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Out-of-Time & Out-of-Place: Queer Horizons of Popular Culture

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Introduction

When I first sat down to watch *Our Flag Means Death*, HBO Max's hit TV show directed by David Jenkins and Taika Waititi, it was in the middle of finals week in my junior year of college, and I had no time to spare between the countless projects, papers, and final exams to study for. Which, of course, meant that I watched the series in its entirety in the span of two days. I had not heard about the show while it was airing, nor in the buildup to its release. It had been recommended to me via word of mouth, with minimal details. There was hardly any pre-advertising to be found, so going in, I had no idea what to expect.

I was blown away.

The series was like nothing I had ever seen before, and I loved it. It felt fresh and new, as a casual workplace comedy that shifted into a sweet rom-com. It hit emotional highs and lows in between banter and featured an engaging ensemble cast against a backdrop of piracy. Most importantly, it was wholeheartedly and delightfully queer.[1]

It was queer in a way I had learned to expect only from indie comics, short films, and fan interpretations (and definitely never on a major streaming platform). Some review articles went so far as to say that the show killed queerbaiting (Hale-Stern). The show did not simply contain a representational quota of LGBTQ+ characters amid a sea of straight ones, nor did it propose a normalizing paradigm that assimilated queer characters into the white picket fence of suburbia, and it certainly did not partake in a tragedy-spectacle of queerness that hammers over and over just how hard being a queer person in a cis-hetero world is. OFMD turned to and on queer joy,

[1] Queerness is a concept beyond identity; it is a way of interacting with the world that is concerned with the rejection of established binaries and progressions. It challenges us to think in alternative ways, reframes our interactions with the world, and asks us to go beyond socially-expected options. While the standard interpretation of queerness is often framed in terms of binaries of gender, sex, sexuality, and identity, the scope of queerness is not limited to such individual markers. In fact, it can and has been applied to concepts of capitalism and economy, family dynamics, and even space and time. OFMD plays with all of these.

the feeling of finding a family among friends, the trials of defining yourself (and redefining yourself against others' expectations), and it refused to let characters drown under the weight of an intolerant world. OFMD didn't just have queer characters, it told queer stories—and it told them joyfully, intelligently, and with emotional depth.

Apparently, the internet agreed with me. The show blew up on Twitter and Tiktok, with large quantities of fan art circulating, and an average of 100 works of new fanfiction per day appearing under the *Our Flag Means Death* tag on Archive of Our Own.[2] Amid demands for a second season (which has since been confirmed), OFMD rose in rankings and metrics. According to Parrot Analytics, the show was in the top 0.2% of shows in demand within a week of the last episode release. OFMD beat out top shows such as *Peacemaker, Book of Boba Fett*, and *Moon Knight*, all shows associated with major franchises and entire marketing teams (Parrot Analytics). The show was Certified Fresh on Rotten Tomatoes with a 90% critics rating and 95% audience score. Even approximately a year after the last episode aired, the demand is still outstanding, and it ranks in the 99.7th percentile of demand among comedy shows.

The show did extraordinarily well online, in ratings and reviews, and generated a ton of content and fan responses. However, no one else in my life seemed to have encountered this massively successful show. Most of the 'promotion' for the show occurred via word-of-mouth, with people telling their friends to go watch it. But it was sparking a powerful creative impulse, even a utopian impulse, in the fandom as viewers responded to the show and joined the growing

[2] This article suggests that the box office gross divided by the number of fanfictions makes for an insightful measure of cultural relevance. TV shows don't have box office gross, so that measure doesn't work as well, but 100 works posted per day are the kinds of numbers more commonly run by mega-fandoms such as Harry Potter and the Marvel Cinematic Universe, not original comedy series (Wilson).

online community. The actors and creators were very much a part of this community, as well, responding to and uplifting fan work, and even engaging in fan response themselves.[3]

Online, it seemed that everyone who was anyone was talking about OFMD, but every time I asked friends, peers, and family members if they were familiar with the show, I was met with a blank face and confusion. The community the show had gathered disappeared once on the other side of the screen. This tension first alerted me to the idea that there was something odd happening. OFMD had created a new kind of fandom almost overnight, and they were doing something with their collective power—advocating for the renewal of the show, producing huge amounts of fanwork, and even organizing to protect LGBTQ+ rights and advocate against anti-LGBTQ+ legislation ("Our Flag Means Queer Rights"). OFMD was rich with content, and its story was having an immense, widespread, and immediate effect on people, but not *all* people. I wanted to know how that influence was created, why it was so powerful, and what exactly was it about OFMD that spoke to their specific audience and encouraged them to add a piece of themselves to the story. And what might this mean if studied through a lens of leadership?

What is *Our Flag Means Death?*

But first, before we can really delve into those questions, it is important to explain what exactly *Our Flag Means Death* is. At its most simple, OFMD is a TV series written by David Jenkins and directed by David Jenkins and Taika Waititi, hosted on the streaming platform HBO Max. It was released in weekly episode batches from March 3rd to March 24th, 2022. The series fits most closely within the subgenres of workplace comedy and romantic comedy, but also falls within the boundaries of historical fiction. The show centers on two real-life pirates, Stede Bonnet and Blackbeard, who really did share a boat in 1717. IMDB describes the show: "The

[3] See actors Vico Ortiz in cosplay of other show characters and Samba Schutte's creation of the 40-orange-glaze cake recipe, and the subsequent reposting and tweeting of images of fan-made cakes.

year is 1717. Wealthy land-owner Stede Bonnet has a midlife crisis and decides to blow up his cushy life to become a pirate. It does not go well. Based on a true story" (IMDB). Stede Bonnet, played by Rhys Darby, gathers an eclectic pirate crew, including Lucius (Nathan Foad), Oluwande (Samson Kayo), Jim (Vico Ortiz), Buttons (Ewan Bremmer), Frenchie (Joel Fry), Roach (Samba Schutte), Black Pete (Matt Maher), Wee John (Kristian Nairn), and the Swede (Nat Faxon). Along the way, they encounter British Officers Nigel and Chauncy Badminton (Rory Kinnear), Spanish Jackie (Leslie Jones) and Geraldo (Fred Armisen). The crew later joins up with Blackbeard (Taika Waititi) and his men, Izzy Hands (Con O'Brian), Ivan (Guz Khan), and Fang (David Fane).

