

# Making Gender Trouble: How *Sex Education* Subverts Compulsory Heteronormativity and Re-Imagines Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*

Nathalie Rennhack

## Abstract

This paper approaches the internationally successful Netflix series *Sex Education* through Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* and investigates how the show – through its characters – imagines and constructs a realm of cultural possibility that exceeds the heteronormative matrix. This paper reads the representation of the characters Eric Effiong (Ncuti Gatwa) and Adam Groff (Connor Swindells) throughout the first season of *Sex Education* as an answer to questions Butler poses concerning identity and legibility. In doing so, this paper argues that the series subverts culturally constructed heteronormativity through the repetition of attributes which construct the heteronormative matrix. The show thus, through this repetition, destabilizes the attributes that – according to Butler – naturalize this exact matrix. This paper thus explores how *Sex Education* engages with Butler's ideas and suggests how the realm of cultural possibility that Butler imagines might function.

## Keywords

Gender Studies – Queer – Judith Butler – Heteronormativity – Television Studies

## Introduction

“What the fuck did you come as, Tromboner? A girl?” (1.7). These questions from the Netflix series *Sex Education* (2019-) exemplify what Judith Butler refers to as “metaphysics of substance” (*Gender Trouble* 22): particular but accidental attributes make the human body meaningful and thus legible within society. In their work, Butler uses this concept, amongst others, to demonstrate how the entirety of compulsory heteronormativity is culturally constructed. Their ultimate goal is to imagine and eventually construct a social realm which is able to surpass this heteronormativity. Butler argues that “[i]f subversion is possible it will be a subversion from within” that is able to take place “when the law turns against itself” (127).<sup>2</sup> Still, most media representations are

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<sup>2</sup> The law or name of the father is a psychoanalytical term coined by Jacques Lacan that, according to Butler, constructs the basis of heterosexuality in that the father prohibits children from continuing to fully occupy the time and attention

“constructed through a heteronormative lens” (Poole 279) and thereby only stabilize what Butler aims to deconstruct. When compared to those depictions, *Sex Education*’s focus on queer characters stands out.

I argue that the Netflix show *Sex Education* can enter into a dialogue with Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* and is thus able to answer distinct questions Butler poses in their writing. Following Butler, who tries to imagine a realm of cultural possibility which exceeds compulsory heteronormativity, *Sex Education* outlines this discourse and offers answers to questions concerning identity, legibility, and cultural subversion. Even though the show operates within the culturally constructed heteronormativity, it exemplifies how this exact system can be deconstructed within and through itself. *Sex Education* employs overt representations of gendered stereotypes and mixes opposing attributes within one character to destabilize gendered attributes as well as the need for one’s identity to function within the restricted realm of heteronormativity. It thereby creates a discourse which subverts compulsory heteronormativity while simultaneously offering a perspective on queer men’s identities in this discourse.

I will specifically focus on the characters Eric Effiong (Ncuti Gatwa) and Adam Groff (Connor Swindells) and approach their representation through Butler’s imagined utopia. I ultimately aim to show how, thirty years later, Butler’s ideas function in the framework of a (British) mass media production and how conceptions of gender have or have not changed. It still needs to be taken into account that Butler’s theory was thought, written, and published in an American context, whereas *Sex Education* is set in Britain, written by a staff of screenwriters around the British series creator Laurie Nunn, and performed by mostly British actors.

I nonetheless assert that, in spite of these British influences, the show can be approached through Butler’s theory as it has an international character due to the blending of American and British aesthetics. The online magazine *RadioTimes* notes that *Sex Education* “feels distinctly American” (Harrison), notwithstanding the fact that it is set in a rural area close to Cardiff (Vázquez-Rodríguez et al. 199). The feeling that *RadioTimes* describes is caused by “Breakfast Club-style lockers,” “American football,” and “Letterman jackets” (Harrison). Nunn even describes these distinctly American visuals as a “conscious choice” (qtd. in Harrison). These characteristics, which clash with the rural British setting and dialect, create a scenery that is neither British nor American but has an extremely international character – it is “a teenage utopia” (Palmer). The blending of American and British culture in the visuals inevitably also influences the characters portrayed within them. Simultaneously, the British setting allows to openly address teenagers’ sexuality as the British curriculum explicitly includes sex education (Long 6) and even addresses LGBTQIA+ (13), whereas most American schools still refrain from teaching anything beyond abstinence (Bleakley et al. 1151). The British setting is thus utilized to justify the show’s focus, and the mixing of cultures then functions to actively include a multiplicity of cultures. Netflix, as a global streaming platform with culturally diverse, international audiences, also furthers this understanding. Thus, the discussion of *Sex Education* in the context of Butler’s *Gender Trouble* is promising.

