Drawing Out Queerness in *Ponyo*:

Animation as a Mode of Radical Imagination

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All figures are screenshotted from HBO by the author,
Hayao Miyazaki, dir. *Gake no Ue no **Ponyo** / **Ponyo** on the Cliff by the Sea* (2008; Japan: Toho Co.)

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Introduction

"Intent on disrupting anything too smoothly commonsensical or straightforward, 'queer' stands for recalcitrance and strategic fractiousness, forever positioning itself cross-purposes with what Michael Warner has called the 'regimes of the normal.'"
Berthold Schoene[i]

In the summer of 2020, amidst uprisings against police brutality and large conversations around abolition, I learned the term *radical imagination*. In a time marked by seeming impossibility, with the climate crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, and a resurgence of fascism on a global scale, it feels like everyone is facing physical and mental constraints. Radical imagination is a welcome raft in such a harmful world; it is the ability to think beyond existing structures in service of building our future.[ii] To think in this way collapses the binary between imagination and reality, creating a void ready to be filled with the pieces of a new world. It is a skill that must be cultivated and learning to do so was a catalyst for this project. How can we dream outside the lines? Where does one find inspiration to imagine? What does it look like to picture a world without the structures we see all around us? As I thought about this, I thought of all the cultural texts that already do this work; books, movies, and other stories that invent alternate realities for us to step into and think with. I felt that consuming these stories could help me and my peers build our own radical imaginations, and thus this project stems from an aspiration to discover radical imagination in cultural texts and encourage my own skill.

I immediately looked to animation to find a text for this project. My interest in feminist film studies grew as I took critical media and film courses and extended into the shows I watched for fun. Only in recent years did I begin appreciating animated content, including diving into the vast Studio Ghibli archive for the first time. The medium brimmed with possibility – so silly and imaginative, visually beautiful, and always tickling me as somehow gay. The shows I watched had fan theories with queer themes, queer creators, and were just so weird or imaginative they at

least stood in contrast to more mainstream shows. Additionally, in my research, the words people used to describe both queerness and animation rung in my ears as so similar – many of those quotes have found their way into this project in the epigraphs.

Perhaps animation felt queer to me because it seemed to reflect my growing understanding of my own identity. Drawing from peers, curricular texts, and popular artists, I have embraced an unbound, magical transness in myself. Releasing the need for firm labels or boundaries has allowed me to have more fun with my expression, to move toward gender play and away from gendered constructs.[iii] So, when I see animated beings dissolve into lava-lamp bubbles or rapidly transform, I feel a kinship, perhaps a representation of how I would like to be. Not only are rigid boundaries eschewed, binary thinking can be completely abandoned in animation. The options are almost overwhelmingly colossal because drawn animation can truly depict anything, limited only by the animator's imagination.

At the same time, our current political climate is focused precisely on restricting and disciplining queer imagination and trans bodies. Norms of legibility and acceptability are forced onto queer bodies, particularly queer and trans folks of color or low economic status, through policing and criminalization. The ACLU is tracking 452 anti-LGBTQ laws at the time of this writing in U.S. state legislatures alone, including attacks on trans youth in sports, schools, and bathrooms.[iv] Young people are especially vulnerable to these laws which intervene in schools, criminalize parental rights to support their children, and remove opportunities for gender affirming care, particularly during puberty. Transphobic arguments are tied to a distrust of children and their agency, insisting queer children are too young to really know what they want or to make such decisions. It is a radical attack on fluidity and imagination, underscoring the need for uplifting those values, especially for and in children. Adolescence is a time when social

scripts are being solidified and children are vulnerable to being silenced or squished into conformity. Although visibility from queer and trans celebrities and activists works to destabilizes gender norms and promote fluid expressions of self in the media,[v] such representation comes with its own limitations of access and impact.

Given the horrors of our political and environmental realities, why wouldn't we want to be animated beings with no biological or physical limits? It's a silly thought – our bodies cannot abandon the physics of volume and shape – however, I have come to understand that this rejection of boundaries can be applied through a radical imagination to structures of power in our world. Though this project focuses on unbound gender, all rigid constructs of identity and oppressive limits placed on marginalized subjects are the systems we can and should imagine beyond. What would it look like to not have national borders? Who would we be if we abolish and heal from classed and racialized hierarchies? If there was no 'normal body,' how would notions of (dis)ability change?

These are questions that Black Feminists and Black Queer and Trans scholars have engaged through scholarship and speculative fiction that seeks to envision more just Black futures.[vi] Within animation, this is evident in the translation of The Black Panther comic books into a rich cinematic Wakandan world, as well as shows like Craig of the Creek.[vii] Alongside this, Studio Ghibli's work from Japan has been visualizing alternative worlds and ethics since the 1980s, focused on antiwar messages, highlighting female protagonists, and supporting environmentalism. I looked to Ghibli for a world that embodies radical imagination in subversive and exciting ways and found *Ponyo* (2008) by director Hayao Miyazaki.[viii] As someone interested in gender play, the protagonist immediately stood out to me in her relationship to her body and the transformation she undergoes. Ponyo provides an accessible and joyful point of

entry into the potentialities of animation for showing us queer worlds and ways of being. Despite mixed critical receptions when it was released, when I talk to others about the film I am almost always met with excitement, and it is the joyous connection to *Ponyo* and to animation that I hope to deepen through critical analysis.

Background on Ponyo

Ponyo follows the titular protagonist on a journey from her life as a goldfish in a magical underwater realm, to life as a human girl on the shore. She embarks on this adventure with Sosuke, a young boy who finds her, cares for her, and builds a loving friendship with her. Ponyo's transformation catalyzes a tsunami and the merging of her worlds, which the two friends must traverse to restore order and earn Ponyo permanent human form.

Ponyo comes from Studio Ghibli, the renowned Japanese animation studio built by Hayao Miyazaki. With 11 feature films, Miyazaki stands as one of the greatest animators of our time. His unique style is celebrated globally for telling complex stories in beautiful and imaginative worlds with animation that enhances the story and the experience. He stands apart from contemporary animation trends, which typically originate in the US/Hollywood, by rejecting hyperrealism and digital tools in favor of grand imagination and hand drawn techniques.[ix] Though he is often referred to as 'The Walt Disney of Japan,' this western-centric comparison is a major disservice to his creative and political interventions in the world of animation and storytelling.[x] Miyazaki's work has inspired numerous blogs, books, podcasts, and documentaries interpreting the worlds he's built and how he builds them.[xi] It often seems like Miyazaki despises this spotlight; he has painted himself as a grumpy luddite who craves the end of all creative media, including animation, in favor of a society more in tune with the natural

world.[xii] This is a tension he holds with his work, a taut balance between the potentialities of animation to tell important stories and the fact that it puts children in front of a screen.

There is a sincerity in his filmmaking process, a need to give children something they can understand and learn from. These values are evident in the origins of *Ponyo,* which, unlike his other films such as *Spirited Away* and *Howl's Moving Castle* with dense storylines and tormented characters, is fairly simple in themes and visuals. Though this was a point of critique in many reviews, I contend that the simplicity was intentional and effective in uplifting the perspective of children. As Miyazaki developed the movie, he knew he wanted to make a film for five-year-olds. Not because that's easy – he felt that young children are very mature, and if they enjoy the film then surely adults will too.[xiii] In this way, *Ponyo* is an act of honoring the often-overlooked knowledge that children hold and trusting them to engage in the text – a practice Miyazaki shares with queer and feminist scholars.[xiv] Perhaps he is also inspired by children, as his own imagination appears unbridled on the screen.

When *Ponyo* was released, both in Japan and a year later in the US, critics did not feel it met the Ghibli standard. Though Miyazaki's reputation garnered enough interest for the film to do well in the box office, it was regarded as a mere children's movie and remains low in rankings of Ghibli films.[xv] However, it's portrayal of oceanic ecosystems and environmentalism has led to *Ponyo* being taken up as a cultural phenomenon in scholarly environmental discussions.