The show takes place in 1717 in the Caribbean, mostly around Barbados, St. Augustine, and an approximation of Nassau and various other islands. The Caribbean has been described as a place of dichotomies and contradictions (namely by the German naturalist Alexander von Humboldt), but is perhaps more accurately described as a place of mixing, movement, and hybridity (Morgan).[4] Today the Caribbean is associated more with beaches and tourist vacations than anything else, but in the early 18th century, the region was under constant stress and had a reputation for being dangerous for many reasons, not the least being the colonial presence and general piracy associated with the region. One geographer explains that "the Caribbean, in European eyes, was both an earthly paradise and a place of nightmarish menace. The region inspired wonder and anxiety in roughly equal measure" (Morgan 30). The islands of the Caribbean had been colonized by Spain, Great Britain, and France, all of whom oppressed and subjugated the Native peoples, forcing them to work on plantations, and through violence and the introduction of disease, enacting genocide on them to the point of near non-existence. As the

[4] As evidenced by the term 'creole' used to describe people and culture that are Caribbean-rooted with mixed race ancestry.

sugar plantations grew, the planter settlers demanded a growing workforce and forcibly brought over between 5 and 7 million enslaved African people, changing the racial composition of the population, which was leveraged to create a hierarchy of European white supremacy and Brown and Black inferiority (Elements of Caribbean History | Modern Latin America). The history of the region is inescapable for the show, especially considering that the historical Stede Bonnet generated most of his wealth from being a plantation owner. Furthermore, on the show, there are people of color in the crew of The Revenge who make reference to and have to navigate around the racial oppression and presence of slavery within this pseudo-historical context. But OFMD is not interested in making racial trauma and oppression the focus of the narrative. So while it acknowledges the presence of racism, colonialism, and the system of slavery and illustrates how these systems of oppression affect people's lives, characters are not defined by their interaction with these oppressive structures.

The series follows Stede as he attempts to redefine himself as the 'Gentleman Pirate' and is backdropped by recurring conversations about what it means to be a good pirate and a good man. The ensemble crew each gets their own time to shine, as well, with romantic, revenge, and comedic subplots. The show takes great care with how it engages with and depicts instances of racism, homophobia, and colonization, and the nuances allow for more intricate and interesting storytelling in an imperfect, but improving world.

Piracy and Popular Culture

Pirates have long held the position of society's outlaws, as both villains and anti-heroes. Much of the actual history of pirates has been lost, in part due to the likely hesitation to record what were extremely illegal actions (and in part simply due to the fragility of paper in a waterlogged environment). Some of the 'facts' we have about pirates come from documentation

of trials or records made by merchants who encountered them on the seas and wrote down evidence of the interaction, but much more of the historical narrative concerning piracy is drawn from largely fictional accounts posing as objective, such as *A General History of Piracy* by Captain Charles Johnson (which was most likely the pen name of author Daniel Defoe). Scholar Marcus Rediker explains that "in truth, pirates were terrorists of a sort. And yet we do not think of them in this way. They have become, over the years, cultural heroes, perhaps anti-heros and at the very least romantic and powerful figures in an American and increasingly global popular culture" (Rediker 5). There is much debate over pirates' representational role in anarchist-libertarian ideologies in which freedom and might rules all (see the mythic pirate-nation Libertalia) or socialist-communist ideologies as a communal democracy instituting early forms of welfare (see early versions of disabilty compensation in ships' articles).[5] Additionally, there is much scholarly debate over the homosocial nature of piracy, with some leaning into the homoerotic implications of an all-male seafaring society (homosexual acts were fairly well documented in various navy iterations through history) with others completely ignoring those implications, refusing the possibility of non-heterosexual contact.[6] The ambiguity and variation between seemingly opposite poles (anarcho-libertarian and communist-socialism, homosexual and heterosexual, villain and hero) is part of what has led the figure of the pirate to be so prolific in popular culture and an extremely malleable romantic symbol. As such, the actual authenticity of the pirate as a historical figure pales next to the prominence of the pirate as a

[5] For example: "Rediker imagines the Golden Age pirate ships as experiments in consensual democracy, free culture, and socialist redistribution of wealth—nostalgically, who we *could* have been. But for Leeson, pirates are ideal consumers and predicable entrepreneurs. They are just like us (well, the Milton Friedman version of us). Same pirates. Different utopia" (Dawdy and Bonni 685).

[6] Identity-based ideas of sex conduct did not exist until 1800s at least. It doesn't matter if pirates were gay, bi, etc, but their behavior runs counter to the heteronormative, and they are in a sense queer in terms of non-repruductive non-heteronormative ways of being.

cultural figure. In popular culture, pirates have been depicted as "predators, parasites, criminals, outlaws, rebels, heroes, heroines, evildoers, buffoons, opportunities, armed robbers, raiders, plunderers, bandits, brigands, liberators, rogues, robin hoods, rapscallions, and bloodthirsty killers," and, perhaps most importantly, stand-ins for social deviance within the confines of accepted romantic figure; whether that be on the lines of gender, sexuality, class and capitalism, nationalism, colonialism, or hierarchies of all sorts, piracy was used to reinforce and subvert various system structures by taking them to the extreme (Dawdy and Bonni 674). Most stories of piracy rely on using pirates as a stand in: "Many people dream of freedom and independence, even if—for different reasons—they are not ready or able to fight for it in their daily lives. Tales of pirates are welcome substitutes" (Kuhn xiv). But while the metaphors of piracy often have similar beats (freedom and independence, lawlessness, extremes), the message vacillates wildly.

Pirate society was undoubtedly homosocial (see the all-male environment, and the presence of arrangements like *matelotage*[7]), but positioning pirates as a homosexual community is not only over-broad, but also incorrect. The construction of 'the homosexual,' or sexual orientation as a function of identity and not the description of behavior that could vary according to the situation, is a relatively new concept, as the word 'homosexual' was only invented in the 19th century (Pickett). Just as piracy was a criminal behavior, so too was same-sex attraction (at least in England and many other colonizing countries), which contributes to the lack of evidence and documentation. However, there is at least one documented *matelotage* arrangement that most likely included a same-sex relationship depicted in the autobiography *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* by Olaudah Equiano. While one example is nowhere near enough to draw overall conclusions about the nature of pirate *matelotage* arrangements as a whole, there

[7] *Matelotage* was a French term meaning 'seaman,' used to describe for what was essentially a civil union between pirates (Milne). It also shows up in works of fiction, including Ishmail and Quequeg in *Moby Dick*.

