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### The Queer Representation Equation

Growing up without a role model, without someone in whom you see parts of your identity and personality is extremely detrimental to someone's acceptance of themselves. The queer community, along with many other disenfranchised communities, has experienced this thoroughly. Throughout the presence of the film industry in our world, there has been a severe lack of queer representation, actors, and characters alike. Despite this shortcoming, when there is representation, such films far too often fail to ethically cast and produce positive stories concerning queer people and queer relationship structures. Unsurprisingly, heterosexual actors claim queer roles in film and television more often than queer actors do. *Call Me By Your Name*, directed by Luca Guadagnino in 2017, is one of the highest-praised queer films to date. The film follows a youthful and lively queer romance between Elio (Timothée Chalamet) and Oliver (Armie Hammer). Due to both Chalamet's and Hammer's heterosexuality, their relationship with their characters is labeled "misaligned." Even with this misalignment, the film was a major success, reaching and resonating with a large audience of both heterosexual and homosexual viewers. Along with the success of the film was intense backlash; some viewers believed that only gay actors should play gay characters, creating a very divided and dangerous discussion environment. The argument surrounding the misalignment of a character's and actor's sexual orientation in the film industry is complicated and strenuous to discuss. If the film industry can

re-evaluate its portrayal of the queer identity and require the practice of consultation, positive queer representation can flourish in the coexistence of misaligned and aligned characters.

The queer identity is incredibly nuanced and essentially impossible to grasp entirely unless you exist within it. The word queer, defined as a gender or sexual identity that differs from the gender and sexual normatives present in society, reduces the depths of what the queer identity is to: not heterosexual and not cisgender. Alfred L. Martin Jr., author of the article “The Queer Business of Casting Gay Characters on U.S. Television” conducted interviews with different actors and casting directors involved in the portrayal of queer characters in television and film to approach this issue. Martin exemplifies the depth of the queer identity and claims that the film industry has contributed to a “devaluation of queerness as a discrete and important identity category...” (Martin 285). He continues to argue that queerness must be recognized as an identity category alongside race, gender, and ethnicity, to approach ethical and positive queer representation (Martin 294). With the infinite amount of sexual and romantic preferences present on the spectrum of sexuality and the various gender identities publicly claimed, it is necessary to acknowledge the vastness of the queer identity. But, with that immeasurable count of identities, it becomes impossible to comprehend the queer identity without being a part of it yourself.

When queer people play queer characters, labeled as “alignment,” they bring their authentic experience into their character, creating a more reality-based performance. No matter how fantastical or unrealistic the narrative that the character exists within is, the queer actors’ immersion of their lived experience creates a solid and truthful character. Rob Cover, a professor at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT), conducted a study on Australian screen stakeholders and audience members to determine their perspectives on the ethicality of straight actors playing queer characters. In his article “Straight and Cisgender Actors Playing Queer and

Trans Characters: The Views of Australian Screen Stakeholders” he discovered four main perspectives from the participants, categorizing them as those against misalignment, those for misalignment, those who introduce the practice of consultation, and those who condemn the stakeholders behind the camera for the subpar representation. Cover, in his research, finds that many stakeholders believe queer characters’ identities should be aligned with the actor due to the honesty and authenticity they provide. He claims that alignment provides lived experience into the role, which can “bring nuanced social contexts to narratives of identity that are otherwise excluded from ‘ordinary’ public knowledge frameworks” (Cover). For viewers, accuracy in the portrayal of characters in minority groups is immensely important. Being exposed to people like oneself in mainstream media benefits the younger audience in accepting themselves in the unfortunately hateful society present. With the queer actors’ reality-based performance, they accurately portray queer characters and therefore uplift queer representation in the film industry.

Unfortunately, the systemic disadvantages queer actors experience deny them the opportunity to have a positive impact. They deserve equitable employment opportunities to contribute to the representation of their community. When comparing the number of heterosexual actors cast in queer roles against the number of queer actors cast in queer roles, the data skews heavily towards the former. Martin finds that casting director Lilienfield, *Grace & Frankie*, shifts the blame to the queer actor for their lack of employment, arguing ““there are plenty of young gay actors who are not getting work for reasons other than them being gay”” (Martin 287). She extracts the systemic issue from the equation of unfair casting practices and twists it into her own homophobic prejudices. Cover’s argument opposes Lilienfield, introducing data from *Screen Australia*, proving that “90% of LGBTQ roles were filled by actors who did not meet that background” (Cover). The alignment of queer characters occurring a mere ten percent of the time

