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# **Bending the Elementary**

*Queering Gender and Sexuality in Avatar: The Last Airbender and Beyond*

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Bachelor of Arts in  
Media Studies at Vassar College.

By

Sophia Blush

Thesis Advisor:

Alexander M. Kupfer, Visiting Assistant Professor of Film

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## I. Introduction

### *Introducing Avatar: the Last Airbender and The Legend of Korra*

*Avatar: the Last Airbender (ATLA)* is an American animated television series, originally airing on Nickelodeon from 2005-2008. The show is set in a world where some people have the ability to manipulate (or ‘bend’) one of the four elements- water, earth, air, or fire. The series follows Aang, the 12 year old Avatar who is also the last surviving airbender, as well as his friends Katara, Sokka, and, in seasons 2 and 3, Toph, as they embark on a quest to train Aang in each form of bending with the ultimate goal of stopping the imperialist Fire Nation’s war against the other nations. It also follows the story of Zuko, the exiled prince of the Fire Nation, on his quest to capture the Avatar. Later, as Aang becomes more of a threat to the Fire Nation, Zuko’s sister, Azula, accompanied by her female chronies, joins the mission to capture him. *The Legend of Korra (TLOK)* is the sequel to *ATLA*, with four seasons running from 2012-2014. It’s lead character is Korra, the avatar of the generation following Aang. The show is known for depicting the first canonically queer relationship on children’s animated television, taking place between Korra and another leading character, Asami, in the series finale.

### *Judith Butler’s Heterosexual Matrix; Theoretical Precedents on Gender and Sexuality*

Historically, gender and feminist theorists have assumed that there is a binary gender system, where gender and sex are inextricably tied together. This would mean that “gender mirrors sex or is otherwise restricted by it”<sup>1</sup>. This ideology remains the hegemonic understanding of sex and gender, in some form or another, throughout the world. In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler argues that gender is performative, “produced and compelled by the regulatory practices

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<sup>1</sup>Judith Butler. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. (New York: Routledge, 2006), 9.

of gender coherence”<sup>2</sup>. Gender is something that one *does*, not *has*. This means that gender is something that is taught; universally, boys and girls are raised differently and learn different patterns of behavior. These patterns become inextricably linked to femininity and masculinity, and it is through this lens that meaning is formed.

Because it implies that gender roles can be deconstructed and stripped of meaning, this is the theoretical framework that this thesis relies on. Media, including children’s television, plays a role in the formation and teaching of gender; it follows that television shows like *Avatar: The Last Airbender* that subvert hegemonic ideologies can play a role in their deconstruction. The social construction of gender is crucial to understanding the hegemonic system of assumed heterosexuality that defines contemporary social systems. Judith Butler’s ‘heterosexual matrix’ states the relationship between gender roles and heterosexual practices clearly; in *Gender Trouble*, Butler, drawing from the work of other feminist theorists, attempts to

“characterize a hegemonic discursive/epistemic model of gender intelligibility that assumes that for bodies to cohere and make sense there must be a stable sex expressed through a stable gender... that is oppositionally and hierarchically defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality”<sup>3</sup>.

Butler’s work, along with feminist scholars such as Monique Wittig and Adrienne Rich, argues that to adhere to the socially constructed understanding of gender is inherently to adhere to the practice of heterosexuality, because part of what defines the feminine is the sexual desire for the masculine, and vice versa. She therefore makes the argument that to separate oneself from heterosexuality is to remove oneself from the heterosexual matrix. In other words, to separate oneself from heterosexuality is also to remove oneself from hegemonic perceptions of gender.

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<sup>2</sup> Judith Butler. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. (New York: Routledge, 2006), 34.

<sup>3</sup> Butler 208.

Consequently, acts of stigmatizing relating to non-heterosexual practices “in order to privilege heterosexuality,” referred to as “sexual othering,” are common or even necessary in a society that is reliant on maintaining its heteronormative status quo.<sup>4</sup> This concept is reflected across children’s television through the privileging of heteronormative characters and character traits, and consequently the trivialization or even villainization of characters that break from gendered stereotypes.

### *Constructing Gender Through Television*

There is a “general agreement” among researchers that the “media are a socializing force that have significant influence on how we learn to define ourselves and others by our gender and so develop our subjectivities about our own and others’ gender.”<sup>5</sup> This is especially prevalent in children’s media, because children learn about the world through the media they consume and the games that they play; they learn who to identify as, who to relate to, who to imitate, and how to make meaning. Assuming gender is a construction, a “product of ‘social technologies’” that include media texts, gender stereotypes presented in children’s television define societal understandings of what gender is.<sup>6</sup> For example, children who watch more television are more likely to endorse or believe in traditional gender roles, which indicates a direct correlation between consuming television and defining gender.<sup>7</sup> Presentation of certain values by media texts

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<sup>4</sup> Brian L. Ott and Robert L. Mack. “Queer Analysis.” *Critical Media Studies: An Introduction, Second Edition*. (Wiley, 2013), 217.

<sup>5</sup> Dafna Lemish. *Screening Gender on Children's Television: The Views of Producers Around the World*. 1st ed. (London; Routledge, 2010), 8.

<sup>6</sup> Lemish 7.

<sup>7</sup> Rebecca Martin. “Gender and Emotion Stereotypes in Children’s Television.” *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 61 (3) (2017), 501.

“may serve as a significant contribution to reinforcement and internalization as well as normalization and legitimization of the current social structure and its underlying patriarchal ideology.”<sup>8</sup> Due to the existence of the heterosexual matrix, by reinforcing gender stereotypes, media inherently also reinforce heteronormative stereotypes. Television therefore has the power to impact great change or to uphold traditional standards, both in positive and in deeply damaging ways. When children are not represented on television, or if they see their identity represented as something that is bad or evil, it ingrains in them the notion that they must form an identity that more closely corresponds to what is seen by ‘good’ as society.

There are certain gender stereotypes which are commonly presented as fact in televisual media, supporting the concept of the gender binary and perpetuating the idea that many societal roles and characteristics are divided on gender lines. Stereotypes associated with men, or masculine stereotypes, are “defined by power, significance, agency, and social influence.”<sup>9</sup> They are associated with the public sphere, defined by ‘doing,’ and identified by “characteristics such as action, rationality, forcefulness, aggressiveness, ambitiousness, competitiveness, achievement, higher social status, and humor.”<sup>10</sup> Stereotypes of femininity exist on the complete opposite end of the spectrum, “defined by powerlessness, insignificance, passiveness, and limited control.”<sup>11</sup> Girls are additionally “associated with ‘being,’” placed in the private sphere, and are “characterized, generally, as passive, emotional, caregiving, childish, sexy, subordinate to males,

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<sup>8</sup> Dafna Lemish. *Screening Gender on Children's Television: The Views of Producers Around the World*. 1st ed. (London; Routledge, 2010), 15.

<sup>9</sup> Ott, Brian L. and Robert L. Mack. “Queer Analysis.” *Critical Media Studies: An Introduction, Second Edition*. (Wiley, 2013), 198.

<sup>10</sup>Lemish 1

<sup>11</sup>Ott and Mack 198



and of lower social status.”<sup>12</sup> These stereotypes often function as dichotomies; for example, masculine action opposes feminine inaction, while the feminine domestic sphere counters the masculine public sphere. Within the heterosexual matrix, feminine and masculine are, themselves, complete opposites of one another. This ideology assumes that when two people come together as a heterosexual couple, they complete one another.

As media most often adheres to the most heteronormative depiction of society, genders and sexualities that lay outside of this matrix have a difficult time existing within children’s television. As television has such an influence on our perception of gender and sexuality, it defines what gender means in the first place. Media then has to maintain its own constructed ideology to preserve success and viewership, creating a cycle in which gender is a construct taught to children largely for capitalist motivations.

For the purposes of this thesis, it is particularly important to note the dichotomy of public/private spheres and doing/being. These common distinctions place emphasis on women in the role of caretaker, concerned with the nurturance of others. Additionally, because the public sphere is associated with action, areas such as “technology, action or fighting are almost always framed as male, hence reinforcing viewer expectations of masculine dominance in these domains”<sup>13</sup>. The final distinction between female and male stereotypes that is important to note is the coding of “logic as a masculine trait and emotion as a feminine one”<sup>14</sup>. Because femininity is

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<sup>12</sup> Dafna Lemish. *Screening Gender on Children's Television: The Views of Producers Around the World*. 1st ed. (London; Routledge, 2010), 2.

<sup>13</sup>Lemish 2.

<sup>14</sup> Brian L. Ott and Robert L. Mack. “Queer Analysis.” *Critical Media Studies: An Introduction, Second Edition*. (ed. Wiley, 2013), 201.

so closely connected to family and caregiving, it is in turn defined by the emotion and irrationality that these subjects are also associated with.