are substantial reasons for the information to have been suppressed in the recording of history, and circumstantial evidence suggests that the behavior was likely. The popular conception of pirates does not include nor allow for homosocial or homoerotic behavior; instead "pirates are swashbuckling, hyper-masculine men set free from daily labor and the domestic routines of landed life" (Dawdy and Bonni 676). Yet the link between the two returns again and again, sometimes through queer-coded depictions of excess virility or excess masculinity(*Pirates of the Caribbean*), sometimes through a named same-sex partnership (*Black Sails*), but is rarely given a focus or priority in the construction of the genre.[8] In other words,

> Both piracy and homosexuality have been universally shunned by hegemonic powers in the Western world as their visible presence was deemed to upset the balance of society (Sanna, 2018, p. 8; Kutulas, 2017, p. 146). Piracy was a threat to the integrity of empires and their practices while homosexuality was seen as a threat to the integrity of conventional family life and traditional social roles. (Răzman 3)

Both *Pirates of the Caribbean* and *Black Sails* capitalize on the subversive nature of queerness to add an 'edge' to their narrative, but are bound by the depictions of pirates as villains and anti-heroes and are necessarily deviant. This is not inherently a negative assessment, as piracy is criminal, and in many cases to be queer is to be criminal, as well. But there is even more potential in the figure of the explicitly queer pirate.

Răzman explains that "in British and American film and television, but also in print, the figure of the pirate is a subcategory of the outlaw archetype, a highly ambivalent and subversive character who on one hand commits criminal acts but on the other hand appears heroic and free

[8] Excess gender performance such as hyperfemininty or hypermasculinity is often equated with queeness.

while standing up against oppressive forces, thus turning into a particularly useful archetype for the creation of thrilling adventure stories" (Răzman 9). However, the pirate is not the only ambivalent outlaw who stands in for the pursuit of freedom and independence; the imagery of the outlaw has been co-opted for use by the *Star Wars* franchise in the Rebel Alliance, and Robin Hood is a reoccurring criminal figure who also appears heroic throughout popular culture. Pirates are not even the only outlaws with homosocial tendencies. The quintessential outlaws, the cowboys of the Wild West, were also historically all-male and displayed circumstantial evidence of same-sex relations.[9]

So what about pirates make them the essential vehicle to communicate OFMD queer outlaw storytelling? The role of the ocean as an open, anything-goes space where the horizon is always present cannot be overstated, but it is not the defining difference between the cowboy and the pirate figures.[10] Mackie suggests: "Wild West gunfighters, like early modern pirates, are the glamorous denizens of the frontier; the Caribbean was the first American frontier, the North American West was next," illustrating how the ocean and the "Wild West" frontier have been discussed similarly (Mackie 28). The conception of 'untamed' and 'undiscovered' nature was as much true of the western frontier as the Caribbean Sea, and just as colonial in tone. Rather, what makes pirates different is that there is an required element of community—pirates are not lone rangers or individuals in pursuit of solitary independence, and if a pirate is abandoned by a crew, it is a mark of failure or betrayal. In their attempts to draw a line between the Golden Age Pirates and the media pirates of the 21st century, researchers Dawdy and Bonni came to the conclusion that "no pirate works alone. This is an important fact that has not been sufficiently appreciated in

[9] Robin Hood and the Merry Men are also pretty gay coded in many popular culture depictions (such as *Men in Tights*), but there is always a balancing feminine presence in Maid Marian to lend plausible deniability.
[10] More on this in the Space and Spatiality Chapter.

the literature on piracy due to a leap to legally classify piracy with individually-motivated criminality" (Dawdy and Bonni 675). It is this community aspect that holds together OFMD as a show, and it is their deliberate positioning of the ensemble crew as a form of family that pushes the potential of queer piracy beyond its previous limits.

Fictional Relativity Theory as Cultural Production

The questions I asked earlier—how OFMD creates influence, why that influence is powerful, and how it inspires others to create in turn—are fundamentally all about cultural production, or more specifically, how popular culture influences people and brings them together. Put another way, I was interested in how a work of popular culture, such as OFMD, performs leadership. Kristin Bezio, expanding on the work of Lionel Trilling, suggests "[much like] culture more generally, popular culture engages on multiple levels with contextual social and political concerns, capturing and driving debates on core issues of religion, economics, security and domestic and international politics, as well as questions of personal and relational identity. In short, popular culture provides a distillation of the concerns facing a civilization at a particular sociohistorical moment" (Bezio 2). Each element listed influences the structure of society (materially) and ideology, constituting much of the context that the creators of media texts draw on.[11] Popular media not only reflects the state of the society, but also holds within it the wish to alter (or preserve) it in some way. As such, it can also be used to examine hidden discourses around social tension points. Bezio continues, "at its core, the study of popular culture

[11] Ideology as used in this thesis will refer to the belief systems and structures of society that justify inequality. Ideologies can range from an overarching structure to individual beliefs or myths told to reinforce the overarching structure. Examples include capitalism, colonialism, white supremacy, meritocracy, sexism, cis-heteronormativity, democratism, socialism, liberalism, conservatism, and anarchism. As shown by these examples, ideology can include the structures that people choose or purposefully buy into (such as a system of political beliefs) and structures that organize society at large, but are perhaps rejected by individuals (white supremacy) and structures that people may be unaware that they are buying into or unaware that there are other options (cis-heteronormativity, meritocracy).

is the study of social history through a society's stories—an examination of the ideological dialectic between those with and those without power concealed within fictional and fictionalized representations and narratives of identity" (Bezio 4). Works of culture have the ability to reflect back the cultural ideology of a particular time and place (often reflecting the wish to alter it), and the ability to affect how people behave, think, and create in response.[12] This supports a reading of cultural works as enacting leadership, and aligns with Bezio's assessment of the role popular culture can have in the realm of leadership: "First, and most obviously, it tells us what we expect of—and fear from—our leaders. Second and, we argue, more importantly, the study of popular culture opens up a critical space in which to question the oppressive and exclusive structures in place in our society in the interest of inclusivity and social justice. It is the second of these which we find most valuable to—and, unfortunately, most neglected in—leadership studies" (Bezio 4). Synthesizing and reflecting the surrounding ideology in its creation, providing space to question the dominant ideology using tools such as speculation, and contributing to the formation of ideology along with influencing the actions, thoughts, and behaviors of individual viewers reflects the role and ability of leaders to assess the circumstances, question the status quo, develop strategies to achieve goals, and influence groups.