Depictions of the ocean are common throughout Japanese cultural history from *The Great Wave off Kanagawa*, a woodblock print by Hokusai, to the very popular manga, *Children of the Sea*. One folk tale in particular inspired *Ponyo*: *Urashima Tarō.* In this story, a fisherman saves a turtle who, to return the favor, brings the fisherman to the undersea Dragon Palace and the beautiful princess who lives there. The fisherman returns to shore after what feels like a few

days, only to realize years have passed and his family has died.[xvi] The ocean acts as a space of desire, where time is transformed, and life can be liminal or suspended. *Ponyo* adds to this tradition in Japanese art of reckoning with the ocean, touching a lot of the same themes. This is especially significant in light of the 2011 offshore earthquake in Japan that caused a tsunami with waves over 100ft high which damaged the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Plant. This was the most powerful earthquake ever recorded in Japan and the second worse radioactivity release in the world.[xvii] In the wake of this disaster, all films depicting tsunamis were temporarily banned in Japan, including *Ponyo*.[xviii] Despite it being considered a "simple children's movie,"[xix] it was impactful enough to be censored. Since that classification, more scholars have taken it up as a site of investigation, looking to the animated (in the sense of alive and active) portrayal of the ocean in particular. [xx] This demonstrates the generative social critiques and alternative perspectives offered by the film providing an entry point to the queer and trans- theoretical framework through which I read it here.

The significance of *Ponyo* stems from the context of its production: a Japanese film with 170,000 hand drawn frames in an era dominated by Disney, Pixar, and computer-generated animation. Additionally, in the historical context I write within, where transphobic rhetoric is materialized into harmful laws and violence across the US, this text and my reading of it are valuable for the counter-cultural analysis it offers. As I will explore, the animation techniques used in *Ponyo* draw a queer and trans- lens for understanding and bettering our world and how we want to live in it. And while it is reductive to claim that this film is simple, it does mark a change in pace and tone from other Miyazaki films. I contend that the film's childlike aesthetic and perspective is a strength of the film intended to invite children into the effort of building the

future and encourage adults to listen to them by uplifting their point of view and taking seriously the value and necessity of radical imagination.

Literature Review

"Gender play has become a mythology that I create for myself… a web of references and experiences that I gather and hold underneath my skin"
Brigette Lundy-Paine[xxi]

Activists, scholars and enthusiasts use fiction, from historical to absurdist, to look for reflections of the truth. I place my own analysis of *Ponyo* at the intersection of feminist queer studies, and cultural and film studies conversations about imagination and world building in animation. In doing so, I aim to use an interdisciplinary approach that can offer a new way of approaching *Ponyo* and consuming animated content more generally.

Feminist and Queer Visual Culture

Broadly speaking, queer studies approaches topics from a marginalized perspective and attempts to render the subject unfamiliar, denaturalized, or otherwise use it oppositionally. Both the creation and study of queer art has been a powerful site to do such work. Cultural texts have real effects on popular beliefs and consequently interpersonal and structural oppression. This has often overlapped with film theory because of the stake video media has in mainstream culture. In the 1970s, feminist film scholar Laura Mulvey wrote "Visual Pleasures and Narrative Cinema" in which she coined the terms "male/female gaze."[xxii] Her article broke down the various lenses through which a film is seen, who they are for, and the impact this allows media to have on hegemonic ideologies. Black feminist Patricia Hill Collins details these effects of culture by evaluating representations of Black women which position them as the "other."[xxiii] These representations are what she calls "controlling images" which serve to justify oppressive social structures and continuously reproduce a multiply inferior "other" for Whiteness to stand against

as "normal."[xxiv] Thus, there is a huge need for the critical voices of marginalized peoples responding to mainstream cultural texts.

Cultural theorist Stuart Hall's early theory of encoding/decoding media invited different modes of receiving content based on one's positionality.[xxv] Hall's theory precisely renders media subjects unfamiliar to some (the mainstream) by allowing others (the margins) to put forth their own interpretations, a practice embraced by queer and other marginalized scholars. This laid fertile ground for subjective content analysis and more in-depth theories of oppositional decoding beyond Mulvey, such as bell hooks' "Oppositional Gaze." Her essay reified the value of reading cultural texts from a situated viewpoint.[xxvi] The oppositional gaze she coins argues that Black female spectators find pleasure in deconstruction of hegemonic images and storylines. She writes of the "power in looking" and reacting to existing, often oppressive, narratives.[xxvii] By recognizing critical Black spectatorship, she creates space for new transgressive relationships between representation and identity formation.[xxviii] Building on these works, José Esteban Muñoz put forward his theory of disidentification.[xxix] The Cuban American academic, in his book *Disidentifications*, articulates a new mode of transforming majority/hegemonic culture for those outside the racial and sexual mainstream to leverage for their own cultural purposes and belonging. Focusing on performance art by queers of color and the sources these pieces build from, Muñoz looks at how minority subjects negotiate mainstream culture by transforming it for their own purposes.

Building on this work, Muñoz, Alexander Doty and Jack Halberstam brought queer and trans reading practices to films. Doty's book on how to read mass culture queerly established important points of subversion in popular films and shows.[xxx] Where Doty generalized the queer lens, Halberstam develops a more specific transgender gaze in a chapter of their book, *In a*

Queer Time and Place.[xxxi] Focusing on the use of the camera and specific shot structures, Halberstam develops this viewpoint as one that reveals both the male and female gazes and ultimately accesses an alternate vision altogether. Though this building on Mulvey's theory uses the gender binary, it grants the trans subject a unique position that can be developed further by individual trans viewers. From popular action movies, musicals and queer films in *Female Masculinity* to Pixar films in *The Queer Art of Failure*, Halberstam demonstrates the scope of queer texts across culture, the impact of these texts, and the need for identifying their subversiveness.[xxxii]

This field is crucial to my own analysis of a cultural text and the queerness I see within it. It is through these scholars and others in the field that I learn to read texts subversively and queerly. Many scholars add to this body of literature through readings of specific texts. They contribute to an archive, but also to the validity of such readings, especially in texts with no LGBT intentions, such as *Ponyo*. Often, articles focusing on one text use queer cultural lenses to discuss gender and sexuality alongside other subjects such as colonialism, normative families, or notions of the frontier, to name a few. This demonstrates the breadth of queer cultural studies and inspires my own transdisciplinary analysis of gender alongside environmental discussions. Though this thesis will likely not be shared very far, my own learning and the conversations I have will hopefully extend past academia to enrich viewers' experiences.

The Queer Art of Animation

Animation separates from film theory because of the absence of a camera and the concomitant step away from reality. Halberstam's mid-aughts book, *The Queer Art of Failure*, looks at Pixar films and their use of new digital animation technology to understand messages of revolt. The Pixarvolt genre, as he coins it, is a site to deconstruct ideas of natural humanity and anthropomorphism, instead uplifting models of resistance built on collectivity found in the

natural world.[xxxiii] The book understands these films to be aimed at children and sees the queer ethos of failure and oddballness as in line with the child perspective. Centering children's imagination as these films do, and taking it seriously as Halberstam does, reveals a shared rejection of normativity between young people and queer folks. That is, the pressure to be a productive capitalist that does not go outside the lines or challenge the status quo is not yet calcified in children and is the antithesis of queerness and queer scholarship.

Halberstam joins animation scholars in celebrating the unique tools of animation that can bring to life subjugated perspectives. For instance, theories of queer corporeality have been investigated in animation studies by Ngai Sianne and Daisy Yan Du who interrogate over-animatedness and sublime stillness, respectively, to critique how animation has been used by some showrunners.[xxxiv] Sianne's book, *Ugly Feelings,* draws attention to the affective dimensions of animation and the power it holds to demonstrate emotions, focusing on instances where this has been overdone. She demonstrates how overanimatedness uphold racist stereotypes through caricaturing and comparisons of racialized others to animals or supernatural beings.[xxxv] Yan Du compliments this argument by looking at the opposite tool – unaminatedness. Her article examines time and motion as a means of visualizing power politics and denoting the status of various characters. In a similar vein, Eli Boonin-Vail examines animated bodies but towards a theory of queer time in animation and connections to the realm of child phenomenology.[xxxvi] His article revels in the fluidity of animated children, how their bodies can seep into the corners & closets where childhood fantasies reside. And still other scholars such as Ursula K. Heise and Daniel Morgan bring forward animated backgrounds to discuss the value of plasmaticity in creating a radical world and alternative modes of engaging with nature.[xxxvii]

Thus, animation studies has significant uptake within queer theory and animated texts are rich sites for reflection on our own reality. Numerous scholars in this field have contributed to this project, building my understanding of and vocabulary around animation. Reading thorough analyses of animations such as *WALL-E*, *Steven Universe*, and *Asparagus* inspired, encouraged, and guided me.[xxxviii] In contributing another film to this archive, I aim to strengthen the validity of such work and further the conversations around imagination, animation, and transness. It is my hope that these discussions reach beyond academia to producers and studio executives with the power to diversify the animation industry and the stories being told in mainstream media.