exemplifies the incredibly homophobic prejudices in the industry. He continues to argue that “half of the people who get the lead gay roles...seem to be the guys who get all the work anyway” (Cover). Cover recognizes and holds the industry accountable for its unethical casting practices and specifically the prioritization of straight actors in all roles. Charles Kaiser, author of the New York Times article “Should Straight Actors Play Gay? A Star TV Writer Says No” examines the writer Russel Davies and his stances on this cultural issue. Davies’ statements support Cover’s argument by adding that queer actors have been “systematically excluded from straight roles” (Kaiser 3). This exclusion is primarily revealed within “best actor discourse,” when one primarily casts queer characters based on whoever is the apparent “best actor” and ignores their identity wholly (Cover). Since straight actors hold dominance in the population of actors, they have a higher probability of claiming queer roles through “best actor discourse.” There is no justification for the lack of queer employment in the industry, but when heterosexual actors are cast far more often in queer roles, denying opportunities for queer actors, a clear flaw in the industry’s casting practices is uncovered. Requiring alignment, therefore, would ensure queer actors’ employment, but solely in queer roles.

Casting only with the intention of alignment, though, is itself homophobic and contributes to the worsening of the queer image in media. While queer actors are disadvantaged and do require equitable employment opportunities, ensuring queer actors’ employment by marking queer characters as “theirs” introduces the discourse of type-casting. Type-casting, when a casting director’s primary motive in their practice is to align the identities of the actor and character, ignores the actors’ talent and judges them based on who they are on paper exclusively. Even with the territorial view on roles, casting directors unethically utilize queer actors with intentions far away from promoting queer acceptance in society. Martin finds that Greenberg, the

*Modern Family* casting director, intended to cast a gay actor as Cam, the more flamboyant partner in the central queer couple in the show. By casting a queer actor in the “stereotypically feminine” role, he contributes to amplifying homophobic stereotypes immersed in society by associating the queer actor with the “existing tropes of ‘real world’ gay men” (Martin 291). The problem does not lie within the character being “stereotypically gay,” but rather the act of taking advantage of gay actors to neutralize backlash when creating stereotypically gay characters. Casting directors believe the “representation is unable to be considered ‘offensive’ because a gay man is embodying the otherwise flamboyant role” (Martin 289). Further, Martin discovers the frequency of straight actors cast in masculine-coded queer roles, revealing that many casting directors assume queer actors are unable to “play it straight” (Martin 285). He claims that there is a “set of ideological assumptions that pre-determine the kinds of actors who can be considered...” (Martin 292). Casting directors and screen stakeholders both hold prejudices with the belief that gay actors cannot possibly act masculine or heterosexual, but continue to argue that straight actors can act queer. This contradictory stance shows that queer actors, even when prioritized for queer roles, are therefore excluded from heterosexual roles and are taken advantage of to protect the creators of media from homophobic allegations.

On a different route, when straight actors are cast in queer roles, they partake in homophobic and unethical practices when learning about and discussing their characters. Some of the primary steps actors follow in the process of researching their roles include gaining an understanding of their character’s identity, desires, and motivations. This research, when a straight actor plays a queer character, implies the actor’s reliance on stereotypes existing in the media to become their character. Kathleen Battles and Martin, authors of the article “The Straight Labor of Playing Gay” dive directly into the unethical process of straight actors preparing for

their portrayal of queer characters. Battles and Martin argue that straight actors primarily use stereotypes to become their characters, whether they intend to or not. Eric Stonestreet, the straight actor who plays Cam in *Modern Family*, describes that his preparation for his portrayal of a gay character can be summed up by his outfit and hairstyle (Martin 291). This reduction of queerness to physical features diminishes its true complexity and value. One cannot just “put on gay,” as queerness lacks a distinct physical attribute and holds generations of development and individual queer experiences. Battles and Martin additionally uncover a “possessive investment in straightness,” which is the industry’s and audience’s “willingness to help these actors reassert their claims to heterosexuality” (Battles and Martin 128). Straight actors on press tours heavily emphasize a separation between themselves and their queer characters. On an episode of *Ellen*, actors Chalamet and Hammer from *Call Me By Your Name* contribute to this “distancing” of themselves from their characters. In their interview, they infuse humor into the conversation surrounding their intimate scenes, therefore “positioning intimacy between men as something ‘unnatural’” (Battles and Martin 134). Heath Ledger and Jake Gyllenhaal, the actors portraying a violent and masculine queer romance in *Brokeback Mountain*, enforce similar tactics to distance themselves from their roles. Ledger admits to consuming 12 beers before playing his role, again pairing homosexuality with something “wrong” (Battles and Martin 136). Straight actors continuously work to distance themselves from the queerness in their characters, but no such effort has been shown when playing other roles. Ledger, for example, utilized the practice of method acting when preparing for his role as The Joker in *The Dark Knight*, directed by Christopher Nolan. Unfortunately leading to his death, he did not actively separate himself from the psychopathic murderer he played, but for some reason had to stray away from the queerness of his character in *Brokeback Mountain*. This hypocritical practice exemplifies the unethicity of

straight actors' portrayal of queer characters and their negative influence on the queer community.