The reflection of cultural ideology is most often expressed in the world-building aspect of works of culture. World-building refers to the ways that works of fiction (or even forms of nonfiction) form, utilize, and represent the structure of the created world. Any work that depicts a society, whether it is speculative and completely fictional or a work of creative nonfiction,

[12] Works of popular culture reflect the values and ideologies of the time they were made and give indications of the direction the culture is moving towards. There are many ways to asses the popularity of a work of culture, but there is no specific metric that must be met or threshhold that must be crossed in order to qualify as popular culture as opposed to a cult classic, part of highbrow or lowbrow culture, or simply being unpopular. The role of works of culture will be further discussed in the Fanwork, Utopia, and Cultural Production Chapter.

engages with world-building at some level: most narratives inhabit a textual, social, and cultural context differentiated from the 'real world.' This includes social structure elements, such as how hierarchy is organized, what economic systems are in use, and how power is used and represented. It also includes physical world elements (including landforms, bodies of water, regions of geography, how time is organized, etc.) and metaphysical world elements, such as spiritual practices and epistemology. Finally, world-building defines the general boundaries of what is possible in the simulated, often fictional, world of the text.

Many, if not most, ideologies are linked to particular organizations of time and space. These organizations are sometimes figured as prerequisites for the structuring ideology to exist and flourish, and at other times these time-space organizations are in fact produced by the structuring ideologies. For example, capitalism requires and produces an understanding of time as always moving towards progress and the ever-increasing discovery and co-option, conquering, or colonization of space. As such, a work of fiction that relies on capitalism as the predominant economic system in its world-building will likely reflect this progress and expansion imperative in how time and space are organized within the work. Meanwhile, a work that rejects capitalism as an economic system will likely have a different formation of time and space, or the ideals of progress and expansion will be attributed to a different ideology, such as colonialism, which requires a similar organization of spacetime. Ideology as a whole is inescapable, as we are all enveloped within its various forms, but individual ideologies can be consciously examined, negotiated, and rejected. Media and culture do not exist in a vacuum and are affected by the ideologies of the society that produces and consumes them, in large part because the creators are affected by the ideologies with which they exist. As such, the way that a text integrates, resists,

and subverts dominant constructions of spacetime (or space and time) reveals something about the text's structuring ideologies.

There is a shift between replicating a 'real world' space or time period to speculating an alternative version of the spacetime location or even an entirely new spacetime location (though drawn from an amalgamation of ideas about places and time periods and purely speculative elements). Many works of historical fiction can also be considered forms of speculative fiction due to their preoccupation with answering what-if questions and imagining beyond the current confines of the established order. While speculative fiction is typically associated with science fiction or fantasy using supernatural or futuristic elements, historical fiction engages in speculating the past, producing an alternative history beyond our known world, particularly in times and spaces when the historical facts are unknown or only scantily known.

In the realm of speculation, there are nevertheless expectations that the new world will operate on some form of quasi-familiar logic. There are rules, even if we do not understand them, whether they are rules of science or of magic. These rules also extend to social structures and general world-building. Often, these rules are unconscious, constructed from our socially-created assumptions, and we tend to not notice them until they have been broken. Works of historical fiction are typically bound by the rules of 'feeling historical' and matching the dominant ideas about antiquity and progress.[13] As a work of historical fiction, *Bridgerton*, for example, feels rather modern in taste, and includes string covers of contemporary pop songs as opposed to period music. Generally, people do not have trouble with a contemporary soundtrack being used for a historical piece, but *Bridgerton*'s 'color-blind' casting of non-white actors in

[13] For example, to adhere to this rule, the people in the past have to be depicted as 'less advanced' than people in the present to reinforce the idea that we have collectively made progress (technologically, socially inclusive, etc.) over time. This ends up with a lot of representations of historical people being dumb, but in reality, they were just as intelligent and capable as people today, but working with different limitations.

Regency-period aristocratic roles sparked outrage online as the show pushed back against an insidious rule (that Black and Brown people do not exist in historical settings unless they are in positions of subservience). Regardless of the actual history, this 'rule' has traditionally consolidated itself through a continuous loop of predominantly white creators (writers, actors, etc.) creating predominantly white worlds for predominantly white audiences.[14] This reinforces prejudice (in this case, racism, but could be reframed to address homophobia, sexism, etc.) and builds a narrative that Black and Brown people do not have access to historical worlds (at least in non-subservient positions) and have no place sharing their narratives in these contexts.

These unspoken rules of representation extend to ideas about queerness, as well, and pushback about the inclusion of queer characters in historical narratives reveals another false rule: the assumption that queerness and queer people did not exist in the past and are a modern 'invention.'[15] The lack of queer people in historical narrative is both a symptom and a cause of this false belief—throughout much of history, queerness existed in the margins with little, if any, acknowledgment in official historical record due to criminalization. These artificially-created historical absences reproduce and reinforce the false belief that queer people did not exist in the past.

Breaking the 'unspoken' rules and assumptions about history reveals what those rules are and hints at what causes the backlash against breaking them. Despite the general public's idea of history as a collection of facts that build a cohesive story, history has always been a place of

[14] The cycle continues regardless of historical accuracy. There are recorded instances of people of color, principally Black and Brown people, who held upper level social positions in British society, even though slavery was still legal and racism and white supremacy were very much part of the dominant system structure (Robinson).

[15] There is a second discussion over the application of modern terms to historical figures, as ideas and binaries of sex, gender, orientation, etc. are socially constructed and vary across time, place, and culture. Though this point is sometimes raised alongside questioning the presence of queer people in historical narratives, it serves a very different purpose and rises from a different set of concerns.

negotiation (in the way that all storytelling tends to be). The stories we tell are not neutral, nor are the 'facts' we take for granted. Beyond the actual content, the structure of our stories (great individuals, good guys, bad guys, direct causality) influences our expectations about the world and can even change or alter what we hold as 'facts' to fit the narrative. Historical fiction leans into this negotiation even moreso than history as an academic entity, as it does not have to abide by the premise of 'objective truth.' Historical fiction seeks instead to create a 'subjective truth.' Subjective truth does not necessarily rely on the concrete knowledge of the past, but tells a historical story using 'true emotions' or relating it to the contemporary viewer.

Because texts are influenced by the conditions in which they are created, it is important to address and examine the context of the work when analyzing texts. When and where the text was created, what relevant discourses were happening in the world, and what mitigating concepts or associations did those creating and consuming the text have around the setting (place and time) and concepts that the text is concerned with are all relevant points of view in understanding the purpose of a text. As discussed earlier in the Introduction, the organization of time and space within the text indicates something about the ideology of the text and, therefore, how it might be interpreted and put to work in a culture. But the 'real-life' time and space surrounding the text's creation also influence its conception and formation. This thesis will illustrate a new theory of cultural production process, termed ***Fictional Relativity Theory*** (FRT), that turns attention to time and space and integrates them into an examination of a text from its initial conception to production and interpretation as a means of better understanding how that text influences people and culture.