Imagination and Worldbuilding Studies

One reason animation is such a deep site for analysis is its inherent nonrealism, the way large imaginative leaps taken to explore realities vastly different from our own can be harnessed as a tool for change. The term *radical imagination* has no specific root but can be found across many disciplines. It sits as a dream of the future held open, never solidified into a blueprint or losing sight of the present, but wide enough for leaps toward what may feel impossible. Alex Khasnabish and Max Haiven published a special issue on the topic in *Affinities* and later wrote a book pulling theorists together around radical imagination.[xxxix] The scholars they write with grapple with potentialities and possible potholes, urging us not to restrict the imagination with too singular a definition.[xl] Larissa Lai, novelist and lesbian literary critic also featured in the issue, discusses the worlds opened up for practitioners who share their imagination as a gift. In a "gift economy" one's wealth is increased by how much they give away, and thus using radical imagination as a collaborative practice already begins to rebuild our reality and create new ethics around value.[xli] Also shifting beliefs in our world is the Black radical imagination, which has always been indelibly tied to community and to struggle.[xlii] In popular culture, fiction is a rich site to see radical imaginations in action, especially in speculative fiction and Afrofuturism.

Speculative fiction, as Black literary scholar Sami Schalk describes it, is not escapist fluff but politically astute comments on our world that make us imagine alternative possibilities.[xliii] In literature, film, performance, and visual art, speculative fiction wonders what the future could look like if we stay on our path or choose differently, both in the direction of dystopian nightmares and beautiful dreams. The methodologies of this paper draw from speculative fiction scholars and writers because of their strong grasp on reading radical imaginations. Afrofuturistic fictions are almost always speculative as well, specifically fusing African diaspora culture with science fiction. The genre reclaims the past to imagine a future, as S.R. Tolliver describes it, inherently political, transformative, revolutionary, and combatting oppression.[xliv] Though it is an aesthetic that can be found in music, fashion and dance, it is the vast worlds built in comic books, novels, and films that relate to the interests of this project.

Worldmaking is the point of intersection between fiction and activism, the connection between imagination and action. Gloria Anzaldúa, in her book *Luz En Lo Oscuro,* challenges any distinction between dream realms and our world, asserting the decoloniality of unlearning common notions of reality and uplifting the practice of building imaginative worlds.[xlv] Additionally, her work situates creation as a rereading, rewriting, and rearrangement of reality, uplifting fiction as an act of worldbuilding. Thus, the field of imagination is occupied by both scholars and practitioners, those imagining new worlds and interpreting those worlds, with no clear distinction between the two. And it does not only involve activism in our current world or building entire fiction universes for the purpose of storytelling. José Esteban Muñoz's book, *Cruising Utopia*, explores the temporary, ephemeral worlds enacted in performances and art that create a glimpse of queer possibility and utopian future.[xlvi] Focusing on queer creatives of color, Muñoz relishes in the value of these spaces that both imagine and enact worlds, even if only for

the audience in a small room. His investment in utopias serves to jolt queer theory out of its anti-relational rut which resulted in individualism and pragmatism, in favor of imagining a future for and of queerness, and then creating it. He positions queerness as a horizon, a space unknown and imbued with potential, contesting the ontological certitude that restricts queerness and hinders construction of a queer utopia.[xlvii] That is, rather than feel stymied by the present reality, Muñoz gives us a reason to focus on the future and invest in imagination, placing queerness as a tool to do so.

This sphere of culture and fiction studies by scholars of color, especially film studies, has a long history with queer and feminist studies, creating together a deep world of worlds connected through their insight into our own reality. Animation is a relatively new technology for building these imaginative spaces and brings with it new tools for queering media narratives. Rather than staying intangible, however, radical imagination exists in radical practices, in ways of living against normative structures, and in worldmaking movements including building fictive worlds. I cherish this practice, a skill that must be cultivated and one I am working on nourishing in myself. This is what brought me to this project, and I am indebted to scholars and practitioners of Black imagination and other radical speculators of color. Though I do not share the positionality of many of the scholars and writers I am citing, I learn so much from them about the ways in which imagination can be used to manifest more just worlds. I hope to contribute not just to how we view imaginative worlds, but what we can be inspired to do after engaging with them. Building the future is necessarily intersectional work and I focus on queer and trans children with the understanding that liberation must include everyone.

Methodologies

"Pulsating, elongating, and throbbing, the animated body presents itself as an amorphous blob of queer energies, capable of shifting taxonomies from human to animal forms at the whim of a playful and capricious animator"
Eli Boonin-Vail[xlviii]

I watch animations through the lens of my life: I am white, upper-class, queer, young, Jewish, neuro-atypical, over invested, easily excitable, creative. This constructs how I decode the world around me, including *Ponyo.* My first encounter with *Ponyo* was the English-dubbed version released by Disney. The story I consumed necessarily passed through many hands before getting to me and not only the language, but much of the context, was lost for the western audience. I haven't lived through tsunamis or massive earthquakes; my community doesn't have systemic support for the elderly; nor did I know, until researching this project, the folk tale of Urashima Tarō.[xlix] Watching, decoding, and interpreting the film in this project are yet more acts of translation *Ponyo* undergoes, being slightly remolded each time. My personal animated film archive rests on years of Disney and Pixar before seeing any Ghibli film, so it is instinctual for me to compare *Ponyo* to western work. I read alongside but also against the western aesthetic, valuing *Ponyo*'s marked differences, especially the lack of hyperrealism. I also include the Japanese context in my analysis, though I am extremely new to that information, and balance the necessity of that context with my lack of expertise.

I do not shy away from the ways this paper further translates the film, as any analytical reading is a transformative consumption, but am aware of my positionality and strive to work critically with it. Indeed, many of the methodologies I lay out below come from subjective and situated readings of culture. I also hope to move the text toward a place accessible to queer viewers and fans who want to see parts of their stories reflected on screens. Though I read mostly for and through my own experience of queerness, I hope to inspire and empower audiences very different from myself in their own readings.

Framework

To guide my reading in this project, I operate within a "trans-" framework. Following the introduction to *The Trans- Issue* of *The Women's Studies Quarterly* (2008), this analytic lens uses the hyphen after "trans" as a theoretical diving board to leap off.[l] The authors of that introduction, Susan Stryker, Paisley Currah, and Lisa Jean Moore, begin with the prefix use of "trans-" meaning to cross, and build a framework that can traverse many spaces. Though gender remains the primary category for analysis in this and most trans- texts, this framework invites other sites as well, such as trans -national or -generic. These two categories are pertinent for my project as I analyze *Ponyo* from its Japanese context to its western, specifically US-based audience reception as an animated film that defies simple genre classification: a children's-fantasy-coming-of-age-tsunami film appropriate for all ages. Other scholars fill the blank after trans- as they need. For example, Filipino transnational Trans Studies scholar Kale Fajardo emphasizes a transgender, translocal, transnational, and transportation based interpretation of Filipino masculinities on seafaring ships.[li] This path across many subfields mutually enriches the fields while decentering white trans histories and moving to include historical and contemporary practices of racialization, and migration. Destabilizing separations between these topics enacts the trans-border ethos that a trans- framework rests on.

Additionally, the *Trans- Issue* authors encourage a shift from the common thinking of trans- as moving horizontally between two established genders toward a trans- along a vertical axis between the biomateriality of individual bodies and the biopolitical realm of populations.[lii] This first destabilizes the notion of a binary that transgenderness switches between, establishing instead an infinite spectrum to be crossed at any pace. Further, by rotating the axis, the authors invite theorization beyond the individual body or even the queer transgender experience. I

appreciate this intervention as it encourages questions of other boundaries and spaces we cross, and where and how that crossing occurs, including in cultural texts.