This thesis investigates the ways in which *Avatar: the Last Airbender* (2005-2008) either upholds or subverts the dichotomies of gender and, consequently, of sexuality, by analyzing specific characters and storylines. It also looks at the implications of these portrayals. The influence of Nickelodeon's corporate strategy on what the shows portray in terms of gender and sexuality will also be investigated. My argument is that *Avatar: the Last Airbender* and *The Legend of Korra* act as important stepping stones for Nickelodeon, as well as children's television as a whole, in terms of queering portrayals of gender and sexuality in television, illustrating a shift from the post-feminist content of the early 2000s to contemporary content that is trending towards inclusivity and representation.

*Nickelodeon's Brand Strategy; Understanding Girl Power and Postfeminist Media Texts*

The portrayal of gender on *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, especially the portrayal of women and girls is closely related to Nickelodeon's corporate strategy of producing shows with strong female characters which epitomize the trend of 'girl power' which was prevalent throughout the 2000s. Girl power is a postfeminist "articulation... that emerged in the mid 1990s, celebrating autonomy and self-determination, the exploitation of traditional signifiers of femininity, and a playfully confrontational attitude towards traditions considered sexist or repressive"<sup>15</sup>. It takes for granted all the empowering aspects of feminism and embraces the coexistence of femininity and power while simultaneously ignoring the history of feminist politics. In other words, girl power media commodifies the appealing aspects of feminism while discarding a history of

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<sup>15</sup> Ewan Kirkland. "The Politics of Powerpuff: Putting the 'Girl' into 'Girl Power'." *Animation : An Interdisciplinary Journal* 5 (1) (2010), 10.

political struggle and ideological battles. Postfeminism in general assumes that the need for actively political feminism is a thing of the past, and that the issues of feminism have already been solved. This assumption allows for the commodification of feminist ideologies, suddenly articulating female empowerment “through cultural consumption rather than production or political engagement”<sup>16</sup>. This watered down, capitalist-approved version of feminism is rampant throughout the popular, female-targeted media of the early 2000s, from children’s cartoons like *The PowerPuff Girls*, to shows like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Charlies Angels*.<sup>17</sup> Much of the children’s television that features strong female lead characters that was produced from the mid 1990s to the early 2010s exemplifies and emphasizes ‘girl power,’ exhibiting feminist ideologies in a palatable way that clearly ties the ideology to consumption and consumerism.

Nickelodeon, starting in the mid 1990s, embraced this quasi-progressive offshoot of feminism and began producing ‘empowering’ shows with strong female lead characters, “garnering the channel an industry and public reputation as a vanguard in challenging television stereotypes about girls”<sup>18</sup>. At the same time, the network has refused to commit to being “‘too political’ when it comes to gender politics, framing programming decisions in a liberal rhetoric of personhood.”<sup>19</sup> It takes instead the position of complete “gender neutrality” in its programming, allowing Nickelodeon to “occupy a position of general inclusion rather than

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<sup>16</sup> Ewan Kirkland. "The Politics of Powerpuff: Putting the ‘Girl’ into ‘Girl Power’." *Animation : An Interdisciplinary Journal* 5 (1) (2010), 10.

<sup>17</sup> Kirkland 12.

<sup>18</sup> Sarah Banet-Weiser, “Girls Rule! Gender, Feminism, and Nickelodeon.” *Kids Rule: Nickelodeon and Consumer Citizenship*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 104-105.

<sup>19</sup> Banet-Weiser 123.

appear to be specifically invested in a particular group”<sup>20</sup>. This allowed the network to appeal to a wide audience, while still maintaining a plausible deniability of sorts in terms of its motivations for producing more female centered content, keeping Nickelodeon safe from too much entanglement with gender politics.

While the trivialization of feminist motivations is inherently present in girl power television, it must also be noted that the sheer existence of female leads is important, as “media visibility is an important component of empowerment”<sup>21</sup>. There is value in representation, no matter the motivations of the network. For example, similar critiques can be made of Fox network’s representation of people of color in the 1980s and 90s, though it is widely accepted that this representation was a positive step in the diversity of television programming. Similarly, there is value even in problematic or partial subversions of gender roles, as they still manage to question hegemonic ideologies. The reality is that the children’s programming that emphasized the ‘strong female lead’ of the 2000s and early 2010s presents a complex issue within feminist politics and media representation. *Avatar: The Last Airbender* and *The Legend of Korra* are a part of this era of confusing and complicated gender politics on children’s television. They show characters who have been designed through a postfeminist lens, and many plotlines throughout the series avoid controversy at any cost. Still, despite their flaws, the representations of women and queerness that exist in these shows were significant not only in their existence, but also in the precedent that they set for future programming.

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<sup>20</sup>Sarah Banet-Weiser, “Girls Rule! Gender, Feminism, and Nickelodeon.” *Kids Rule: Nickelodeon and Consumer Citizenship*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 123.

<sup>21</sup>Banet-Weiser 115.

*Encoding and Decoding: Interpreting Television Through the Lens of Stuart Hall*

In his essay “Encoding/Decoding”, Stuart Hall introduces the idea that there are different ways to receive television messages. He first explains that the “consumption or reception of the television message” is an important part of the production process, as this is the “point of departure for the realization of the message”.<sup>22</sup> This means that a piece of television has not been fully created when it reaches the screen; instead, the audience are an active part of the production process, because it is the viewer who interprets, or decodes, the message that has been encoded into any given piece of media. Accordingly, the media’s meaning cannot be complete until it has been interpreted by the audience. Hall goes on to explain that there are different positions for the viewer to take when receiving a text; in other words, there are multiple ways a viewer may choose to decode the messages that the text communicates.

The first is that of the *dominant-hegemonic position*; this is when the viewer decodes the same message that was encoded by the creators of the text, therein “operating inside the dominant code”<sup>23</sup>. This is the most simple interpretation, because it requires little to no work on behalf of the viewer. Hall goes on to define the hegemonic position by explaining that it defines how the viewer thinks, creating in its own terms “the mental horizon, the universe, of possible meanings of a whole sector of relations in a society or culture”<sup>24</sup>. In the example of gender on children’s television, this is the construction of gender roles or stereotypes. Television shows create their own definition of what relations should look like based on gender, and that becomes the universe in which children operate. Action and violence become male traits, and nurture and

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<sup>22</sup>Stuart Hall. “Encoding/decoding.” *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972-79*. (London; Routledge 1992). 130.

<sup>23</sup>Hall 136.

<sup>24</sup>Hall 137.

inaction become female ones. Additionally, the dominant position is perceived as a legitimate one to take because it is aligned with hegemonic social ideologies, or “coterminous with what is ‘natural’, ‘inevitable’, ‘taken for granted’ about the social order.”<sup>25</sup> Gender roles have been in existence for so long that characters who embody these roles are seen as completely natural, and it follows that it will be received in this way by audiences.

The second is “that of the *negotiated code* or position,” wherein the viewer recognizes the dominant reading of the and accords the “privileged position” to these “definitions of events, while reserving the right to make a more negotiated application to ‘local conditions’”.<sup>26</sup> This means that the viewer accepts the general hegemonic ideologies as truth, yet still chooses specific situations in which to negotiate their definitions to fit with an interpretation of the text that opposes these ideologies. For example, a viewer may accept that the *ATLA* characters Azula and Ty Lee are intended to be heterosexual. However, both characters in their own ways reject heteronormative gender norms, and therefore queer the heterosexual matrix. Because they do not clearly fit under the hegemonic heterosexual code, some viewers choose to interpret their relationship as a queer one.

The final position, called the *oppositional code*, occurs when the viewer understands “both the literal and the connotative inflection given by a discourse” but chooses to decode the text in a completely oppositional way.<sup>27</sup> An example of this would be a viewer of *Avatar: The*

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<sup>25</sup>Stuart Hall. “Encoding/decoding.” *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972-79*. (London; Routledge 1992). 137.

<sup>26</sup>Hall 137.

<sup>27</sup>Stuart Hall. “Encoding/decoding.” *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972-79*. (London; Routledge 1992). 137-138.

*Last Airbender* who chooses to interpret a character like Sokka or Katara, who is clearly coded as heterosexual and participates in opposite sex relationships on the show, as queer.

*Avatar: The Last Airbender and Gender Stereotypes*

*Avatar: the Last Airbender* (ATLA) can be defined as a third wave feminist text because in many ways, it rejects stereotypical gender roles that are perpetuated by most children's television from the same era. *Legend of Korra* plays a similar role in its own era. The most significant and pervasive example of this subversion is the rejection of the passive feminine/active masculine dichotomy. Leading female characters on both shows take just as active a role as the male characters, particularly in moments of conflict. This is true not only in action, but also in the fundamental traits that characters possess. Katara, Toph, and Azula are extremely strong female characters who define themselves in many ways by their fighting ability and frequently reject, in all cases except for Katara, the role of caregiver, as well as other stereotypes such as emotion and passivity- sometimes even to a fault. Female characters are decisive and capable, easily and often placing themselves in leadership positions. In fact, female characters in ATLA exhibit masculine traits more strongly than their male counterparts, frequently taking on leadership roles and exhibiting prodigious fighting skill.

