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Up *Schitt's Creek*? Comedy as a Slantwise Pedagogical Encounter with Queerness

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Abstract

Background: Pedagogical approaches to learning about LGBTQI+ themes and experiences remain a largely understudied topic in teacher education. This is partly due to anxieties around exploring these themes in nuanced and sensitive ways, with many teacher educators feeling ill-equipped to navigate the complexities of exploring so-called "difficult knowledge."

Purpose: In response to this, the purpose of this paper is to offer reflections on the pedagogical value of comedy for exploring such themes and experiences in teacher education, focusing especially on the situational comedy (sitcom) *Schitt's Creek*. We turn to comedy given our interest in the capacity of comedic modalities to offer "slantwise" pedagogical encounters with LGBTQI+ themes and experiences, that is, nonaffronting encounters that resist damage-centered narratives of LGBTQI+ people and are open to multiple queer futures.

Research design: In exploring how the sitcom offers teacher educators and student teachers these kinds of encounters, we provide a reading of three episodes of *Schitt's Creek* through a "queer utopian" lens. We analyze a purposive sample of episodes from the series that speak directly to LGBTQI+ themes and experiences. We accompany this analysis with prompts for teacher educators to use in discussing these episodes in the teacher education classroom.

Conclusions: We suggest that the sitcom offers teacher education an opportunity for student teachers and teacher educators to access a queer utopianism that can be encountered not only in the specifics of *Schitt's Creek*'s plotlines, characters, and/or settings, but also, perhaps more primarily, through the affective dimensions of

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watching the sitcom itself. The piece comes to a close with some thoughts on the significance of comedy for exploring the relationship among affect, education, and social justice more generally.

Keywords
queer pedagogy, queer utopia, teacher education, affect, *Schitt's Creek*

Introduction

> "I never thought the show was laying out a message. It just is. It's just an example of what life could be. And you're laughing. What better way to open someone's heart and soul?"
>
> —Catherine O'Hara

This comment made by actress Catherine O'Hara in the documentary *Best Wishes, Warmest Regards* (2020) about the popular situational comedy (sitcom) *Schitt's Creek* (SC) (2015–2019) highlights the pedagogical potential of humor, laughter, and positive affect more generally in both teacher education and schools. These modalities remain undertheorized in mainstream educational research, particularly where the teaching of so-called "controversial" topics like "queerness"[1] is concerned, where the desired affective response typically includes "serious" emotions such as empathy, tolerance, compassion, or respect for difference or otherness. This paper addresses this gap in the literature by considering the pedagogical value of nondidactic, humorous, popular cultural engagements with queerness in teacher education settings. In so doing, we critique mainstream approaches to teaching and thinking *about* queerness that have the unintended consequence of bolstering heteronormativity and abnormalizing queerness by reproducing a series of dominant affects that position queer people as other or as "victims" in need of protection and empathy.

SC centers on the Roses, a rich family that loses their fortune when their business manager fails to pay their taxes. Finding themselves homeless, Johnny Rose (played by Eugene Levy), Moira Rose (O'Hara), and their two adult children, David (Dan Levy) and Alexis (Annie Murphy), move into two motel rooms in the small, rural town of Schitt's Creek (Horeck, 2021). O'Hara's comment above occurs in relation to the critical acclaim SC has received for its representation of queer characters. David, the sitcom's protagonist, is the first major pansexual character to be depicted on television. Over the course of the series, he enters into a relationship with (and eventually marries) his business partner, Patrick. SC has been praised for carving out new ground in the representation of queerness in popular culture, specifically because of its refusal to depict queerphobia (Horeck, 2021). Echoing O'Hara's sentiments, critics have lauded this aspect of SC because it shows audiences "what life could be" without falling into trite moralistic sentiments. Reminiscent of José Esteban Muñoz's (2019) concept of queer utopia, the show represents a "better" world than the here and now, a utopian, other-worldly place where queerphobia does not exist (Horeck, 2021). This particular understanding of queerness extends beyond specific identity claims or

political positions to include a more fundamental, affective desire for social change that surpasses the limits of our present world.