In my analysis, I interrogate the formal characteristics of animation by focusing specifically on plasmaticity and its ability to trans-form a character and the ethical world it inhabits. In other words, in this thesis I understand trans- as crossing a plasmatic line that is squiggly with loops and mobius curves, still a space with borders to cross but not ones that remain fixed by any means. Where Doty places queer as against-straight, I see trans- as against-boundaries and ossification; it is movement, crossing, transformation. The trans- ethos drawn from this framework is creative and improvisational, seeing and creating spaces through which one can discover radically new possibilities for being in the world.

Imagination and creative thinking has often been tied to disrupting binaries. Chicana feminist Gloria Anzaldúa's book, *Luz En Lo Oscuro,* is a treatise on her own philosophies in which she uplifts methods of knowing, being, and creating that have been marginalized by Western thought and places her own process as an embodied artistic and political practice. In the second chapter, "Flights of the Imagination," she validates the imagination, reclassifying it as another type of reality and urging readers avoid the snares of literalism. As mentioned above, this challenges the separation of dream worlds and reality, instead proposing a shifting, unstable border between the two realms that can be bridged. Looking at el Nagualismo, a Toltec shapeshifter carried in chamanerías who travel to other realities to solve problems of the present, Anzaldúa presents the importance of imaginations without binaries or rigid boundaries. Of course, her work is in conversation with national borders, particularly the US/Mexican border, which sits as a site of violence for specifically racialized populations. Recognizing the difference in our contexts, this remains a bountiful foundation for my own analysis of animated worlds

which are influenced by and speak back to the real world. In my methodology, I hold dearly this ethic of border crossing, a valuing of imaginative knowledge and overlapping realms, which speaks to freedom, and policing, in varied forms.

Feminist & Queer Reading

To enter the imaginative realm and find a trans- ethos in *Ponyo*, I looked to queer and feminist strategies for reading fiction texts. Scholars and makers of queer culture engage with context, production, and the text holistically to understand the meaning and impact of the piece they're studying. Alexander Doty was not the first to write about queer media, but his book *Making Things Perfectly Queer* (1993) is considered an early and influential text that changed how films and television could be read, including elucidating the three areas of context, production and diegesis (the world within the text).[liii] He takes care to define queerness in a flexible and broad way, only marked as "contra-, non-, or anti-straight."[liv] This applies not just to an identity, but to the method of queer reading which is helpful in clarifying a methodological framework and methods for analysis. My analysis intertwines readings of context and production throughout my examination of the film itself.

Within a fiction text are the laws, logics, and limits that shape the reality inside and there is a lot to be found within these bounds of the diegetic world. I look to Ursula K. Le Guin and Sami Schalk – feminist scholars of science fiction and fantasy – who's analyses extends to animated content because of its inclination to nonrealism. In her book *Bodyminds Reimagined,* Schalk specifies reading within the diegetic parameters as one of her three main methods.[lv] Stepping into and immersing oneself in the reality of the text provides a new vantage point from which to look back at our present. Ursula K. Le Guin, in her introduction to *The Left Hand of Darkness,* writes that science fiction is a thought-experiment meant to describe the present world.[lvi] Writers start with a 'what if…?' and follow that ellipses to a world that could be in any

time or place. Sometimes, the farther from the 'truth' a fiction is, the more radically it can reflect on the present, unbound by our societal norms and structures. Schalk demonstrates this, writing about how nonreal species such as werewolves, demons, and demi-gods work to defamiliarize norms of our society and give them new meanings in their fantastical worlds.[lvii] Taking these fictive worlds seriously and on their own terms is important to feminist practices of honoring subjugated and diverse knowledges.

Listening to those on the margins and uplifting the knowledge created there is crucial to destabilizing hegemonic ideologies and processes. Children's voices are certainly disregarded, especially in conversations around science and the environment, and even how to build a better future. Miyazaki's choice not just to speak to children but learn from them and uplift them in *Ponyo* invites young people into the conversations and asks their opinion. This film, along with Miyazaki's documented love of children and frequent visits to the Ghibli daycare, is a call to include children in the brainstorm, to learn from the worlds they build and appreciate that their imagination is often unbridled.[lviii] Jack Halberstam and Eli Boonin-Vail both talk about the importance of children's perspective specifically in relation to animation because the content often is made for and about them. Boonin-Vail, in discussing the queer temporalities of animation, cherishes the hidden spaces and bedroom fantasies that populate children's worlds.[lix] Though these films are rarely actually made by or with children, it is precisely the gap between director and audience that necessitates an appreciation and honoring of young people's viewpoints. Building a world is never objective, and Miyazaki is among those that balance their lived experiences with those of their audience's.

In other words, fictive worlds are built on embodied and experiential knowledge of their creators, influenced by their reality, either a reproduction of or a reaction to the context. Le Guin

reminds readers that writers tell us to open our eyes and listen, "but they don't tell you what you will see and hear. All they can tell you is what they have seen and heard…"[lx] Thus, investigating the lived experiences of creators can help illuminate what is actually in the text and situate their world with more specificity. Particularly when thinking about systems of power and the construction of our reality, this wider approach is necessary. That is, our lived experiences are a confluence of constructed identities, imposed hierarchies, and interlocking systems of oppression and privilege; and cultural artifacts all either uphold or disrupt those structures.[lxi] Hence, the consequences of such constructions and systems on the author or animator influence if the world they create reifies hegemony or proposes alternative ways of being. In this project I include director and writer Hayao Miyazaki and his animation powerhouse Studio Ghibli, as well as the Japanese context in which *Ponyo* was created. For example, Miyazaki grew up in a war-torn Japan in a family that sold airplanes to the military; though he was raised affluent because of this, he has been antiwar since his adolescence. His position is not on the margins of society, yet various mentors and experiences have led him to at least try to tell stories against the grain.

The methodology for this paper is reading the context and the diegesis together, using the trans- analytic lenses developed above which requires examining what the text lies in opposition to. Additionally, I read for and through the children's perspective, acknowledging the animated context and intended audience. Finally, understanding that this reading is further influenced by my own context and lived experiences, I insert myself as a collaborator by analyzing the text.

In the following analysis, I identify instances of plasmaticity in the protagonist, Ponyo, and the ocean in order to demonstrate the queer ethics that are highlighted in the story through those visuals. I situate this fiction text in conversations around how to create a better future, so I

then move to a discussion of world making in the film. The world of *Ponyo* and the worlds in *Ponyo* demonstrate the malleability of reality and empower audiences to join worldbuilding efforts. All three pieces of the analysis work together to paint a picture of *Ponyo* as an inspiring text, a piece of culture working against normative narratives of rigidity and passivity in identity and toward ecological and collective fluidity.

Plasmatic Queerness

"I have made changes to my body.
I love that our biology is malleable
And that our bodies are ours to shape.
It is not always easy (no body is ever easy)
But I never knew it was possible to feel this kind of joy and freedom in my form before"
ND Stevenson[lxii]

A defining feature of animation compared to other film mediums is what I like to call gooeyness: subjects with impermanent volume or shape, fluid movement, and near constant change. This is *plasmaticity*, originally coined in the 1930s by Soviet director and film theorist Sergei Eisenstein and defined as "the rejection of the once-and-forever allotted form, freedom from ossification, an ability to take on any form dynamically."[lxiii] Since Eisenstein's identification of this feature of animation, several scholars have theorized about what possibilities this opens in the animated form.[lxiv] Similar definitions of animation arose that focused not just on animation's elastic visuals, but also its ability to construct imaginative worlds that provide liberatory possibilities for queer and other marginalized people, stories, and ethics.[lxv] Through fluidity of form, the possibility of dynamic and ever-changing characters, manifesting imaginative worlds, and non-normative storylines, this medium is particularly well suited to express, depict, and contribute to an expansive conception of queerness. Explorations of animated worlds reveal over and over how open and fertile those fictive spaces are. Dripping in

possibility, unburdened by the norms we face in our "real" lives, our inner emotions and processes are drawn into existence.