Though not nearly as frequently, male characters also take on stereotypically feminine traits, sometimes taking the role of caretaker; this is perhaps not as significant in its subversive effect, as these characters are usually placed in the role of caretaker out of necessity, as opposed to choice, such as in season 1 episode 13, "The Blue Spirit". The subversion of gender norms in both shows opens the door a little further to negotiated or oppositional interpretations of the text, so meaning may be created by viewers even past these subversions, and queer readings of each text become available, if not encouraged. As previously discussed, the heterosexual matrix links

together the queering of gender and of sexuality; consequently, there is more space for a negotiated queer reading when there is an overtly subversive expression of gender. *Legend of Korra*, for example, is known as the first animated children's show to represent a queer couple, though no explicitly queer acts are shown during the run of the show.

## II. Chapter 1: Katara

Throughout *ATLA*, Katara navigates masculine stereotypes and feminine ones, shifting seamlessly between them, though she embodies more feminine traits than masculine ones. To some extent, she embodies the 'girl power' trope. Her feminine characteristics, such as emotionality, are exaggerated, and her waterbending ability, which gives her the power to fight and exist in the masculine sphere, also gives her the power to be a healer and caretaker. This is done in order to balance the masculine and feminine in order to make Katara more appealing. While she generally does not take the frontline in battles, she also has some of the most important fighting scenes in the show and has skills that cannot be rivaled by her male counterparts. At the same time, she is the caretaker of the group, often seen as a sort of mother figure to 'Team Avatar'. Overall, she is an incredibly complex character who, while fitting into some problematic feminine tropes, is generally a well rounded representation of a strong female character.

### *Smart Girls; Negotiating Beauty to Create Space for Intelligent Women on Television*

Katara is a perfect example of a female character who is both smart and beautiful, a trend that was commonly seen in children's cartoons and family dramas of the 2000s, and especially in girl power media. Characters such as *Kim Possible*, *The PowerPuff Girls*, Lisa on *The Simpsons*, and Rory on *Gilmore Girls* all challenge the previous media trope that girls who are intelligent



are inherently unattractive or unpopular, instead suggesting that “being smart and ‘cool’ are not mutually exclusive nor do they cancel out one another”<sup>28</sup>.

Like these other characters, Katara is beautiful in a very traditionally feminine way. With



big blue eyes and long, flowing dark hair, she embodies the attractive, popular girl that is so commonly sought after in America. Long hair especially is an indicator of femininity, so in opposition to most other girls on the show, who generally have short hair and/or always have their hair up so its length is not

distinguishable, Katara appears to be the most conventionally feminine.<sup>29</sup> Her sexuality is made even more overt in the final season, where the outfit she wears in each episode is changed from a modest blue long sleeved dress and pants, traditional to her culture, and hair in a braid down her back, to a deep red cropped tank top and pants with long hair down. This is not uncommon; “females 11 years and under on TV for children were found to be almost four times as likely as males to be shown in sexy attire”<sup>30</sup>.



All of these changes serve the purpose of emphasizing Katara’s femininity and therefore her attractiveness, sexualizing her in a way that fits with the trope of ‘girl power’ cartoons.

<sup>28</sup>Dafna Lemish. *Screening Gender on Children's Television: The Views of Producers Around the World*. 1st ed. (London; Routledge, 2010), 5.

<sup>29</sup>Rebecca C. Hains. "'Pretty Smart': Subversive Intelligence in Girl Power Cartoons." *Geek Chic: Smart Women in Popular Culture*. 1st ed. Ed. Sherrie A. Inness, 65-84. (New York, N.Y: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 76.

<sup>30</sup>Lemish 3.

Embracing femininity and placing an emphasis on physical appearance allows her to exhibit intelligence without being overly threatening to hegemonic gender roles.

It also leaves more room for her to exhibit masculine traits in other spheres, like fighting and ‘saving the world’. Depicting strong female characters as physically attractive and stereotypically feminine is one way that children’s media negotiates their existence, allowing them to exist in a world of strength and action without posing “too dramatic a challenge to the traditional association between men and toughness”.<sup>31</sup> Sexualization of characters like Katara is one way for Nickelodeon to depict tough and active women and still avoid getting entangled with gender politics, because her heteronormative attractiveness keeps her within the realms of the heterosexual matrix.

*Nice Girls; Compensating for Strength with Subversive Niceness*

In addition to being beautiful, Katara is also incredibly nice, which is another prerequisite for being an outspoken and openly intelligent female character in children’s media during the 2000s. Girls in the United States are taught that “being ‘nice’ is highly desirable”<sup>32</sup>. Similarly, girls who are *not* nice, modest, and demure, which are feminine traits, but rather outgoing, ambitious, or forceful in their actions or thoughts, which are masculine traits, are perceived as ‘bitchy’, bossy, or insufferable. Gifted girls in particular are “more likely than their peers to internalize gendered social norms,” perhaps because they feel that they need to subvert their

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<sup>31</sup>Dafna Lemish. *Screening Gender on Children's Television: The Views of Producers Around the World*. 1st ed. (London; Routledge, 2010), 4.

<sup>32</sup>Hains, Rebecca C. "'Pretty Smart': Subversive Intelligence in Girl Power Cartoons." *Geek Chic: Smart Women in Popular Culture*. 1st ed. Ed. Sherrie A. Inness, 65-84. (New York, N.Y: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 75.

intelligence in order to seem less threatening, as smart girls in children's television do.<sup>33</sup> These gendered social norms include expected politeness for women in ways as simple as language norms, such as deference in conversation that is simply not present in men's speech<sup>34</sup>. In other words, being nice is inseparable from being feminine, and in turn, attractive. In this way, politeness and kindness is a necessary characteristic for women to exist within the heterosexual matrix. In order to be palatable on television, strong, smart female characters have to be incredibly nice to make up for their superior intelligence; this 'subversive niceness' is a strategy used by these girls in order to ensure that their displays of intelligence are "less of a threat to social norms"<sup>35</sup>.

An example of this inherent kindness in Katara is clear in season 3, episode 3, "The Painted Lady". When the group stops into a town to stock up on food and supplies, they realize that a factory has polluted the lake the town lies on and relies on for all their food. While Sokka, Aang and Toph all want to leave immediately and continue their journey, Katara fools them into thinking they cannot travel and sneaks out at night to help the town by delivering food and healing their sick. While they are on a tight, intricately planned schedule to save the world, Katara cannot fathom moving on without helping this town so much that she is willing to lie to her friends. One of her ways of solving this problem, however, includes blowing up and destroying the military factory that is polluting the river. In addition, she conveniently disguises herself as a beautiful spirit while carrying out these acts. So not only is she showing immense

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<sup>33</sup>Hains, Rebecca C. "'Pretty Smart': Subversive Intelligence in Girl Power Cartoons." *Geek Chic: Smart Women in Popular Culture*. 1st ed. Ed. Sherrie A. Inness, 65-84. (New York, N.Y: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 75.

<sup>34</sup>Lakoff, Robin Tolmach. *Language and Woman's Place*. Vol. CN 389. (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 64.

<sup>35</sup> Hains 77.

kindness, but in doing so, she is also embodying the stereotypically masculine drive for violence and action while appearing beautiful. Without all these traits working together, Katara might not be perceived as palatable enough for children's television; it is her kindness and beauty that leaves room, culturally, for her violence and drive to action. Katara's stereotypically feminine and masculine characteristics converge and the way that they coexist to create a complete, dynamic character becomes clear.

*The Gender Gap in Expectations of Emotion and Nurturance*

Katara is an incredibly emotional character; this is also the trait that defines her previously discussed 'niceness'. Nurturance and family are intricately connected to femininity because they are the defining aspect of the private (or feminine) sphere. As a result, "femininity is defined by irrational or emotional impulses"<sup>36</sup>. Katara embodies all of these characteristics; in fact, her emotions act as a catalyst of the entire series. In season 1 episode 1, "The Boy in the Iceberg," Katara and her brother argue while out at sea, causing her to have an outburst of anger, which, because of her waterbending powers, causes a large glacier to shatter and Aang to emerge, launching the narrative of the series. This outburst characterizes Katara as emotional and even irrational, which is a quintessential patriarchal portrayal of femininity. By causing an iceberg to shatter, she is putting herself and Sokka in literal physical danger, indicating that perhaps she is overly emotional to the point that it becomes dangerous. At the same time, it depicts her as incredibly powerful, foreshadowing her immense waterbending skill, a tool that she uses to fight and therefore exist within the masculine sphere. Complicating things even further, her anger is a direct reaction to overtly sexist comments from Sokka, who says "leave it

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<sup>36</sup> Brian L. Ott and Robert L. Mack. "Queer Analysis." *Critical Media Studies: An Introduction, Second Edition*. (Wiley, 2013), 201.

to a girl to screw things up!” Katara directly calls Sokka sexist, which is the first of many times that *ATLA* directly addresses feminist issues, and connotes this moment of anger with female strength and feminism.