Fictional Relativity concerns itself with primarily works of fiction or works with fictional elements. More important, however, the term 'relativity' lends a particular perspective to the role

of time and space within works of culture. First, it relies on the premise asserted by Einstein's Special Relativity that states that time and space are different ways of quantifying and describing the same phenomenon, and that they are inseparable (Carroll; Tillman et. al.). The interpretations of space-time manifest differently relative to the observers' position. In terms of FRT, the way we depict and understand functions of space and time depend on our context and cultural perspective. Second, it extrapolates from Sandvoss' description of a fandom where "fan objects thus form a field of gravity, which may or may not have an *urtext* at its epicenter" and takes this metaphor seriously, reading it within the context of Einstien's General Relativity that integrates the role of gravity as a force that distorts space and time (Carroll; Sandvoss 23; Tillman et. al.). The original text forms the center of gravity that fan works and other works that reference the original text through allusion orbit around, each with their own gravitational pull. In this way, each text in the system effects the others, but some works have greater pull than others, or have more or fewer response texts surrounding them (which in turn would moderate their gravitational field, as well). Each work of fiction must establish a relationship to space and time within the created world (whether consciously or not), but it can also effect the way that we as readers interact with the text. Quality fiction is often able to (metaphorically) transport readers to another time and place within the story. Another example is being in a 'flow state' where the perceptions of time and space are warped around the object or activity around which the flow is centered. Fictional Relativity Theory provides an approach that synthesizes the metaphor of texts existing in a field of gravity, the ability to understand real and fictional constructions of spacetime as context-specific, and cycles of cultural production and consumption in a single framework.

FRT draws on the work of Edward Soja and his concept of thirdspace, which breaks down the difference between physical space, imagined or representations of space, and lived

space. This framework allows social geographers to make sense of how people interact with the spaces in which they find themselves.

As a tool of social geography, thirdspace theory generates interesting tension when translated to works of film and entertainment. The added layer of fictionality throws the seemingly stable scaffold of physical space, mental space, and lived space into disarray. However, the additional element of imagination and creation does not displace Soja's thirdspace theory, but instead refracts the original thirdspace trio into a cyclical and iterative process of creation (conception-creation-production trio).[16] FRT thereby describes the creative process of a work of media as it undergoes the complex cycle of from conception to completion.[17] In this thesis, the description of the process will use the context of a work of film or tv, but can be transferred to any other method of cultural production.

In the movement and interplay between each layer of creation, there is the possibility for misinterpretation, misunderstanding, and misrepresentation, and, also in each layer, there is some essential aspect lost and some essential aspect gained. The shift through and between each layer may result in a final iteration that is vastly different from the sources that initiated the process.[18] Put another way, FRT describes the play between layers and the ways that creators generate new meaning and ideas from the existing concepts. The flexibility of FRT opens texts up for play, but there must some some engagement on the part of the creators to activate this ability, some commitment to refusing the given narrative and constructions of space and time. The structure allows for both conventional and queered or playful modes of conception, creation, and

[16] It also generates a new trio of equally cyclical and iterative stages of reception (projection-interpretation-inspiration) to explain the newly produced relations as the product (media) is dispersed, to be discussed in the FUCkery Chapter.
[17] The secondary stages of dispersal and reception will be discussed in the FUCkery Chapter.
[18] The second trio will be detailed in the FUCkery Chapter, in which we will understand that the conclusion of the consumption process (second trio) is not a conclusion at all, but is often a cyclical return to the creation process (first trio).

production. The iterative and playful aspect of the FRT is one of its strengths, but it also means that the explanation of the theory is at times circular and potentially non-linear, as there is no true or exact beginning or end.[19]

Conception-Creation-Production

FRT should be understood not as a set of rules, but as a theoretical understanding of the universal (often interactive and non-linear) processes of creation, beginning with conception, moving through (and back and forth with) creation, and concluding with the final production (or productions) of a work of culture.[20] The conception level is the conceived or imagined space. It matches most consistently with Soja's secondspace, but is created in continuous exchanges with the creation level (most closely mapped to Soja's firstspace). The conception level consists of the initial ideas for the setting, including representations or sketches of the set design and the descriptions of a setting for a scene, as well as the connotations that the setting might have for the fictional subjects. In the sense that the setting represents another place—other than the literal, geographical location—the conception level also includes the design of the set, props, and other material and ideological components. It refers to the imaginative aspect of brainstorming and the ability to form ideas about other worlds, places, or times located outside of our own. This aspect is typically created prior to the construction of the actual, physical set in the studio. The conception level is mostly imaginative, though in order to generate the ideas involved in the representation, there is a connection to the outside knowledges of those involved that may reference other real world places or fictional works.[21] Describing these places includes not only

[19] An application of this theory can be found after the explanation of the show.
[20] A particular work—such as a show or novel—must be understood to reach a concluding point at which it becomes static for some amount of time, even if only for a brief moment as in the live performance of a theatrical production. As will be explained in FUCKery chapter, this is when the three-stage process of reception begins, continuing the cycle.
[21] As will be explained later, the process of allusion is, in part, a linkage between the sixth and first layers of the Fictional Relativity cycle.

the mental construction of the physical, but also the mental construction of the social and cultural. The setting represents another place, and places are imbued with meaning beyond the physical construction.

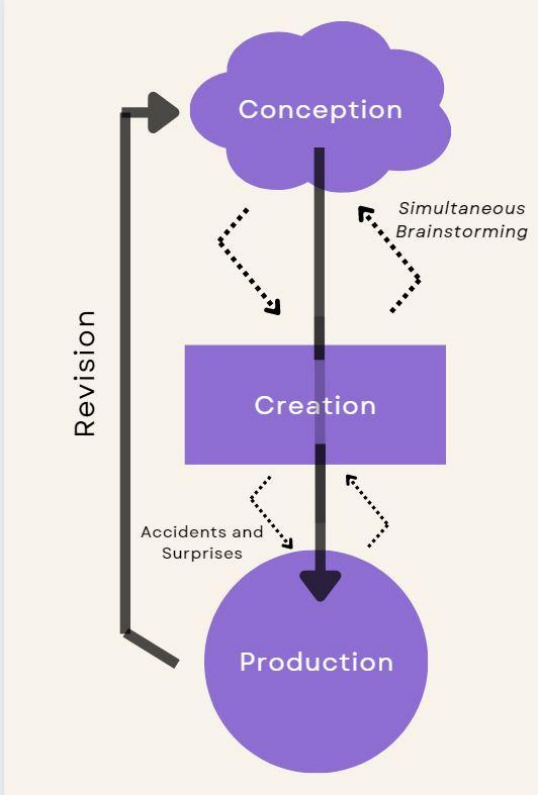
The conception level is in constant conversation and often has significant overlap with the creation level. The creation level consists of the physical location where the filming takes place. This includes the literal landscape and cityscape of the area of the film location and of the set studio. The creation level forms the context for the work; it is concerned with the material conditions of the space in which the filming takes place. One could term this contextual piece as the 'real' world to the conceptual level's 'imaginative' world, but that description obscures nuances that become apparent in their separation. The creation level also includes the physical components of the set (not what it represents, but what it literally *is*) and the physical bodies of the actors and crew working to create the show. It is the structure that brings the conception level into being and continues to inform the concept and brainstorming even as it is built according to the direction offered by the conceptual level.

