, the CCA had hard restrictions on violence, horror, sexuality, and morality (Casey 124). Anna Peppard's 2020 piece exploring Batwoman said this about the CCA: "The

code didn't invent the lingering assumption that comic books are strictly "kid's stuff," but it did help to solidify it" (Peppard 2020).

It was this notion of comics as a child's medium that arguably most impacted queer representation in comics. This point was mirrored in Anna Peppard's "Introduction" to *Supersex: Sexuality, Fantasy and the Superhero*, where she identified the specifically anti-gay and anti-sex text in Fredric Wertham's CCA driving book *Seduction of the Innocent* (Peppard 1). Both Peppard and Hanley, though Hanley more directly, focused attention on how the creation of the CCA drew heavy influence from The Motion Picture Production Code, often simplified to "the Hays Code". The Hays Code was a regulatory body for controlling content in film, including limiting violence, sexuality and explicitly limited the presence of queer characters in film. While Hanley's focus would remain on issues of the masculine hero (notions of toxic masculinity, violence, among others), Peppard would instead focus on how this impacted the depiction of sex and sexuality in comics. The CCA would heavily feature in other texts on the medium and its history, outlining its disruptive presence to the entire medium. Even for Peppard and Hanley, non-normative gender identities were, at best, a secondary concern.

While the CCA did technically impact the entire medium, with several genres disappearing entirely from major publications (Casey 124), it is its impact on the Superhero genre that is most pivotal to this thesis. The CCA limited depictions of violence, sexuality, and women significantly (Peppard 1-3), restricting what could be published in the mainstream publishing industry significantly. While the underground and countercultural comics would emerge, they never reached the same breadth of audience. The CCA was, in some ways, a more restrictive rules set than the Hays Code, with the CCA limiting depictions of many facets common to the genre previously. The CCA gradually lost influence over the medium for various

reasons, including the shift to a direct market model and individual creators not seeking

certification on some works.

Genre: Queerness Within Superhero Comics

While a focus on genre, specifically the superhero genre, is prominent within the research

thus far discussed, a discussion of the constraints of genre as a structure has not. This can

partially be linked to Carolyn Miller's "Genre as Social Action" which grounds genre as

extension of social and hierarchical structures (Miller 163). Genre is not a fixed structure that can

be linked to and interpreted in isolation that works fit into or not, but a structure that rises, falls,

and evolves with society (163).

The superhero genre, unto itself, has an interesting relationship with gender and

queerness. While one could easily blame the CCA for this, as outlined in Hanley's book, gender

and queerness was not absent in the pre-CCA period, it was instead pushed to the margins or to

the subtext. Resulting from this lack of explicit text on queerness, queer analysis of the superhero

genre and the concept of the superhero itself would rely upon analysis of subtext. This subtextual

research looking at how themes and ideas connected to queer existence proliferated through the

genre. This could be the contrasting of how the notion of the "secret identity", a common

character trait in the genre, mirrors both in practice and in emotional resonance to notions of the

closet (Friedlander 154). There is also the textual, looking at how queer people are depicted (or

more often not) by the genre. This is often commenting on how these elements or characters are

used with Friedlander's discussion of the closet in "Parents, Counterpublics, and Sexual Identity

in Young Avengers" works well here as well, outlining how the queerness of the characters

becomes entwined with notions of super heroics (157). Part of this is Friedlander looking at how

the sexuality of the series' queer characters becomes marginalised; it also situates their queer

identities as textually integral to the themes of the text itself. While this can be read as simply a manifestation of representation politics, it helps function as a temperature check about both the creators and the audience for these narratives.

It is common for studies of queerness within the superhero genre to operate in the space between a subtextual analysis and an explicitly textual one. The reasoning for this is that there is interplay between the subtext and text in evolving narratives. One example of this would be how the subtextual can becomes text in later works, such as in Anna Peppard's (2020) piece on the *Batwoman* show discussing the queer subtext around the character's initial creation becoming text in the character's reintroduction and television portrayal). On the other hand, works discussing the explicit presence of queer characters in the text of superhero genre works rely upon the presence of subtext. In his chapter in *Supersex* about the Young Avengers Friedlander relied heavily on analysis of how even in explicitly textual queer relationships, queer signifiers are often repositioned to the background, or the subtext. Beyond that, Tim Hanley's *Not all Supermen* looks at how subtextual analysis is reinforced by paratextual or metatextual accounts like letters pages and testimonials.

Hanley's book does introduce another facet of queer analysis of the superhero genre; that is, how it has a relational, often secondary status, to other fields like feminist studies. Hanley's writing situates queer identities as a component of the genre's larger issues with representing and exploring identities that are, non-white, non-male, among other historically marginalised groups. Queerness is but one of these factors, often given a chapter or a section in a larger work about another topic. This extends to characters who are textually queer, with characters like Loki being talked about in articles and having gender identity or sexuality be a passing mention. This happens in Emily Bartz's piece on Loki as adopted god(dess) which utilises a framing around

liminality, but a liminality not tied to queerness. These same ideas, even the same sequences could be used for a queer reading, but the focus is placed instead on how Loki's adopted origin situates him with a liminal status. Bartz arguably minimises a queer reading in favour of the liminality of adoption in this sentence: "Adoption for Loki is not just another element next to his races, his cultures, his sexualities, or his genders, but also the conduit through which he can play with identity while still being true to himself" (Bartz 94). This single sentence on Loki's queerness exemplifies one of the core aspects of the field right now: its marginal status.

This marginality of the scholarship is mirrored in how the genre often deals with queerness itself. In "The Absence of Queer Vocabulary: Exploration of Queerness in Western Children's Comics" Jessica Cynthea and Jacinta Pricilla Wibowo identify that queer vocabulary is often absent in works aimed at children and young adults. This is despite the fact that, as the article addresses, many children's comics do depict queer content, such as gender non-conformity or same-sex attraction. Friedlander's work about Young Avengers, mentioned earlier, identifies the inverse in the superhero genre, which is the willingness to use queer vocabulary, but unwillingness to depict queer content. The exact difference between the two situations could be temporal; Cynthea and Wibowo are discussing books published in the late 2010's, while Friedlander was discussing those published over a decade before.

Gender Roles and Shapeshifters

One of Loki's primary characteristics throughout both his mythological and Marvel comics existence is his shapeshifting abilities. Now shapeshifters are not an uncommon feature within the superhero genre, though they do pose a unique question by their presence. Ross Murray makes the succinct point that "Superheroes perform and display hypermasculine and hyperfeminine roles and forms" (Murray 59). What Murray is stating here is a notion of gendered

caricature, these notions of hypermasculine and hyperfeminine are exaggerated traits that have become the dominant form in the genre. This plays into the same notions of toxic masculinity discussed by Hanley and by Esther De Dauw and Daniel James Connell in their introduction to their book on the subject. This leads to a broader notion of gender as caricature, where gendered features and actions are exaggerated for effect, a notion commented upon in both Hanley's and Dauw and Connell's books.

What this fundamentally leads to is an exaggerated notion of both a rigidly constructed masculine and feminine identity within the genre through visual signifier alone. De Dauw and Connell argue that these notions of the hyper masculine reemerge in non-comic mediums as exaggerated physical forms. In the book's chapter on *Arrow* James C Taylor suggests that the masculine form is venerated not as an object but as an idealised subject, a male power fantasy (Taylor 34). The idea that the serial format of the series reinforces the rigidity and repetition of hegemonic masculinity is true for both the television medium and the comic medium as well.

Following binary logics of gender, the inverse of this is present in the female form. Hanley identifies that female characters became prop-like in the stories of the male protagonist, often little more than a visual object of desire. This itself led to what writer Gail Simone emphasised the precarity of women in the genre on her website *Women in Refrigerators*, describing it as "being a girl superhero meant inevitably being killed, maimed or depowered" (Simone "Front Page"). What Simone is getting at, and other writers (both academic and non-academic) have built upon, is the notion that female comic characters, even those seemingly empowered by the plot, are still marketed and understood first within the context of a male character's stories. This itself was noted by Hanley when he writes that the non-normative, in

this case the female (though it could be expanded to include other marginalised characteristics), exists by the grace of the cis-straight-white-male writers and editors (Hanley 120).

This explicit queering of the genre is seemingly a role which scholars are primarily occupying. In a piece for Sequential Scholars on DC's Martian Manhunter, lead scholars Anna Peppard and J. Andrew Deman identify the character as existing in a constant, transitory state because of his shape changing ability. The piece outlines how J'ohn does not simply play the role of the person whose identity he takes, but he becomes that person; the difference between performing the role (or identity) and embodying it. This piece, though brief, outlines one of the key aspects of looking at shapeshifters through a queer lens, looking at how characters for whom identity is a non-rigid structure can exist outside of a rigid singular identity structure. This discussion of identity is not made within the comic directly but drawn from the subtext and visuals of it. The key example of this is the focus placed on the traditionally masculine J'ohn's alternate identity of female reporter Goldie Johnston and how the depiction of that identity rejects a singular, performative reading of J'ohn's actions (Peppard and Deman).

J'ohn is an outlier in comics regarding one aspect of the shapeshifter, their usually villainous narrative role. Marvel's Mystique is probably the most prominent shapeshifter in the genre, likely due to the character's appearance in seven movies. Ross Murray's piece "The Feminine Mystique: Feminism, Sexuality, Motherhood" works well as a companion piece to the Sequential Scholars work. Murray's piece explores how Mystique's identity has shifted gradually since her inception, including an attempt at depicting her in a same sex relationship in the 1980s. This paper identifies elements of Mystique's character that fundamentally rely upon her sexuality and its entwinement with notions of self-identity and liberation. Identity in Murray's piece for Mystique is derived from the conflict between a repressive straight identity

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and a repressed (often meta-textually) lesbian one. However, in contrast to this dynamic, Murray identifies that Mystique's moral identity is tied to her acceptance of the heterosexual relationship available to her. Murray places this as a dichotomy, accepting the heterosexual relationship requires rejecting the homosexual relationship, but none of this builds upon Mystique's shapeshifting, but rather her choice of partner.

Interestingly it is characters who are not normally understood as shapeshifters who actually grapple with notions of identity. In Anthony Michael D'Agostino's piece on the X-Men character Rogue, they identify a reading of the character that realises a queer body politic through the adopting of both form and identity. D'Agostino rejects the reading of Rogue exclusively as tormented by her ability, but instead repositions her as a queer possibility space. Rogue's ability to absorb the abilities and identities of those she touches make her a polymorphic character according to D'Agostino. This creates a reading of the character where her identity is not inherent to her but constructed by her exposure to others; this is identity as construct taken to a literal level.

These articles themselves help frame the discussion of liminality within both the medium and the genre. In turn, that helps identify a notion of the shapeshifter as existing in a fundamentally non-normative role. One of the key notions, looking from the existing literature to the thesis as a whole, is this notion of constructed identity, especially how "constructed" can lead to a variable identity. While this has been taken up by these authors to varying degrees, it identifies a foundational queerness to the concept that should be examined.

Chapter Overviews

As for the bulk of this project, the research is delineated into two body chapters. Each chapter takes one of the two dominant texts, *Loki: Agent of Asgard* for chapter two and *Loki* for

chapter three, and looks at how queerness, liminality, and identity are reflected and depicted in the respective text. The fourth chapter will synthesise the two body chapters, taking the contrasting understanding from to create an understanding of how liminal queerness is intrinsic to Loki as a concept, but the manifestation within a given text changes the framing of liminal queer identities.

Chapter one will look at how the visual language of *Loki: Agent of Asgard* is used to express an understanding of liminality that corresponds to history within the medium. This then moves into how the language around how signifiers of the superhero genre are manipulated to subvert a reader's understanding of usually binaristic notions, preparing the reader for a less rigid understanding of other presumed binaries. This moves into an analysis of identity as a construct within the text and how the series uses understanding of identity and its relationship to narrative archetypes to deconstruct the idea of rigid, singular, identities. The chapter ends by addressing how these themes are combined in the notion of self-recreation with Story Loki and the liminal possibility space created by the series' ending.

As for the third chapter, its focus is how Loki's filmic portrayals ground their understanding of the character through the notion of the facade. Then how that notion of the facade, along with understanding of medium and genre, creates an understanding of Loki as the perpetual outsider within the *Loki* series. This builds to an analysis of Loki's narrative development inconsistency and its relationship to liminal instability. This moves into how the *Loki* series portrays queerness, predominantly looking at how the series implies a queer reading of Sylvie. This then culminates in the chapter's discussion of how the ending of the show draws into question forms of resistance to hegemonic power structures and how liminal queerness gains a negative association in that act of questioning.

The final chapter will address where the two dominant texts, as discussed in the previous chapters, converge or diverge on the same ideas. First is how the two texts utilise medium and genre specific notions of liminality in relation to notions of queerness and identity. Next is how textual focuses on queerness and identity vary between the two texts, looking at how the recurring motif of deception in both texts amplifies queer reading, regardless of the explicit queerness of the given text. After that is a look at how both texts use a shared notion of predestination as a discussion of free will as it relates to notions of the liminality and as a result identity. Following that is a discussion of the research's limitations and further spaces for academic expansion in this space. Finally, concluding the paper, is a look at how broader notions of metanarrative framing influence how this kind of text ends and how different contexts of endings change the understanding of liminal queerness' possibility space.

Chapter 2: *Loki: Agent of Asgard*: Technologics of Queer Liminality

Addressing the character and concept of Loki, specifically how notions of liminality play into the character, requires placing the character at the intersection of various historical, genre, cultural, and theoretical contexts. Loki's existence in the superhero comics genre and medium is a microcosm for how that genre and medium evolve characters and concepts. This itself requires that Loki be discussed not only in how he is depicted and reinterpreted through the medium and genre, but in how the language, concepts, and functions of both medium and genre mould Loki to fit them. This chapter will look at Loki through notions of medium liminality, genre technologics and assumptions, and identity, primarily focusing on the character's depiction between 2011 and 2015, focusing primarily on the depiction in the Al Ewing-written *Loki: Agent of Asgard* title from 2014-2015. The idea that medium liminality, expressed through visual language, is expressed around Loki, then moving to how liminalities of genre expression do the same. The latter sections will then look at how liminality is expressed from a character focused perspective, and how that then relates and empowers queer expression in Loki's depiction.

This period correlates with both growing acceptance and representation of marginalised gender and sexual identities within a western cultural framework; applying those ideas to Loki. While Loki's relationship to ideas of gender queerness is important, it is how those relationships are depicted and grounded in an understanding of Loki as a liminal and transformative character that is critical. Explicit discussion of Loki's gender identity within the text of the comics does not occur within the comics; instead, the texts use figurative language to illustrate queer identity indirectly. It is this indirect yet evocative form of queer identity that makes this series interesting

to dissect from a queer perspective, partially impacted by how later series apply textually queer labels to Loki as a character.