Katara is also incredibly nurturing, acting as a sort of mother figure to the group. This mother/child relationship is especially clear between Katara and Sokka, despite the fact that Sokka is two years older than his sister. The passing of the siblings’ mother at a young age is given as the reason for Katara’s nurturing personality, as well as the reason for many of her most emotional moments on the show. In season 3, episode 7, “The Runaway,” this motherly behavior becomes a point of contention, as Toph becomes angry with Katara for being too controlling. As the conflict is resolved, Sokka tells Toph:

“When our mom died, that was the hardest time in my life. Our family was a mess. But Katara, she had so much strength. She stepped up and took on so much responsibility. She helped fill the void that was left by our mom... I’m not sure I can remember what my mother looked like. It really seems like my whole life, Katara’s been the one looking out for me”<sup>37</sup>.

This moment demonstrates the emotional relationship that Katara has with her family and friends on the show. In this way, she embodies the patriarchal media trope of ‘the Madonna,’ in which “women are cast in the role of mother;” the one who will nurture, raise, and finally “the one who mourns her loved ones”<sup>38</sup>. Katara cares for her brother, as well as her friends or adopted family, often acting as the voice of reason on the show. Simultaneously, she is mourning the loss of her mother, whose place she has taken in the

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<sup>37</sup>*Avatar: The Last Airbender*. Season 3, episode 7, “Chapter Seven: The Runaway.” Directed by Giancarlo Volpe, written by Joshua Hamilton. Animated by Moi Animation. Aired November 2, 2007, on Nickelodeon.

<sup>38</sup>Lemish, Dafna. *Screening Gender on Children's Television: The Views of Producers Around the World*. 1st ed. (London; Routledge, 2010), 11.

family. The fact that it was Katara who took on the role of ‘mother’ after their real mother died instead of Sokka, who is the older sibling, is a clear separation of gender roles on the show. The only possible reason for this choice is gender; because nurturance is a feminine trait, Sokka couldn’t have possibly, according to stereotype, taken the role of a parent. Instead, he had the privilege of continuing his childhood in an almost unaltered way, while his younger sister inherited the burden of caretaking from her mother.

Her nurturing nature is also exaggerated through the fact that her waterbending powers also give her healing abilities. This means that she takes responsibility not only for the emotional wellbeing of those around her, but for their physical wellbeing as well. She uses this power regularly, even saving Aang’s life midway through the series. This ability to heal is particularly interesting because it is intricately connected to, and inseparable from, her waterbending superpower, a tool she uses to fight, therein embodying masculinity. It is this one superpower is what imbues in Katara her most masculine and most feminine traits.

Katara’s waterbending abilities are where every feminine trope she represents as well as each one that she queers converge. The convergence of her masculine, aggressive side and her nurturing, healing side has already been touched upon. However, Katara’s intelligence and kindness are also important factors in the style and outcome of most fights that she takes part in. In the series finale, “Sozin’s Comet” (season 3, episodes 18-21), Katara comes head to head with Azula, the female villain of the show. She wins the fight with clever strategy instead of brute force, and is able to tie up and therefore defeat Azula without harming her at all. This fight is one of the most important moments of action in the show, coming at the climax of the entire series.

The import of kindness in Katara's fighting style holds potential ideological issues, because it reinforces the necessity of her embodiment of those traits to be able to fight in the first place. At the same time, however, it demonstrates skill and savviness in battle that emphasizes her ability to compete in masculine spheres. Katara manages to weaponize the trait of subversive niceness and use it to her advantage in conjunction with her masculine traits to embody a masterful fighter.

*Direct Confrontations of Sexism in Avatar: The Last Airbender*

Katara's character confronts sexism more directly than any other on the show (or for that matter, on most children's shows at the time). In season 1, episode 18, entitled *The Waterbending Master*, Sokka, Katara and Aang reach the Northern Water Tribe, and find a waterbending master to train Aang and Katara in waterbending. When they arrive to train, however, and the master realizes that Katara is a girl, he refuses to train her and informs them that women who have the ability to waterbend do not train to fight and instead train to become 'healers', a form of medicinal waterbending. Katara is extremely frustrated, but obeys and takes a healing class with children much younger than she. Eventually, however, Katara challenges the master to a fight in order to prove her worth. While she loses the battle, he agrees to take her on as a student; however, this is because she is the granddaughter of a woman he was in love with, not her ability. As the season progresses, it becomes clear that Katara is a waterbender of incredible strength, ascending to the level of master extraordinarily quickly.

This episode is one of the most direct ways in which the show tackles the issue of sexism.\* It provides an incredibly overt example of realistic inequalities between men and women, categorizing men as strong, violent warriors while relegating women to a nurturing role in the domestic sphere. However, the fact that in the end the master agrees to take her on because

she is the granddaughter of a woman he was in love with instead of her actual skills or innate ability once again allows Nickelodeon to get away with showing “gender asymmetry within television” while still avoiding grappling with any real gender politics<sup>39</sup>. Sexism exists, is clearly portrayed as an issue, and yet the conflict is resolved without any real change taking place. At the same time, showing that a girl can stand up to someone who is being oppressive is a valuable lesson for young girls. Even addressing such clear examples of the patriarchy in a children’s television show is significant, as most children’s television at the time ignored issues of gender inequality in a complete and postfeminist fashion. Katara is completely unafraid to challenge the master in his own sphere, a masculine one of fighting and violence, even though she knows that she will lose, because she knows that it is morally the right thing to do.

Katara is more complicated than any one trope. For example, she embodies the media trope of the Madonna in many ways; however, she is also sexualized and portrayed as conventionally attractive. While both of these feminine tropes are common in contemporary children’s media, they are almost never seen together, as Madonna is very rarely sexualized, and the feminine, attractive ‘girl power’ girl is not usually a caretaker. While both of these tropes are problematic, putting them together complicates their meaning because it strips them of their one-dimensionality: Katara manages to both embody and queer each trope. She embraces her femininity but does not compromise her desire to fight, be outspoken, or any other masculine aspect of her character because of it. The dichotomies of Katara’s character can be seen as compromises that make her palatable to audiences; and in many ways, that is exactly what they are. The fact that the dichotomies exist in the first place, however, leaves room for a negotiated

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<sup>39</sup> Sarah Banet-Weiser. “Girls Rule! Gender, Feminism, and Nickelodeon.” *Kids Rule: Nickelodeon and Consumer Citizenship*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 123.



interpretation of the text<sup>40</sup>. Children can “accord the privileged definition to the dominant reading of the text” while still negotiating some of the meanings, reading into Katara’s character what representations they want to see<sup>41</sup>. The existence of this space for negotiation separates Katara’s character, and *ATLA* as a whole, from other media at the time. A little bit of room for queer interpretations of the text in *ATLA* means that future shows had permission to create even more room, making *Avatar* one of the media texts that started a shift away from entirely postfeminist, girl power texts.

### III. Chapter Two: Toph

While Katara maintains traditional femininity throughout the show, Toph, the other female lead, is defined by her masculine traits. Ostensibly, she is extremely small and feminine, and her potential frailty is made apparent because she is blind. *ATLA* and Nickelodeon use these features as a tool of juxtaposition which emphasizes her true character, an extremely powerful and capable fighter.\*\* This juxtaposition is made apparent right from the beginning of the series. When she is introduced in season 2, episode 6, “The Blind Bandit,” she is shown leading a double life; one as the young, disabled daughter of a wealthy family who is constantly sheltered and kept from the outside world, and one as a tough and skillful competitor in earthbending matches, which somewhat resemble wrestling matches.<sup>42</sup> Like Katara, Toph is a prodigy in her respective skill, even going so far as to ‘invent’ a new form of earthbending called ‘metalbending’ later in the series, something previously thought to be impossible and requiring

<sup>40</sup>Hall, Stuart, “Encoding/decoding.” *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972-79*. (London; Routledge 1992).

<sup>41</sup>Hall 137.

<sup>42</sup>*Avatar: The Last Airbender*. Season 2, episode 6, “Chapter Six: The Blind Bandit.” Directed by Ethan Spaulding, written by Michael Dante DiMartino. Animated by JM Animation. Aired May 5, 2006, on Nickelodeon.

immense amounts of strength and power. Toph's character queers hegemonic gender norms because the depth and complexity of her character are unobscured by the hypersexuality or extreme femininity that were frequent modifiers of strong female characters during the girl power era.