The conception level also includes how the actors and other creative production members think about the set itself. This could have little to do with the actual story that will be told on the set, or it might be intrinsically connected. More likely, however, the conceptual level also includes ideas about what film studios are used for and what they mean culturally. The translation from the conceptual level to the creation level loses some detail and ephemera aspects, but gains an embodied form that can more easily be shared and understood. The translation from creation to conception loses some definition and precision in depiction (the mental construct will always be inaccurate to the physical construct), but in this translation, the work gains contextual cultural significance.

The conception and creation levels co-constitute and inform each other as separate processes, but together they produce a third level: the production level. The production level is the lived space that brings together the imaginative, material, and human elements (matched most closely with Soja's thirdspace). The production level refers to how people navigate the creation spacetime through the conception spacetime, the process of actually creating the work, and all of the steps involved in creating a finished media object. Using production in both senses (the process of creation and the product of that creative process), the production level includes both the process and the product itself (in the case of works on the stage and screen, typically referred to as 'a production'). It represents how the actors and other people present in the creation of the film process the physical setting they find themselves in through their concepts of the film studio and the design of the set. It might include the improvised moments between actors or real-time directorial suggestions as those involved co-create the production level in the film studio.

The production space covers a large amount of space and time, in part due to the incorporation of the 'backstage' in its scope and the fact that it includes the action and processing aspects of media creation. In a film studio, the camera and act of filming are necessarily part of the lived space and production. As the camera frames the actors in the setting, it focuses the scene, concentrating the meaning behind it. While the edges of the frame are cropped and removed from view, the raw film illustrates the production level in action—it is a recording of people navigating a physical space using their mental schemas. The film is further modified through numerous techniques such as editing, splicing, and video effects. The translation from concept-creation to production results in the loss of individual mental schemas in favor of a more collective significance and the loss of scale and definition of the physical construction in

exchange for the activity of a lived-in space. The production level is the film itself, both the literal digital or analog material that the film is inscribed upon *and* the cultural artifact, including both medium and content. It reintroduces a physical or material object, though perhaps not in the traditional sense of the word relating to a tactile interaction, but as an inscribed idea existing more concretely than an idea in the ether.



The levels of concept, creation, and production can be applied to works on stage and screen due to their interaction between the 'real' and 'fictional' world (though there is no requirement that the narrative be a work of fiction, as even non-fiction depictions rely on the translation between the mental and physical constructs and the production process). No work of culture or media exists in a vacuum, and this framework provides a structure to examine the influence of context, prior knowledge, cultural connotation, and the role of the 'creators' (actors, writers, directors, etc.) on the creation, conception, and production of the texts. With some

adjustment, this framework could also be applied to a wide range of media genres and formats, including textual, plastic, and digital.

To illustrate Fictional Relativity through OFMD, we can see how the show navigates comedic storytelling, historical fiction, and the existence of oppressive systems in episode two, "A Damned Man," where Stede, Black Pete, and Oluwande are captured by native people on an island they previously thought was deserted. This scene can also be used as an example of how FRT, specifically the conception-creation-production trio, can be applied to unlock hidden levels in the scene construction and how the show opens up to its queer potential by going beyond the given.[22]

At some point, David Jenkins or one of the other writers or creative contributors had the idea of having Stede and the crew encounter a native tribe. This idea was likely influenced by myriad narrative examples of white explorers or seafarers encountering Indigenous peoples and enacting the trope of the white savior with relation to uncivilized natives (as has been seen in works such as *Peter Pan* or *Robinson Crusoe*). In the context of the Caribbean, this trope has additional weight as it also reflects the myth of Christopher Columbus 'discovering' the West Indies (what he called the Caribbean, thinking it was close to India) that is used to reinforce colonialization narratives and white supremacy and cover up the genocide of Indigenous peoples, which in turn directly led to the turn to chattel slavery in the Caribbean. Since OFMD is deliberately working against this myth, the writers draw on this original (historical) narrative so that they could subvert and invert it, and they needed to be aware of the history and cultural conceptions of the Caribbean so that they didn't fall into the trap of otherizing the region and reinforcing the system they were trying to question and take down. The actors and set designers

[22] We will return to this scene in the FUCKery Chapter, in an investigation of the second trio of projection, interpretation, and inspiration.

also likely had (and have) their own ideas about the Caribbean, its history, and the 1700s in general. All of these mental constructs contribute to the conception level and the initial idea formation.

The idea formation is then put to work in the creation level. The writers and set designers had to design and build a representation of the Caribbean in a way that is recognizable to the viewers, but that also troubled the dominant colonial narrative of the Caribbean that many people use as their guide post or reference point in recognizing the region. Additionally, the set needed to reflect the Caribbean in the 1700s, which was thought of as a dangerous area, yet also be recognizable relative to viewers' idea of the Caribbean today as a beautiful tourist location. Plus, due to budget and practicality restraints, the series must cue in its setting without using the actual Caribbean as the filming location. It is worth noting OFMD did not film in the Caribbean itself; instead, it filmed the majority of its scenes in California and used footage from the Puerto Rico coastline to reference the Caribbean Sea. Specifically, the scenes on the island where the Indigenous people lived were filmed in Arcadia and Malibu, California (Gokhale). At the production level, the California-based filming locations therefore become combined with the mental construction of the Caribbean to form a fictional or imagined Caribbean of the alternate history where OFMD takes place.