Before going forward with this analysis, a discussion of gendered pronouns as they relate to the character of Loki and how they will be used going forward. Pronouns are generally a sticking point for people with regards to trans, non-binary, and other individuals who do not conform to a normative gender binary. In essence, pronouns are simplified versions of an identity marker for an individual's gender identity that is externally framed in the form of third person pronouns. Pronouns, specifically the third person singular sets of he/him, she/her, and they/them, among others, are simplified expressions of gender identity and acceptance. These pronoun sets are two gendered sets (he/him being masculine and she/her being feminine) with the ungendered set of they/them being also shared with the third person plural pronouns. This acceptance is entwined with the fact that they are almost exclusively used by an externalised other, as the English language presently uses non-gendered first (I) and second (you) pronouns.

Mythological Loki was predominantly depicted as a man in the sources like the *Prose Edda* and *Poetic Eddas*. There are times where mythical Loki becomes or takes on the form of a woman, including being the mother to several monsters. Comics Loki is considered male until 2008, taking on a traditionally female form at that point. Loki would eventually categorically fall into the umbrella category of "nonbinary", though in one of the few instances to really comment on gendered terminology, *Loki* (2019) issue 4, has Loki respond to "him", "boy", and "person" with the line "They're all acceptable, thanks for asking" (Kibblesmith 4:21). For this chapter, the pronoun of "he" will be predominantly used for Loki, except when discussing moments or variations of the character where "she" or "they" would be more appropriate. This is partially for consistency with the source text, since when Loki is referred to with gendered pronouns for most

of the series and in prior depictions, it uses the masculine "he". This is not consistent however, since there is a shift in how Loki is depicted in relation to gender identity later in the series, with those moments or versions of the character being more rigidly separated from a strict masculine identity. These moments will shift towards utilising she/her pronouns if the shift is explicitly to the feminine, or to the non-gendered they/them when gender becomes more explicitly fluid, especially with regards to Story Loki.

Loki, because of this existing liminal framework, enables a discussion of how the comic medium and the superhero genre have dominant, counter-dominant, and liminal possibility spaces. The varying ideas of liminality, predominantly the personal and the textual, combine within Loki, especially within the text of *Loki: Agent of Asgard* to create an understanding of the character that exemplifies a queer liminal possibility space. This understanding of queer liminal space creates a means of grounding the personal within a larger political and social space of queer liberation.

White Space: How the Comics Medium's Technologics Create Liminality

Liminality, as discussed in the previous chapter, is both a complicated concept and deceptively simple one. In simplest terms, liminality is a contextual idea derived from presumed norms and their mirrored absence. Put another way, in the words of Kim Skjoldager-Nielsen and Joshua Edelman, liminality is the "transitory and precarious phase between stable states" (Skjoldager 33). This notion situates an understanding of the liminal as a form of instability between stable states; the gap between two stable expressions within a given system. We can then apply this understanding of liminality easily to both literal expressions and to social constructions. A simple understanding of non-binary identities can frame them as liminal

identities between the rigid binaries of male and female. To then apply this to texts is to look at elements within the given text that of evoke the base idea of liminality; of existing between two points on a presumed binary. This binary requires the text to be entwined with a cultural framework and, for lack of a better term, medium language that has a normative function.

One of the visual elements that comics have used to impart liminality through the comics medium that is unique to the medium is the interaction with the transitory lines on the page. A "standard", for lack of a better term, comic page utilises panels, often black lines on white backdrop, to divide images. The white background being discussed here is not just an absence of colour or detail to a background. The white or plain background without textual or thematic meaning can be seen in many early comics, often when drawing a background was not deemed relevant to the panel. What is being discussed here is the white background being used as a means of evoking the feel of the empty page, the space between the black panel divider lines.

The traditional panel structure, absent the white background liminality, is a means of aiding with McCloud's notion of closure (McCloud 66-68). To disrupt the transition from panel to panel requires the dividing aspects of closure to be bent or take on new meanings. McCloud's notion of closure is inarguably core to the medium of comics because it is how the brain processes the transition from scene one to scene two. Without closure, and McCloud identifies this particularly, comics are not comics (67). One element that is important here is that closure is never destroyed, it simply utilises a different means of imparting division when the usual framing is removed. The simplest non-panel divider is simply to move to an already existing divider of the page, but this can also be done by using other non-diegetic elements like speech bubbles to direct narrative flow. This creates a new context for a pure white background in

comics, because it blurs the line between panel and background. To utilise a pure white background is often to create a feeling of metatextuality, which is how it is mostly utilised.

However, it is also a modification of the notion of the technologics of mediums, where the dominant structure and format imposes upon the artwork an assumption of rigidity. This is the differentiation point between comic art and non-comic art, the imposition of a linear structuring upon the non-linear piece. The panel structure of a standard comic segments the art as trapped within a linear structure, taking the non-linear structure of art and forcing upon it a linear structure. The gutter, the gap between the panels, is therefore a space of non-existence within the creative work, its absence giving structure to the presence. The manipulation of the page structure itself, specifically to play with and evoke liminality, is a prominent element in *Loki: Agent of Asgard*, so a bit of grounding of its presence in the medium's history should better contextualize that correlation.

The most prominent early usage of this concept would be Grant Morrison in varying works for DC Comics. Morrison's work would generally explore how both the superhero genre and the comics medium modified and mediated discussions of identity, the self, and notions of morality. Morrison's utilisation of the white space began with their work on *Animal Man*, where the titular character's connection to the narrative he is within begins to fray as different narratives begin to interlace with his own. Morrison starts using the visual language of comics to address the comics medium itself. Beginning in a story in issue 5, titled "The Coyote Gospel" the notion of the white space is briefly used as a transitional state between the comedic world of Crafty Coyote, modelled after *Looney Toons*, into the more realistic world of *Animal Man* (Morrison 5:21). Within the text of this series, it is the first instance where the diegetic reality of the narrative is called into question. This white space is later described within the narrative as

"The absence that lies behind what you call 'reality'" (12:19). The white void is eventually used within the series to address the notion of the reader and character identity within the genre.

This white space in Morrison's writing is explicitly meant to invoke the notion of the blank page. This white space is paired with a body horror-esque notion of characters having parts of their bodies reverted to sketch form to make the page analogy become more apparent. Starting in issue 24 the boundary of the comic panel itself becomes damaged, with a gap into the white space itself. Once Animal Man crosses that boundary, he exists outside the diegetic structure, while interacting with people trapped within it. Animal Man's visual depiction in issue 24, resting his arms on a panel or reaching into one to punch someone, expresses liminality of existence (24). Animal Man is both contained within the story, while also being outside its normal structure.

There is a common focus on metatextuality in Morrison's *Animal Man*, as well as many of their other works; often taking the form of a comic about people realising they are inside a comic. This inherently draws attention to issues of diegesis and questions of what elements of the comic structuring do/do not exist within the world of the story. Morrison's exploration of liminality in comics is entwined with these notions of metatextual exploration, playing with the notion of both reader and the comic itself. While Morrison popularised the usage of the white space in general it is through Loki that the white space as liminal space would be utilised more directly.

This is where liminality comes into play. The notion of liminality is to exist between, it draws parallels to connected ideas of transitionality and medium. While liminality can be portrayed in various ways in comics, including through characterization and text, the panel divide, the white space, visually portrays a liminal existence. While *Loki: Agent of Asgard* would

use this motif in its final issues, it is most visually evocative of liminality in Loki's appearance in issue two of the series *Young Avengers*. The most evocative sequence is page 18 (figure 1.) where Loki and Wiccan exit a panel shaped box, into the white space and utilise panels as platforms for movement. This sequence is fundamentally a visual exploration of liminality, evoking the image of a comic page by visually referencing the panels, but repurposing them for a different, counter-purpose. Loki's actions become those of a transgressor of boundaries, but not contained by them. Loki's narrative role in the series becomes entwined with that of a liminal figure because of this transgression.
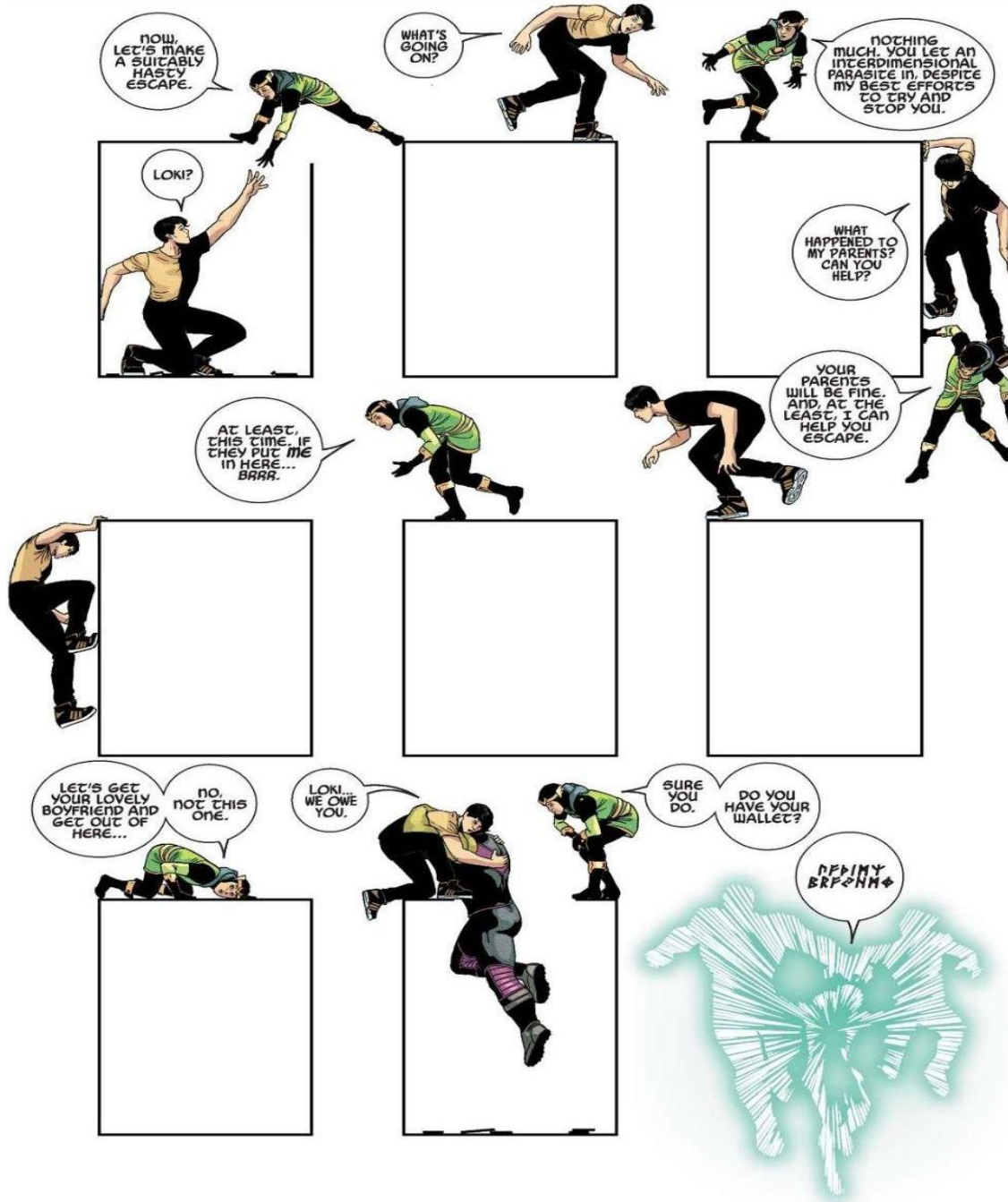
Figure 1 Loki, Wiccan and Hulkling Navigating the White Space from: *Young Avengers* Issue 2. Page 18. 2013.

It is also in how the panel structure is recontextualized, granting it the meaning of

containment, of restriction not normally associated with the panel. The panel's lines become a

means of containing Hulkling, the third figure in the last two images in the sequence. The closure

usually associated with the panel structure is moved into what McCloud calls "the gutter"

(McCloud 66) and the psychological load becomes situated upon the visual repetition of the character. The repetition of Loki and Wiccan creates the opportunity for closure by replicating the eye's movement around the page. Starting from the top left, the figures moving right mirrors how the text is read. While an English reader might, when the end of the page is reached, move down and to the far left, the repeated figures instead scale the panel and begin moving left. This creates not only the assumption that the page is a physical space within the diegetic reality of the narrative, but also that the panels themselves are physically restricting objects. In looking for Hulkling in a panel, the two characters map out a possibility space on the page itself, only to shatter the panel then the page itself when the task is completed.

Where this representation becomes thematically important is when looking at how the two repeated figures are visually designed. Loki is in a vertically symmetrical outfit, identical visually regardless of camera or body positioning. Wiccan, on the other hand is bilaterally asymmetric, with a beige side and a black side to his top. The differentiation point between the two is how Loki's outfit, in never changing from perspective, imparts a completeness, or comfort with the self. Wiccan's outfit, in changing with the frame, does the opposite, drawing into focus an internal self-struggle. While the surface reading for Wiccan is narratively apt, his story in this series is one of self-acceptance and coming to terms with himself, for Loki it is a play of surfaces.

The context for this page sets a symbolic entanglement of the panel and homogeneity and authority, with the panel-prison structure itself being created and enforced by the villainous Mother, the main antagonist for the series. Mother is depicted in the series as functionally an eldritch horror embodiment of cultural normativity. This is represented by how her presence shifts adults within the narrative towards a conservative ideology, which puts her against the

predominantly queer cast. The fact that her means of control, her means of trapping the heroes, is to recreate the panel structure as diegetic force bends the reading of Loki's violation of those boundaries towards one of liminal queerness. This sets a narrative standard that, at least for Loki, to violate the gutter space, the blank page, is an act of queer resistance. It is a representation of how queer identities, in existing outside of binaristic or otherwise limited social constructs like gender or sexuality, can be foundationally threatening to a cis-heteronormative ideology. This is made textual by entwining that ideology within the character of Mother and having the subversion of that space, of her power, be by the hands of queer youth, and for queer love.

Loki, starting in *Young Avengers* and continuing in *Loki: Agent of Asgard* is defined by his internal struggle, specifically in how he forces himself to hide it. figure 1 is an instance of Loki playing at sincerity, at being the hero, while internally Loki is reckoning with his past. *Young Avengers*, as a series, utilises the white space to explore notions of the self, it is in this space that Wiccan's self-discovery is made manifest, along with other characters in that series. This is not however true for Loki in this series, for at this point Loki is not emotionally prepared for self-actualization. It is the entwining of Loki's personal and internal struggle with the notions of comic medium liminality that makes Loki's relationship with liminal existence initially tantalising. To therefore engage with the liminal aspects of the comics medium's language is to imply themes of liminality in the surrounding text, the expressions of the message being impacted by technologics of the medium transmitting it. While Loki's presence in *Young Avengers* does not build directly upon this notion, his narrative in *Loki: Agent of Asgard* takes it up as textual metaphor.