*Code Switching; The Embodiment of Masculine and Feminine*

She is defined by the stereotypically masculine traits of power, agency, aggressiveness, and competitiveness, among others.<sup>4344</sup> The audience's first introduction to Toph is in the competitive setting of a fighting arena, and it is later learned that she snuck away from her overprotective home in order to participate in the fight, demonstrating her fearless agency. Her physical strength and martial arts abilities demonstrate her masculinity; in addition to these, she generally portrays more stereotypically 'male' characteristics, including habits and mannerisms. These traits are emphasized by their frequent use as tools for humor on the show. For example, in season 2, episode 8, Katara says to the boys "I'm just glad we finally have another girl in the group, because you two are disgusting"<sup>45</sup>. This statement is followed by a camera 'pan' to Toph participating in the same crude joke as the boys, resulting in laughter from everyone.



<sup>43</sup> Brian L. Ott and Robert L. Mack. "Queer Analysis." *Critical Media Studies: An Introduction, Second Edition*. (Wiley, 2013), 198.

<sup>44</sup> Dafna Lemish. *Screening Gender on Children's Television: The Views of Producers Around the World*. 1st ed. (London; New York; Routledge, 2010), 1.

<sup>45</sup> *Avatar: The Last Airbender*. Season 2, episode 8, "Chapter Eight: The Chase." Directed by Giancarlo Volpe, written by Joshua Hamilton. Animated by DR Movie. Aired May 26, 2006, on Nickelodeon.

Her strength and masculinity is in no way presented by the show as a negative; in fact, her masculine habits are what help her be a powerful bender, and her strength and bravery in action are what make her a crucial addition to ‘Team Avatar’, and therefore to the plot of the show. She breaks free of the heterosexual matrix in almost every possible way; in addition to her action, language, and appearance, she is the only lead character on the show who never has a romantic relationship. Yet at the same time, Toph still identifies with some aspects of femininity. In season 2, episode 14, “Tales of Ba Sing Se,” there is a storyline in which Katara takes an extremely unenthusiastic Toph on a ‘girls’ day out’ at a spa, where they undergo various pampering or ‘girly’ treatments, including having their makeup done. Afterwards, Toph expresses to Katara that she’s “not usually into that stuff, but I actually feel... girly”. This expression of vulnerability and the comfort with femininity lends an important depth to Toph’s character; instead of being simply an asexual embodiment of the masculine in a female body, she is allowed to embody both feminine and masculine characteristics, transitioning relatively seamlessly between them while still maintaining her gender identity unwaveringly. Her ability to embody both the masculine and the feminine simultaneously can be clearly seen in the next scene:

Girl: Wow, great makeup!

Toph: Thanks!

Girl: For a clown! [*girls titter*]

At this point, Toph has tears in her eyes- however, she still laughs at the girls and reacts by breaking the bridge on which the girls are standing, causing them to fall into the stream below, while Katara sends them floating down the river with her waterbending. This demonstrates Toph’s active, aggressive side. The direct confrontation of the girls that have insulted her with a violent action is a reaction that is stereotypically masculine, and illustrates her ability to switch between feminine and masculine codes of behavior. The scene continues:

Katara: Those girls don’t know what they’re talking about.

Toph: It's ok. One of the good things about being blind is that I don't have to waste my time worrying about appearances. I don't care what I look like. I'm not looking for anyone's approval. I know who I am.

Katara: That's what I really admire about you, Toph. You're so strong and confident and self-assured. And I know it doesn't matter, but... you're really pretty.

Toph: I am?

Katara: Yeah, you are.

On one hand, it is clear that Toph is incredibly hurt when these strangers on the street insult the way she looks; especially when she has stepped out of her comfort zone and embraced a more traditionally feminine look for the first time. It is also clear that while she says she doesn't care what she looks like, she still cares to some extent; when Katara tells her that she is pretty, she is extremely touched, demonstrating a desire to feel beautiful, attractive, and feminine. Yet in the same moment, Toph demonstrates her aggressive side as well. This scene clearly shows Toph's ability to flow with ease between masculine and feminine stereotypes, queering gender while simultaneously remaining clear in her identity as a woman. Fluidly shifting between stereotypes of femininity and masculinity while maintaining her core characteristics means that Toph's character queers gender and rejects the heterosexual matrix. The complexity that this ability to shift creates in her character is more meaningful than the outright repudiation of femininity, because it rejects the notion that characteristics or behaviors coded as masculine or feminine are inherently in opposition to one another.

### *Disability and Desexualization*

Despite Toph's complex and unique expression of gender, the portrayal of her character, especially her sexuality and femininity, is deeply complicated by her disability. Characters with disabilities are largely excluded from the television landscape. For example, in 2014, "one percent of regular characters on American broadcast TV had one or more disabilities." When

such characters are included, they tend to be desexualized and are portrayed as dependent.<sup>46</sup>

*Avatar: The Last Airbender* successfully portrays Toph as independent; her blindness is even used to emphasize her independence and ability in many cases. Despite this, the asexualization of disabled characters is clear and present. Toph is the only leading character who does not have a single romantic interest throughout the course of ATLA. Even in *Legend of Korra*, where she is shown as an adult with children, she is completely separated from sexuality or romance, single and seemingly having raised her children on her own. While this is shown as her own decision, and in many ways a progressive choice, it is also impossible to overlook the fact that this choice was made for the only permanently disabled character on either show.

The example from “Tales of Ba Sing Se” previously discussed illustrates the way in which the relationship between disability and sexuality is portrayed on children’s television. Toph tells Katara that “one of the good things about being blind is that I don’t have to worry about appearances. I don’t care what I look like. I’m not looking for anyone’s approval. I know who I am.” This statement indicates that because she has a disability, Toph is inherently excluded from the concern of physical appearance. Alternatively, she is automatically exempt from being perceived as a sexual being. Like other disabled people, she experiences “sexual repression” and possesses “little or no sexual autonomy”<sup>47</sup>. Because she does not participate in romance and is therefore essentially rendered asexual, Toph’s break from the heterosexual matrix and her queering of gender norms are more easily digestible to hegemonic audiences. Additionally, this

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<sup>46</sup> A. L. Parsons, A. J. Reichl, and C. L. Pedersen. “Gendered Ableism: Media Representations and Gender Role Beliefs’ Effect on Perceptions of Disability and Sexuality. *Sexuality, Disability, and Aging: Queer Temporalities of the Phallus*. Ed. Jane Gallop. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 208.

<sup>47</sup> Robert McCruer and Anna Mollow. *Sex and Disability*. (Durham; Duke University Press, 2012), 38.

strategy of creating a feminist character that rejects gender norms in a way that doesn't actually challenge the status quo fits with Nickelodeon's strategy of "general inclusion," allowing them to stay, as much as possible, out of entanglement with gender politics<sup>48</sup>. So while her character is an excellent example of a strong female character whose strength is not reliant on consumerism and sexuality, as under the 'girl power' trend, Toph still must find compromises elsewhere so as not to appear 'too' strong or powerful.

#### IV. Chapter 3: Azula

##### *The Villainization of Female Power*

A common problematic trope that is common in children's media is the villainization of queer and female characters. One of the most common critiques of children's media is that female characters are often depicted as hyperfeminine and sexual. However, there is also an innate innocence and subservience that is seen as crucial for 'good' female characters. Female power contradicts the patriarchal hegemony in which women are seen as powerless, at least in comparison to their male counterparts. When women are portrayed as powerful on children's television, they must find other ways to 'make up for' the femininity that is removed through their power in order to remain unthreatening to the status quo. Katara uses subversive niceness and western, heteronormative beauty standards as shields that allow her to hold power. Toph queers these standard tropes, but is completely removed from any sexual context, eliminating her as a threat to masculinity. When they do not make such compromises, female characters are villainized. Women who have total ownership over their own sexuality, or who refuse to be nice, are almost always coded as corrupt and evil. In order to preserve the hegemonic gender politics,

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<sup>48</sup> Sarah Banet-Weiser. "Girls Rule! Gender, Feminism, and Nickelodeon." *Kids Rule: Nickelodeon and Consumer Citizenship*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 123.

the “the easiest and safest way to depict female sexuality (and power) in children’s media has been to associate it negatively with corrupt female villains.”<sup>49</sup> This also applies to intelligence; intelligent girls who refuse to use subversive niceness to fit into the heterosexual matrix are coded as “outcasts” and frequently villainized.<sup>50</sup> This villainization is clear and present in the character of Azula as well as, to a certain extent, her cronies Mai and Ty Lee.

*Avatar: the Last Airbender* is a particularly good example of female villainization in children’s media because it explicitly depicts the gendered application of this trope. In season 1, the main villain is Zuko, Azula’s brother who is a banished prince of the Fire Kingdom. His ultimate mission is to capture the Avatar, a mission which he believes will restore his honor and allow him to return home. As the show progresses, however, Zuko slowly undergoes an internal struggle, transforming into a leading character that the audience roots for and sympathizes with. In order to leave room for this transformation, the central villain of the story is replaced at the end of season 1 when Azula is introduced in a scene where the Firelord says to her “Iroh is a traitor, and your brother Zuko is a failure. I have a task for you...”<sup>51</sup> The existence of two villains, one male and one female, from the same family, on the same television show, allows for a side by side comparison of the way in which male and female villains are depicted.