To understand and demonstrate this affinity between animation and queerness more deeply, I look to *Ponyo* as a film whose queer themes depend on the animation as much as the animation is queer. That is, the hand drawn animation allows for the queer themes to materialize, demonstrating the ability for the animation to communicate beyond the surface plot. *Ponyo* depicts themes of gendered and ethical transformation within individuals and the world, which I read as queer and trans with the help of queer and trans- scholarship. Additionally, these themes cherish and uplift the act of transformation and of fluid embodiment, an important countermessage to transphobic rhetoric.

The film's animation style is simple yet divine, applauded by some critics and viewers while most also noted the change in Miyazaki's style from more intricate works. I join these reviews by specifically highlighting where form and content meet, each needing the other to be fully expressed. I read the animation, and particularly the plasmaticity, as much as the plot in my analysis which ultimately is an argument to value the filmic form on its own. That is, the film depicts one way in which animation can be queer and helps encourage more queer readings of the medium. In *Ponyo*, I found fluidity, desire, and performativity brought to life through lines and colors that can stretch, change, and grow.

Fluidity

The "freedom from ossification" described by Eisenstein is the core identifier of plasmaticity – that subjects in animated worlds can abandon any consistent shape, size, or volume and morph into literally anything. For Eisenstein, the effect of this in Disney animations was an escape for the audience from the rigidity of their lives in capitalist America.[lxvi] While his

faith in Walt Disney does not quite hold up, the liberatory possibilities he saw in animation continue to find their way into new theories of the medium.

Descriptions of plasmaticity reminded me of the expansive understanding of queerness found in some queer theory and recently in mainstream spaces. Alexander Doty's definition of queer as positioned against straightness, as mentioned earlier, is a helpful starting point for these newer conceptions of queerness.[lxvii] He positions the queer lens as an oppositional force, a broad entity opposed to the white, patriarchal, upper-class mainstream. This allowed anyone not embraced by those norms to identify as queer and work to denaturalize that hegemony. This was an important intervention, and queerness continued to be developed in its own right, not always in contrast to straightness. For instance, in her exploration of video games, Bonnie Ruberg focuses on the playful aspects of queerness; the ways affect, desire and embodiment show up through and as queerness.[lxviii] She sees queerness as "reimagining, resisting, and remaking the world."[lxix] These moves to expand what is queer open the door to diverse, fluid, and ever-growing understandings and identifications with queerness, increasingly defined as undefinable. In his book, *Cruising Utopia*, José Esteban Muñoz described queerness as a temporal unattainability, a then and there future we may never actually grasp.[lxx] Though this abstracts queerness, it is also a move to broaden the power and potentialities of the term as a scholarly tool and as an identity.

Increasingly, queer folks are refusing to conform to a certain aesthetic or identity, labels and identity boxes are being broken out of, and self-expression is an art bounded only by one's imagination. Like scholarly understandings, queer identity is being destabilized as a fixed category, constantly reshaping itself to include new manifestations of queerness. Of course, this freedom is an ongoing effort in an incredibly hostile environment and norms of legibility are still

forced onto many queer and trans bodies. Alongside cultural and scholarly efforts to broaden queerness and share the beautiful, rich rainbow of such a position, the reality of anti-trans and queer efforts cannot be understated. The nexus of childhood and queerness is an important one to this project, and the force being exerted on trans children is a point at which I hope to intervene. The idea that queer children can't imagine their own future, because they don't know enough or are simply too young, devalues fluid growth and fetishizes racialized constructions of (white children's) childhood innocence. Ponyo reacts to this cultural and political fetishization of children's lack of knowledge and agency oppositionally, giving us five-year-old protagonists with strong senses of self. The intense policing in our world is a containment of the fluidity of children's bodies, genders, and possibilities. I aim to add animation as a tool that can open all the possibilities of queer and trans expression and hope more animated texts will serve as foils to transphobic rhetoric. Additionally, for queer and trans audiences, perhaps this lens can contribute to moments of solace and representation amidst this oppression.

Ponyo's transformative journey, read with a queer lens, is a nuanced representation of a trans identity. Her transmogrification certainly defies binaries as she moves nonlinearly between fish and human, back and forth with different interstitial forms each time. Gender transitions are often assumed to move between two points, boy and girl, instead of along a spectrum of innumerable unbound points. The titular protagonist does not undergo simple bodily transformation from a fish to a young girl, but meanders through many less-clear stages in between including going back to her fish form, as illustrated in Figure 1. Her body stretches and pops, sometimes without you noticing and other times before your eyes, always in an incredibly plasmatic way. Though her final form as a young girl is a very legible representation of one

gender in the hegemonic binary, her journey to that form undermines any status as one fixed point out of two.

Figure 1: Some of Ponyo's many forms, in chronological order as seen in the film. (Miyazaki, Ponyo).

Ponyo therefore demonstrates the ability for animation to communicate these aspects of queerness situated in the in-between and outside of fixed identities. Ponyo's metamorphosis would not be possible without animation as it is an imagined corporeal experience outside the physical limits on bodies in our world, reliant on the impermanent and stretchy qualities of animated bodies. Animator ND Stevenson understands and embodies plasmatic queerness as an artist in this industry and a trans person. In their graphic blog, *I'm Fine I'm Fine Just Understand,* they share their gender transformation through comics.[lxxi] They frequently refer to their own identity in terms of fluidity and malleability, as in the epigraph. They visualize their desire by describing wanting gender as both and neither, to destroy it and to feast on it like a buffet.[lxxii] Similarly, Ponyo consumes humanness, wanting to experience and embody everything she encounters on the bright new shore. However, she holds onto aspects of her magical fishiness and grapples with who she wants to be even as she transforms her body.

Desire

The plot of *Ponyo* relies heavily on the protagonist's transmogrification. Though plasmatic animation is not always a full or permanent transformation, it allows for bodily changes in many ways. That is, some bodies stretch or squash and then return to their original shape while others undergo full metamorphoses, and often subjects experience various levels of plasmaticity. The scale of transformation is a tool to communicate what is not in the dialogue. Ghibli character designer Katsuya Kondo intentionally infused Ponyo's appearance and form with her mental state, wanting to cast her emotions into shape.[lxxiii] Pleasure is expressed by ballooned faces and curiosity becomes glee when her body swings unnaturally, trailing behind her exploring eyes. When Sosuke shows Ponyo love, she becomes more human in form but when Ponyo is exhausted, her progress towards a human shape reverses.

Thus, Ponyo's plasmaticity is driven by her own desire and will - desire to be human and to be an agentive subject free from the restrictions of her father. She is a subjugated character, literally held back by her father at one point in a bubble, and thus needs to extend herself through conscious liberation. In Figure 2, Ponyo forces out limbs to pop her bubbled cage. Though she is a child, it is clear what she wants, and the film does not discount that. Given that children are rarely taken seriously or trusted to make decisions, this is a significant counter narrative to one of innocence or ineptitude in children. Innocence is often synonymized with ignorance and especially a lack of sexuality; any desire from a child is politicized and squashed. However, Ponyo's wants are actualized in the film and a statement is made to respect her understanding of herself. In the animation, her aspirations are what inspire her physical changes, and that it is a purposeful choice by Kondo emphasizes the value of plasmatic animation to storytelling.

Figure 2: Ponyo forces out a leg while held in a bubble of her father's making. (Miyazaki, Ponyo).

Bonnie Ruberg writes about queer desire in her exploration of videogames, commending the opportunity to indulge those wishes through play and nonrealistic spaces.[lxxiv] Akin to games, the animated world gifts Ponyo space to try out new forms, room to stretch into a new version of herself. Throughout the film, what and who Ponyo wants to be grows and changes as she learns more about herself through interacting with Sosuke and the human world. Her desire grounds the fluidity so she transforms with purpose and not solely at the whims of external forces. Judith Butler, in her foundational text, *Gender Trouble*, theorizes gender and desire together as part of one matrix, though one that she questions.[lxxv] It is interesting that desire is central to *Ponyo,* one does not need to read queerly to see that, and queer gender is able to be read on top of and through that desire. Gender theory is useful in reading this film because of the way Ponyo wills her body to contort and transform as a mode of liberation. It is a productive alignment, but not perfectly analogous in her move from fishy to human because she does become a very legible girl and thus does not operate overtly outside the gender binary. Ultimately, however, her story

reflects the desire for freedom and exploration more than girliness or even a human body. It is the desire driving her impressive bodily transformation that invokes Ponyo's future orientation and sense of agency. Butler's matrix of gender and desire allows us to read the intersection of restrictive and empowering forces on Ponyo's transmogrification and connect the film to queer folks and especially queer and trans children.