Drawing on SC as a pedagogical resource, the purpose of this paper is twofold: (1) to discuss how SC achieves queer, utopian effects that disrupt simplistic or deficit narratives about queer lives; and (2) to offer prompts for exploring these effects with student teachers for encountering queerness in the teacher education classroom. Although engagements with queerness have begun to emerge as a theme in teacher education research (Airton & Koecher, 2019; Airton & Martin, 2022; Blair & Deckman, 2022; Brant, 2016; Erden, 2009; Gorski et al., 2013; Iskander, 2021; Kearns et al., 2017; McEntarfer, 2016; Rands, 2009), queer issues, experiences, and priorities nonetheless remain a challenge for some teacher educators to navigate pedagogically in their classrooms. In her paper on preparing student teachers to become queer allies in their practice, Clark (2010) identifies multiple factors contributing to this being a challenge for some teacher educators, including student teachers' anxieties around the expectations of school management and parents, as well as teacher educators' own lack of knowledge on queerness. Other challenges include the perceived "irrelevance" of exploring queerness in higher education generally and in teacher education specifically (Allen, 2015; Allen & Rasmussen, 2015; Anthony-Stevens & Langford, 2020; Ferfolja & Robinson, 2004), as well as some student teachers' resistance to being exposed to such conversations at all (Gray, 2018; Gray & Harris, 2015). These challenges have the potential to demotivate, demoralize, or overwhelm even the most committed teacher educators. The title of our paper—"Up *Schitt's Creek*?"—serves to capture these anxieties and how it feels to be alone in a classroom, having to navigate these tricky waters "without a paddle" or prompts one could work with to ensure meaningful, antioppressive engagements with queerness.

As teacher educators committed to exploring queerness with student teachers, we suggest that SC's utopianism and humor offer an important "slantwise" engagement with queerness in teacher education (Ahmed, 2006; Quinlivan, 2018). Inspired by Muñoz, we suggest that SC's generativity lies in its understanding of queerness that is propelled by an affective desire for change that extends beyond the limits of the present. SC's capacity to afford these opportunities for teacher educators is threefold, in our view.

Firstly, SC's utopian representation of queer lives offers an important pedagogical resource for teacher educators in its capacity to counteract popular media narratives, as well as educational policies and practices, which associate queerness with vulnerability, victimization, and suicidality. Our analysis of SC seeks to contribute to recent scholarly attempts to speak back to "risk-based" accounts of bullying, mental health, and queerness that typically populate school policies and practices. We offer this on the grounds that such accounts risk individualizing heteronormativity and queerphobia, rather than seeing these realities as structural (e.g., Airton, 2013; Driver, 2008; Formby, 2015; Gilbert et al., 2018; Savin-Williams, 2005; Talburt et al., 2004). Waidzunas (2012), for instance, has indicated "the looping effects" of conflating queer

lives inevitably with narratives of vulnerability, arguing, along with many others, that the creation of "at-risk" queer youth is sustained precisely through the discursive construction of queerness in these terms (Airton, 2013; Driver, 2008; Formby, 2015; Marshall, 2010; Quinlivan, 2002; Talburt, 2010; Talburt & Rasmussen, 2010). Scholars such as Rasmussen (2010) have argued that these kinds of discursive constructions risk obfuscating queer youths' lived experiences of inclusion within "It Gets Better" narratives that position the happiness of queer youth as something to be deferred to the future rather than enacted in the present. In their Beyond Bullying project, Gilbert et al. (2018) respond to this context by emphasizing the need to foreground alternative stories of, for, and with queer youth in schools. In particular, they avoid stories that depict queer youth solely as at-risk victims in need of protection and instead engage with stories that chart the "intimate possibilities" afforded to queer youth in school settings, possibilities of desire, belonging, family, and school life. In tandem with this move, our interest in the utopianism of SC as a pedagogical resource for teacher educators lies in its capacity to expose alternative ways of imagining queer lives.