Throughout the entire show, Zuko’s purpose is the journey to regain his honor. Azula and Zuko are both brainwashed by the imperialist, nationalist propaganda that is spread by the Fire

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<sup>49</sup> Sarah Banet-Weiser. “Girls Rule! Gender, Feminism, and Nickelodeon.” *Kids Rule: Nickelodeon and Consumer Citizenship*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 108.

<sup>50</sup>Rebecca C. Hains. "Pretty Smart": Subversive Intelligence in Girl Power Cartoons." in *Geek Chic: Smart Women in Popular Culture*. 1st ed. Ed. Sherrie A. Inness. New York, N.Y: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, 80.

<sup>51</sup>*Avatar: The Last Airbender*. Season 1, episode 20. “Chapter Twenty: The Siege of the North Part 2.” Directed by Dave Filoni, Written by Aaron Ehasz. Animated by JM Animation. Aired Dec. 2, 2005 on Nickelodeon.

Nation; Zuko's journey, however, starts from a place of ignorance and leads to a journey of discovery, guided by a wise and nurturing uncle. Azula, on the other hand, is portrayed as cunning, completely aware of the harm she is causing. She is extremely intelligent, though this intelligence is displayed through manipulation and sadism. Zuko's role in season one and Azula's role in season two are extremely similar, as they both act as foils to Aang, Sokka, Katara, and Toph. Despite this, however, Azula is presented as inherently evil in a way that Zuko simply is not.

Zuko is someone who "keeps fighting even though it's hard," works incredibly hard in order to 'earn' his firebending skills. In juxtaposition to this, it is made clear throughout the show that Azula is a firebending prodigy in a way that her brother is not. In season 2, episode 7, "Zuko Alone," there is a flashback to Zuko and Azula's childhoods in which each child presents skills they have learned to their grandfather; in response to Azula, her father says that she is a "true prodigy," while Zuko cannot perform nearly as well.

The scene is from Zuko's point of view, so Azula's skill is seen as something she uses as a weapon against her brother in order to make him feel inferior to her. Because she is set in comparison to her brother, who the audience is meant to sympathize with, and because



she queers feminine stereotypes and instead excels at masculine ones like firebending, Azula's prodigious skill is used to villainize her.

Azula embodies the masculine traits of intelligence, skill in the active sphere of fighting, and a drive for power without making up for these traits with subversive femininity. In opposition to this, Katara is intelligent, but makes up for this intelligence with ample amounts of



kindness and normative femininity, so that she still acts in “accordance with the mythological archetype of the ‘good mother’”.<sup>52</sup> Azula is not kind, so her intelligence is seemingly directed towards acts of cunning, all with the evil intention of causing pain and gaining power. This reinforces the notion that “girl’s power and intelligence are only acceptable if girls are nice, sweet, and normatively feminine”.<sup>53</sup> Because she refuses to be nice, her intelligence immediately falls under the problematic notion that women are ‘manipulative’.<sup>54</sup> Above all else, Azula is portrayed as extremely power hungry; she is willing to sacrifice anything and anyone, including her own friends and family, for the goal of attaining the power she craves. This drive for power is ultimately Azula’s undoing; in the series finale, “Sozin’s Comet” (season 3, episodes 20 and 21), she reaches a breaking point. As she prepares to be crowned Fire Lord, she grows increasingly manic, banishing all of her servants and guards, and even cutting her own hair in a moment of anger and frustration. This last action serves as a way to visually depict her breakdown, but can also be seen as a ritual act that strips her of her femininity, of which hair can be an important indicator. All of this serves to demonstrate the point that in connection to female characters in children’s media, power is “almost always corrupting, evil, and lethal”.<sup>55</sup>

In addition to her intelligence, her active participation in the masculine sphere of battle and ownership over her body is villainized. As previously discussed, Katara is able to participate

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<sup>52</sup>Rebecca C. Hains. "Pretty Smart": Subversive Intelligence in Girl Power Cartoons." in *Geek Chic: Smart Women in Popular Culture*. 1st ed. Ed. Sherrie A. Inness. New York, N.Y: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, 80.

<sup>53</sup> Hains 80.

<sup>54</sup> Lemish, Dafna. *Screening Gender on Children's Television: The Views of Producers Around the World*. 1st ed. (London; Routledge, 2010), 5.

<sup>55</sup> Sarah Banet-Weiser. “Girls Rule! Gender, Feminism, and Nickelodeon.” *Kids Rule: Nickelodeon and Consumer Citizenship*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 108.

in this sphere because she is sexually desirable, while Toph is excused from the heterosexual matrix because her disability allows for her complete desexualization. Azula, on the other hand, is portrayed as someone who has no interest in boys; or, if she is interested in a boy, her motive is generally still the accumulation of power. The only episode in which any romantic interest is expressed by Azula, she is portrayed as completely inept at navigating this social sphere. In season 3, episode 5, “The Beach,” Azula and her friends attend a party, and Azula expresses to Ty Lee her frustration that no boys are ever interested in her:

Ty Lee: “But you’re the most beautiful, smartest, perfect girl in the world!”

Azula: “Well, you’re right about all those things. But for some reason, when I meet boys, they act like I’m going to do something horrible to them.”

Ty Lee “But you probably would do something horrible to them.”

This example not only displays but also makes light of Azula’s cruelty; it suggests that in order to attract men, women must be kind and subservient. This is especially true because the same episode depicts Ty Lee attracting dozens of boys, who are drawn to her because of her hypersexualized body and amiable, giggly responses to their interest. In comparison, Azula is shown is highly competitive, saying after winning a volleyball game on the beach that their opponents will “never rise from the ashes of [their] shame”<sup>56</sup>.

After she shares with Ty Lee her frustration with boys, Ty Lee advises Azula on how to flirt. This advice includes, and is pretty much limited to, being nice to and appeasing boys; and yet, Azula cannot even have one interaction with a boy successfully. When she finally gets the chance to carry out Ty Lee’s advice, she is successful for a short while, even kissing the boy in question. However, the interaction ends with the boy telling her she’s pretty and Azula announcing that “together, you and I will be the strongest couple in the entire world. We will

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<sup>56</sup>*Avatar: The Last Airbender*. Season 3, episode 5, “Chapter Five: The Beach.” Directed by Joaquim Dos Santos, written by Katie Mattila. Animated by Moi Animation. Aired October 19, 2007, on Nickelodeon.

dominate the earth!”<sup>57</sup> While Azula may have a desire to participate in normal activities like dating, she is fundamentally incapable of doing so because of how far she strays from the heterosexual matrix. Instead of the powerlessness and passivity that are required for Azula to perform femininity, her most prominent trait is the masculine one of power.<sup>58</sup> Azula’s inability to navigate social situations that may seem like common sense to the audience others her in a way that emphasizes her villainy. She fails to participate in the heterosexual hegemony because she is lacking in femininity that is crucial for the heterosexual matrix.<sup>59</sup> It is this failure to conform to the matrix that this episode villainizes, linking the queering of the heterosexual matrix and Azula’s ruthless hunger for power together.

When it comes to Azula’s queering of heterosexuality, it is also worth noting the possibility of a queer reading of Azula and Ty Lee’s characters. While most characters on the show at some point have some form of romantic relationship, Azula and Ty Lee, in addition to Toph, never do. In “The Beach,” Ty Lee accepts the attention of the boys that like her to an extent; however, when she becomes uncomfortable with their advances, she knocks them unconscious and leaves to go talk to Azula. She frequently tells Azula things like “you’re the most beautiful, smartest, perfect girl in the world!”. In the same episode, Azula also tells Ty Lee that she is jealous of the attention Ty Lee is receiving- or, possibly, could she be jealous of the attention that Ty Lee is giving the boys? All of these factors have a simple, hegemonic-dominant

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<sup>57</sup> *Avatar: The Last Airbender*. Season 3, episode 5, “Chapter Five: The Beach.” Directed by Joaquim Dos Santos, written by Katie Mattila. Animated by Moi Animation. Aired October 19, 2007, on Nickelodeon.

<sup>58</sup> Brian L. Ott and Robert L. Mack. “Queer Analysis.” *Critical Media Studies: An Introduction, Second Edition*. (Wiley, 2013), 198.

<sup>59</sup> Judith Butler. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. (New York: Routledge, 2006), 208.

reading.<sup>60</sup> There is enough space, however, for a negotiated reading of the text. It is a common fan theory that Ty Lee and Azula are participating in a queer relationship with one another; this is one of several queer readings in the *ATLA* universe.<sup>61</sup> This queer reading has potential to be harmful, as villains in children's media are frequently queercoded so that there becomes a connotation between queerness and evil.\*\*\* Still, the potential for a queer reading leaves the possibility for perceived queer representation in children's television.