While there is always an initial idea, or introduction of the conception level, that starts the process, the conception and creation and even production levels are constantly exchanging and overlapping. As someone transforms an idea (concept) into a physical expression of the idea (creation), there are often new ideas that form in response or as a reaction to the new physical form (or its constraints). In this case, the order of the scene's conception, creation, and production is less important than the idea that these (conception, creation, production) are layers

that frequently function simultaneously.[23] Not only does this specific scene in OFMD consolidate ideas about the Caribbean and the 1700s into a fictional representation expressed qua places in California, but it also negotiates ideas of indigeneity. Indigenous peoples and cultures are vastly different in different parts of the world, but for many white settlers in the 1700s and too many white viewers today, these nuances and differences are often collapsed into a one-dimensional patchwork caricature of indigenity. OFMD shows Stede and the crew encountering Indigenous people, but they are not actually representative of people native to the Caribbean area. The character they interact with most as the representative of the tribe is named Chief Mabo, played by Gary Farmer. The name 'Chief Mabo' suggests an entirely different (and unknown to most American or European audiences) Indigenous history; specifically, it invokes the Mabo v. Queensland decision about aboriginal land rights in Australia and the legacy of Eddie Koiki Mabo, a Torres Strait Islander (Loos). Mabo v. Queensland was the case that legally returned the rights of Aboriginal land to the Indigenous people who lived there prior to the imposition of white settlers and is a landmark case in Indigenous Australian history (National Museum Australia). This history is brought to the forefront of the conception level of OFMD through the naming of the character, but is reinforced by the creation level—the setting and costumes reinforce this association due to their approximation of the dress and building construction of the Mabo people. Considering that director Taika Waititi is a Maori person from New Zealand, it is extremely likely that the Mabo decision would be part of his conception level influences, which in turn would impact the creation level and representation of native peoples in OFMD in the production level.

While the production level also includes how the actors and creators feel about existing in

[23] That said, one must always first *have* an idea (conception) before the other stages can begin, even if there is frequent fluctuation, overlap, and play between them during the creation and production processes.

the space mediated by their own ideas about the space, this process is generally internal and something to which viewers do not have access to unless the actor shares what they were thinking at the time. It also includes all of the improv, backstage negotiations, and editing that goes on behind the scenes, and which the viewer typically doesn't see, either. For our practical purposes of analyzing the scene, the production level describes the scene action as the viewer receives it: in episode two, "A Damned Man," the Revenge is grounded on an island, and Stede, Black Pete, and Oluwande are captured by a tribe of Indigenous people. Or rather, Stede and Black Pete are captured, but Oluwande is offered a piña colada.[24] When Stede and Black Pete realize they are prisoners, the conversation with their guard starts off with Stede saying, "Oh you speak English, wonderful" ("A Damned Man" 0:13:17). The racist-colonial microaggressions (and straight-up aggressions) just get worse when Stede and Black Pete assume the tribe has strung up the hostages to eat them, and Black Pete exclaims "Christ, you savages!" ("A Damned Man" 0:13:30). The guard says under his breath "fucking racists!" summarizing the situation quite succinctly ("A Damned Man" 0:13:40). Additionally, the scene as a whole shows Indigenous people depicted in mostly accurate settings to the culture that is named (via the reference to Mabo and the Torres Strait Islanders), though displaced in both space and time, as well as with modern trappings, language, and ideas. Indigenous people are in the past and the present, and, with reference to the show's vantage point and our own, in the future, as well. While many, many factors influence the concept, creation, and production levels, conceptions of space-time often run through and are affected by all of them as they are the predominant methods of organization we use to make sense of our world. Throughout the production process, time and space constitute important axes that can be used to orient the text towards or away from a ideology, so the approach of this thesis will focus on those elements specifically as a way to

[24] It is worth noting that piña coladas had not yet been invented in the 1700s.

reveal something larger about what the text has to say about the world (real and fictional) and how it works.

Approach

Given the importance of space and time to the concept of Relativity—whether in physics or fiction—it is particularly important for us to consider OFMD's use (and misuse) of both space and time from conception through creation and production. The ways that we have come to expect constructions of space and time to be depicted and dealt with in media have changed greatly across culture and throughout history. OFMD continues the tradition of redefining these expectations to communicate a new kind of narrative, and it particaptes in this process in a way that queers the convention—undermining hierachies, binaries, boundaries, and narratives of expansion and progress.

According to the Classical tradition explained in Aristotle's *Poetics*, plays (the precursors to film and television) should take place 'in real time' and 'in real place'—the narrative should unfold in the length of time the audience was present, and the location remain stable within a single room or environment, with characters coming on and off of the stage as needed, but the central narrative should remain rooted in an active experience of time and place. As the kinds of stories being told in theaters (and, later, on screens) changed, scenes shifted location, and time became unmoored from the active time experience of the audience—now stories are often told across time, using memory and simultaneous action, and across space. The invention of film in particular allowed for a disjointed experience of narrative, as no longer would the audience be gathered in a single location to experience the story in real time, but, instead, film allowed for wider repetition and dissemination (for playing in theaters). Film in general, as a medium, is therefore ideally suited for manipulating temporality and spatiality.

Shared location fractured with broadcast TV (and radio) as people could experience television media in united time, but in their own homes. As technology improved, the audience could watch films outside of a shared experience entirely with VHS tapes (and later DVDs)—and rewind and replay as many times as they wanted. This dispersal continued with the spread of streaming and internet-based access, which further democratized and dispersed the genre of work that is classified as 'time-based media'—which includes anything with an audio and/or visual component that changes across time. Time-based media includes films, movies, TV shows, podcasts, and time-based visual or auditory art pieces. Modern TV shows produce a certain relationality to time that allows for a break with 'real time' experiences that is partially due to the ability of the viewer to completely control their experience of the story—how quickly they are able to consume it, going so far as to 'binge' watch the show or consume it in its entirety, the ability to pause and play and rewind at will, and the ability to watch out of context—separating one or a few episodes away from the collection. This fractured the previously rigid, regimented, and sequenced constructs of time and space that had been built up (and slowly broken down) since Aristole, and, in in the gaps and overlaps, a more fluid and viewer-centered, and in many ways, a more queer experience of media consumption emerged.