Secondly, the utopianism of SC interests us as a pedagogical resource in the capacity of the sitcom to tap into the emotionality of audiences in ways that are generative and world-building. Much educational research has, across time, been concerned with the presence, power, and strategic potential of emotion in teaching and learning (Boler, 1999; Rosiek, 2003; Zembylas, 2012). In particular, research committed to and/or engaged with issues of social justice in education has explored the generative potential of examining emotion (Boler, 1999; Britzman, 1998, 2000, 2013; Britzman & Pitt, 2004 Grant, 2019; Kenway & Youdell, 2011; Pitt & Britzman, 2003; Zembylas, 2007, 2014, 2015). Across this body of work, there is an emphasis on the importance of facing, rather than avoiding, emotion in understanding and navigating students' encounters with so-called difficult knowledge, that is, knowledge that is traumatic, difficult to bear, or intellectually, psychologically, or emotionally destabilizing in some way (Simon, 2011; Zembylas, 2014). Emotion has also featured as a theme in queer educational research. Indeed, Staley and Leonardi (2021) explicate how learning is itself "a pretty queer thing" and they underscore how emotionality is always present in the process of "(un)learning" difficult knowledge related to gender and sexuality diversity in education. Quinlivan has emphasized the importance of working with "queer emotional provocations in greater depth as part of the pedagogical process," seeing a focus on the "high emotionality" of teaching and learning as key to bringing queer pedagogies in new directions (2012, p. 520). Neary (2020) builds on this, suggesting that a "queer pedagogy of emotion" might facilitate teacher educators to resist slippages into individualizing and victimizing narratives of empathy and instead forge queer responses to so-called "diversity dilemmas" in ways that can yield new and different pedagogical imaginaries and possibilities. For us, the sitcom's utopian, "rosy-mood aesthetic" (Horeck, 2021) has much potential as a pedagogical resource for teacher educators in exploring queerness with student teachers in ways that tap into their emotional lifeworlds.

Finally, SC interests us as a pedagogical resource for teacher educators in the potential of humor and laughter to generate relationships of solidarity across social,

political, and cultural differences in educational spaces. Cris Mayo (2010), for instance, has underlined the transformative pedagogical effects of incongruity as a central characteristic of humor. By incongruity, Mayo refers to humor's capacity to disrupt the status quo by bringing together seemingly unresolvable ideas and/or experiences that, through their temporary "coming together," expose other ways of being and relating in the world (2010, p. 511). Building on this, Mayo points to how the specific experience of laughter can create a provisional sense of the collective across difference by engendering "a momentary pause, a surprising fraction of time in which the antagonisms that precede the moment of concord abate ever so slightly in order to allow what one might think of as contingent communication" (2010, p. 511).

Similarly, Tyson Lewis, like Vlieghe (2014) and Zembylas (2018), argues that the physical nature of laughter can act as "a type of embodied deconstruction where normalized discourses and power hierarchies demonstrate their artificial and thus fugitive natures" (2010, p. 637) in ways that expose alternatives to "the givenness of the social world" (McLaren, 1999, p. 289). In the context of difficult knowledge, Stengel suggests that laughter diffuses difficult affect and, in doing so, clears a space for response rather than reaction. It allows, she contends, "the one laughing to think and feel through immediate discomfort or delight towards a considered action. . ." (2014, p. 201). In this way, laughter makes students' and teachers' discomfort more bearable, and because of this creates an opening for us to respond to others in educational settings in less defensive and more empathic and considered ways. This being said, as we have noted elsewhere (Henry et al., 2023), and as Mayo (2010) and Zembylas (2018) also confirm, comedy can reproduce structural exclusions in our relationships as much as it can disrupt them. Ahmed (2008), for example, has drawn attention to how humor and laughter can be used by those in positions of power and privilege to reassert normative, oppressive, and inequitable social conditions. Pailer (2009) makes a similar point, noting how the laughter experienced through encounters with comedy can "smooth over differences" in certain instances but in others can keep "hierarchical distinctions" intact (Pailer, 2009, p. 8). These ideas notwithstanding, we suggest that the humor through which the utopianism of SC is distilled renders it a valuable resource for teacher educators, particularly in a context where queer issues, experiences, and priorities remain a challenge for some teacher educators to navigate.