## Gender and Heteronormativity

When analyzing Netflix’s *Sex Education* with Butler’s theory, gender must first and foremost be understood as constructed. Years before writing and publishing *Gender Trouble*, Butler already

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of their mother. This law thereby normalizes and enforces ongoing heterosexual behavior. Refer to chapter 2 of *Gender Trouble* for a more detailed discussion of this law and its problems.

argued that “gender is not a fact” but “a construction that regularly conceals its genesis” (“Performative Acts” 522). This idea is fundamental to their arguments concerning heteronormativity and its subversion and closely connected to the production of binary categories for attributes and behaviors. The result is what Butler refers to as “metaphysics of substance” (*Gender Trouble* 22) – a concept that is indispensable for cultural subversion.

Butler describes gender as being performative and highly regulated (“Performative Acts” 520). Repeated actions thus naturalize gender and simultaneously create ideas of gender. These repetitions then create social norms which “govern intelligibility” (*Undoing Gender* 42). An individual’s performance allows society to ‘read’ their gender identity; through a heteronormative lens, individuals are recognized as either ‘man’ or ‘woman.’ Compulsory heteronormativity, which relies on heterosexuality, then, “both requires and produces the univocity of each of the gendered terms that constitute the limit of gendered possibilities within an oppositional, binary gender system” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 31). This system thus needs clear definitions of ‘man’ and ‘woman,’ which also include desire: a man desires a woman and vice versa. A discourse which presupposes this binary system and enforces it must be understood as performing “a regulatory operation of power that naturalize[s] the hegemonic instance and forecloses the thinkability of its disruption” (Butler, *Undoing Gender* 43). Compulsory heteronormativity, in the most fundamental way, is consequently a regulatory system which governs what is thinkable and intelligible within a given social context.

As this concept is neither natural nor given, it must be stabilized through social practice in order to persist. In this context, Butler argues that “[t]he cultural matrix through which gender identity has become intelligible requires that certain kinds of ‘identities’ cannot ‘exist’ – this is, that those in which gender does not follow from sex and those in which the practice of desire do not ‘follow’ from either sex or gender” (*Gender Trouble* 24). The binary system modern society widely relies on can thus only exist as long as individuals follow heteronormativity – queer individuals become unintelligible. This also relates back to the creation of norms which are necessary in a binary gender system. But while individuals who do not follow norms become unintelligible and therefore do not fit into any of the binary categories, “any opposition to the norm is already contained within the norm, and is crucial to its own functioning” (Butler, *Undoing Gender* 51). Gender identities which deviate from the norm hence also stabilize the norm when the deviation is recognized as such. A restricted and highly regulated heteronormative system only allows certain identities to exist, resulting in a suppression and the creation of a hierarchy of identities.

One result of this regulatory practice, which stems from the intelligibility of norms, is what Butler refers to as the “metaphysics of substance” (*Gender Trouble* 22). When certain behaviors and attributes – which become norms through repetition – are understood to be accidental, they are exposed as unnatural and “a regulated fiction” (33). Butler furthermore names this understanding of gendered attributes as one way to work against heteronormativity (33). The deconstruction of such attributes and norms might also deconstruct notions of ‘man’ and ‘woman’ and what it means to be either.

This already is a starting point for Butler’s wish for cultural subversion which would ideally result in a realm of cultural possibility. And even though they still pose many questions concerning this subversion and how it may take place, they are certain that any kind of subversion must take place within the heteronormative law (127). Some of Butler’s questions nonetheless remain unanswered throughout their whole work. In my approach to Netflix’s *Sex Education*, I will use the following two questions Butler asks about subversion and identity: “What kind of subversive repetition might call into question the regulatory practice of identity itself?” (44). And: “If the

multiplication of gender possibilities expose[s] and disrupt[s] the binary reification of gender, what is the nature of such a subversive enactment? How can such an enactment constitute a subversion?” (171). In this context, identity must be understood as “an effect of discursive practices” (24) and as following from performative acts within society.

Butler mainly focuses on women and the suppression of them within society throughout *Gender Trouble*, but their explanations and ideas concerning heteronormativity and its subversion can still be applied to any contexts involving queer characters. Even in such queer settings in this heteronormative culture, someone is either ‘man’ or ‘woman,’ ‘masculine’ or ‘feminine.’ Most media representations consequently still widely rely on a heteronormative context (Poole 279), which includes stereotypical and accidental behaviors and attributes that are closely related to the production and stabilization of heteronormativity.

Following this understanding, being masculine is still understood as “being not-female” (125), as Sharone Bird suggests. Hegemonic masculinity furthermore includes attributes such as domination (Poole 282), “a quick temper” (283), as well as “detachment and independence” (Bird 125). Femininity is often associated with opposing characteristics such as subordination, vulnerability (Poole 283), and emotionality (284). Femininity as ascribed to women in a heteronormative framework is thus constructed as inferior and articulates the need for domination by masculine men. Amanda Lotz similarly states that “masculinities that reinforce men’s dominant gender status in the culture include aspects such as behaviors and attitudes that assert men’s ‘natural’ place as leaders and their superiority over women” (35). This ultimately creates the powerful and the powerless within the binary of man and woman.