The origins of Azula's desire for power are alluded to in a surprisingly feminist way. In a flashback in "Zuko Alone," in which Azula looks to be about 8 years old, Zuko and Azula's uncle, who is heir to the throne, sends them each a gift from the war front; to Zuko, a valuable dagger from an important battle, and to Azula, a doll who "wears the latest fashion for Earth Kingdom girls."<sup>62</sup> This distinct and clearly uneven distribution of gifts based on gender lines clearly upsets Azula, who goes on to suggest that if their Uncle "did not return from war," it would be their father who would inherit the throne. This direct association of gender stereotypes to Azula and Zuko implies that during her childhood, Azula was frequently passed over in the world of war and fighting, which she happened to be more skilled in than her brother. Her actions in this scene indicate that it was this frustration and desire to be seen as equal to her brother was a direct cause to her evil thoughts and actions. This implies that her hunger for power comes, in part, from a desire to prove herself as a woman in a masculine sphere.

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<sup>60</sup>Stuart Hall. "Encoding/decoding." *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972-79*. (London; Routledge, 1992) 136.

<sup>61</sup>"Tyzula." Shipping Wiki. Accessed May 12, 2021. <https://shipping.fandom.com/wiki/Tyzula>.

<sup>62</sup>*Avatar: The Last Airbender*. Season 2, episode 7, "Chapter Seven: Zuko Alone." Directed by Lauren MacMullan, written by Elizabeth Welch. Animated by JM Animation. Aired May 12, 2006, on Nickelodeon.

*Looking at the Art; The Animation Theory Walter Benjamin*

Walter Benjamin argues that “cartoons can present a counter-hegemonic potential to the culture industry” because the medium is so based in imagination and therefore is more likely to lead to “deviation from the dominant paradigms of thought”<sup>63</sup>. According to Benjamin, who was speaking in this case about Mickey Mouse, animation is its own entity instead of a reproduction, as most film and technology heavy media. For these two reasons, Benjamin believed that animation has the heavy potential to counter “dangers threatening mankind from the repressions implicit in civilization”<sup>64</sup>. By these dangers, Benjamin was speaking specifically about moralistic values and sexual repression he felt were oft found in film; something that he once again reflected upon after the release of *Snow White* (1937), which “set the standard for gendered representation in children’s motion picture production,” moving further towards a realistic style “respectable” for bourgeois consumption<sup>65</sup>. This standard of “naturalistic, moralistic, and tamed” cartoon media was certainly influenced by the Hays Code, a production self-censorship code that was applied to media from 1934-1968. All of this put together meant that even though animated media had the power to subvert hegemonic ideologies in a way that most other media doesn’t, it did not take advantage of that fact and instead created safer, more broadly marketable content which presented sexuality and gender expression in very conservative, hegemonic ways.

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<sup>63</sup> Katia Perea. "Touching Queerness in Disney Films Dumbo and Lilo & Stitch." *Social Sciences* 7, no. 11 (11, 2018), 2.

<sup>64</sup>Walter Benjamin, Michael William Jennings, Brigid Doherty, Thomas Y. Levin, and E. F. N. Jephcott. “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility.” *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*. (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008), 38.

<sup>65</sup> Perea 2.

The foundation of this argument, however, was that “because of this potential to deviate from the dominant paradigms of thought, cartoons facilitate playful transgressions on normative coding”.<sup>66</sup> This means that cartoons have a power to subvert hegemonic ideologies, which can be applied beyond Benjamin’s specific concerns during the 1930s. As MacLuhan argued in his 1967 text *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, “the media is the message.” This statement has become quintessential in the field of media studies, and means that the medium itself is an important part of the message that is being communicated to the viewer. While Hall’s concept of encoding and decoding speaks about the content of the text, Benjamin and McLuhan are speaking about the format in which this content is presented; in the case of *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, this medium is animated television.

Translated to the television landscape or at least that of the 2000s and early 2010s, the issue of hegemonic presentations of gender and sexuality are still just as relevant as they were when *Snow White* was released in 1937. According to Benjamin, this movie set the standard for representations of gender and sexuality in animated media.<sup>67</sup> Since its release, little has changed when it comes to children’s animated media. While contemporary animated television arguably “deviates from the dominant paradigms of thought” more frequently than non-animated television and allows for increased creativity and experimentation in the medium, this is seen mostly in adult animation (*The Simpsons*, *BoJack Horseman*, and *Big Mouth*, for instance).

Benjamin’s argument adds an interesting dimension to the discussion of gender representations in children’s animated television, because it allows us to consider the role that the

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<sup>66</sup> Katia Perea. "Touching Queerness in Disney Films Dumbo and Lilo & Stitch." *Social Sciences* 7, no. 11 (11, 2018), 2.

<sup>67</sup> Esther Leslie. *Hollywood Flatlands: Animation, Critical Theory and the Avant-Garde*. (London; Verso, 2002), 83.

artwork itself plays in any movement away from dominant gender roles. The world of *Avatar: The Last Airbender* is one of magic. There is a magical spirit world within the *ATLA* universe, humans can manipulate the elements, and the Avatar is reincarnated once in a lifetime. This allows for artwork that is imaginative and experimental. An example of how *Avatar* used artwork as a tool to communicate a message about femininity can be seen in Azula's firebending. Most firebenders in this universe use orange and red flames; only Azula's flames are blue. This is used to juxtapose her in battle with other firefighters. However, it also assists in vilifying her further. The color of the flame is icy blue and cold, which is evocative of her cold personality; at the same time, blue flames are hotter in temperature than red and orange flames, therefore making Azula's weapon extremely destructive.

## V. Conclusion

*Avatar: The Last Airbender* appeared on Nickelodeon during an era of postfeminist, girl-power or gender neutral media. In many ways, the show exists in parallel to these ideas, its characters embodying many of the gender stereotypes that Nickelodeon relied on to remain apolitical. In other ways, however, *ATLA* subverted these stereotypes. This paper has discussed the various complexities of Katara, Toph, and Azula's embodiment of masculine stereotypes. There are many other examples throughout the show, including more female characters who reject gender expectations like Suki and the Kyoshi Warriors, or the embodiment of feminine stereotypes by male characters like Sokka and Aang. The ways in which this subversion is done is often subtle and sometimes even left up to the viewer to negotiate their reading of the text. It was enough, however, to pry ajar the door that gave creators the opportunity to depict gender and sexuality in non-hegemonic ways in the future. The progression that animated children's

television has undergone from the early 2000s to the 2010s can be clearly seen when examining *Avatar: The Legend of Korra* (2012-2014), the sequel to *Avatar: The Last Airbender*.

*Avatar: The Legend of Korra (TLOK)*

takes place a generation later than *The Last Airbender*, within the same universe. The queering of gender and femininity is taken a step further in *TLOK* than it was in the original series. This is true of many of the characters on the show, but none more so than the titular lead, Korra. From season one,



Korra breaks any and all gender norms, as well as the rules set up for female characters like Katara or Toph who do so in an unthreatening way. Korra exudes masculinity and aggression in everything from her appearance to her actions. She is tall and muscular, clearly displaying strength and masculinity from first glance. She wears a sleeveless shirt and very loose pants, which emphasize her athletic physique while still staying away from being sexual or suggestive. In the first seasons, her hair is long but always up in a ponytail, while in later seasons, Korra has short hair. As previously established, long hair in media is a clear representation of femininity and often heterosexual attractiveness, and the absence of this feature is a subtle way of visually foiling heteronormative standards of appearance. All of this strays from the reliance on female characters displaying traditional signifiers of femininity, such as in Katara's character. Instead of emphasizing Korra's inherent femininity and sexuality, her appearance further emphasizes her dedication to the masculine sphere of fighting.



Korra embodies many masculine characteristics, such as power, agency, action, forcefulness, aggressiveness, ambitiousness, competitiveness, and achievement, while simultaneously rejecting most female tropes.<sup>6869</sup> Still, she does not use ‘subversive niceness’ to soften the edges of her masculinity; instead, she is often brash and forceful to a fault. Nor is she particularly caring or emotional, instead struggling to even understand her emotions throughout much of the show. Her appearance and her character are not overtly feminine, and consequently there is more space for queer interpretations of her character. Korra’s appearance does not tie her to the heterosexual matrix, and her character actively strays from heteronormative standards, which opens the door to queer interpretations of her character.

*Avatar: The Last Airbender* ends with a kiss between Aang and Katara. *Avatar: The Legend of Korra* ends, instead, with Korra and Asami holding hands, going into the Spirit World together. The shot mirrors the scene from *ATLA* without the overt romance, therefore leaving much of the context of the scene up to the viewer to decide. The



creators of *Legend Of Korra*, Bryan Konietzko and Michael DiMartino wanted the relationship between Asami and Korra to clearly shift from friendship to romance in this scene. Because of censorship from Nickelodeon, they could not depict this relationship overtly, such as with a kiss, as they were able to do in heterosexual relationships. According to Konietzko, the network was

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<sup>68</sup>Dafna Lemish. *Screening Gender on Children's Television: The Views of Producers Around the World*. 1st ed. (London; New York; Routledge, 2010), 1.