The Technologics of Genre and Morality of the Superhero

Often nested within the comics medium, though present in other mediums, the superhero genre has its own notions of liminality. Before moving into that however, there is an issue of how understandings of genre interact with understandings of medium. Sharma's analysis of the technologics of a medium identifies them within the context of how systems are "time-shifting and space-altering" (Sharma 6), with the technologics being how it functions. As argued above, McCloud's notion of closure can be understood as a medium technologic of comics displaying how the medium creates connections between otherwise unconnected single images. This is where a question comes into focus of what constitutes genre, and how its functions mirror that of a medium.

This exploration of genre as akin to medium has a few definitional hurdles to address first, specifically on the nature of genre. This is partially due to the fact that genre has itself been a fruitful field of academic inquiry for a while now. While Carolyn Miller's notion of genre as "tell[ing] us something theoretically important about discourse" (Miller 155) provides a grounding in genre theory, it does not fully illuminate how genre acts upon the work. Where Miller's work becomes pivotal is the notion of the entwining of genre and the audience. Miller describes this as "Form shapes the response of the reader or listener to substance by providing instruction, so to speak, about how to perceive and interpret" (159). The notion of the genre modifying the assumptions of the listener, is a way of understanding genre not as a prescriptive system, but as a series of conventions that, when together, inform the audience. Another way to address this was described by Ian Danskin.

In a video essay on the adventure game genre, Ian Danskin makes the point that a genre can be understood as "a pattern of behaviour" (Danskin 8:39). This conception of genre, though

drawn from the medium of video games and seemingly derived from the medium's interactivity, can be also fits within a noninteractive medium. Genre is "a pattern of behaviour" (8:39) but in whose behaviour reflects the pattern is the reader, and the behaviour is their assumptions of the narrative. Danskin uses the example of the sentence "the horizon does flips" to explain this reading of genre:

Imagine for me you just read the following four words "the horizon does flips". If this is just a, for a lack of a better word "normal" story (not genre fiction), that's got to be some kind of metaphor right? Maybe for the protagonist feeling dizzy or for the moment the drugs start to hit? Whatever it is, it can't be literal because the Earth and sky do not change places in naturalistic fiction, but they can in fantasy, certainly stranger things have happened. (21:25-21:55)

What Danskin is doing with this analogy is approaching genre as a social construct that frames how elements within a genre text are understood. Like Miller's work, it creates a notion of the genre form as that which modifies the reader's understanding of the text, without changing the text, only its surrounding context. This could be read as the broad technologics of genre. Genre changes meaning, shifting space, by applying a contextual framework to the reader. The sentence's meaning is changed to reflect the genre context applied to it.

One example of this from the superhero genre in comics is how the visual signifier of the costume changes. If we take the shared symbol of a Loki costume (heavy use of green and gold, usually a crown with two horns) and place that in the genre context of the superhero genre, that signifies not just the character of Loki, but the abilities, threat, and assumptions tied to him. However, move that same costume out of the superhero genre, for example a high school comedy, and it becomes a costume or symbol of fandom or the nerd. The latter removes the

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association of threat or power because the genre language and framework does not exist for it. Even if the character is not previously known, the fact that a character is visually differentiated from a crowd by outfit, in a visual medium like comics, film, or television imparts a semiotic weight upon the reader.

This notion itself relies upon a uniform understanding of genre, a cultural normativity and understanding of what constitutes a genre's form. Therefore, just as the technologics of a medium impose upon a dominant power assumption, so too do the technologics of genre impose a limiting element upon the genre space. Genre becomes a structure of control that enforces a dominant paratextual context upon the text through the medium of the reader's genre-preconception. The understanding of a genre becomes entwined with how the dominant culture reflects it. This makes works that function outside the dominant culture, such as those marginalised from it, forms of resistance to the dominant genre form.

With these broad technologics of genre established, the question becomes one of genre-specific manifestations. The easiest place to start would be the genre name and breaking it down by components and assumption. Starting with the superlative "super" identifies an exaggerated characteristic or several. "Super" is where we get a general notion of exaggeration, a notion of the elements being outside of the otherwise assumed norms[3]. The assumption of normal human abilities is generally rejected in the superhero genre in conjunction with this notion. One example of this is Batman, a character often defined by his lack of extranormal abilities, performs feats that are, unto themselves, beyond the norm despite attestation that he is a "normal" human being.

This superlative framing is, both in the genre name and within the genre itself, applied to the role of the hero. "Hero", as a narrative and cultural signifier has had significant drift and is not to be mistaken for the more neutral term "protagonist". To be the "hero" of a narrative places

a degree of moral righteousness on the character, which in turn creates a notion of rigid or non-relative morality. Superhero comics do not have "protagonists", they have "heroes". This itself extends to the moral antithesis of the hero, the villain, who would in a different genre often be framed as the "antagonist". However, that same notion of the superlative modifier applies to moral exaggeration as well: the "hero" becomes the "superhero" while the "villain" becomes the "supervillain". Both these elements are constructs of how the superhero genre frames both itself and the moral universe it creates.

Both the "super" prefix superlative and the "hero" base frame how the genre is approached and, as a result, how a reader contextualises any works within it. If these notions function as the technologics of the superhero genre, they open the door to understanding how liminality within the genre functions. A good place to start would be that notion of the "hero" and morality in the genre's space. Loki is an exceptional character in this regard partially because of his history as the supervillain, with his portrayal in both *Young Avengers* and *Loki: Agent of Asgard* being narratives of rejecting that villainous framing. How that is done however is more nuanced, since the texts themselves function uniquely from the genre's general function of morality. The notion being played with is of explicit duality, that the middle ground between "good" and "evil" is not a spectrum, but a transitional space.

Tracking the narrative of Loki in this series is confusing in some respects. While this is mostly because of how *Loki: Agent of Asgard* was written to tie-in with multiple ongoing, upcoming, or limited Marvel Comics events, it is partially because of genre staples of time-travel, multiverses, and psychic spaces. Summarising the plot in a meaningful and succinct manner is likely a fruitless endeavour, but context is important. That context is primarily presented through the notion of "the crime that will not be forgiven", a repeated line spoken by

the manifestation of Loki's guilt. This "crime that will not be forgiven" is arguably Loki's defining motivation for most of the series, being the driving force behind both his best and worst actions in the series.

This "crime", though equated to murder by characters who learn of it, is a bit closer to mind swap. Loki had been reborn as a child in *Thor* in 2010 and developed as a character for the following years in the title *Journey into Mystery*. The "crime" is functionally that the older Loki, the one who had existed previously in Marvel's narrative continuity and defined predominantly by his villainy, takes over the young Loki's body. It is Loki's interactions with his past self, his identity as the comic book villain, that drives him to reject that identity and try to become a heroic character. It is here where that crime occurs, with elder Loki taking over the body of younger Loki. The elder Loki is fundamentally changed by this and begins to take up an identity that is between the younger Loki's heroism and his initial villainy, creating a new liminal identity defined by proximity to the previous two. This itself creates a liminal moral standing in a genre of absolutes.

The younger Loki, functionally deceased, becomes a recurring element in Loki's subconscious in both *Young Avengers* and *Loki: Agent of Asgard*, having the common refrain of "I am the crime that cannot be forgiven" (Ewing 9:21). This element becomes more prominent throughout the two series as they progress and is inarguably Loki's driving motivation. In *Young Avengers* this manifests as Loki's drive to avoid the need for forgiveness, becoming powerful enough that he can avoid it. After this fails, Loki's plan in *Loki: Agent of Asgard* is initially to earn the magical equivalent of a pardon, where his history of evil deeds is erased not only from history but the memories of those who experienced it. Loki is functionally looking for absolution.

This itself is a major plot point in issues seven through nine, where due to the events of a different series (the crossover event *AXIS*) Loki and Thor among others, have their morality (and some personality traits) inverted. While Thor is turned into a villainous character, Loki experiences a more lateral change; he does not become heroic but only loses the self-assumption that he is villainous. This is most evident in issue eight, where Loki begins to forgive himself for "the crime that cannot be forgiven", with the spectre of child Loki being reduced to almost nothing on page (8:13). This is fundamentally a shift in Loki's interiority, one that, at the end of the story, is inverted when the spectre of Young Loki takes up the majority of the page (9:21) after the inversion of Loki's morality ends.

This creates a thematic push and pull for Loki's identity, where a desire to cause mischief or be evil is tempered by a desire to do good and be better. The dichotomy between good and bad, often defined in comics by contrasting external forces, becomes an internalised struggle. The fact that this struggle is itself internal situates Loki in a position of true moral neutrality within the generic framework of the binaristic superhero genre. Loki's actions are framed as a balance between both good and evil in equal measure and, as a result, deconstructs moral dualism in the superhero genre by creating a liminal moral positionality.

Loki becoming a liminal moral actor is critical for understanding why he is a unique figure in the superhero genre. A reader of *Loki: Agent of Asgard* might try and compare him to an anti-hero in this series, his actions being broadly heroic even if his means often are not. An example of these ill means to heroic ends is the usual space for characters like The Punisher, whose normal narrative action in any story is murder, but he kills "bad guys". The refrain around the anti-hero is that they occupy a space between absolute good and absolute evil, treading that liminal space. Where the differentiation point between Loki and the Anti-hero lies is in framing.

Loki, when acting selfishly or destructively, is framed as in the wrong. Despite being the protagonist of this series, Loki is not the hero of it, for this series lacks the signifier of the hero. The narrative is instead focusing on how Loki is reaching for heroism, reaching for the genre ideal, and then failing to reach it.

This is where a common visual motif of the series becomes important, that of height and falling. Many of the series' sequences are designed around heights and then Loki's fall from them, sometimes intentionally and sometimes not. One example of this is in the first issue (see figures 2. and 3.) where this rise and fall motif is illustrated on a micro-scale, with a literal ascent and a literal descent. However, the rise and fall motif also serves a larger, narrative structural element in *Loki: Agent of Asgard*, specifically as a mirror to classical tragedies. The idea here is that Loki's rise, specifically the visual motif of ascents, is representative of Loki reaching for heroism, reaching for his goal of heroism. The resulting fall is the failure to reach that goal, the destructive forces of the other or the self that stops this self-realisation. Less visually apparent is the metaphorical fall, where Loki has finally earned his brother's trust, only to admit to having earned it through deceit… then being thrown out a window (10:10-16).

Figure 2 Loki's Ascent, walking up a building from: *Loki: Agent of Asgard,* Issue 1. Page 6. 2014

Figure 3 Loki falling out a window from: *Loki: Agent of Asgard,* Issue 1. Page 8.

It is here where we see the culmination of this rise and fall motif, where the physical fall

is pre-empted and entwined with Loki's moral failing on the way to it. Loki in this series

becomes a foundational analysis of the axiom "the ends justify the means" because his means are

the same deceitful acts that got him to his previous state of moral villainy. This sequence (Ewing

issue 10, pp. 10-16) returns to the classic motif of Thor fighting Loki, the hero defeating the

villain. However, the framing is different because the reader has spent the previous ten issues

being placed within Loki's perspective, we see that, while Loki's means have been deceitful, it

was always to good ends. Those good ends go unnoticed by Thor, who, upon realising Loki's

deceit, falls back into the old assumptions - the old narrative expectations.

Liminal Identity and the Decentred "I" of Loki

Loki's positionality within *Loki: Agent of Asgard* is partially an extension of a notion of

fragmented identity. This fragmentation is both a literal and figurative process for Loki, being as

there are three different visually, narratively, and personally distinct Lokis (and two less

prominent ghost/memory Lokis). One could look at this situation of tripartite Lokis or assume

that one is "real", and the others are "fake" or in disguise, but neither fit with how they are

portrayed. The text of *Loki: Agent of Asgard* is itself refusing to engage in absolutes with regards

to truth and deception, and as a result all the versions of Loki displayed within the series are

"real" to the thematics and identity of both the character and text.

Before moving forward, I need to clearly delineate between the three prominent Lokis in

this series. Since they are all called "Loki", the means of delineation requires identifying their

unique traits and using it as modifier for the name. The first Loki, the one who has been

discussed primarily thus far in this paper, shall remain simply Loki or, when clarification is

needed, Main Loki. This Loki functions as an extension of the original Loki through the chain of rebirths mentioned in chapter one.

The second Loki, an older Loki who travelled from the future to expedite Loki's transformation into him, will be Future Loki. Future Loki is the villain of the story, at least in the overarching narrative. He functions as an extension of Main Loki if Future Loki had never intervened in the narrative. He is the logical end point of Main Loki's narrative present in *Young Avengers*, a return to the villain archetype. However, his presence is specifically to change that trajectory, to make Main Loki's journey different than what he had experienced.

Lastly is the Loki who appears in the final few issues of the series, this one has excised from themselves the identity of "Loki, God of Mischief" and has taken up the role of the "God of Stories". This Loki is not only explicitly gender queer, but alternates between male and female presentation within the space of single panel transitions frequently and seemingly randomly. Using the singular "they/them" pronouns for this version makes sense and, for reasons still to be discussed, is an apt transition. The narrative division between this Loki and Main Loki and Future Loki is arguably both the most rigid and least well defined. The simplest pseudonym for this Loki would be Story Loki, though that simplification is arguably inaccurate. There is also the already discussed presence of Young Loki, whose role in the narrative is that of reminder and echo of past failure, and Classic Loki, the memory of Loki as the classic villain.

To discuss this treatment of Loki, it is first important to identify how notions of identity already exist within the superhero genre which inherently revolves around the notion of transformation and the dual identity. There is a transformative aspect inherent to the superhero genre, the notion of the dual identity. This idea is present in the earliest superhero narratives. For a simple case study look at the first comic-based superhero, Superman. Superman and Clark

Kent are the same individual, but with different identities, a public and a private. Superman could be argued to "become" Clark Kent when he removes the costume with the reverse also being true, Clark Kent "becomes" Superman by donning the Superman costume. The question of which is the core identity, the root on which the other is a derivation, poses an interesting problem here. One notion would be that one identity dons the clothing and mannerisms of the other; Superman is occasionally playing the role of Clark Kent or the reverse. This is the result Catherine Williamson describes: "each is the other's secret: Clark masks Superman, Superman masks Clark." (Williamson 6). This notion hinges upon a notion of the secret identity, where both are disguises for the other, but does not answer the question of a root identity.

There is another answer, that neither identity reflects the whole and that Clark Kent and Superman are non-liminal expressions of the liminal core. This would be a phenomenological identity, and, because of how much of the superhero genre is or has been derived from Superman, this notion of liminal identity can be extended to many major characters. Part of this notion of liminal identity is an attempt to disentangle the notion of identity from a binary notion of the secret/public divide. This creates a space where the notion of truth is situated in neither a public facing nor a private facing component of the character but rather one being a different expression of the same identity. While this might seem to reject the notion of superheroes as analogous to the closet (as notion derived by Anna Peppard's writings) it actually clarifies Peppard's notion through Judith Butler's notions of performativity. Superman and Clark Kent are both that core, nebulous, personality "performing" that identity both to the self and an assumed audience. In Butler's opening to "Imitation and Gender Insubordination" they comment upon the nebulous or decentred "I", arguing that:

To claim that this is what I *am* is to suggest a provisional totalization of this "I". But if

the I can so determine itself, then that which it excludes in order to make that

determination remains constitutive of the determination itself. In other words, such a

statement presupposes that the "I" exceeds its determination, and even produces that very

excess in and by the act which seeks to exhaust the semantic field of that "I". In the act

which would disclose the true and full content of that "I", a certain radical concealment is

thereby produced. (Butler 309)

This nebulous and indeterminate "I" that Butler is attempting to define can itself be understood

as a "true" self or core self. Utilising the language already used to explore the Superman/Clark

Kent dichotomy, this is an attempt to identify the self behind the varying performances. That

being said, the core self is still illusive, possibly because there is only an illusion of it implied by

the presence of the performances.