Performativity

In theorizations of gender and desire, Butler's early theory of performativity is crucial because it looks at how social scripts are repeated by us every day in ways that produce and stabilize the norm.[lxxvi] For Ponyo, the script she is trying to reproduce is something she doesn't fully understand, which means she sometimes gets it a little wrong – first with chicken limbs and then fully opposable toes. This underscores her position as an outsider subject in the world she is trying to enter but demonstrates just how quickly one can begin to conform to a new social script. In contrast to Butler's theorization, Ponyo is primarily driven by her inner aspirations, not entirely by outside forces.

But there are external forces, and Butler also writes about how these norms that shape our identities act both productively and as a practice to oppose. Explaining how we search for a critical balance and transformative relationship to them, she writes, "there is a certain departure from the human that takes place in order to start the process of remaking the human."[lxxvii] That departure is explored, tested, and developed in animation where it can be literalized with nonhuman and nonrealistic characters that can embody a changing relationship. Ponyo starts away from the human form and throughout the film becomes, regresses from, and re-makes that human identity. Her thorough exploration of her body through numerous interstitial forms allows Ponyo to find the shape that best fits her needs. Perhaps she is rehearsing her humanness in the safety of Sosuke's presence, assuring that her expression matches her desire by taking advantage

of her plasmatic freedom. The elements of Butler's gender theory read in *Ponyo* serve to validate the text as a site of queer emotion and process, reflexively contributing to the film's position as a tool to understand and depict queerness and transness.

The Ocean

"Plasmaticness strikingly envisions an escape not only from the social but also from the biological order."
Ursula K. Heise[lxxviii]

Fluidity, desire, performativity and ultimately queerness can all be found in the ocean as well. Indeed, such a film about these themes would not have been as powerful without the presence of this massive body of water. Queerness is relational, a matter of how we inhabit spaces and who or what we inhabit spaces with, according to feminist writer Sara Ahmed. In her investigation of orientation, Ahmed discusses the ways bodies take shape as they move through the world directing themselves toward or away from objects and others.[lxxix] Ponyo's shape shifting journey orients itself in many ways, including both toward and away from her home in the sea. We can understand the pull of the sea on Ponyo even as she moves toward and into humanness through Ahmed's queering of backgrounds and spaces behind us. Ahmed proposes a queer phenomenology that faces the back, considering how one's background affects and allows for their view.[lxxx] For Ponyo, the ocean is the background, and the view is life as a human. Her life underwater has oriented the shore as something mysterious, a site to be discovered. Even as she learns more about the human world, it stays in contrast to the ocean, especially when the ocean rises and merges those two worlds. However, as a hand drawn animated film, backgrounds cannot be taken for granted since they are created with equal intent to the foreground.

In his films, Miyazaki's backgrounds are alive and moving, imbued with the same plasmatic breath as the foregrounded subjects. The grand animation serves to reflect the ocean's

emotions and portray the immense power of the environment. As an archipelago, Japan experiences tsunamis semi-frequently and Miyazaki translates that lived experience and learned reverence into his film. With a humble respect for the potentially destructive whim of wind and sea, Miyazaki argues for submission, coexistence, and interdependence, a theme clear in many of his films.[lxxxi] This contrasts to popular animation techniques that paint static backgrounds and animate the moving pieces separately.

Cinema and media studies scholars Daniel Morgan and Ursula K. Heise both use animated backgrounds and analyses of plasmaticity to understand messages in films. Morgan looks to static backgrounds, finding them as a foil to the liberation Eisenstein proclaimed and a hinderance to the potential for animation to bring true joy.[lxxxii] He argues that fluid subjects in a rigid world cannot change that world, and viewers cannot truly escape from the oppression of capitalism. Given that Eisenstein's original analysis praised Walt Disney, an anti-union multi-millionaire, this critique is poignant and Morgan artfully uses the animated form to visualize it. The backgrounds in *Ponyo*, however, are quite alive, as demonstrated by the ocean that takes up space and engages with the human characters.[lxxxiii] In conversation with Morgan, Heise's article, "Plasmatic Nature: Environmentalism and Animated Film," uplifts moments of plasmatic environments and backgrounds. She highlights the environmentalist values embedded in such visuals and encourages depictions of the environment that give it agency, arguing that animation is the principal aesthetic to depict possible alternative relationships to nature.[lxxxiv] Thus, Miyazaki's plasmatic backgrounds are an important counter presence in the animation industry, with blowing grass, boats that more than bob, and the famously remarkable ocean.

Indeed, more than merely a background, the sea is arguably a main character in *Ponyo*, almost always present and certainly sentient. Not only is the body of water a plot driver, but it is

also the ultimate fluid being. In our world, water may be the closest thing to plasmaticity we have, with no rigid form and the ability to fit into any shape and cross nearly any threshold. *Ponyo*'s water sloshes around, seems to reach for and chase Ponyo up the shore, resists any drawn confines, and takes multiple forms throughout the film, as seen in Figure 3. In giving the ocean such life, the director also unintentionally animates a second queer character with desires and performances of its own.

Figure 3: Some of the many forms taken by the water, in chronological order as seen in the film. (Miyazaki, Ponyo).

The ocean Miyazaki creates is made up of many small parts and yet is still one being. For instance, Ponyo's father can send out water droplets – wormy water creature with eyes – to do his bidding. In the climax of the film, the ocean rises as massive fish, leaping, crashing, and reforming as a chaotic unit. As Figure 4 shows, these too have faces and shape, but this is not personification. Rather than attempt to fit the entire ocean into these fish, they serve to represent only the water's support of Ponyo and her goal. While the body of water is clearly powerful enough to create or destroy as it sees fit, it chooses to support Ponyo on her journey, emphasizing the ocean's importance as a character. It is a translation of the sea's desire and Miyazaki bestows on it the ability to perform that desire.

The animator's style actively resists against 'Disneyfication' by not giving the ocean a voice or anthropomorphic features.[lxxxv] Rather, the transformation of waves into fish creates the impression of the ocean, in its multiplicity, coming together to create a new being that propels Ponyo forward, away from her home in her father's fish tank and towards the freedom she has found on land. This animation gives the ocean power in an artistic and sublimated way, not needing humanness to communicate a queer human ethos. Distance from the human form encourages a relationship to nature, one where we can learn about our own existence from the ocean without having to fully relate to it. 'Disneyfication,' giving natural subjects a face and a voice, alienates our connection to the real environment and reflects a distrust in children. Assuming children will only be able to understand the role of nature in a story if the plant or animal can talk discounts the strength of their imagination as well as their emotional intelligence. Miyazaki toes the line, ultimately putting on screen a beautiful and imaginative water with character depth whose role can be understood by all. Not only does the ocean embody and magnify the queer themes of the film, it provides children an opportunity to connect with a

natural subject and broaden their imaginations to include an oceanic being. For coastal Japanese children especially, this hopefully translates to an off-screen engagement with nature and an embrace of Miyazaki's environmentalist messages. Though it is not the focus of this paper, the environmentalism in *Ponyo* is part of the radical imagination infused throughout the film, and the trans- framework employed here gives room for the subject to bolster the trans- analysis. That is, ecological aspects of the water dissolve into the queer space of the ocean and strengthen each other in the depiction of this new world.