<sup>69</sup> Brian L. Ott and Robert L. Mack. “Queer Analysis.” *Critical Media Studies: An Introduction, Second Edition*. (Wiley, 2013), 198.

supportive of this plot choice but that “there was a limit to how far we could go with it.”<sup>70</sup> The showrunners relied instead on the ability of the viewer to take the negotiated position, counting on a culture of queer interpretations of hegemonic texts, especially within *TLOK*'s audience, to convey the narrative that they intended to depict.<sup>71</sup>

This choice creates a somewhat unprecedented dynamic in animated children's television, because it means that the writers and creators of the show are assisting in the creation of the negotiated position in opposition to the hegemonic position that is being pushed by the network. The line between the hegemonic and negotiated codes becomes blurred, as the narrative between Korra and Asami is not fully negotiated, because this narrative is intended, but it is certainly not hegemonic, either, because it is not clearly depicted, nor is it fully encouraged by Nickelodeon. This blurring of lines between the hegemonic and negotiated, however, takes queer representation a step beyond willed interpretation. While the scene does not fully embody the concept of queer representation, it is still intended to be, and therefore exists somewhere between representation and interpretation. It is a small step that allows the next creator to create more clear representation, and bring queerness further into the realm of the dominant-hegemonic code.

Konietzko and DiMartino took to personal social media accounts after the finale of *Korra* aired to make their intended meaning clear. DiMartino posted in a statement on his Tumblr account in December of 2014, three days after the series finale aired on television:

Our intention with the last scene was to make it as clear as possible that yes, Korra and Asami have romantic feelings for each other. The moment where they

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<sup>70</sup>Bryankonietzko. “Korrasami is canon...” Dec. 22, 2014. <https://bryankonietzko.tumblr.com/post/105916338157/korrasami-is-canon-you-can-celebrate-it-embrace>

<sup>71</sup>Stuart Hall. “Encoding/decoding.” *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972-79*. (London; Routledge 1992). 130

enter the spirit portal symbolizes their evolution from being friends to being a couple.<sup>72</sup>

Konietzko made a similar post, also on his Tumblr account, going into even more detail about the process of this choice. He noted that he, DiMartino, and the *TLOK* writers considered a queer relationship between Korra and Asami from the first season, but assumed they would never “get away with depicting [a same sex relationship] on an animated show for a kids network” in 2010.<sup>73</sup> In his reflection of the progression of Korra’s relationships throughout the show, Konietzko also notes something of particular interest; he details the realization that no one ever actually *said* that a queer relationship could not be depicted, but rather that “it was just another assumption based on a paradigm that marginalizes non-heterosexual people. If we want to see that paradigm evolve, we need to take a stand against it”.<sup>74</sup> This shows that heteronormativity has historically been so ingrained in media creation that creators don’t even attempt to push against the hegemony, even if they may want to. By “taking a stand” against this paradigm, Konietzko and DiMartino met some resistance and censorship from Nickelodeon, but were still able to depict, to some extent, a queer relationship.

This scene in *TLOK* is barely more than a mere suggestion of a queer relationship. Still, it is *more* than a mere suggestion of a queer relationship; this opened the door for bolder depictions of queer relationships in animated television that came after *Legend of Korra*. In the series finale of *Adventure Time* (2010-2018), the female characters Princess Bubblegum and Marceline share a brief kiss, insinuating that the nature of their relationship is romantic. Also in 2018, *Steven Universe* (2013-2018) dedicated an entire episode to the wedding of two female characters, Sapphire and Ruby. In 2019, *Arthur*

<sup>72</sup>Michaeldantedimartino. “Korrasami Confirmed...” Tumblr. Dec. 22, 2014.

<sup>73</sup>Bryankonietzko. “Korrasami is canon...” Tumblr. Dec. 22, 2014.

<sup>74</sup>Bryankonietzko.

(1996-) premiered its 22nd season with a story about the same sex wedding of Arthur's teacher. Most recently, a Netflix series, *She Ra and the Princess of Power* (2018-2020) depicts multiple queer storylines, including both side and main characters engaging in queer relationships.

When each example is laid out, the slow build to this type of representation can be seen clearly. *Avatar: The Last Airbender* and similar shows started to stray away from the problematic girl power-esque depiction of female characters that was prevalent in the early 2000s. Though certainly not without its problems, it created complex characters who queered gender in many ways. This led the way to *Legend of Korra*, where queer representation in children's animated television first appeared. In this way, *Avatar: The Last Airbender* is one of few shows that acted as an important stepping stone for diverse representation within children's television. This idea can be expanded beyond just queer and feminist representations, as this show managed to tackle important subjects such as race, colonialism, war, and trauma in ways that has rarely been seen before *Avatar* on children's television.

*Notes*

\* Another example in which sexism is directly confronted in *Avatar: The Last Airbender* happens in season 1, episode 4, “The Warriors of Kyoshi.” When Aang, Sokka, and Katara are ambushed and captured by a group of female guerilla fighters called the Kyoshi Warriors, Sokka demands to know “who are you?” and “where are the men who ambushed us?” He then refuses to believe that they were captured by these women, saying “there’s no way a bunch of girls took us down”. This evidences that Sokka believes that women are less capable than men at fighting, in line with the hegemonic perspective that fighting is a masculine activity. This episode differs from the other example of a direct confrontation with sexism in this thesis, however, because it does not resolve Sokka’s sexism in a trivial way. He spends the episode training with Suki, the leader of the Kyoshi Warriors. At the end of the episode, he apologizes to her, explaining that he treated her “like a girl” when he should have treated her “like a warrior.” To this, Suki replies “I am a warrior... but I’m a girl too.” This makes it clear, without any hesitation, that the position that this show takes is that at least in the universe of *Avatar*, women and men are equally capable of fighting. Sokka evolves into a more feminist character through this lesson. <sup>75</sup>

\*\*Toph’s blindness is portrayed as an asset to her bending ability. Because she cannot see, she feels each vibration of the earth and therefore can predict her opponents movement with extreme accuracy. She is most similar in her fighting technique not to

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<sup>75</sup>*Avatar: The Last Airbender*. Season 1, episode 4, “Chapter Four: The Warriors of Kyoshi.” Directed by Giancarlo Volpe, written by Nick Malis. Animated by JM Animation. Aired March 4, 2005, on Nickelodeon.

other people, but to the ‘badgermoles’ a fictional species of animals that are seen in the world of *ATLA* as ‘the original benders’. This portrayal of disability as a useful tool that betters her life in many ways is an uncommon and significant mode of representation.

\*\*\*Examples of the villainization of queer tropes is rampant throughout children’s media, and especially in Disney films. Examples of queercoded villains in popular Disney movies include Ursula (*The Little Mermaid*), Jafar (*Aladdin*), Falicier (*The Princess and the Frog*), Hades (*Hercules*), and Scar (*The Lion King*). Ursula was even modeled directly after a popular Drag Queen.

*Appendix 1: Personal Video Project*

What Does it Mean to be a Girl?

Link to video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g70jh60e-sE>

Young children relate to and attempt to emulate the characters that they admire. I remember how, growing up, I would take on the personality of the character I most related to in whichever film I had watched most recently. After watching *The Aristocats*, I would pretend to be ‘proper’ and ‘ladylike,’ like Marie. After watching *Aladdin*, I would climb the cabinets of my house and pretend I was stealing food to survive. *Pocahontas* inspired me to run barefoot, and *Mulan* transformed me into a warrior. I was always particularly connected to the film *Mulan*, because it made me feel empowered in being a woman and not wanting to appear feminine. Of course, that is not exactly what the film is about, but I took from it what I needed. Negotiated interpretations for the win. While I learned about my preferences and who I liked to be through these films, I was also indoctrinated with ideas about what it means to be a girl in contemporary society. Each of these movies says something, whether subtly or not, about how women should behave, look, dress. How women should feel attraction, and who they should feel it towards.

This piece of video art explores the relationship that children have to the media that they consume. I use a combination of stop motion animation created using my own drawing and found footage from the Disney films that I grew up watching. I use clips from *Alice in Wonderland* (1951), *Pocahontas* (1995), *Mulan* (1998), *Bambi* (1942), *The Aristocats* (1970), *101 Dalmatians* (1961), and *The Lion King* (1994). In my film, a young girl deals with all this information within the world of the television screen. She transforms her likes, desires, and her appearance based on what she is experiencing; just like we did when we were little children.

Thanks to the power of animation, she can physically metamorphose. The process of making this film happened tangentially to the writing of this thesis, so my paper and this project follow the ideological framework. Hopefully all of this comes across. I hope, also, that this meaning doesn't fully come across, and that each viewer finds their own meaning and interpretation.



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