Nevertheless, the most popular queer media today contains queer characters primarily portrayed by actors misaligned with their character's identities like *Call Me By Your Name* and *Brokeback Mountain*. Even with misalignment, one cannot immediately assume the representation is faulty and harmful. While unethical practices in the actors' preparation for their characters are present, the widespread positive impact these films had on queer representation cannot be ignored. Tyler Quick, author of the article "The Queer Public and its Problem with Representation" strictly analyzes the representation and impact of the films *Call Me By Your Name* and *Brokeback Mountain*. One of Quick's interviewees claims that the film "'captured and reified my experiences of loving and desiring'" and that "'until I saw an approximation of them represented... felt impossible to put into words or represent...'" (Quick 28). *Call Me By Your Name*, in some ways, accurately portrayed the queer experience with misalignment. A straight actor playing a gay character does not automatically suggest that the representation is subpar, especially with *Call Me By Your Name*'s heavily apparent success within the queer community. But, with this success, one must continue to recognize the unfair casting and employment practices present in the pre-production stage of queer films.

Straight actors' obstruction of queer actors' employment is extremely unethical, but preventing straight actors from queer roles also smudges the line of discrimination, introducing an even more complex argument in favor of straight actors. The new interpretation of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prevents discrimination based on sexual orientation in terms of employment, which must be applied to straight actors as well. Kaiser finds that Davies, who has previously cast straight actors in queer roles, argues that straight actors should never be considered for queer

roles. He states that straight people should reject gay roles, but that an exception can be made if “a marquee name were the only way he could get a production financed,” contributing to the discrimination of an actor because of their sexual orientation (Kaiser 3). Davies’ stance, at its core, is pro-gay employment until he needs money to work on a project, revealing queer representation does not truly matter to him. But, ignoring that argument, why should an actor be prevented from playing a character who does not identify the same as oneself? Straight actor Stanley Tucci, who has portrayed many queer characters including in the film *The Devil Wears Prada*, agrees with Davies to an extent. He alternatively states that ““acting is all about not being yourself... if we were to use that as a template, we would only ever play ourselves”” (Kaiser 3). Cover similarly notes an interview with Cate Blanchett, her making the argument ““I hope that all my career I’m playing roles that I’m not”” (Cover). It is illogical to disallow actors from pursuing their careers, playing characters who are different from themselves is the entire basis of acting. Further, preventing straight actors from playing queer roles ignites discrimination based on sexual orientation and would not result in the improvement of queer representation in the industry. Casting ethically is far too complex to approach with the simplistic exclusion of straight actors.

The practice of consultation engages the issue of queer representation and casting from an overarching point of view and would allow both straight and queer actors to play queer characters, with restrictions. Consultation would occur in the presence of an actor misaligned with their character, requiring the actor to discuss and research (consult) their queer character with someone of similar background to their character. Cover explains that the practice of consultation has many benefits, including the advancing of positive queer representation and the consistent inclusion of queer people in the making of queer media. Consultation is “sensitive to



the news of a minority community” and has ensured that the queer people consulted were paid for their participation (Cover). It avoids the prior failures that the conclusions of solely alignment or misalignment propose. Consultation avoids discrimination based on sexual identity, unfailingly allows the participation of queer people in queer media, and results in positive, accurate queer representation.

This analysis thus expresses that the ethicality of straight actors playing queer characters cannot be determined by the simple conclusions of pro-alignment or pro-misalignment. If one concludes that the alignment of characters should be required, their practice discriminates against heterosexual actors, influences type-casting, and permits harmful messages to be subliminally embedded into queer media without backlash. Allowing misalignment with no boundaries, though, opens a gateway for the pushing of stereotypes, the lack of accurate queer representation, and the increase of unemployed queer actors. The only plausible approach is for those who participate within the industry and the industry itself to re-evaluate their perspectives and practices concerning queer casting and representation within film. The film industry must allow queer stakeholders to collaborate with heterosexual stakeholders to set boundaries and requirements for straight actors playing queer characters and continue to open opportunities for queer actors. With this in mind, the portrayal of queer characters and the production of queer representation positively and ethically can ensue.

## Works Cited

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