In the context of this binary opposition, queer characters can hardly be represented at all. Jay Poole states that men “who adopt or exhibit traditional feminine attributes [...] were and are contextualized as ‘queer’ and/or ‘gay’ by mainstream America” (280). Hence, a man who is not portraying masculinity in a patriarchal sense has to be queer by default. Bird similarly argues that “meanings associated with behaviors that challenge hegemonic masculinity are denied legitimation as *masculine*” (121). This regulation stabilizes the gender binary and allows gay characters to only live on the margin as they are men but often stereotypically portray feminine attributes and thus, according to Butler, become unintelligible.

Even though the number of queer representations in mainstream television is evidently multiplying (Vázquez-Rodríguez et al. 199), these characters still mostly operate within a heteronormative framework. Bird also asserts that “violations of the norms [...] typically fail to produce alternations” and rather “result in penalties to violators” (130). As *Sex Education* represents many queer characters, it is crucial to analyze what role this heteronormative framework plays in the show in order to discuss whether or not the show is able to function beyond this regulatory system.

## Creating the Realm of Compulsory Heteronormativity

When following Butler’s understanding of cultural subversion, Netflix’s *Sex Education* needs to produce a realm within the law in order to create a possible scenario for subverting compulsory heteronormativity. This includes the notion of heterosexuality as given and therefore pre-discursive, which makes the idea of the natural binary of the sexes inseparable from gender (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 7). What also follows is the homosexual taboo that heteronormativity inherently entails. I assert that this space within the law of compulsory heteronormativity that enables cultural subversion is particularly constructed through the character Adam Groff. Adam’s hegemonic

masculinity – which surfaces in his phallogocentric speech and behavior, his need for (physical) domination, and his emotional detachment – as well as the fact that he evidently internalized the norms and attributes which lead to this conception of masculinity, work together in creating this space.

Phallogocentric language is described as being “pervasively masculinist” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 13). This phallogocentrism particularly shows in Adam’s repeated usage of words related to ‘fuck,’ which center the penis and the active act of penetration. For example, in the first season, he addresses his peers with statements such as “[s]hut the fuck up” or “I’m gonna fucking kill you” in the first and second episodes, respectively. Such behavior not only represents hegemonic masculinity which is associated with a “quick temper” (Poole 283) but also constructs Adam as the dominant and active individual in those situations. This observation also fits with Butler’s conception of phallogocentric speech that fails at representing women (*Gender Trouble* 13) and which thus supports patriarchal structures that also play a decisive role in the construction of compulsory heteronormativity. Beyond Adam’s language, the show focuses on his actual penis that he reveals while standing on a table above everyone else and explaining that “this is [his] dick” and referring to it as “large” towards the end of the first episode. The camera further supports his physical superiority with a shot that is taken through Adam’s bare legs at the height of his thighs, making everyone else visually appear below him. Considering that Poole explains that media representations of “‘real’ men” often involve “large dicks” (288), this scene physically constructs Adam as superior – both through him presenting his penis as well as through him positioning himself above everyone else – and thus further stresses his masculine behavior.

While this already demonstrates domination, Adam also repeatedly showcases a need for physical domination. The aggressiveness that his cursing conveys is furthered through him physically attacking other male characters in the second and seventh episode of the first season. In both of these situations, he punches his ex-girlfriend’s new boyfriend while the camera follows his movements and centers his actions rather than his opponent’s, which, again, constructs him as the dominating man. Presenting Adam in this way aligns with Lotz’s argument that particularly physical power puts men in superior positions (35), which then also strengthens the relationship between men and power (34). The powerful and superior position Adam assumes can thus also be connected to the power certain individuals – specifically masculine men like Adam – are granted in the regulatory practice of compulsory heteronormativity.

His emotional detachment, which is another attribute that is still commonly associated with masculinity (Bird 125), emphasizes this position. Adam’s first appearance on the show in the first episode of season one presents him with a straight face during sex. Ultimately, this depicts him as emotionally detached, even in extremely intimate situations. Throughout the first season, his straight face remains Adam’s most common facial expression; he rarely smiles or shows emotions apart from aggression. The emotional detachment and distance this portrayal conveys is supported by bland and mostly gray clothing paired with the brown leather jacket that Adam wears regularly (fig. 1). When compared to other characters who at least wear one colorful piece of clothing – such as the school’s red letterman jacket that the captain of the



Figure 1. Adam’s outfit in the first episode.



swim team usually wears (fig. 2) – Adam’s colorlessness coupled with his lack of emotions stands out. This detachment together with the need for domination and the phallogocentric speech and behavior constructs Adam as the ‘manly’ man whose gender performance repeats and normalizes a heteronormative social setting.