While many dominant structures and systems require rigid experiences of space and time that prioritize understandings of progress (capitalism) and binaries (heteronormativity, cisnormativity, and white supremacy), these understandings are only a few of many potential options available to explain and explore space and time. The separation of space and time is artificially constructed, as Einstein's theory of relativity explains, they are two expressions of the same phenomena divided only for our convenience: spacetime/timespace (Carroll; Tillerman et. al.). Additionally, our human experiences of space and time do not often match the artificial

constraints we have put on them in an effort to measure and organize the universe.[25] No one is ever truly in only one space and time, but is always negotiating several overlaps (or gaps) between spacetimes and timespaces. Whether that is the simultaneous experience of physical and mental space, or the ability to exist in one point in time while conceptualizing another via memory or forward-thinking, or some cross-spatial cross-temporal experience, one always exists in a multiplicity of spaces and times. Adding fictional worlds to the mix allows for people to engage a desire for otherwise space and otherwise time (or a rejection of such) beyond their own experiences, a desire for the otherwise being a principally queer mode in the formulations of José Muñoz.[26] As constructed texts, fictional media both reflect the dominant ideology and often offer a critique or resistant response to some aspect of it. This is often incorporated into the text as a result of the creators' intentions and deliberate (or indeliberate) messaging attempts or in how the audience interprets the texts. Since ideology shapes how we think about (or do not think about) the concepts that we take for granted and structures how we understand how the world works, it also influences (and allows for the queering of) understandings of spacetime. We apply these understandings to the 'real world' as we experience it, but we also unconsciously and consciously apply them to the words we create in fiction in the process of world-building.

As such, the way that a text integrates and deals with space and time reveals something about the text's structuring ideology or the ways that it resists and subverts the dominant

[25] The adage "time flies when you are having fun" is an excellent example of this phenomenon: the experience of time varies according to what actions and feelings are happening within the measured allotment. An hour with friends goes by much faster than an hour doing unpleasant chores or taxes. Similarly, the length of something varies according to our experiences of the particular measured space. A mile walking in the rain or uphill or going somewhere unpleasant feels much longer than walking in the sun or downhill or going somewhere exciting (keeping same amount of time to walk from point A to point B) even though the space covered is the same.

[26] See more on Muñoz in both the Time and Temporality Chapter and Space and Spatiality Chapter.

constructions of timespace and spacetime. For example, an explorer's narrative (consider even *Treasure Island*) that uses tropes of *bildungsroman*, consistent future-oriented progress, and the discovery of wild, untamed, land has some adherence to, is complicit with, and even reinforces structuring ideologies of colonialism, white supremacy, cisheteronormativity, and capitalism. Comparatively, a work like *Framing Agnes* splices historical reenactment with contemporary narrative and reflection, mixing up the antiquated and modern spaces, recasting and scattering the talk-show format in order to tell a documentary-style blend of fiction, non-fiction, and archive story of a group of trans people in the 50s alongside the stories of the trans cast (Joynt). In scattering, splicing, and rewriting spacetime, the film attempts to subvert and resist cisnormativity, heteronormativity, and white supremacy in favor of a trans-centric mode of storytelling that engages queer temporality and queer spatiality, or rather, queer spatial-temporality. OFMD relies on similar scattering and overlapping of space-time to engage in queer storytelling that resists and troubles the dominant constructions and expectations of time-space, especially in historical fiction.

A Spacetime/Timespace Compass

While it is clear that spacetime/timespace is truly just one concept, inextricably linked, this thesis breaks it apart (insofar as that is possible) into time and space. Separating the two to focus on one at a time allows for a magnified look at the expression of each phenomenon in order to bring out nuances that would be obscured in an attempt to study them simultaneously. In dividing them, time and space are each brought into high-definition focus, emphasizing their effects. As separating the two is an artificial distinction, there is no given order to reading the chapters on time and space, nor in fact, is there a requirement to read these chapters prior to the FUCkery Chapter. This interchangeable approach is not to suggest that the concepts or

arguments are fungible in such that they are replaceable—every chapter of this thesis is, in fact, necessary for a full explanation of the theory and application. But in an effort to reflect the agency of the readers and viewers in their engagement with texts, this thesis is set up to encourage a queer(ed) reading that mimics the cyclical and overlapping nature of the argument. There is a starting point (to follow the metaphor, the north arrow on the compass) to orient the reader and provide them with a wayfinder, but the direction the reader takes from this point is their own (and they are welcome, and at times encouraged, to return to the 'starting' point throughout the journey). It is entirely possible to read any of the three chapters after the Introduction, and while the choice will certainly affect the reading experience, there is no prescribed correct manner of navigation. To that extent, there will also be frequent footnote references to material throughout the thesis, to allow for a more interconnected (or tangled) reading making use of short journeys to other chapters where concepts might be better outlined or cross-temporospatially connected.

The introduction (this chapter) offers an overview of the show and related concepts while also outlining the initial stages of Fictional Relativity Theory. These initial stages concern the levels of conception, creation and production. This section also provides—here—an overview or 'broken compass' that explains the possible directions a reader might choose to take while navigating the remainder of the thesis.

The remainder of FRT is explained in the FUCkery Chapter, specifically focusing on the projection, interpretation, and inspiration phases. The FUCkery Chapter also addresses the online community-building aspect of the OFMD fandom as an expression of the inspiration level, and zeros in on the leadership potential of texts that imagine grounded utopias. This chapter also discusses the idea that integrating transtemporality, transpatiality, anachronism, liminality, and

the overlapping nature of spacetime allows for a multiply-oriented, queerer narrative, queerer way of being, and queerer method of interacting with the world and its structuring elements.

In Time and Temporality, I argue that engaging queer temporality, via what I call integrated and metaleptic anachronism, creates spaces for inclusion for both queer characters and queer viewers. OFMD draws viewers and characters alike out-of-time, and in the displacement, is able to reaffirm the utopian impulse.

In Space and Spatiality, I argue that the show disrupts land vs. ocean binaries through its consistent engagement with liminality, expressed in thresholds, horizons, and in-between spaces, and positions Stede's Ship, The Revenge, as out-of-place even within a wider outcast collective, again reinforcing a utopian impulse. In doing so, the show undermines and resists narratives of the coming-of-age chronicle, historic periodization, and binary 'versus' storytelling, and proposes a queer-centric approach.

This thesis uses OFMD to illustrate the ability of FRT to unpack a text according to constructs of space-time and the translations from the creation process and and interpretation process, but it is also serves an example of the ways that texts can operate within the structure to encourage and engage with queer potential. OFMD pushes the boundaries and expectations in every step of FRT, from messing with constructs and expectations of time and space, to encouraging queer play and new kinds of engagement with fan communities in the second half of FRT's cultural production process. This flexibility and playfulness is part of what makes OFMD an exemplary text to examine not only the ways that FRT can reproduce conventional narrative and ideology (by showing how it refuses these conventions), but also the ways that queerneness intwines with the (fan) responses to texts, what we do with them, and how we make them our own.

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