It is here where discussions of Loki within this context can take place. Loki does not have

a dual identity in the manner of the Superman/Clark Kent dichotomy discussed, with all Lokis

having instead a decentred and displaced origin of self. In her article "'I Can Turn into Anything

as Long as It's Me': The Adoptee God[dess] of Lies and Stories in *Loki: Agent of Asgard*,"

Emily Bartz outlines how Marvel Loki's otherment in the comics is derived from a decentring

origin of adoption. While Loki's mythical origin is a narrative of displacement with him only

being a member of the Aesir (Norse Gods) because of a blood oath made with Odin, the comics

made him the adopted child of Odin from the giants. This meant Loki was a perpetual outsider,

being neither of Asgard because of his lineage and not welcome in Jotunheim (land of the giants)

because of his Asgardian nurture. This idea of Loki as a perpetual outsider has been taken up as

text within both the comics and the live action performances. This outsider nature is contrasted

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with a deep desire for belonging seen in *Loki: Agent of Asgard*. Initially, this connection to Jotunheim is used to justify Loki's villainous tendencies, an element of xenophobia ingrained in early understandings of the character.

This liminality of heritage is a switch of connotative meaning to this translation from blood brother to adopted child- it enforces a hierarchy. Loki's relationship to Odin goes from that of near-equals an asymmetric power disparity favouring Odin. Helena Bassil-Morozow's piece on Loki acknowledges the nuance that the original trickster Loki from Norse mythology had with regards to hierarchy. Bassil-Morozow identifies that Loki's mythological origin situates him in opposition to the Norse Gods because of their structure and rigidity, making it important that he exist outside of a nominal hierarchy of patrilineal control. In changing this relation, the Marvel Loki becomes a centred trickster, one whose resistance to the structure is internal to the structure rather than external. This shift in framing creates a dichotomy for all Lokis, in that they become intrinsically tied to the system that, in the mythology, they seek to disrupt. Bassil-Morozow uses notions of the archetypal trickster to argue that Loki's depiction falls into this role of liminal and categorically neutral trickster, drawing primarily upon Loki's portrayals in the Norse Eddas. Loki's role in the Norse narratives is contextually varied, sometimes being an ally to the gods, sometimes an antagonist to them, and sometimes acting in isolation from the other gods. This leads to Bassil-Morozow's notion of Loki as anti-systemics, or anti-structure (Bassil-Morozow 85-86). One aspect of Bassil-Morozow's piece that is critical to understanding Loki, both the mythological figure and Marvel character, is the notion of fluidity, or perhaps more accurately an "anti-rigidity".

This is where the notion of the liminal identity becomes critical. Loki's identity in the comics is and has been defined entirely by external perception, the self-reflection required for

identifying that decentred "I" Butler comments upon is fundamentally absent. The early Loki, from introduction to rebirth as Young Loki, is defined by the role of the supervillain. Young Loki's narrative in *Journey into Mystery* is a reflection on, and rejection of, that previous identity, only to have that original identity supplant and combine with the young Loki. The question of who Loki is, that core question of the "I" applied to another, is at the core of Loki's development in *Loki: Agent of Asgard*, specifically in how the liminal self becomes uncovered.

Part of *Loki: Agent of Asgard*'s plot is the examination of this notion of the indeterminate self, taking it as a space of possibility for the character. Main Loki is introduced to the series having been transformed by his encounter with Wiccan in *Young Avengers* and is, like young Loki before him, actively rejecting the actions of his previous self. Main Loki's goal in the series is to have the records of Loki's past crimes erased from the records of history by doing work for those who manage that history, creating a literal blank slate for himself. This desire for the blank slate, for his failures and bad actions to simply disappear is Main Loki continuing to look externally for personal affirmation and identity. Main Loki plays the role of the hero because playing the hero changes what performance the social audience sees. Loki is trying to redefine the indeterminate "I" by changing the performance and neglecting self-reflection. It is in working towards this goal that Main Loki encounters Future Loki.

Future Loki is where a discussion of intent becomes fuzzy and unclear. Future Loki is a version of Main Loki that completed that task of creating the blank slate for himself and found no meaning in it. Future Loki, in an attempt to find self-definition, returned to a previous role, the role of the villain. Future Loki, in reverting to this old performance of identity is trying to recreate the identity that he had once rejected: seeking within it a simpler existence and more

solid meaning. Future Loki's self-proclaimed motivation is to speed up the process of Main Loki becoming him, by destroying Main Loki's chance at the blank slate.

When contrasting Future Loki with Main Loki, it is easy to fall into the perspective that Future Loki is simply the reemergence of Loki the villain: though that is a key factor to it. The difference between Future Loki and the more classically villainous version is partially in how he is interpreted by others. This does require some additional context. Back during the "Thor: Disassembled" story, the big narrative twist at the end was that Ragnarok was a cyclical process: that the Norse gods would rise to their peak, Loki would betray them all and start Ragnarok and lead to their collective destruction: only to be reborn and start the cycle over again. Part of the resolution of that story was Thor dismantling the cyclic nature (Oeming 85).

This narrative, when picked back up in *Loki: Agent of Asgard*, is treated as a cultural absence that forms around the absence of an impending finality. The idea, as addressed by Frigga, Loki's adoptive mother, is that "for the rest of Asgard, knowing the end of the story brought security. We were at peace with fate." (Ewing 5:20). Future Loki is offering a potential rigidity, a form of prophecy unto itself by his presence, that ensures an end to the Asgardian story, that it builds to something. The idea that "To have that back – without the horrors of Ragnarok, with a better tomorrow in its stead – // We call that a miracle" (5:20) illustrates a lot about a cultural understanding of predestination. What it also does is change the framing of Future Loki within the narrative context from villain to something approaching a necessary evil. It is this additional element, the notion of Future Loki as a stabilising force, that makes the character fundamentally different than a reemergence of the classical villain Loki.

We can then understand the divergence of the Future and Classic villain Lokis in how they represent inevitability and self-expression. Classic Loki, in his rigidly performed villainy,

leaves little space for the liminal, and his existence is always entwined with the fundamental inevitability of Ragnarok as a concept. Future Loki, on the other hand is an extension of a liminal expression, that then rejects liminality, choosing instead to embrace and try to enforce a non-liminal and stable rigidity upon the world. It is important to note that Future Loki's world is dead: the rigidity and assuredness he is proposing is one of oblivion.

Then there is Story Loki, created after Future Loki kills Main Loki. Story Loki is a rejection of all previous Lokis and an acknowledgement of a liminal "I". This is portrayed visually through a discussion between both Classic Loki and Young Loki and the symbol of Loki's Crown (see figure 4.). For Main Loki to accept the crown would be to cause "ego death" (13:6), a death of the current expression of self-identity. The crown begins as a symbolic representation of an acceptance of the Classic Loki, that the villain role is where Loki belongs in the narrative structure. Classic Loki is not saying that Main Loki will simply become Classic Loki or Future Loki, but that Loki's existence trends towards the archetype defined by Classic Loki. Classic Loki describes this problem as "any Loki in my shape can only ever be a worthless copy" (13:4). This can be understood as understanding identity in terms similar to Butler's of notion of gender as "a kind of imitation for which there is no original." (Butler, pp.312) where Classic Loki posits himself as the original and all others as the copy. In a metatextual sense, where Loki is a being who has pre-existed the Marvel Comics and, as already discussed, varies wildly, this is inarguably an instance where a copy is proclaiming itself to be the definitive source.

Figure 4 Main Loki, Classic Loki, and Young Loki discussing Identity from: Loki: Agent of Asgard issue 13 page 5.

On the other hand, Young Loki is offering oblivion, non-existence, for in non-existence at least one does not need to play a role they do not want to. Young Loki's offer is to reject the role, reject the performance. This notion of oblivion becomes a mirror to the copy, with Young Loki saying of his non-existence "I died forever. / But I died as myself, not as a worthless copy. I won an ending" (Ewing 13:5). Young Loki is positing an escape to the issue identity as reflection posed by Classic Loki: with that escape being through non-existence. In becoming nothing, in death, Young Loki solidifies the boundary between the self and not the self: between identity and the performance by ending the performance. The two choices create a rigid binary, of dominant language and of the counter dominant. To accept either is to reject liminality, to reject

permeability and change. The only outcome in the dominant cultural language is either to recreate in the dominant mode or cease creation.

Loki's solution to this dilemma is to reject the dichotomy; create a liminal space between the dominant and counter-dominant forms of creation. The realisation of this option is coupled with a change in visual symbolism the crown becomes fractured and bilaterally asymmetric with one horn being broken off. While the surface reading of the crown's fracture is that of a midpoint between being a copy and non-existence, the symbol also calls back to the framing of Wiccan in the discussed sequence from *Young Avengers*. The broken crown replicates the asymmetry of Wiccan's outfit (Gillen 2:18) but represents the internalisation of Loki's outward performance. Main Loki, in donning the new crown, ceases to exist and returns instead as Story Loki.

Story Loki and Liminal Queerness

While much of this chapter seems to have been walking around a discussion of queerness as it relates to liminality, placing focus on how the liminal is expressed, queerness in this text manifests through the implications of text and subtext: there is no moment in either *Young Avengers* or *Loki: Agent of Asgard*, where any Loki says, "I am queer." Instead, with the shift from Main Loki to Story Loki, there is a change in how they discuss their gender that draws a queer reading. This shift in pronouns from he to they is important to note because of how Story Loki embraces a transformative and non-rigid understanding of gender, with the character shifting from masculine to feminine forms quickly and fluidly. It is also fundamentally dependent on the visual component of the medium. On its own, the sentence "I can turn into anything as long as it's me" (Ewing 5:11) can be read as an inability to change one's shape. However, the visual context (Figure 5) gives it a queer and liminal reading from the physical transformation from masculine to feminine form It is the transformation from the masculine

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presentation in panel one, to the feminine panel two, and animal panel 3, while maintaining the

dialogue and notion of self that belies a liminal identity. Loki is not one of these figures, he is all

three of them, but only expresses one at any given instance.

Where Loki's liminality falters is where queer expression impacts with past expectation,

where the queer self is hampered by the normative public, or in Loki's case, the normative past.

The idea of Loki as "a worthless copy" (13:4) has an additional queer meaning when

contextualised with Loki's budding queer identity. This expression: "I can turn into anything as

long as it's me" (5:11) is the beginning of a queer exploration of self that is halted and impacted

predominantly by external forces; often by the intervention of Classic and Future Loki, both

representing a return to a cis-normative existence. Future Loki, though he does take on non-humanoid forms like a bird, does not take on a non-masculine humanoid identity. Classic Loki was similarly defined by a singular visage and identity. Main Loki, embracing not only transformation but non-cis-normative ones, is identifying a non-binary and liminal gender presentation and existence. This sequence is one of the only instances of Main Loki playing with gender presentation, instead preferring the masculine form for the remainder of the series.[4]

It is with the rebirth as Story Loki that a focus on gender identity becomes more visually apparent. In this sequence (see figure 6) Story Loki shifts between two clearly gendered physical forms where not only does physical form change to match a cis-normative frame, but external gender signifiers like makeup appear or disappear depending on direction of transformation. Story Loki is clearly an extension of the non-cis-normative though infrequent transformations of Main Loki, but without caring for either the public or the self-critical eye, creating a space that is neither Classic Loki nor Main Loki but with elements unique unto themself. The seemingly chaotic shifts between male presenting and female presenting being representative of Loki not "becoming" one or the other gender, but the perception of the performance changing. This is why this first transition from masculine to feminine (Figure 6) is important, it is the masculine presenting body disappearing into the clothes and emerging as the feminine. The clothes do not change Loki from masculine presenting to feminine presenting, but the donning and doffing of the clothes changes how the subject, and as a result the performance, is viewed.

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Figure 6 Loki Contextualizing Identity change with physical change from: *Loki Agent of Asgard* Issue 14 Page 8

This is where we see an element of queer liberation within simply the framing of the

character of Loki, where the queerness becomes intrinsic to the character. While one could

simply say that this is a continuation of "I can turn into anything as long as it's me" (5:11) from

earlier, it is also its own distinct representation of queer identity. What I want to emphasize is a

reading of this sequence that centres a phenomenological and contextual understanding of gender

identity. The idea here is not so much that Loki is transforming into the female form from the

male or the reverse (though it is also that), but that they both are always present, and that the perspective changes the way we understand the figure. One could relate it to the notion of "passing" as a gender, where not only do appearance impact the understanding of a person's gender identity but voice, gait, posture, and innumerable other mostly unconscious aspects of one's existence change how others understand their gender identity. The idea that fits better in my understanding is a form of phenomenological passing, where the experience of identity shifts with the contextual experience.

This is seen in how the two sequences (figure 5 and figure 6) differ in their emphasis. The first sequence centres transformation in its dialogue, with visual signifiers of change. There is no motion between panels, the only change is Main Loki's form and the dialogue boxes. This is in contrast with figure 6, where motion is emphasized, the movement across the room and even the size of panels are used to shift emphasis. The dialogue itself centres not Story Loki's ability to change, to take other forms, but to maintain a core sense of self. This is why the page ends with the line "I'm me // First, last and always." (Ewing 14:8) which emphasizes continuity of self, by deemphasizing physicality. Whether Story Loki "passes" as a "man" or "woman" is fundamentally dependent upon diegetic context, but also irrelevant to their personhood. They are themself regardless of the form they take.

The series maintains this shift between two gendered forms for the remaining issues, with the shifts corresponding primarily with changing external contexts. They maintain a female form while with Verity (the woman behind them in figure 6) and shift to the masculine form when joining the Asgardians in issue 16. The idea that the form they take matches the assumptions of those they surround themself with is partially what matters here. The female form makes contextual sense around Verity because they are attempting to convince Verity to let them save

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her (by killing her[5]). They switch to the masculine form when around the Asgardians because of the presupposed understanding of "Loki" that the Asgardians have. They expect Loki to be male, so they take a masculine form. It is using gender expression to suit the situation at hand, changing gender expression like one would change clothes for different activities. They stay in the masculine form for the remainder of the series' last two issues.

Conclusion: NEXT:

Loki: Agent of Asgard ends with a return to the white space, the possibility space created by the comics medium's technologics and understanding of closure. Story Loki returns to this space to follow Future Loki and remedy that portion of their narrative arc, the last component of their previous life left unresolved. While the genre conventions, the assumption of spectacle in particular, imply that this should result in combat, it is framed instead as an embrace, Story Loki acknowledging and identifying how Future Loki's actions derived not from malice, but from pain.