Figure 2. Jackson Marchetti’s (Kedar Williams-Stirling) outfit in the first episode.

Consequently, Adam must have internalized the norms that compulsory heteronormativity governs. They appear natural to him to the extent that he polices spaces and individuals around him. This particularly applies to the openly gay Eric Effiong, who Adam repeatedly frames as being unintelligible to his surroundings. Being gay, Eric’s gender identity does not fit the binary which heteronormativity establishes. In this context, his identity belongs to the ones which cannot exist as “the practice of desire do[es] not ‘follow’ from either sex or gender” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 24). Adam, having internalized this regulatory practice, frequently draws attention to Eric’s unintelligible identity. In the seventh episode of the first season, for instance, he asks him if he came as “a girl,” when Eric shows up to the school dance in colorful clothing and a Nigerian headpiece traditionally worn by women. Adam also directly addresses Eric’s sexual orientation in episode six and asks him if he has “[w]oken up straight,” acknowledging that Eric’s grey clothes in this sequence add to his gender performance and identifying clothing that is as bland as his own as ‘straight’ and thus also as masculine. Fashion, as argued before, clearly influences individuals’ gender performances; it can be compared to “the speaking of a language” as it has a structure that is “agreed upon by those who [speak]’ and [wear] it” (McNeil et al. 1). This scene exemplifies that in the fashion system that is governed by heteronormativity, specific clothing signifies gender conform and masculine behavior. Even more strikingly, the coding of Adam as heteronormative, straight, and masculine is reinforced through another character’s gender performance in this instance. Adam’s behavior towards Eric also implicitly includes the homosexual taboo: not conforming with the gendered norms Adam has internalized and perceives as natural is, in his eyes, not desirable or even acceptable. This is conveyed through the framing of Eric’s unintelligibility and the comparison to the previously outlined gendered ‘norms.’

My analysis of Adam Groff already partly addresses Butler’s question, which asks “[w]hat kind of subversive repetition might call into question the regulatory practice of identity itself?” (*Gender Trouble* 44). Butler herself notes that “repetition is bound to persist” (44) right before posing this question and later on argues that subversion *must* take place within the law (127). The system which is the ultimate source of the norms reproduced as well as the reproduction itself must be repeated in this show in order to create a realm which allows for any form of cultural subversion. In *Sex Education* this is achieved through Adam Groff, whose gender performance throughout the first season aligns with hegemonic masculinity that is produced by the regulatory quality of heteronormativity. He frequently uses phallogocentric speech which foregrounds men and demonstrates domination through implicitly entailing penetration. The show thus repeatedly draws attention to his ‘manliness’ – not only through his phallogocentric speech but also through physical domination and the portrayal of ‘masculine’ emotional detachment. In transferring these gendered norms onto the social space around him, Adam proves that they are given to him. He enforces a

realm within the law of compulsory heteronormativity which can then function as the foundation for cultural subversion.

## A Way into Cultural Possibility

Kylo-Patrick Hart notes that “representation is a form of social action, involving the production of meanings that ultimately have real effects” (61). Representation thus also influences how various social groups are perceived (60). Even if the number of queer characters represented on television is growing, Glyn Davis asserts that these characters “are absorbed into the heterosexuality of the medium and its representations. In relation to television queers always have to find a place in a heterosexual structure and system” (129). While this applies to Netflix’s *Sex Education* at least partly – as has become clear in the previous chapter – this heteronormative realm Davis describes does not prevent the imagination of subversion and new cultural possibilities. I argue that *Sex Education* utilizes this heteronormative framework and aims at a subversion from within through a denaturalization of said heteronormative realm. The show is thereby able to answer the question on “[w]hat kind of subversive repetition might call into question the regulatory practice of identity itself” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 44). It simultaneously approaches the question on the nature of such a “subversive enactment” that is able to multiply gender possibilities and “expose and disrupt the binary reifications of gender” (171). Both Adam Groff and Eric Effiong play a decisive role in the show’s subversion of compulsory heteronormativity. Eric noticeably deviates from the norm and is thus expected to become unintelligible to the social space around him. Even though this deviation should stabilize heteronormativity through this unintelligibility, Eric’s gender performance manages to *destabilize* heteronormativity and expose its constructedness. The mixing of stereotypically gay and stereotypically masculine attributes as well as the fact that he is still (partly) legible to his surroundings – not as the heteronormative man but as a new definition of ‘man’ – enables this. Adam then supports this subversion when he exposes the non-existence of this pre-discursive compulsory heteronormativity through his own deviation from it towards the end of season one of *Sex Education*.