With these offerings in mind, this paper will discuss how SC achieves its disruptively utopian effects and explore how these effects might be pedagogically exposed and built upon with student teachers in the teacher education classroom. Following Muñoz's concept of "queer utopia" as an affective mode of desiring that allows us "to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present" (2019, p. 24), we suggest that SC renders alternative queer futures eminent through its characters, their relationships, and the audience's affective attachments to these. In this sense, we suggest that the utopian power of SC to imagine queer futures beyond the "quagmire of the present" lies in its other-worldliness that "astonishes" audiences (to use Muñoz's phrasing) in how matter-of-fact that "other world" is. In making these points, the paper begins with a more extended treatment of Muñoz's perspectives on queer futurities and utopianism

as a theoretical lens for the discussion. Following this, we move to some brief notes on the methodological approach engaged with for this study, before turning to explore SC itself. We focus specifically on scenes from three episodes of the series—Season 1, Episode 11 ("Little Sister"); Season 5, Episode 11 ("Meet the Parents"); and Season 6, Episode 14 ("Happy Ending")—interspersing these with brief references to other episodes where relevant. These analyses will be accompanied with questions and prompts that teacher educators might use with their students in exploring queerness in a teacher education classroom. We offer practical prompts for exploring queerness with student teachers while foregrounding comedy (and the positive affects generated by it) as pedagogically worthwhile for social justice–oriented classrooms.

Queer Futures, Queer Utopias: The Utopian Function of Art

In his book *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, Muñoz forwards an understanding of queer politics that is averse to "the politics of presentist and pragmatic contemporary gay identity" (2019, p. 34). By a "presentist and pragmatic" form of gay identity politics, Muñoz is focusing on political approaches that aim for gays and lesbians "fitting in" to heterosexual structures and imaginaries that define our present moment (e.g., campaigns for equal marriage, rainbow-washing, etc.). What makes these "presentist" for Muñoz is that such approaches are stuck in the "now" because they operate within the sphere of current (heteronormative) circumstances. In this sense, they close off alternative queer futures. In developing this point, he draws inspiration from Lisa Duggan's (2002) work on homonormativity, which likens homonormativity to a neoliberal "politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity" (p. 50). In drawing from Duggan, Muñoz frames his understanding of queer politics as disruptive to "the fake futurity" of assimilationist political approaches, a futurity that he describes as fake in how it aligns within the terms of what is already socially and culturally dominant (an "assimilation that is forever over the rainbow," 2019, p. 76). In terms of speaking to this paper's concern for exposing other ways of imagining queer lives beyond the limits of "at-risk" discourses, Muñoz's suspicion of pragmatic gay identity politics is helpful because at-risk discourses of queer youth vulnerability rely precisely on reifying logics of identity that Muñoz would resist. In this way, we feel his account of utopianism offers a worthwhile register for imagining queer lives beyond the fake futurity of "It Gets Better" logics.

In responding productively to the risks of gay presentism and pragmatism, Muñoz's account of utopianism is framed in terms of a "mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present" (2019, p. 24), a mode of desiring that is "then and there" rather than "here and now." The affective nature of this work is crucial for Muñoz: His understanding of queer politics takes seriously our experiences of

desire, in particular our desire for "new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds" (p. 24). It is because of this that he claims that queerness is not a fixed end point or neat political position, but rather an orientation characterized by an affective *anticipation* for that which exceeds the current state of things (2019, p. 26). He writes: "Queerness is not yet here. Queerness is an ideality. Put another way, we are not yet queer. We may never touch queerness, but we can *feel* it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality" (2019, p. 24). Queerness operates beyond the level of discourse and is, in this way, signaled through prediscursive, embodied, and affective experiences that point to other ways of being and relating that escape "today's hamstrung pragmatic gay agenda" (2019, p. 33). With respect to this paper's concern for tapping into the emotionality of teaching and learning in ways that are generative and world-building, Muñoz's utopianism is instructive in its sensitivity to the affective dimensions of queer politics and the generative capacities of these. Indeed, Muñoz's focus on mobilizing those feelings that go beyond the "quagmire" of the "present" is a helpful theoretical frame for our work in its sensitivity to how emotions both signal and enact possibilities beyond the current order of things.