It is this point that acknowledges the narrative drift from the genre, not the moment of tenderness, but the rejection of the villain as the villain. Future Loki is someone seeking self-actualization and going about it through self-destruction, literally killing a version of himself who approaches that goal without him. Story Loki explains it as "you go back in time [...] and you think you know **why**. You want to become you **sooner.** But when you're here you just smash it all, tear down everything that makes you you… all the support systems" (Ewing 17: 16).

Part of what makes ongoing narratives in the superhero comic genre interesting is in how they take up, reject, and reinterpret what came before them. Loki's narrative in *Loki: Agent of Asgard* only functions the way it does because it exists within the larger context of Loki's comic

history. Some of these historical contextualization are explicit: like Young Loki or the elements from *Young Avengers* recuring in the series and inciting the plot. The most relevant one is instead metatextual, namely line from Classic Loki that "any Loki in my shape can only ever be a worthless copy" (13:6). This draws from the idea that comic characters revert to their most popular state overtime, regardless of how significantly they changed beforehand. Classic Loki, given the presence of their villainous version for most of Marvel's first forty years publishing the character (introduced in 1962, with first death and rebirth in 2004-2007), is assumed to be that most popular version.

Story Loki is, by their existence and expression, deemphasizing this notion of reinvention and reinterpretation while also being entirely new version of the character. They change through maintaining a core self, a central identity outside the performance, instead letting the performance be itself contextual. In the narrative structure of moving past the repressive versions of ones 'self, Story Loki is also a rejection of the genre conceit of consistency, a rejection of the notion of each comic about a character being a further step in that character's journey. This is further decentred with how the series itself ends.

Story Loki, in the white space begins to draw upon the page, adding details to it until the completed images creates a door with the text "NEXT:" (17:20) situated above it. This sequence draws back to the discussion of medium liminality and the white space as a literal possibility space. In acting upon the possibility space, Story Loki creates a line of escape, an opportunity for liberation. Where Young Loki was able to interact with the white space, indicating a latent or potential correlation to liminality, Story Loki, after fully coming into themself, is able to change the space to fit their needs. In changing the white space, Story Loki is changing their world: creating an outlet for themself in a world they do not see themself fitting into.

There is also a metatextual significance to this sequence that needs addressing. As already mentioned, there is a penchant to return characters within an ongoing narrative universe, to a recognizable base state. this is what was being debated in figure 4. Story Loki is taking up the role of the narrative creator, drawing upon the page that is the white space to create a new avenue of escape. It is here that we see an element of liminal queerness that imparts a meaning upon its surroundings but is not welcome in the non-liminal space. Escape becomes necessary because of how Story Loki has framed themselves in this narrative, no longer fitting into the role "Loki, God of Mischief" at all. In rejecting that performance, Story Loki's only mode of escape is out of the story itself, into the indeterminate "Next".

Loki's entanglement with notions of liminality situates them in a form of isolation. While the white space divides them from the narrative, their queerness makes them the other, their rejection of genre conventions of morality, and social conventions of performance all separate Loki; but it is through that subversion that new possibility spaces are opened to us. It is through these forms of queer mapping that new liminal spaces of resistance can be uncovered.

<center>**Chapter 3: Loki, Queerness, and Acts of Resistance.**</center>

Introduction

Genre and medium both have dominant logics of organisation and structuring that shift

how any work within them exists. As the previous chapter argued, *Loki: Agent of Asgard*

demonstrates how the medium of the comic coupled with the superhero genre directly engages

with liminality and queerness. That is, the various representations of Loki depict a fragmented

and decentralised understanding of the self and of identity, which offers an understanding of

identity as liminal, which builds to a textual representation of queer liberation through liminality,

embodied by the NEXT door. Within the comics medium, there are examples of clear divergence

points where the panel structure is no longer required to create a simulacrum of time since filmic

language already contains a clear temporal directionality. Building on Chapter 2, here I argue

that, as a liminal narrative entity, Loki interacts with those structures, they bend or break those

very structures to create new counter expressions. I focus on Loki's portrayal in *Loki*, the

streaming series[6] on Disney+, as it explores a similar form of liminality in ways that both

converge and diverge from the comic depiction. I focus on these iterations of Loki in order to

better understand the various liminal states that Loki as a character occupies and draws upon,

which matters for the queer possibilities of existence and representation that emerge. Overall, I

argue that this liminal and queer expressions in *Loki* build a different understanding of the inter-

relation between a hetero-cis-normative society and the queer artworks that are created at its

margins; grounded within the ideas of genre and medium shift to moderate textual expressions of

queerness.

This chapter will look in depth at *Loki* (2021) and how the series' medium change

reintroduces liminality through narrative structuring of the series, addressing how *Loki's* internal

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and external narrative centre liminality in Loki the character. The next section will explore Sylvie as a character, a queering of Loki, and the narrative protagonist in a counter-narrative reading. The final section will look at how *Loki* functions in conjunction with cis-het-normative assumptions of rigidity and how the conflict between Loki and Sylvie can be read as a symbol of radical queer activism and the bounds of acceptability politics. These sections will outline a liminal reading of *Loki* that outlines a liminal queerness that is self-destructive and unstable, a mirror to *Loki: Agent of Asgard*'s reading of liminal queerness as a liberating force. Overall, *Loki* is an interesting example here because it reframes Loki's liminality not in step with queerness, but as an acceptable form of it, for which there is an unacceptable mirror. *Loki* depicts a liminality that is in opposition to queerness and a queerness in opposition to liminality, fundamentally rejecting the very notion of queer liminality and the queer-liminal possibility space.

As discussed previously, pronouns as they relate to Loki the character are an important factor. Nothing thus far in the text of any MCU depiction of Loki has addressed gender identity for the character, and he/him pronouns are the dominant set used for the character within the texts provided. There is also a presumed masculinity for Loki that is itself violated within the text of Loki itself but is still treated as an abnormality. Outside the series itself, in a promotional feature for the series, an in-universe legal document for Loki that has the statement "Sex: Fluid" ("TVA:POV") within it. This does not directly manifest in any textual manner. Since this information plays no tangible role in the text of the series itself, it can be considered predominantly an Easter Egg, likely a reference to Loki's gender fluid identity in the comics.

Filmic Loki is introduced as Thor's adopted brother (though the adoption is initially unknown) with a penchant for mischief. This is fundamentally the creation of and building of a false external presentation, the good brother simply aiding his brother. This facade gets destroyed through the course of the first film as his actions within the film are revealed. The next film does a similar thing, building another false front, that of the villain. Both of these performances are, even within the diegetic reality of the films, false. This is predominantly revealed in *Thor: The Dark World*, Loki's third filmic appearance.

Loki, in what he thought was a simple trick on Thor, accidentally causes the death of his mother Frigga. This is the moment where Loki's regret over his actions is clearly illustrated, and the facade built up throughout the previous two movies collapses. The moment Thor confronts Loki after Frigga's death visually depicts this facade, as Loki creates an image of himself to gloat and perform stability. When the illusion is dismissed, his entire cell is destroyed, with Loki distanced from the camera and Thor, completely dishevelled (see figure 7.). Loki's state here reflects the unvarnished self, with Loki's statement "Now you see me, Brother" (*Thor: The Dark World* 58:50) being a direct acknowledgement of this fallen facade. It is this moment of true visibility, Loki exposing the broken self instead of performing power and control that truly defines Loki and changes the audience's understanding of him.

Figure 7 Loki, dishevelled, surrounded by destroyed furniture from: *Thor: The Dark World* 58:50

This notion of the facade, the false front covering inner struggle, can be read as an acknowledgement of Loki's queerness. This is the notion of the closet. The idea of the closet, like with previous discussions of identity, is entwined with the notion of the self and "true" identity. In their thesis "Queer Architecture and the Facade (how it is used as a defence mechanism and a way of self-expression)" Jacob Fetterman identifies an understanding of the closet as a form not of external performance, but as a self defence mechanism from accepting self-deviation from societal and structural norms (Fetterman 6). Loki is embodying the destruction of the closet, the inner person being revealed as the closet's facade vanishes. It is important thematically that Loki specifically gets this moment of externalisation forced upon him, because it is building up a notion of Loki's villainous performance in previous films as the closet covering the mess of a person he truly is.

The next film would take this notion further, building up from this moment of the true and messy self to create a new identity. Loki's narrative arc in *Thor: Ragnarok* revolves around him rejecting the need to disguise himself in facades, partially because every time he tries to put

up a facade it falls apart around him. However, this film starts with addressing the need for the facade at all, namely the idea of the patriarch, embodied in Odin. The meeting with Odin, early in the film, is the instigating force for Loki's move away from the role of the villain. How these sequences are visually framed; with both Loki and Thor equally positioned in the sequence (an example in figure 8) displays a shift in narrative understanding of Loki from previous films. This continues with how the two are addressed by Odin, with no favouritism given to either. Odin acknowledges Loki, not as the villain or the problem, but as his child. It is a reckoning with who Loki is as a character, specifically in how he has been defined by his desire for Odin's metaphorical power, the power of leadership, of control. This film abandons that motivation, equates it to something Loki has moved past, and does that by having the symbol of that address Loki absent that assumption. He is not the villain in this sequence, but an equal to his brother.

Figure 8 Loki and Thor sharing a visual frame equally from: Thor: Ragnarok, 22:05, 2017

That being said, a dependence on facades continues throughout the film until late in the film's second act. Thor describes the narrative loop the two of them are in, trust, betrayal, and defeat. It is what punctuates Thor's speech that is perhaps most grounding to the abandonment of facades for Loki, Thor says "life is about [...] growth, it's about change, but you seem to just

wanna stay the same" (*Thor: Ragnarok* 1:31:08-1:31:15). It is the stability of facades that makes them appealing to those reckoning with issues of identity and the notion that you do not fit into the mould previously assumed. The facade is a means of staying the same, regardless of the truth of it: it is artificial consistency.

This creates an understanding of Loki divorced from the previous, classical depiction recreated in both *Thor* (2011) and *The Avengers* (2012) without the convoluted narratives done in the comics to get them there. This is extended to Loki becoming unequivocally heroic in the film's final act and rejecting the guises of the closet or disguise to express himself. One of the film's final moments does this by subverting both diegetic and nondiegetic expectations by having Loki stay with Thor to help build a new Asgard (Waititi 1:58:50-1:59:20). We can read this as Loki choosing a new path, one of creating something rather than destroying it, a form of creative action.

Loki had a minor presence in both *Avengers: Infinity War* and *Avengers: Endgame*. Neither film gives Loki much focus, with him being killed in the opening scene of *Infinity War* and bound and gagged for most of his scenes in *Endgame*. Loki escapes his bonds in the *Endgame* sequence, and escapes to parts unknown. What both films do is recreate Loki as an outsider, a version without the development from *Thor: The Dark World* and *Thor: Ragnarok*. Loki is then returned to the near operatic villain, seeking chaos and destruction out of misplaced desire for familial affirmation and with a wonderful panache and flair. Loki at the end of *Thor: Ragnarok* had created for himself a place to belong and finally worked past his issues with his brother. The moment where Loki is revealed to have stayed with Thor at the end, playing into the repeated gag of Loki being a projection rather than actually present in the scene, perfectly

encapsulates this sense of found belonging. To remove this sense of belonging from Loki is a reversion of the character to an earlier, and inarguably simpler narrative role.

On Situating the Outsider: Liminal Medium and Genre Expressions

While the series begins by recreating the notion of Loki as the perpetual outsider seen in the earliest films, mostly by resituating a pre-character development Loki from those films. The series grounds its thematic focus in how it interlays the development of Loki with its textual narrative. *Loki*, within the terms of medium and genre, is a divergent work from the other appearances of the character in many ways, with the medium shift from film to a streaming series being perhaps the least impactful for this study. This is not to say the shift to an episodic structure and the affordances created by it do not change how a reader understands the positionality of Loki within the series, because it does. This medium reframing is mostly that, a reframing from the long form, singular structure of the film, to the fragmented episodic structure of the series. It does change how the overall structure is framed, with the episodes themselves having to maintain both an escalation of stakes and a degree of self-completion unto themselves. This leads to and creates a specific kind of narrative escalation where the end of an episode needs to feel simultaneously conclusive, but also open to expansion. It enforces a form of spectacle creep, where every episode needs to be more substantial than the previous, repeatedly escalating until the pressure release of the finale.

The genre of *Loki* as a series is a messier structure, being not clearly rooted in a singular generic tradition. While at first glance *Loki* would seemingly fit within the superhero genre, like *Loki: Agent of Asgard* did, there are fundamental differences that need to be addressed. *Loki*'s visual language is intentionally distanced from the visual signifiers of the superhero genre. This includes an absence of the costume in the majority of episodes to decentre the superhero

elements of the text. Loki does not dress recognizably as Loki in this series, instead being predominantly dressed in more muted visual attire. This is not to say that the visual signifiers of the superhero genre are absent, but rather that they are decentred from Loki, instead giving those signifiers to others outside the focal Loki. This situates Loki as a narrative that exists not as a superhero genre series, but as a one whose setting contains those signifiers.

This brings into focus the other generic trappings of *Loki*, specifically that of the mystery. The basic outline of the mystery genre is present: a layered system of intrigue, gradually revealed, which opens greater avenues for intrigue and exploration. To say that Loki is a superhero series without acknowledging the mystery elements would be a mistake. However, this all gets back to the larger and more fundamental question of how genre functions in this text. With the presence of Loki as a character brings in superhero genre impressions, arguably bringing in the superhero genre with him simply by existing within the text.

Genre impacts the reader in how it frames the reader's understanding of the language of the text; to return to comics for a moment, if closure is the grammar of comics and images/words the language, then genre is the context. This is, in part, what makes genre complicated to understand: it is not localised in any singular instance but rather in the broader work and the paratext around it. If we were to take *Loki* as a superhero series that would frame it differently than the mystery framing: the genre frame emphasises different elements.

That being said, *Loki*, as a series, is not utilising the same signifiers for liminal genre expression that *Loki: Agent of Asgard* was, partially because it is dealing in an intersection of genres rather than a non-normative expression of a singular one. If the reader would apply the frame of the mystery to *Loki*, elements that draw on the genre expectations of the mystery would become more prominent. The same broad notion is true for the other component genre

expressions of *Loki*, including the superhero and science fiction elements. If we were trying to assign a genre label to *Loki*, it would be superhero mystery, a fundamentally hybrid genre. This hybridity situates *Loki* as a text in a liminal and unstable generic focus, creating a fragmented framing of the text where the genre is defined not in tandem with the text, but oppositional to other readings. If, as discussed in the previous chapter, genre modifies the understanding of the language of the text, shifting the meaning of it, then variable genres create fundamentally varied readings and, as a result, a liminal text.