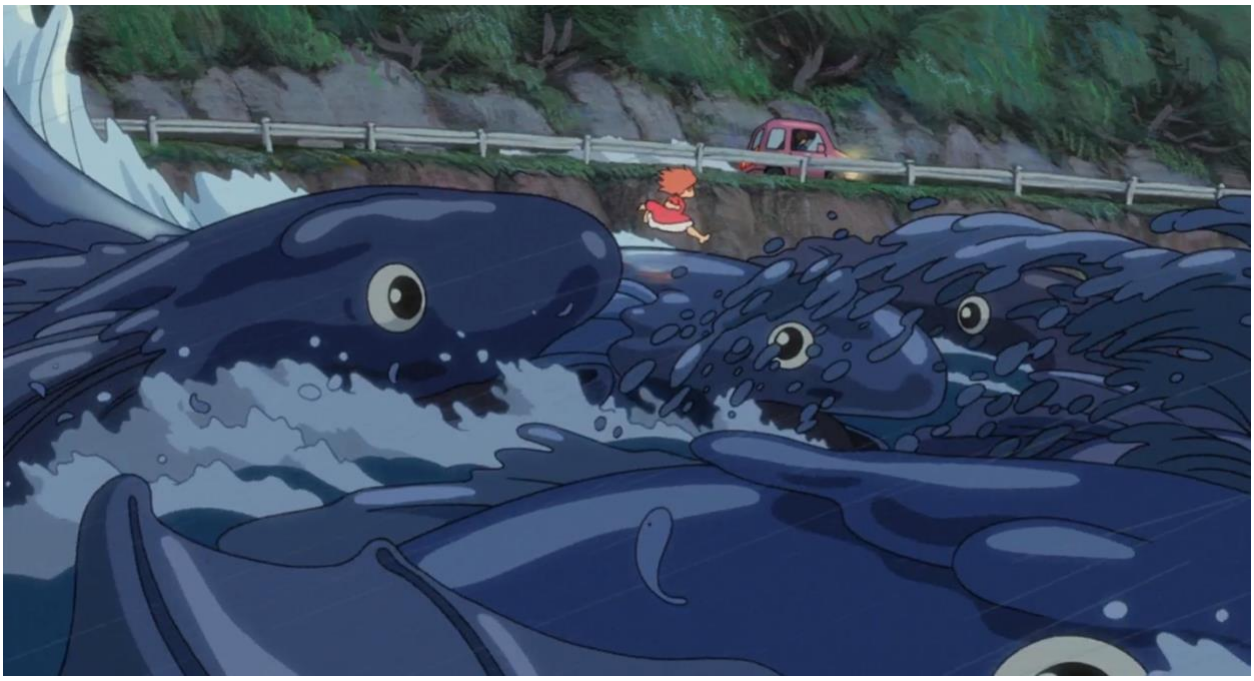

Figure 4: Ponyo runs atop leaping fish, which splash back into waves as they meet the surface. (Miyazaki, Ponyo).

Water as a Queer Space

In the opening act of *Ponyo*, Sosuke's mother allows him to play by the shore but then warns him to stay away for a while after almost losing him to the waves. The contact zone of water and shore is one that changes moment to moment and over the course of a day, potentially dangerous but also full of wonder with sea life, sand creatures, and a pull towards a mysterious depth. Thus, the ocean is a space teeming with potential, much like childhood and much like queerness.

Water has frequently been used by queer and trans scholars to understand and communicate the depth of queerness. It is a container space, holding worlds under its waves and buoyed above them. Queer Filipino scholar Kale Fajardo has used water to theorize movement and masculinity of Filipino/as. [lxxxvi] In his work, both the Pacific Ocean and the Great Lakes act as contact zones, merging regions large and small as people and ideas traverse across their waves. The very fact that water flows from place-to-place works with a trans- framework. Fajardo develops the term *crosscurrents* to build a framework that describes and theorizes alternate water-based borders where constitutive axes of identity get reconfigured.[lxxxvii] Though his work focuses more on people, the water in his work still holds purpose and has effects on those subjects. That intention and causation is animated and brought forth in *Ponyo*. For instance, Fajardo understands oceanic spaces to be queer places and routes of mobility.[lxxxviii] In the climax of the film, the ocean literally carries Ponyo to the place she wants to go: the shore, which is similarly a queer site for her representing her humanness and freedom.

Water also serves as a rough surface to examine what happens to identities in moments of crisis produced by structural violence. Whether a natural disaster or an accessory to violence, water moves people and things across time and space, and reconstitutes them in the process. Black feminist Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley reimagines the Atlantic Ocean as a queer Black space as a site of intimacy and care amidst violence.[lxxxix] Specifically, she understands the "fluid-bodied" experiences of *blackness* and *queerness* to have been constructed aboard slave ships. On those ships queer relationships were formed, an experience that Tinsley uncovers as she reclaims the Atlantic and Black African women's forced journey across it.

Following Tinsley's and Fajardo's theorizations of water as a space of violence creates an opportunity to see where those in crisis manifest humanity and desire. Fajardo writes of

globalization and migrant labor from the global south, Tinsley focuses on slavery and racialized dehumanization, and *Ponyo* examines the impact of confinement and destruction of and by the environment on national and individual identity. Within the tumultuous liminality of the ocean, for Fajardo and Tinsley, is also the unpredictability and the unruly potentiality of being (violently) restricted. For Fajardo this potentiality lies in the rich friendships between and among masculine laborers in ways that deconstruct toxic classed masculinity, and for Tinsley it lies in the bonds between enslaved women in a moment where they are being reduced to commodities. We can see how the trauma and destruction of the tsunami in *Ponyo* forced a new world, sending people onto boats where relationships and care networks were incredibly necessary. Though there were hints of a strong community before this – Sosuke and his mom talk familiarly with the traffic controllers, the elderly women know Sosuke well – we can assume that this level of devastation tests and strengthens those community bonds. All the boats together seem like a parade, the town people not fearing the new world but celebrating the opportunity to help each other and be together. Ponyo and Sosuke traverse the new surface in their own magically enlarged boat, meeting people as they search for Sosuke's mom. Ponyo encounters a baby and Sosuke sees ancient Devonian Sea creatures, each enjoying the merging of their previously separate worlds. More than her newly sprouted limbs, Ponyo's humanity is brought out in these moments of connection, particularly with the baby who she immediately cares for. In the animated film, the water space is one that encourages characters and their world to transform as it grows and flows too. The ocean in *Ponyo* is a carrier of plasmatic queerness, washing the animated world in its transformative power.

Worldmaking

"[Non-binary people] represent possibility. We represent choice, being able to create a life, a way of living, a way of loving, a way of looking that's outside of what we've been told that you should be."
Alok Vaid Menon[xc]

The world changing power of the ocean is not just metaphorical in the diegetic world of *Ponyo*. Throughout the film, we encounter at least four different worlds, iterations of reality with new rules and truths each time. The movie begins with two worlds separated, one under the sea and one above. The tsunami crashes these spheres into each other, creating one water-filled world with ancient creatures visible from the boats that have become mobile homes. There is also a secret, smaller world: a bubble under the surface where water and air seem to coexist, everyone can breathe but still flow as underwater currents ripple through their movements. And once the plot resolves, a new world emerges looking similar to the first but with transformed morals and understandings. In the diegesis, the ocean is the catalyst, both the barrier between worlds and the force that brings them together; the water destroys and builds worlds.

The act of worldmaking, and world unmaking, is often discussed in women of color and Indigenous feminist scholarship and the associated subfields because of the common goal to build a just, livable, and free future. In their new book, Indigenous scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson and Black scholar Robyn Maynard exchange letters regarding this daunting project.[xci] They reckon with the world-endings of the past centuries – apocalypses endured by Black and Indigenous communities and the destruction caused by colonization – while preparing for the world-endings that will need to come. They envision the possibilities for worlds to be made, the chances for more liberatory futures, the progression of work which is underway.

Thus, illustrating the beauty of a fluid and boundaryless world is not the only work done by *Ponyo*'s animation, rather the film depicts the necessary ebb and flow to get to a better future. Though we cannot call a tsunami to cause this destruction and rebirth, feminist scholars and

activists are constantly imagining and enacting new ways of being while opposing harmful aspects of our reality, all towards a new world.

In his work on performance and art, Muñoz also joins the effort of worldmaking. He implores readers to abandon pragmatic politics, and instead to hold onto, and even risk, utopianism while working towards a queer world.[xcii] Worldbuilding straddles the past and future, much like Muñoz's conception of queerness, relying on both an eye towards what feels impossibly far away and actions that can be taken immediately. Imaginative art, such as animated films, helps form that bridge by clearly departing from the confines of the 'here,' while also easily being an allegory to issues of the 'now.'