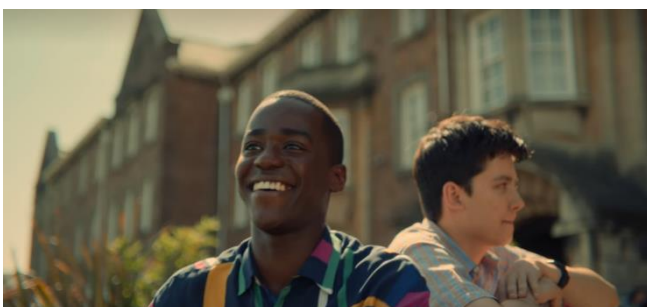


Figure 3. In this scene from episode two, the camera slowly zooms in until Eric is in the center of the frame.

Eric’s most prominent attributes characterize him as queer in the show’s heteronormative realm, as queer is “defined as different or out of what has traditionally or ordinarily been expected” (Poole 280). At first sight, particularly characteristics such as his quirkiness, his open portrayal of various emotions, and his lack of ‘masculine’ aggression thus work together in creating the stereotypically gay or “sissy” (280) character. His happy personality is introduced in his first scene in the first episode, in which he laughs loudly while happy, upbeat music is playing in the background. In this moment, the camera is slowly zooming in on Eric, which results in his reaction being increasingly foregrounded and taking up more space in

the shot (fig. 3). Another scene, in episode two, presents him as being unable to contain his excitement and dancing to express it. His behavior is further highlighted by his exaggerated facial expressions in these scenes. Apart from these happy and excited reactions, Eric is not suppressing his emotions of sadness or hurt. In episode five, he is depicted crying twice within approximately five minutes screen time. The first instance takes place in public and in front of strangers who are trying to help Eric out after being physically assaulted; the second is considerably more private when Eric is alone in his room after fighting with his best friend Otis (Asa Butterfield). Even though the scenes differ – in the setting, in the reason for Eric’s emotional response, and in the emotional response itself – the fact that he does not hide his feelings (that are centered through close-ups) adds to the anti-masculine notion because such “expressions of intimacy” and emotions are considered to be “feminine” in a heteronormative setting (Bird 125). Compared to heteronormative male homosocial groups in which the expression of “emotions signifies weakness and is devalued” (Bird 125), Eric’s behavior greatly deviates from hegemonic masculinity. Comparing Eric’s behavior to Adam’s emotional detachment, as outlined before, sheds further light on this observation.

Eric’s deviation from hegemonic masculinity is emphasized by his lack of aggression and phallogocentrism that is so prominent in Adam’s speech. As opposed to Adam, Eric refrains from using curse words, particularly those which derive from active sexual penetration. Eric’s anger is passive and centered within himself rather than projected onto his surroundings; in one moment in the second episode, he only utters that he is “sick of this behavior, man.” His reactions generally lack words like ‘fuck’ and thereby also seem to lack the aggression Adam portrays with his anger. Eric’s noticeably calmer tone that ultimately keeps him from signifying the same domination that Adam does supports this. In direct comparison, Adam, as pointed out before, dominates, whereas Eric is the one whose behavior seems to allow domination, which pushes him even further into ‘feminine’ ideals. Combined with the fact that Eric is openly gay, these attributes constitute him as unintelligible within the show’s heteronormative framework as the requirement for “the univocity of each of the gendered terms” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 31) does not apply to his character.

Eric’s performance nonetheless shifts drastically after the physical assault he experiences in episode five. In a moment of crisis that follows in the following sixth episode, Eric intentionally alters his performance, including his speech. Now, he shouts “[d]on’t fucking touch me” and exclaims that he is “sick of everyone treating [him] like shit.” Eric’s speech in this particular moment includes the aggressivity and phallogocentrism that his speech lacked earlier in the series and is coupled with drab clothing that Adam codes as “straight” as well as the lack of smiles and laughter that are characteristic for Adam (fig. 4). His clothing and his behavior now clearly resemble Adam and thus also fit the category of hegemonic masculinity. Even though this shift happens when



Figure 4. Eric in drab clothing in episode six.

Eric tries to distance himself from his identity and also achieves to be read as heteronormative by Adam, this drastic change nonetheless complicates his gender performance and already partly achieves what Butler envisions: “If the notion of an abiding substance is a fictive construction



produced through the compulsory ordering of attributes into coherent gender sequences, then it seems that gender as substance, the viability of man and woman as nouns, is called into question by the dissonant play of attributes that fail to conform to sequential or causal models of intelligibility” (*Gender Trouble* 33). In this situation, the stereotypes which I outlined and analyzed earlier are therefore used to initiate a destabilization of heteronormative ideals when Eric’s gender performance has both stereotypically masculine and feminine attributes. Simultaneously, the fact that Eric can so freely and consciously alter his gender performance and thereby also his intelligibility while his sexuality remains the same also questions the ‘given’ nature of heteronormative ideas of gender.