This idea of the liminal text, created as a result of hybridised genre expression, makes sense with Miller's notion of genre being created within their own sociological framework. It is akin to trying to identify a singular genre for a work that would eventually become foundational to a new genre. One example would be to say *Frankenstein* has elements of the gothic romance, tragedy, and the poetic when later it would be grounded as an early work of science fiction. Without a singular generic frame to place the text within, different elements come into focus. It creates an interesting thought experiment about how texts are changed by the cultural norms and preconceptions of the reader. If we reject a reading of genre as rigid and unchanging, the text of *Loki* becomes situated in a liminal space between dominant generic expressions. If we instead look at the genre hybridity as an expression of the present moment, the liminal expression becomes reflective of a current defocus in the culturally dominant framework.

With this in mind, we can return to the narrative structure of *Loki*, looking for how the genre liminality, this variability in genre reading, manifests within the narratological structure of *Loki* as text. One major difference from previous filmic depictions is a reframing of Loki from the villain to the protagonist. The idea of Loki as the outsider is pivotal to understanding the framing of the narrative of *Loki*. The division of internal and external narratives creates a means

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of mapping and understanding the dominant genres, understanding and reframing how the two are dependent upon each other. Both the internal and external narratives are interlinked through the understanding of the frame of Loki as a character, and the text of *Loki* as a series is playing with the notions of that frame to expand upon its notions of genre. The text of Loki could be read as a hybrid one, the genres of the superhero and the mystery being entangled with each other as a singular structure. With this in mind, utilising a model of narrative dualism, where the two generic expressions are expressed explicitly through narrative aspects of the series instead helps explain how the genre expression implies other forms of liminal existence to the text. The text as a whole is generically liminal because of the segmentations of aspects that are generically rigid.

The main plot of the series is most directly representative of the mystery genre, which is the external narrative. The mystery genre functions through the interplay of a problem (often caused by an antagonist) and the hero's disassembly of that problem. This is where *Loki*'s plot is situated, introducing the mysterious and bureaucratic Time Variance Authority (TVA for short) in the first scene and then spending most of the first episode setting it up as a threat. The TVA's nature, who is in charge of it and why it exists the way it does, is the foundational question for the majority of the season. Loki then takes to the role of a detective in some ways, trying to find out about the nature of the TVA. The act of gathering information and knowledge about the TVA becomes the driving action of the narrative itself.

The second episode "The Variant" is a mystery story in microcosm for the series as the uncovering of a mysterious alternate Loki (eventually revealed to be Sylvie, who we will discuss in detail in the next section) attacking the TVA. Loki is playing at being a detective, investigating clues to what this variant Loki is doing and how she is doing it. The text is applying

narrative action of looking for clues, investigating, into a central point and, as a result, placing emphasis on the mysterious and the act of revealing it.

This reading, focusing on the literal plot mechanics, pushes internality to the side, with Loki's character development, the internal narrative, being minimised as a result. The core unifying factor of the superhero genre is the presence of the superhero themself. This is however where calling *Loki* a superhero work comes most into question. Now, as previously mentioned, the notion of the hero, especially when within the superhero genre, carries a narrative and tonal expectation. There is a moral elevation to the superhero where the framing reduces or removes ambiguity from their actions. Moral righteousness in the superhero genre is framed by the superhero, and *Loki*'s deliberate absence of that framework makes reading the genre of *Loki* in that way a challenge. This is not an insurmountable leap as Loki's presence in the previous movies and history in the Marvel comics might itself be enough for a reader to understand *Loki* as a series within the genre frame of the superhero.

Building on Quicksand: How Loki Frames Personal Development

Loki's internal narrative, in absence of the heroic archetype, is structured instead around building a liminal positioning for Loki's character development. The personal narrative for Loki, broken down to a simplified and repeating structure, can be understood as three beats: undermining, deconstructing, and revelation. Each episode's undermining predominant target is the revelation of the previous entry, restarting the cycle. This structure, though entwined with the episodic structure is itself a means of destabilizing Loki's narrative journey. This cycle broadly repeats on an episode by episode basis, with each addressing a different facet of Loki's identity. To see this in microcosm, the first episode "Glorious Purpose" functions as a case study.

Starting with the undermining, which is the first scene, where Loki's successful escape in *Avengers: Endgame* is suddenly and completely negated by his capture by the TVA ("Glorious Purpose" 2:40-5:00). This scene, played to the audience as comedy, centres Loki beginning a speech on his own superiority and how he is "burdened with glorious purpose" (3:00-3:10), only for the TVA to show up and effortlessly take him away. The act of taking Loki away, of stopping him, is played as simply another moment of Loki's repeated failure. The difference here is that Loki is unable to do anything at all to the TVA agents arresting him, diminishing his own sense of self-importance. Loki's inability to act, the negation of his own agency by an external force was previously something he could work around or at least against fruitlessly, here he cannot act at all.

The second beat is deconstructing, with it structurally mirroring the rising action of a traditional narrative work. "Glorious Purpose" introduces this idea visually first, with Loki being processed by the TVA, where he has his clothes removed by a TVA machine (see figures 9 and 10). This visual removal of Loki's clothes is a metaphorical removal of Loki's identity, the start of a larger discussion of how the show treats identity as it relates to bureaucracy, power, and control. This also removes from Loki the façade of his previous self, reducing him to simply one of many, a fundamentally disconcerting position for a Loki who self-defines himself by his extraordinariness, his superiority. This is seen clearly in how Loki's visual mannerisms change between the two outfits, with figure 9 displaying a Loki still attempting to command respect, while figure 10 displays Loki absent that feeling of control. This transition shows the degree of dependence Loki is placing façade upon facade, upon the external appearance of control.
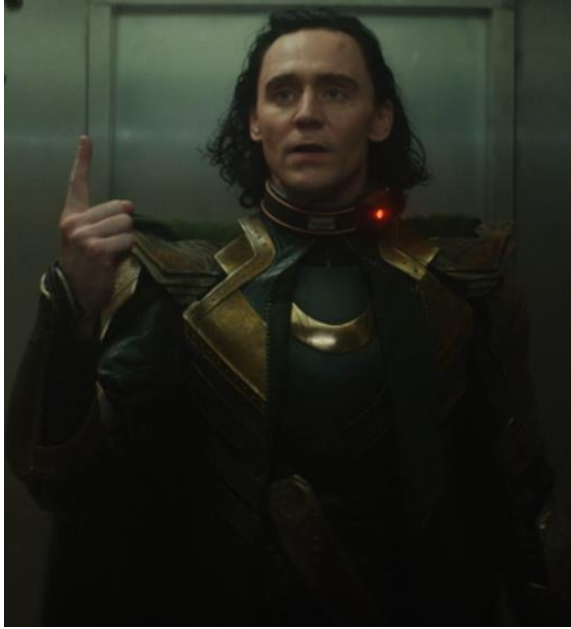
Figure 9 Loki, in previously "normal" costume from: "Glorious Purpose" Loki, 6:21, 2021.

Figure 10 Loki destabilized in TVA jumper from: "Glorious Purpose" Loki, 6:50, 2021.

This is done again in the next episode where Loki is given a jacket labelled "Variant" in large orange letters with a character commenting "I don't want anybody out there to forget what you are [...] a cosmic mistake" ("The Variant" 6:29-6:45). After the facade (represented by clothing) is removed, Loki is placed into a plain and ordinary jumpsuit and TVA processing

continues by questioning his personal history and presence of a soul ("Glorious Purpose" 7:00-8:14). This all deconstructs the basic externality of Loki, from his visual, performative, and finally his actual sense of self itself. This sequence, for the audience, depicts a decline removal of any form of self confidence until, at the end of this sequence, he simply complies with a seemingly meaningless form of bureaucracy. The trickster who fought against all forms of control (except his own) in the films, becomes subservient.

This initial sequence of deconstruction is then followed up with a more internally focused dissection of Loki as a character. Deconstruction here, contrary to the philosophical understanding of the term, is being used as the inverse of construction, with the constructed aspect in this case being Loki's identity and relationship to facades. Constructing is the building up of an identity or character, an additive process that eventually results in a more detailed character. Deconstruction is the removal of components, taking elements away to return to a base, singular core. In Loki's case, it is a removal of the various forms of facades he takes, the falsehoods he tells both himself and everyone else about his intentions, desires, and sense of self. Deconstructing the facade in this case is a means of removing elements of it; those little deceptions, to reveal something at Loki's narrative core.

A large part of this first episode is an interrogation of Loki by Mobius, played by Owen Wilson. The questions would often seem innocent, with Mobius asking questions like "why does someone with such range just wanna rule" (23:35-23:50). These questions attempt to address and probe Loki's identity, playing into Loki's facade to hopefully extract information through Loki's self-deception. Loki as a character is unable to address himself, understand himself, because of his self-deception. The show, in confronting Loki with constant deconstruction, forces him to acknowledge himself.

This interrogation of Loki builds throughout the episode, moving from analysing and deconstructing Loki into a critique of the thematic role of the villain. It is a moment of metatextual commentary incited by Mobius's statement "You weren't born to be king, Loki. You were born to cause pain and suffering and death. [...] All so that others can achieve their best versions of themselves" (32:20-32:40). This is, in a way, a form of revelation for Loki, as it refocuses and shifts his perspective and is fundamentally derived from how Loki faced the deconstruction he just went through. This instance is Loki accepting how his actions and role do not correspond to his professed self-image and self-identity, and that the conflict between his understanding of self and the reality of self leads him and others to pain.

One common element that needs addressing with how *Loki* uses this idea of revelation is in how it undercuts it. There is a back and forth within the show between sincerity and falsity, the facade and its dissolution. There are scenes that invoke real sincerity within any reading of Loki as a character, mostly times where Loki is alone. When Loki is unobserved in a diegetic manner, being observed only by the camera, we can see him cry for certain instances of loss. One instance of this has Loki watching footage and events of *Thor the Dark World* and *Thor: Ragnarok* as well as his own death in *Avengers: Infinity War* ("Glorious Purpose" 37:20-39:50). It is important that Loki chooses to watch this, after realising that this life, what he is seeing, is something he will never get to experience himself. Loki sees a version of himself being accepted and affirmed from both his father Odin and brother Thor in *Thor: Ragnarok*. This is directly an engagement with the non-rigid status of his moral alignment; that he is not always the villain or the trickster, and this is seemingly a moment of real reckoning for Loki. The show mitigates the development by undercutting it with Loki returning to his trickery and an almost childlike

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fascination with tormenting his adversary, in the form of Hunter B-15, almost immediately afterwards (40:56-41:15).

After looking back at the interrogation moment has Loki acting out violently in grief, only to then have Mobius help him back to his feet. This moment is undercut however by how Loki, when being helped up by Mobius, steals the device that controls his restraints (32:25-33:51). This draws into question the authenticity of Loki's emotional response, and the show does this repeatedly. This act of Loki destabilizing the apparent sincerity of his own emotional development creates both a non-diegetic distrust in the reader of Loki's personal development, but also a diegetic one in his fellow characters. The next episode "The Variant" introduces a repeating dialogue focused on how anyone can ever trust Loki to not betray them. This motif repeats throughout the series, including being the inciting action for Loki and Sylvie's final fight in "For All Time, Always", the season one finale. It is the unwillingness to accept that Loki has developed from his initial portrayal that fundamentally shifts how he is perceived in the universe.

This notion of Loki's untrustworthy nature is itself a reason for framing his character's development in this cyclic loop and gets to the general notion of the structure as cyclic. Loki's character development in this first episode, though also undercut in itself, is subverted again in the following episode, where Loki returns to the modus operandi of betraying/attempting to betray almost every character he sees in a position of authority. Although the first episode makes a significant point of establishing Loki's development from that base model, the return to it becomes an act of routine. Loki's character development in *Loki* becomes almost Sisyphean in nature, returning him to a base state from which he can progress in the next episode. Loki becomes stuck in a form of character development limbo, and the ending of the series textually requires the reader accept that Loki has developed away from his previous state.

We can read Loki in *Loki* as a hybridization of Story Loki and Future Loki from the end

of *Loki: Agent of Asgard*, both the desire for self-improvement and the self-destructive instinct.

Loki is actualizing this quote from the final issue of *Loki: Agent of Asgard*: "But when you're

here you just smash it all, tear down everything that makes you you" (Ewing 17:16) as both

speaker and subject. This is why *Loki*'s internal narrative seems cyclic because it is about both

building Loki as a person, by destroying him, all within the singular character of Loki. It draws

into question the idea of change itself for Loki, whether a variation from his own presupposed

norm is either acceptable or desirable, since he simultaneously seeks it out and pushes it away.

That being said, Loki's positionality as the protagonist is itself brought into question by the

presence of Sylvie.

Sylvie: Liminality of Doubling and the Transgender Self Externalized

Any queer reading of *Loki* will include, if not revolve around, the character of Sylvie.

Sylvie's dominant narrative role is to drive Loki's development as a character. Sylvie takes a

multifaceted role as simultaneously the antagonist, foil, and love interest of Loki, reflecting

Loki's initial selfishness with a form of a destructive altruism. The key feature of Sylvie, and

why she functions as a foil for Loki, is the fact that she is Loki, one of five non-Tom Hiddleston

portrayed depictions of Loki. Sylvie serves as an almost co-protagonist of episodes three, four,

five, and six. This is partially due to a coequal framing of both Sylvie and Loki in these episodes,

with Sylvie's actions being framed as equally "heroic" as Loki's.

Loki's in-universe logic functions on a multiverse model, where small decisions people

make can introduce variance into the otherwise ordered system of time. The TVA, when this

"variance" becomes too disruptive (affects to many other people) swoops in, takes the offender

into custody and "resets" the local area. Sylvie is a product of this variance system, with her self-

defined variance being "me being born the Goddess of Mischief" ("The Nexus Event" 7:25).

How we interpret and understand this line is itself a complicated subject and subjected to both queer and non-queer readings, with those readings impacting how we understand not only Sylvie but the main Loki.

A non-queer reading of this line is, perhaps for some, the simplest and most direct reading. Rather than being born male presenting, like the focal Loki, she was assigned female at birth. Now this reading, based upon the established narrative rules of the TVA, would make her nexus event, the point where Sylvie's variance starts to manifest significantly enough to impact those around her, a much earlier event. Sylvie's literal birth, assuming she was assigned female at birth, would more than likely impact how she was treated by both her birth and adopted family. This does not assume that reading Sylvie as cisgender an invalid textual understanding, but rather draws attention to the possible queer readings.

As for a queer reading of Sylvie, this reading is derived from a fundamentally differing understanding of gender and "being born". There is the common metaphor within the trans community of the "trans egg", a term for a trans person before they understand the trans gender aspects of their identity. The idea is that the "egg", upon realizing their transness will "crack" and emerge as a trans person understanding their identity. The egg functions as a trans equivalent of the closet in many ways, but implies an oblivious nature to the subject, not present in the closet metaphor. I mention this predominantly because emerging from the egg, as a metaphor, can be understood as a form of birth/rebirth, hence why the egg is the symbol used. A queer reading of Sylvie that understands her as a trans woman can use this metaphorical understanding of birth to situate a reading of her outside the binaristic male/female state.