Ponyo does not even jump that far into another world, taking place in a seaside town you could imagine visiting. The undersea magic carries the story into a utopia, a nonspecific time and place where anything could happen, and much does happen. Creating the film was one act of worldmaking, and Miyazaki's effort seems to echo Muñoz's, creating a space away from our own to play with utopia. Given all the different worlds in the film, the director is able to explore a lot of different topics such as care networks or the relationship between nature and human infrastructures. As worlds are made and destroyed, Ponyo and Sosuke travel through them all, treating each new reality as a utopia to be conversed with. Miyazaki demonstrates the value of this adaptive ethic, a way to engage with ongoing worldmakings and endings, and the necessity of imaginative spaces to practice this. The world he builds imagines what love, care, and childhood could look like if fluidity was encouraged, instead of stifled as it is by transphobic laws in the US.

Imagination

Maynard and Simpson emphasize the importance of imagination, writing that abolitionist, anti-colonial, anti-racist work is "imagination work, conjure work, science fiction in real

time."[xciii] They join the voices of scholars across many fields in encouraging the practice of radical imagination.[xciv] This transdisciplinarity is needed to dream beyond the power structures that exist in our current society, to envision worlds that feel impossible and ultimately bring them within reach.

Fiction has been a tool of radical worldbuilding imagination for a very long time. Speculative fiction from marginalized voices consistently reflects on the oppressive realities they write from and writes better alternatives into existence. Dreaming is a collective practice, bringing artists, writers, activists, and scholars together. Though they use imagination differently, each piece is vital to building a better world.

Imagination remains tied to realities and existing narratives, responding and building on what we have. In this way, we can understand *Ponyo* to jeopardize and reinvent a narrative: the relationship between Japan and the great ocean surrounding it.[xcv] By making the ocean a powerful character, Miyazaki makes it a space of what could've and should've been; indeed, the depths of the ocean perfectly represent the vast world of unexplored truths. He imagines how crises could be handled and what children should be empowered to do; he gives us a being that should be revered and lived in cooperation with, a space where children could be who they want. Standing at a shore, one can't help but imagine what is past the horizon or under the surface, what stories have not been told and what possibilities are yet to be explored. Miyazaki uses this space of wonder to encourage those questions in the spaces we can reach as well, wanting audiences, especially children, to imagine in their own communities.

Nonrealism

As fiction has always been a site to muse and to build these worlds, nonrealistic animation, such as the works of Studio Ghibli, is a relatively modern tool to continue this practice. Plasmaticity opens the door for desire to be visualized, bodies to be removed from their

corporeal limits, and boundaries to be broken. The laws of physics can be entirely eschewed, as film scholar Cátia Peres explores within Ghibli movies.[xcvi] She reads flying castles and people as "free from the weight of true life."[xcvii] This underscores the value of these spaces for imagining outside of our reality. Though gravity is not an oppressive force in our society, the release of it gives permission for the audience to abandon notions of what's 'possible,' to dream past systems such as institutionalized racism, ableism, and colonialism. If this leap feels absurd, that's the point: fictive worlds have no obligation to hold onto any aspect of their author's reality and thus can illustrate new possibilities and inspire other radical imaginings. In *Ponyo*, disbelief is suspended by adults as they watch a fish talk and grow and then the ocean rise and then a larger-than-life illuminated goddess appear; at that rate, no one would blink an eye at a child's desire to transition. Again, the plasmatic animation spreads outside the bounds of queerness, contributing to a space of exploration for worldmaking of all kinds.

To bring us once more to the importance of plasmatic queerness, I draw attention to the other world-changing force in this diegetic context: Ponyo herself. Ponyo's own world is changed as she explores new possibilities and undergoes bodily transformation. That is, apart from imaginative and nonrealistic environmental changes, her sense of self and relationships adapt with her as she goes along her journey.

Additionally, Ponyo's desires and transmogrification are plot drivers, as discussed above, and thus critical aspects of why the ocean rises and why the world undergoes such massive change. Queerness is relational, not held solely within an individual's body and likewise Ponyo's plasmaticity is contagious. Each time she grows a new limb or her body otherwise changes to reflect her inner desires, there are rippling effects on Sosuke and the whole community as she encourages others to transform as well, though in less corporeal ways. Her father changes his

perspective on humans, the townspeople gain new reverence for the water that surrounds them, and the love between Ponyo and Sosuke reminds everyone to cherish children and their emotions. Compared to scenes at the beginning of the film, limbs seem to stretch a bit farther, bubbles don't quite hold their shape, and the post-tsunami chaos bounces around gelatinously. The entire world is washed in this sea change, experiencing fluidity and growth in all areas. The film shows us that the world can be plasmatic and thus queer and trans. It seeps across disciplinary and thematic borders, a gleeful depiction of plasmatic queerness that can help us embrace and explore an expansive queerness and bring such an ethos into the new world we are building.

CONCLUSION

"Now its all koo-koo bananas and everyone is trying and experimenting and not confining themselves."
David Perlmutter[xcviii]

When I began this project a year ago, I hoped to learn how to dream bigger than the white supremacist, heteropatriarchal, capitalist world I live in. I found the inspiration to do so from feminists and queer folk, writers and animators, scholars and fictional characters. Through my analysis of *Ponyo,* I was able to further understand animation as a technology for telling expansively queer stories, a space that allows one to explore fluidity of form, the possibility of dynamic and ever-changing selfhood, brilliant imaginative worlds, and non-normative storylines.

In this capstone, I have traced my interest in animation and the relation of that to discovering my own queerness. Finding *Ponyo* as my site, I delved deep into the genesis of the film and its production as well as reception. Looking to the genealogy of the ideas in this paper, I reviewed feminist and queer visual culture studies, animation studies, and studies of imagination and worldbuilding. I developed my methodologies starting with a trans- framework built across boundaries and against binaries. I used strategies of reading queerly as well as the method of

fusing context, plot, and form. In my analysis I promote the concept of plasmatic queerness – an expansive understanding of queerness and transness which layers identity and modality, the abstract and embodied aspects of fluid queerness. I situate this alongside the unique visual capabilities of drawn animation. Presentations of fluidity, desire, and performance are drawn from first the protagonist, Ponyo, and then her co-star, the ocean. Understanding water to be a contact zone and space of transformation and transgression, I continue to posit the value of animation for depicting these themes. Finally, I look to worldmaking as a practice in this film and in filmmaking to see what can be inspired from *Ponyo*. I suggest this film should be counted in the conversation around building our future, joining Black and Indigenous and queer led efforts to imagine a better way ahead. Each piece of my analysis serves to peel apart and re-member *Ponyo* to see it as a trans text and to help draw out the potentialities of animation as a form.

Animation is not a perfect or inherently queer medium; it has been leveraged to portray racist caricatures and uphold other stereotypes. Like any form of media, it can be wielded to reify hegemonic norms and large animation studios have used it as such. There is a constant need for critical readings of animated content, especially mainstream productions. Alongside those, it is necessary to uplift positive stories from marginalized voices. There is a concrete need for more diverse animators and producers on all sides of the industry, an economic disparity that must be addressed for new stories to be told.

My hope is that queer readings of animated texts, and appreciation for the potentialities of the form, will encourage more queer animators and their stories. I am interested in more scholarship on animated corporeality and how imagining bodies differently can affect relationships to our own. I wonder about the way lines and colors preform as subjects, what this

opens up for imaginative possibilities. And ultimately, I aspire to see animation being consciously used as a tool for radical imagination and feminist work more often. Particularly in our current climate which is plagued by transphobia and violence against marginalized bodies, having media that takes seriously the need for care is crucial. Having a more expansive understanding of queerness, such as what I have found in *Ponyo*, brings more people into that care as we fight transphobic politics. The fluidity in animation can be for everyone, not just queer folks, since these attacks on fluidity hurt all people in their capacity to live a full and authentic life. Given that this framework would benefit so many, I am also hopeful that audiences will grow in their relationship to texts. Viewers can feel empowered to connect to animation, to see how fluid identity can manifest, what they might desire, which ways they can perform that. In telling queer fictional stories, environmentalism, anti-racism, and other important future oriented themes should and will coexist. So, while someone may just be watching a show today, they can imagine and begin to build our tomorrow.

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