Eric’s performance appears even more complicated when his physical appearance, apart from episode six, is considered. When compared to the dull and grayish clothes Adam wears throughout the first season, Eric’s colorful clothing stands out. The first outfit Eric wears in episode one consists of checked pants and a colorful sweater (fig. 5). While the items can be seen as rather neutral, the colors and patterns Eric chooses differ greatly from other male characters on the show, particularly from Adam. But what stands out even more is Eric’s use of make-up, which is still stereotypically understood as a feminine practice. In the beginning of the first season, Eric secretly applies makeup while being alone in his room in episode one; throughout the season this secrecy decreases, when he first wears makeup in front of one of his friends while wearing an animal-print dress and a hot pink feather scarf in episode three and later puts on bold makeup and a Nigerian head piece traditionally worn by women to the school dance in episode seven. Eric consequently becomes more confident with showing ‘feminine’ attributes in public places over the course of the season.



*Figure 5. Eric’s outfit in the first episode.*

This can be linked to a growing acceptance and recognition within Eric’s social space. While his father seems disappointed after seeing that Eric wears makeup and a dress in episode three, Eric later gains his father’s recognition. In episode seven, his father says that he is “learning from his brave son.” Apart from the significance this moment has for their relationship, it simultaneously indicates a realm in which Eric’s gender performance at least partly becomes legible. Still, the heteronormative framework which Adam creates is supported through various actions of people around Eric, such as the physical assault that takes place in the fifth episode of season one while he is dressed up in ‘women’s clothes.’ This complication of his performance, which moves between heteronormative notions of ‘man’ and ‘woman,’ nonetheless starts to destabilize this realm: Eric is becoming less secretive about his performance and is recognized for being neither ‘man’ nor ‘woman’ by his family and other individuals around him. Instead, he is perceived as “brave,” which also indicates strength.



Figure 6. Eric dressed up as Hedwig in episode five.



Figure 7. Otis dressed up as Hedwig in episode five.

*and the Angry Inch* works to create spaces in which the gendered structures of our society are opened up to allow for behavior that the very same society does not regard as adherent to its norms” (35). Incorporating this character into the series thus also functions to highlight the ideas the show itself tries to communicate: allowing gender identities which exceed the heteronormative definition of man and woman.

Eric furthermore stays intelligible in these clothes. Adam’s policing of Eric’s gender performance in comparably feminine clothes, which stabilizes the heteronormative realm, loses its stability when Eric is still recognized as a man in the Hedwig costume. In the same episode, another group of strangers refers to Eric with “mate” in a moment when he cries and does not suppress his emotions. This exemplifies how accidental gendered attributes are. Butler writes that “[i]f it is possible to speak of a ‘man’ with a masculine attribute and to understand that attribute as a happy but accidental feature of that man, then it is also possible to speak of a ‘man’ with a feminine attribute [...] but to still maintain the integrity of the gender” (*Gender Trouble* 33). In these scenes, *Sex Education* does exactly this and thereby denaturalizes the gendered attributes which were previously perceived as given.

Eric’s generally rather ‘feminine’ performance throughout the series is also repeatedly enriched by more subtle actions that can be interpreted as rather masculine when looking at them through a heteronormative lens. The shift in Adam’s behavior undoubtedly plays into this, but Eric also shows other elements of stereotypical ‘masculine’ behavior without changing the rest of his performance. The most influential attribute is his ability to dominate other individuals – more precisely, other men. Interestingly, this dominant behavior is the most powerful when he wears his school dance outfit in episode seven: a colorful suit, bold makeup, big earrings and the Nigerian

Eric’s portrayal of heteronormatively defined ‘feminine’ attributes climaxes in the fifth episode of season one when he dresses up as Hedwig, the protagonist of the musical and film *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (fig. 6), which tells the story of a trans\* woman from East Berlin. Even though he tells his father that “it’s just a costume,” his clothes and make up are distinctly ‘feminine,’ particularly when compared to his best friend Otis, who also dresses up as the same character but looks considerably less feminine (fig. 7). While Otis wears sneakers and a cheap wig, Eric’s wig looks noticeably more expensive and he wears heels as well as tights. Choosing this character further adds to the subversion of compulsory heteronormativity as Hedwig “is a genderqueer character who challenges and ultimately transcends the boundaries of gender on stage” (Geitlinger 3). Furthermore, “*Hedwig*

headpiece. In this outfit, he is finally able to dominate Adam who regularly polices him for deviating from the norm. When Adam does so in this moment, and utters that he is “gonna fucking kill” Eric, Eric does not obey but steps up to Adam and asks whether he is “gonna do it now or later.” The fact that Adam does not respond to this question and Eric refuses to



Figure 8. Eric facing Adam in episode seven.

back away demonstrates that Eric is in power of the situation. During this shot, the camera moves around them in a circular motion while staying at Eric’s eye level, which results in centering Eric rather than the usually more dominant Adam (fig. 8). Later during the same episode, Eric also more implicitly dominates his best friend Otis when he tells him that “[they] both know that [Eric] lead[s]” the dance, signaling that Eric has the upper hand. What is noteworthy in these situations is that Eric, unlike Adam, is able to dominate without aggression and phallogocentrism.