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In addition to this, there is how Sylvie clearly resents the name "Loki" being applied to her, as illustrated when she directly says, "Don't ever call me that [...] No, a Loki" ("Lamentis" 7:15-7:20). This is reminiscent of the notion of the deadname, utilising the pretransition or abandoned name of a person rather than the name they actually use. While the term deadname itself is fairly recent, first being noted as appearing on Twitter in 2010 according to the Oxford English Dictionary ("Deadname, N").

Whether Sylvie is transgender or cisgender, she is a representation of Loki absent a masculine gender identity, her very presence posits a non-cisnormative reading of Loki. This reading, itself derived from inscribing upon Sylvie a transgender identity, is independent of the actual textual manifestation of Sylvie's queerness as her existence presupposes a queerness of Loki. For the first two episodes, though predominantly in episode two, Sylvie is understood as "a Loki" and referred to with masculine he/him pronouns. This is predominantly done because of her visual absence and the assumption of the previously known (and actively present) Loki and treating him as the normative mode for another Loki. When Sylvie is revealed at the end of the second episode, it is a reveal of her differentiation from the pre-assumed norm. Returning to the line "born the goddess of mischief" ("The Nexus Event" 7:25), we can see that simply her existence in this state shifts the world around her. Sylvie's non-masculine existence violates a presumed masculinity default, creating a non-normative reading independent of cis/transgender identity.

The idea of encountering another version of yourself is a common narrative trope in science fiction and fantasy works, with entire shows like *Fringe* or *The Flash* utilising and revolving around this trope. In recent years however, this trope has begun to take on a queer reading, especially from a transgender perspective. The Hugo Award short story finalist

"Unknown Number" by Blue (Azure) Neustifter is a great example of this premise. The narrative is told as a text message exchange between two versions of the same character, specifically one pretransition and one post-transition, discussing the nature of gender and the desire to transition. The receiver, a transgender woman, explains the reasoning and understanding of why she transitioned and notions of gender as a whole. The sender is a masculine version of the receiver who gradually comes to accept for herself that she is a transgender woman. The story is, in microcosm, a story of self-discovery through the medium of an outside self (Neustifter).

I mention this narrative for several reasons, but primarily because it provides a framework for understanding the basic dynamic of Loki and Sylvie's relationship. Mapping Loki and Sylvie onto Azure's narrative is simple, Loki is the sender, the masculine figure seeking change with Sylvie being the receiver. Where the narratives diverge is partially in its explicit focus with Loki's personal internal narrative is not about coming to terms with gender identity but rather his own self-hatred and self-destructive tendencies. Sylvie becomes a representation of a Loki who, despite being definitively unhappy, is not burdened with the self-hatred seemingly intrinsic to Loki. Loki sees in Sylvie a woman who is the epitome of his self-assuredness yet lacking the preexisting self-reflexivity to doubt.

If we then extend this discussion, looking instead at how Loki and Sylvie's dynamic develops, we see a romantic infatuation develop for Loki of Sylvie. Part of the diegetic reaction to this narrative trajectory is to frame it as a form of narcissism, which is exactly what Mobius does when he learns of it. Mobius describes this fascination as "two variants of the same being, especially you, forming this kind of sick, twisted romantic relationship." ("The Nexus Event" 20:50). This relationship itself reinforces Loki's sense of self obsession simply by focusing his most prominent romantic interest in all filmic appearances with a version of himself that happens

to conform to cis-heteronormative dynamics. This idea of self-obsession seems to draw Loki as a character into an understanding of narcissism, which does not go unaddressed in *Loki*. Sylvie being another version of the self allows Loki to, like Narcissus from Greek myths, fall in love with his own reflection.

However, as already outlined, Sylvie is not only Loki's romantic interest but an antagonist for him in turn. The antagonistic standing of Sylvie's opposition to Loki in episodes two, three, and the end of six is to mirror Loki's self-conflict in those points. Episode two "The Variant" places Sylvie, then predominantly known as a Loki Variant, in opposition to Loki as Loki's relation with Mobius develops. Loki's relationship with Mobius is derived from and dependent upon Loki's assistance in capturing Sylvie, and thus a conflict of interest is created when episode three "Lamentis" develops Loki and Sylvie's relationship as oppositional to the TVA. Now, a reading of Loki's actions in these episodes can be read purely as Loki's opportunist nature, a reading done by characters within the series itself, but *Loki* is, following the above narrative structure, using these characters and their interactions with him to further develop a notion of the self. The fact that all these relationships are oppositional, dependent upon an outside other for stability, is itself fundamentally entwined with how we can understand Loki as a queer liminal character.

It seems logical that in order to be a queer liminal character, Loki's queerness and liminality would need to be at the forefront of the text. Although situating Loki as a liminal figure fits with the instability of the internal/external narrative divide discussed in the previous section, Loki's queerness is instead displaced onto Sylvie. There is a singular line in the third episode that gives Loki a queer textual reference. This line: "a bit of both" ("Lamentis" 22:25) is Loki's response to Sylvie's inquiry of previous relationships, framed by the dichotomy between

"would be princesses or perhaps another prince" (22:17). This, though textually applying the superficial elements of queerness to Loki, predominantly neglects actual exploration of that queerness itself. Loki and the other masculine presenting Lokis in "Journey into Mystery" all reflect a cis-heteronormative understanding of the character, it is through Sylvie that we see a queering of Loki. Sylvie presumes the queerness of Loki in the above quotes and Loki only passively acknowledges it.

Part of this is through how Sylvie differs visually from Loki, and where her costume draws from. Sylvie's costume, with the asymmetric crown design is undoubtedly a reference back to *Loki: Agent of Asgard* and Story Loki. Being that this is also where an exploration of Loki as textually queer began to take root, it makes sense that the manifestation of Loki's queerness would take on aspects from this series. It is also a stark contrast from Loki's predominant outfit in this series (see figure 11.) where the muted and neutral colours show a willingness to conform. Sylvie's costume becomes representative of the anti-conformity, anti-structural framework she takes in this series, and that is partially why her queerness stands out from Loki's.

Loki is himself playing at conformity. He is sub-textually queer but repressing its anti-conformist connotations: the façade of compliance over an anarchic, anti-structural character. Loki becomes synonymous with an understanding of queerness and identity that can and will conform to notions of cis-hetero-patriarchy. His goals throughout the series might be framed as self-motivated or selfish, but his actions are themselves in service to dominant ideological identities. This is a framing of Loki as the acceptable queer, able to exist within society and, broadly, be accepted by it.

Conclusion: Burning the World Down, Loki, Sylvie, and Activist Vengeance

While *Loki*'s structuring invokes liminality, its text and narrative creates a space for understanding the role of the activist in queer spaces. When dissected into simplified thematics, *Loki* is the story of totalitarianism as illustrated by the TVA, versus the freedom represented by

Sylvie. Broken down to even baser levels, it is a conflict between order and chaos. However, the series itself blurs either binary distinction by situating Loki as a median position, neither order nor chaos, but a liminal space between. Loki, on the most simplified and thematic level, is the liminal centre between the two dominant ideological extremes, siding with both Agent Mobius of the TVA and Sylvie at various points in the series.

There is a clear visual connection between the style of the TVA and its connection to rigid bureaucracy through the architectural language of brutalism. Brutalism is defined by its "simple, block-like, hulking concrete structures" (Hohenadel), which visually creates a feeling of repetition and uniformity. The visual space of the TVA is visually evocative brutalism, with its space design airing towards open, blocky, and uniform. Brutalism is itself often correlated with a Soviet or communist utilitarian rigidity, or generally with the functions of bureaucracy. It is that bureaucratic correlation that *Loki* evokes with the TVA's dominant architectural scheme, but that connection to the Soviet brings up additional associative elements. This connection is addressed in "Reading Loki (2021): Free Will and Determinism, Resistance to Autocratic Ideology, And Queer Representation in The Series." by Rohal Raval and Chetan Trivedi. Raval and Trivedi, in identifying this correlation, then proceed to place Sylvie in the historical and ideological position of the United States of America in the ideologically driven narrative (Raval and Trivedi 650). The centring of Sylvie's actions as "[her] unflinching commitment towards Free Will" (651) is perhaps an oversimplification of the text, since her more direct motivation in the text series is not free will, but vengeance.

The fifth episode, "Journey into Mystery" is where we see Sylvie's motivation most clearly. Three choices are offered to Loki: help fix the TVA, destroy the person behind it, or inaction. Each potential is represented by another character, Mobius for fixing the TVA, three

other Lokis for inaction, or Sylvie for destructive and violent options. When given the opportunity to reform the broken system, solving the problem she is dealing with without vengeance, Sylvie instead embodies the destructive solution. This insistence on this particular action is what puts Loki and Sylvie at odds with each other in the final episode.

The final episode "For All Time, Always" finally presents Sylvie with the force behind the TVA, He Who Remains played by Jonathan Majors. It is He Who Remains' justification for why he made the TVA that gives Loki pause, because he states that if Loki and or Sylvie kill him, then billions will die as a result. He Who Remains does however offer an alternative choice - that Loki and Sylvie could take his place and use that position to be benevolent rulers over the TVA and as a result reality. Loki, having spent this season developing a sense of empathy, pushes against Sylvie's desire to kill He Who Remains, and Sylvie instead assumes Loki is acting out of self-interest, a desire for power. This moment, where Sylvie recognizes that Loki cannot be trusted (a revitalization of a previous dominant motif in episode two) is where Sylvie's actual motivation is made most clear. Sylvie is given a restorative option, a way to mitigate all the harm the TVA has ever done, and instead chooses to inflict more violence upon the people already at risk.

This sequence, when placed in the context of Raval and Trivedi's piece, negates a clear order vs chaos, totalitarianism vs freedom dichotomy, as it is all because of where Loki sits in relation to those notions. Loki is fundamentally the pivot point upon which the thematic positioning of *Loki* revolves around, and he is fundamentally taking a conservative position. Loki's role as the perpetually liminal and perpetual outsider allows for a shift in perspective and, as a result, situates him in a fundamentally unique position; that of the centrist. This centrism gives *Loki* as a series an odd frame of reference for its politics, because it places the focal

character into a liminal position of self-instability. This itself is seen in how the show depicts its metaphorical/metatextual queerness.

It is hard to read the subtext of queerness in *Loki* as anything other than a dichotomy of acceptability. Loki's queerness is depicted momentarily and grounded in partner choice; an element mostly neglected by the romantic pairing with Sylvie. It is through Sylvie we see a radical understanding of queerness, one that rejects structures of the past including former names and identities and attempts to destroy the structures that make her existence feel radical. For this, Sylvie is labelled as the antagonist in the last moment, not because she is not sympathetic, but because she goes too far. *Loki* the series is making a point about how to "properly" resist unjust authority and makes a moral statement against upsetting the status quo. The desire to fix the broken TVA is an easy desire to side with, but Sylvie's position is that the entire idea of the TVA is wrong: in existing at all, the TVA is an injustice. Loki, in accepting He Who Remains' logic and argument by defending him from Sylvie is an admission that even noble or justified destruction of unjust systems is wrong.

To strip away the fantastical framing, Loki is defending the most violent form of police interventionism because without them, people would die. Loki has seen the TVA kill people for absurdly minor offences, including simply not grabbing a ticket. The idea that the TVA is "protecting" the world from something worse is the same ideological argument that protects broken and abusive real-world organisations. While Sylvie is fundamentally oriented around revenge and a destruction-oriented perspective, she is not wrong that the system existing in any form is an injustice. The TVA is fundamentally depicted as authoritarian and violent, stamping down on any form of deviance that they do not directly approve of. It is a reading of the world that those excluded, those whose existence becomes synonymous with the deviance the TVA

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resents, must oppose. *Loki*, as a series, frames this side of the argument, opposition to authority, in a negative light, taking instead a stance of gradual change as the solution to oppression from the oppressed. It pushes for an ideology of justice, that systems rooted in cruelty can be fixed from within without radical change, that *Loki: Agent of Asgard* explored as foundationally flawed.

Chapter 4: Conclusion: Understanding Loki Within Liminal Queerness

Introduction

As the previous chapters have outlined, Loki as a character is often entwined with notions of both liminality and queerness, though the exact means of that expression varies greatly between the two works discussed. To say simply that the two texts approach the subject matter differently would be to understate the divergence. The two works take very similar base ideas, instability of narrative position to explore questions of identity using externalised representations of the self but express them towards the opposing ends. With *Loki: Agent of Asgard* liminality is depicted as a constructive and ultimately liberating element. It is through medium, genre, and identity that Loki is able to save both themself and those they care about. On the other hand, *Loki* depicts a liminality that must be controlled or removed for the safety of others. Variants like Loki and Sylvie are responsible for universal destabilisation and their existence is framed as "too great a risk" even by Loki at the end.

There are fundamentally three elements that link the two texts together and to the notions of liminal queerness: namely the textual understanding of medium/genre, identity/expression, and predestination. It is the presence and textual focus upon each of these elements that link the two texts, partially because of how the texts take the same base concept but engage with them in fundamentally different ways. It is instead how these textual and paratextual elements intertwine with the notion of liminal queerness that matters, how they can be understood as elements of liminally queer expression/repression within the given text. Each of these elements, introduced in the larger chapters, diverge from each other on foundational levels, partially on an ideological standpoint, and those differences have ripple effects throughout the entire work; but most prominently for this work, the understanding of liminality and queerness.

As we grapple with a plethora of different Lokis across two different texts, as well as a text called *Loki*, this chapter will give each Loki an additional nominative signifier to indicate specific identity. The delineations from the second chapter (Main Loki, Story Loki, and Future Loki) all still stand when discussing *Loki: Agent of Asgard*, with the addition of Series Loki, for the focal Loki in *Loki.* As for the usage of pronouns, the use of he/him pronouns will continue for most Lokis, except for Story Loki, who, for reasons addressed in Chapter two, will be referred to using they/them pronouns.

Medium and Genre: Liminality Outside Character

The two predominant texts both utilise medium and genre as a means of foregrounding liminal expression in the text; though this correlation is more clearly present in *Loki: Agent of Asgard* than it is in *Loki*. As outlined in chapter two, *Loki: Agent of Asgard* uses the concept of the gutter space and closure to create a form of liminal expression that the characters engage directly with. This manipulation of physical space on the page turns a traditional scene into one where the non-diegetic notion of the page becomes a tangible diegetic element for characters immersed in the liminal space, predominantly Loki. The blank page becomes synonymous with the liminal possibility space, and evoking that space becomes a means of drawing attention to liminal expressions in tandem.

There is not as clear a focus on liminality of medium within *Loki*'s medium expressions, instead utilising what can best be described as traditional filmic language. Where *Loki's* medium based liminality comes from is how it utilises the series structure to create an instability in the reader, with each episode building to a reveal with the following episode subverting or negating that reveal's relevance or factuality. It is through this method of instability that the series

decentres a reader, the same way the explicit manipulation of the page structure in *Loki: Agent of Asgard* did to its expression.