The sexual domination that this episode lacks is nonetheless added in episode eight when Eric and Adam first fight and then end up having oral sex. At first sight, Eric seems to be

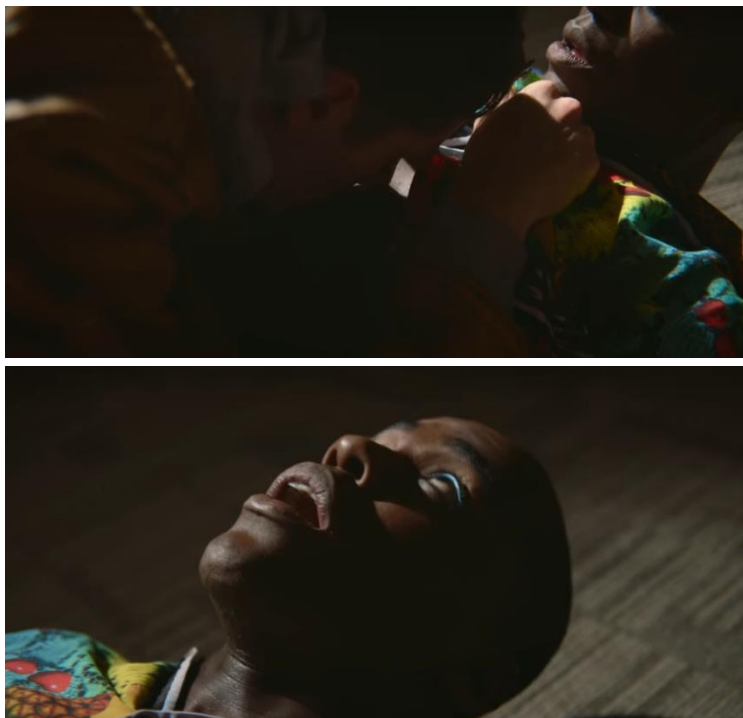


Figure 9. The camera zooming in on Eric in episode eight.

dominated by Adam because he is on top. But it is Eric who plays the ‘male’ part, which can be understood as sexual domination over Adam, who, according to Poole, steps into a submissive role when the focus shifts away from his penis to Eric’s (283). Eric’s dominating position becomes even more apparent when taking into account that Adam’s features are blurred while the camera zooms in on Eric, which eventually results in a close-up of his face (fig. 9). All of these behaviors, as well as the drastic shift outlined before, signify hegemonic masculinity which centers dominant behavior amongst others (Lotz 34) and thus complicate Eric’s gender performance even further.

mixes ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ notions within one character who is then still legible to parts of his surroundings. Furthermore, the portrayal of ‘feminine’ attributes does not keep Eric from also portraying masculinity – the moment at the school dance when attributes that are frequently assigned to either of the binary genders mix the most is the moment when Eric’s masculinity climaxes. Eric’s depiction thus subverts the idea of the binary genders’ univocity, as the mixing of attributes of both genders within his character does not affect his legibility nor his masculinity and he is even able to dominate the character who represents the heteronormative framework in the first place. Consequently, the gendering of attributes which constructs the binary categories *must* be a construct itself. Eric’s gender performance thus also suggests a new gender possibility: a man who can portray masculinity but at the same time also have attributes which are traditionally – but still accidentally – assigned to women. This idea is supported by the song Eric and Otis dance to during the scene in which Eric dominates Otis. “Origin of Love” from *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* thematizes a legend according to which there used to be three genders (Geitlinger 18) and marks another reference to the film and musical, which functions beyond the framework of a binary gender system. The song thereby furthers the subversive character of this distinct scene and the show in general as well as the possibility for genders beyond the heteronormative idea of ‘man’ and ‘woman.’

After Eric’s gender performance already denaturalized and destabilized compulsory heteronormativity, the show makes the system collapse in on itself when Adam deviates from the heteronormative framework that he himself enforces throughout the first season. The sex scene between Adam and Eric at the end of season one is – apart from how it impacts Eric’s character – also highly relevant for Adam. This scene ultimately constructs Adam as not fitting into the binary categories and thus as unintelligible within a heteronormative framework. His deviation reveals the non-existence of heteronormativity before the law and therefore completes the subversion of this exact realm. Lastly, it is crucial to understand that both Eric and Adam who are supposed to be illegible are still only described with attributes that can be traced back to the already subverted heteronormativity, which is exposed to be anything but pre-discursive by this exact practice. Eric’s and Adam’s gender performances throughout the first season consequently first destabilize and eventually subvert and collapse compulsory heteronormativity.

The first season of Netflix’s *Sex Education* evidently executes exactly what Butler predicts: subversion is able to take place “when the law turns against itself and spawns unexpected permutations on itself” (*Gender Trouble* 127). At first sight, the show works with stereotypes of ‘the straight guy’ and ‘the gay guy,’ but what actually happens is that these stereotypes are mixed with opposing attributes that complicate particularly Eric’s gender performance and succeed in revealing the constructed nature of the gendering of attributes. Butler also names the understanding of these attributes as accidental and a key to cultural subversion (33). The subversion that takes place during the first season of *Sex Education* thus functions through a repetition that denaturalizes the norms that are repeated. After answering Butler’s first question with this strategy, the show is also able to answer the second, which is concerned with the nature of a subversive enactment that takes place when gender possibilities are multiplied (171): exposing heteronormativity and multiplying gender possibilities go hand in hand. Eric’s gender performance does both simultaneously. His behavior as well as the reactions to his behavior disrupt compulsory heteronormativity while he already suggests a possibility that the old system renders unintelligible. Adam’s deviation then finishes the process of cultural subversion when he reveals the actual non-existence of the heteronormative law. The first season of the show thus subverts compulsory heteronormativity with what is actually already a new cultural possibility.



## Conclusion

Butler, in the preface to *Gender Trouble*, writes that they “continue to hope for a coalition of sexual minorities that will transcend the simple categories of identity” (xxvii). But thirty years after the first version of the book was published, most media representations still depict heteronormative ideals of what is ‘feminine’ and what is ‘masculine’ (Poole 289). And even though queer characters are now being depicted, most of them still have to find their place in a heteronormative realm (Davis 129). However, this is not surprising since the regulatory practice of gender constantly repeats itself and is thereby naturalized in society (Butler, “Performative Acts” 526). As media representations are a social act that inevitably influences social reality (Hart 61), shows like Netflix’s *Sex Education* technically have the ability to initiate a subversion of the heteronormativity that limits the range of identities that can and cannot exist.

The subversion of the heteronormative matrix that Butler aims at must take place within the realm of compulsory heteronormativity. In the show, this realm is created through the character Adam Groff, who behaves according to hegemonic masculine norms which center domination (Poole 282), “a quick temper” (284) and “emotional detachment” (Bird 125). Adam also projects this heteronormative ideal onto his social sphere through policing other characters’ behavior. The realm that Adam’s behavior constructs is then utilized to enable cultural subversion through Eric Effiong who already deviates from heteronormativity because he is openly gay. His most prominent attributes directly oppose Adam’s and thereby are ‘feminine’ by default and construct a stereotypically “sissy” character (Poole 280). The cultural subversion takes place when this stereotype is mixed with multiple attributes that fit the definition of hegemonic masculinity. Against the law of compulsory heteronormativity, Eric still remains legible and thus resembles a new gender possibility that can portray ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ attributes at the same time while also unmasking the ultimately constructed nature of the gendering of these attributes. The subversive nature of Eric’s character is then supported by Adam, which further collapses the system he himself enforces within the show when he deviates from the norm. Compulsory heteronormativity is therefore subverted by repeating and then de-naturalizing existing norms while simultaneously introducing a new cultural possibility. *Sex Education* thus responds to Butler’s work and re-imagines their ideas while thinking beyond the heteronormative definitions of ‘man’ and ‘woman.’

Besides Adam and Eric, the show also represents multiple other queer characters over the course of its (currently) three seasons. An engagement with more than these two characters and beyond the first season could reveal how the show re-imagines gender in different situations, particularly as the general framework of the show can be expected to shift considerably after Adam’s outing. Multiple scholars also note that in representing queer characters, television tends to repeat heterosexual norms in a queer context (Poole 284; Butler, *Gender Trouble* 43). As Butler points this out as another means of revealing the constructed nature of heteronormativity (*Gender Trouble* 43), investigating this in *Sex Education* might allow to gain even further insight into the show’s understanding of gender.

## Author Biography

**Nathalie Rennhack** is a graduate student of North American Studies and the Teacher Training Program at Leibniz University Hannover (LUH). In 2021, she received a bachelor’s degree in English and Biology from Leibniz University Hannover. Her research interests are in the fields of Gender Studies and women’s representations in Early American literature. In her bachelor’s thesis,

she analyzed the genre markers of sentimental literature and domestic fiction in Sukey Vickery's *Emily Hamilton* with a particular focus on representations of women's mental health.

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