For both texts, the idea of genre liminality is rooted within an understanding of genre hybridity. For *Loki*, it is drawing clear influences from both mystery and the superhero genre to create a work that does not fit cleanly into either genre. Part of the text of *Loki* is a balancing between dominant genre expressions, using visual and thematic elements of the superhero genre to tell a mystery centric narrative. On the other hand, *Loki: Agent of Asgard* works to fundamentally subvert traditional superhero genre binaries, drawing into question ideas of moral dualism, though this is partially to prepare the reader for a deconstruction of gender expression and identity binaries.

The connective tissue between the two texts is in how the liminal expression through the medium and genre liminal expression draws attention and focus to other forms of expressive liminality. This itself entices a liminal reading of other corresponding elements, such as those figures entwined with the liminal space itself, often creating an understanding of liminality separate from those spaces but prompted by it.

Identity: How Situating Queerness Changes Loki

Both texts, in engaging with notions of liminal queerness, are fundamentally also dealing with a question of identity. Partially, what makes these two texts interesting as case studies for readings of identity is how they use the language and symbols surrounding queerness, but do not address it directly. *Loki: Agent of Asgard* is more direct with its queer framing, with Main Loki's claim that "I can turn into anything as long as it's me" (Ewing 5:11) being evocative of gender nonconformity and gender fluidity. The dialogue (neither internal nor external) directly addresses these elements within a larger queer context. The closest is a speech from Odin (or a dream of

Odin, it is unclear) welcoming Main Loki as "My child who is both son and daughter" (11:14). While there is some ambiguity in this sentence, it does have a queer reading to it as a form of external validation of a non-binaristic identity. However, to frame that scene outside of a focus on identity would be to neglect the context of this sequence as part of the larger reckoning with the self-described in chapter two.

Loki on the other hand deals entirely in implication and subtext when it comes to queerness for its characters. Series Loki alludes to romantic partners of multiple genders, and Sylvie's presence implies a possible transgender reading, but neither of these are dominant text, nor are they central to the narrative. *Loki* also goes out of its way to enforce a heteronormative reading by centring a straight relationship through Sylvie and Series Loki. While framing it as explicitly queer baiting is possible, I prefer the idea of it as a missed opportunity. The marginalisation of queerness in *Loki* is partially why a discussion of it through a liminally queer lens looked predominantly at narrative framing outside the characters.

That being said, there is a queerness to *Loki*'s dominant narrative regardless of textual queerness. Centring a narrative of both self-discovery and community building (Mobius, Hunter B-15, Sylvie, and other Lokis) uniting around the persecution of them for an identity outside their choice to change (being variants) is rooted in models of the queer experience. Even the idea that Mobius, upon being told he is a variant, something he himself has fought against in others, has elements of the narrative of bigoted people being deep in the closet. This is partially why Mobius being told he is a variant ("The Nexus Event" 22:25-22:50) lingers on his face, until, like Series Loki and his facade of repeated betrayal, he returns to his facade of the bureaucracy. Akin to the notion of the closet as protection for the self, the process of bureaucracy becomes synonymous with the system working as normal, with everything being normal. This is why a

few scenes later, when Mobius accepts this truth, he immediately rejects the bureaucratic

structures and acts out to help Series Loki.

Liminality in Predestination and Liberation

The idea of predestination was mentioned briefly with regards to *Loki: Agent of Asgard*

in chapter two, but it is a unifying textual element between the two texts. The plot of *Loki* itself

is framed in opposition to an understanding of predestination posited by the TVA and He Who

Remains. Both texts align predestination with their antagonists in some way, with the protagonist

being entwined with a form of free will or general resistance to the rigidity of predestination. It

is, as a result, critical to understand how these notions are explored and more importantly how

the resistance to it is performed by the focal Loki.

Series Loki himself is liminality situated, not belonging in either the world he came from

nor the TVA he now exists within. Sylvie is similarly situated, being displaced to grow up an

eternal runaway, being unable to call anywhere home for her entire life because of her liminal

and persecuted nature. Both Loki and Sylvie are brought together by their mutual liminal natures

but driven apart ideologically by their understanding of predestination. It is the notion of

predestination as an absolute evil or absolute good ending to everything, that *Loki* as a series

revolves around as a question, and this question is one of predestination. The framing of Sylvie's

choice to reject power, killing He Who Remains, is framed in opposition to Series Loki and as a

result is framed with a negative bias.

This is in direct contrast with how *Loki: Agent of Asgard* centres predestination, as a

desired source of closure. This is outlined in Main Loki's first encounter with Future Loki and

the rulers of Asgard, where the absence of Ragnarok, the death of all Asgardians, is looked at as

something that needs to be remedied. This narrative element is an engagement with a desire for

completion, for a narrative to end. One could read this as a comment on the nature of ongoing

comic universes, where no story is ever considered "finished", but it works just as well removing

metatextuality from the equation. While I cannot say this is universal, it speaks to me as an

epitome of the desire to have something done so it no longer can worry you, extended to a

universal finality. However, this desire does not mesh directly with liminality, which continues

to keep doors open, that project can always be added to, revised later for a different purpose.

It is this that truly divides the two texts along this theme, that despite utilising the same

characters and along the same themes, *Loki* is a pessimistic look at liberation. Sylvie's act of

killing He Who Remains strands Loki again within a liminal existence, isolated from any form of

home he had built through the series. This is depicted in the final episode by Mobius's

unawareness as to who Loki is, in spite of their friendship being central to the series. It is a form

of liberation that centres a self-centeredness, stranding others, especially others liminally to their

own devices. Liberation from systems, fighting against oppression becomes a trade-off for

personal existence and personal happiness. There is no winning against unfair or unjust power

structures in *Loki*; the only choice is to how you lose.

Loki: Agent of Asgard takes a fundamentally different view of this with its ending. Story

Loki's narrative escape is an acceptance and embrace of liminality, a different option outside a

binaristic framework. The NEXT door at the end of the series becomes a symbol and

representation of queer liberation through liminality, through struggle. The door is a possibility

space that is not enclosed within the systemic of the text, medium, or genre. The door becomes

symbolically and narratively liberating, a means of escape into liminality. This works partially

because of how *Loki: Agent of Asgard* engages with its notions of liminality and entwines them

with notions of metatextuality and medium technologics. Elements like the white space display a

willingness to utilise a subversion of traditional visual motifs to invoke liminality outside

narrative thematics and build a broader understanding of the idea. Liminal expression becomes

something not only talked about but baked into the text itself.

Contributions

This project, in looking at Loki in *Loki: Agent of Asgard* and *Loki*, is, in a sense, looking

at how representations of queer identity and liminality are not a fixed positive or negative

element. The idea that simply the presence of queer subtext or text makes a text more palatable,

or progressive is partially a refusal to engage with the actual issues and nuances of liminally

queer identities. This study, in looking at Loki in two clearly delineated states, is addressing

broader notions of identity and liminality entwined with it and how the context surrounding those

elements change the meaning or expression of those identities. It is partially that element of

context, of the surrounding text modifying meaning, that is most critical to understanding both

the texts and the notion of liminality nestled within them. It is the framing of queerness and

liminality as fundamentally and irrevocably contextual and constructed that changes how we

look at those identities that is perhaps most critical to understanding this project as a whole.

The idea of contextually framed understandings of identity is what both texts centre

consistently. *Loki* is framed partially in absence of traditional contexts with the brutalist framing

of the TVA paired with its supernatural and fantastical elements helping to unseat the reader

from a normal understanding of it being real. That framing itself is how the text creates a sense

of instability in the reader about much of the text, enabling the cavalcade of reveal and

deceptions throughout the series. Loki himself, becomes a point of reference, a stable point in the

instability, but his very nature as a deceiver, a trickster, makes that stability untenable. But that

untenable stability itself is what allows the text to interrogate, regardless of the depth of

exploration, the concept of identity itself within an unjust system. Sylvie's very existence in the series posits an understanding of gender identity in absence of a predefined identity, that change on a personal level is possible.

On the other hand, *Loki: Agent of Asgard* immerses the character in context and frames every action as grounded within plans within plans within plans. There is rarely a scene where the context of a moment is neglected or minimised because the context is what drives that narrative. Loki's world is ending, both figuratively and literally, and every single action he or they take is working to build something new, not necessarily to escape the end. It is however this context, this framing of the near apocalypse that enables Main Loki to become Story Loki, to become a better version of themself and reject the identity forced on them. Identity creation becomes understood as a component of the larger cultural, social, political, and personal environment, but the need for that creation is present regardless.

Limitations and Areas for Expansion

While it might be easy to say that the predominant limitation on this analysis was addressing the breadth of Loki's appearances, including stretching back into the mythology along with other modern takes on the character, that is not the most looming limitation. The most significant limitation to this study was in the entwined nature of liminality within the texts. That is part of what made the analysis interesting, but the sheer breadth of elements that both impact and are impacted by a liminal understanding meant any analysis felt lacking in retrospect. The idea that liminality is itself relative to the context makes liminal possibility spaces functionally infinite, leaving open innumerable possible avenues for exploration.

On the other hand, with regards to areas for further research, this project sets the stage for research on multiple directly and indirectly related topics. Keeping with Loki, there is the

opportunity to look at other appearances of Loki within the Marvel media landscape, whether that be films, comics, or future seasons of the show. Loki has also been taken up as a character in other modern works, and those works could themselves be used to apply these ideas. There are also other figures, less present in the present public consciousness that could mirror Loki's queer liminality in various cultural mythologies, with works like "Loki Then and Now: The Trickster Against Civilization." by Helena Bassil-Morozow outlining some possible subjects in that regard.

There is also the opportunity to look at these texts through different frames, as the multifaceted nature of both texts allows for multifaceted readings. Looking at *Loki: Agent of Asgard* through a mental health lens could bring in some of the analysis of trauma and self-hatred addressed in that chapter. On the other hand, *Loki* has had some discussion of its relationship to political and social movements which could be expanded with a greater focus on what the show says about radicalism and the police. As mentioned before, this paper does not interact with the second season of *Loki*, which could expand on or reject the ideas discussed here in interesting ways. This can also be expanded to other works discussed in passing or briefly, with greater focus on works like *Young Avengers* or *Thor: The Dark World* and their understanding of Loki as they relate to queerness and liminal identities in general.

In Conclusion

It is hard to not simplify this ending to simply saying one is a good representation of liminality through queerness and one is not. Doing that would fundamentally cheapen this study, even if that end result is a simpler and cleaner solution. Instead, it is a question of degree of depth and what the focus is for the given work. *Loki: Agent of Asgard* was a mostly self-contained narrative with a set end in mind (Marvel was building up to a corporate wide relaunch

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for 2015/2016 called *Secret Wars*) and thus was able to deal in absolutes and feel cumulative. It feels, for lack of a better word, complete.

For most of this paper, I have been treating *Loki* as a singular entity, expanding on elements of previous Loki narratives but avoiding the broader context of the filmic landscape it exists within. This is partially because framing *Loki* this way is functionally true, given that it mostly does exist in isolation, but it does impact other narrative texts and, as a result, must aid in driving their ongoing narratives in turn. One example of this is the series' villain, He Who Remains, who would later appear in *Ant Man and the Wasp: Quantumania* as Kang, whose role in that film was to introduce other versions of himself as future antagonists. *Loki*, despite its general isolation from other texts, is not actually isolated in a functional sense. One of the more significant impacts of this metanarrative element is how the text does not feel conclusive. It is instead a single part of a much larger chain.

There are narrative constraints on *Loki* as a series to interact in certain ways with the larger MCU metanarrative, which fundamentally impacts how final or complete its narratives can feel. This is not to say that good and narratively satisfying art cannot be made in this system, because it can. *Loki* is overall a good and interesting series for the ideas it is playing with. There are however elements that, though they might have worked better for this series in microcosm, might not have been accepted as part of the broader MCU landscape.

It is easy to take these two feelings of completeness and say that one leaves open more avenues for queer and liminal exploration, the one that feels open ended. That being said, I think it is through the completeness, the seemingly concrete conclusion of *Loki: Agent of Asgard*'s ending, that opportunities for liminal escape and thus liberation are increased. *Loki* feels like a single chapter in an ongoing (likely unending) story, while *Loki: Agent of Asgard* give the

impression of a story finished but still open, and that is driven by both liminality and queerness and visually symbolised by the manipulation of the white space to create the exit, the liminal escape.

This is where the two texts fundamentally differ, *Loki*'s last shot of the season implies a continuation, but a continuation of the same. The TVA is returned to a form of normalcy, with all attempts to rectify it or change it seemingly being ineffective. It is, to use a common aphorism, "business as usual" for the world of *Loki*, a reset to status quo. The text can promise change, but that change cannot be framed in the same radical escapism as the NEXT door in *Loki: Agent of Asgard*, because that door implies continuation through escape, through liminality, through change. *Loki's* open-ended ending is symptomatic of the metanarrative model it is created in. The metanarrative removes agency and possibility and fundamentally neglects the importance of its characters. It is irrelevant to the broader structure if Loki is liminal or queer, his existence is not required.

Maybe that kind of hopeless nihilistic framing might be more accurate to the real world on a macro-scale, but people do not live on that scale. Liminal queerness is an expression of individuality standing out from a binary logic or structure and creating meaning in that space. It is a focus on change and recontextualization of the world. It is a form of escape for those who do not fit into the world as it is. It is, to look back to Helena Bassil-Morozow's understanding of the trickster, of a figure both a part of society and functioning against its rigidity. Loki is an expression of liminal queerness as the counterpoint to social rigidity, to the monolithic notions of dualistic societies. The differentiation point between the two texts is that *Loki: Agent of Asgard* frames that intervention as liberation, while *Loki* shows its futility within a larger system.

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Notes

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[1] *Thor* was not the original title of the series, originally being *Journey into Mystery*, with Thor appearing in issue 83 in 1962. The title became *Journey into Mystery with the Mighty Thor* with issue 104 in 1964 and then *Thor* in issue 126 in 1966. The simplification to *Thor* comics is to minimise confusion based upon changing titles when the comic itself remained, functionally, the same (including shared numbering).

[2] North America is fundamentally a colonialist term, with the preferred term from indigenous groups being "Turtle Island."

[3] The term "norm" and "normal", when applied to ability, can often be attributed in the negative to differently abled and neuro-divergent people. In this case normative ability is used to identify a cultural conception of "normal" based around general understanding of biology, physics, and other scientific disciplines. While some instances of this are based around physical or mental abilities "beyond the norm", they are alluding to this idea of the extraordinary.

[4] This is not mentioning the miniseries, released around this time in the series *Original Sin: Thor & Loki: The Tenth Realm* which had Main Loki take on a female angelic form. This is mentioned in a foot note of issue 11 as the main source of Odin's "Both son and daughter" comment.

[5] This is a vast oversimplification, but the broader context, the actual actions taken by Story Loki, and the narrative implications of this moment are overcomplicated unto themselves.

[6] The first season is all that is presently available of the Loki series at time of writing, a second season is to be released during the completion of this project but is unavailable for most of the time of writing.