In developing this last point, Muñoz "looks to what is and fashions important critiques of the present by insisting on the present's dialectical relation to the future" (2019, p. 71). In other words, his critique is not a disavowal of the present, but of presentism, that is, of ways of thinking, feeling, and acting that assume that what *is* is all that could ever be. In these terms, Muñoz's queer utopianism is not decontextualized from the present, but rather takes it as a propulsion for enacting "a future in the present . . . in the service of subaltern politics" (p. 71), that is, a politics that responds to the needs and desires of minoritized queer communities. In accessing this "future in the present" (where heteronormativity and gay pragmatism can be undermined and queer futures enabled), Muñoz turns to the feelings of anticipation and "astonishment" often engendered by art, broadly understood to include painting, sculpture, fiction, poetry, theater, and performance. He writes of how art can stage experiences of longing, desire, anticipation, and astonishment through representational practices that help "us to see the not-yet-conscious. This not-yet-conscious is knowable . . . as a utopian feeling" (2019, p. 26). For Muñoz, art can often represent other-worldly realities that, in their other-worldliness, engender affective experiences that disrupt the present state of things and bring the potential (and, indeed, necessity) of alternative futures into focus. In the context of this paper's concern for bringing together seemingly unresolvable ideas in the classroom in ways that expose other, more unifying modes of being and relating in the world, Muñoz's utopianism is again helpful in pointing to the capacity of art to signal "better" worlds, in which divisive and oppressive social structures and relationships can be overcome.

Of course, Muñoz is not alone in concentrating on the utopian capacity of art to insist on "something else, something better, something dawning" (Muñoz, 2019, p. 214). Indeed Richard Dyer (2002) understands the utopian capacity of entertainment (across multiple genres) not only as a matter of representation, but also as a matter of

the unrepresentable, whereby audiences are exposed to how a better future might *feel*, rather than what it might concretely "look like" as such. He writes:

> Rather the utopianism is contained in the feelings it embodies. It presents, head on as it were, what utopia would feel like rather than how it would be organized. It thus works at the level of sensibility, by which I mean an affective code that is characteristic of, and largely specific to, a given mode of cultural production. (2002, p. 18)

It is in these affective terms that Tanya Horeck (2021) positions SC as exposing audiences to a "queer utopia" that fulfills "a desire for an alternative time and future." In homing in on the utopianism of SC, Horeck emphasizes the placelessness of *Schitt's Creek*: although produced in Canada and featuring Canadian actors, the exact location of the titular town is never specified in the script, underscoring the other-worldliness of the sitcom's setting. Furthermore, Horeck (2021) writes of how the "queer utopianism of [SC] resides in [its] affective sensibilities, which attune viewers to the joy and possibilities of alternative modes of being," specifically modes of being that, through the show's "rosy-mood aesthetic," seek to "undo binary oppositions between straight and gay, normative and non-normative" and through this "affectively attune spectators to a queer worldview." Focusing mainly on clips from three episodes of the series, in what follows we take Muñoz's understanding of queer utopia as a lens for unpacking the extent to which SC enacts these disruptive utopian effects. We then supplement these analyses with prompts for discussion in the teacher education classroom.

Methodology

Our analysis of the SC clips was based on a purposive sampling of episodes selected from the series because of their general and direct representation of queer themes and/or relationships. Twelve out of 80 episodes were initially identified under this criterion, including a 13th clip from the *Best Wishes, Warmest Regards* documentary referenced in the introduction to this paper. Having conducted an initial review of the literature, we then narrowed down this list of 13 episodes to 6.

This selection was informed by a need to purposely select episodes that could in some way speak to core concerns in the field. For one, we were keen to purposely select episodes that could open up alternative ways of representing queer lives beyond "at-risk" discourses of vulnerability. This was important to us in light of the field's critique of such discourses on the grounds that such views risk locating queer youth within damage-centered narratives that close off who queer youth can be and become (Airton, 2013; Driver, 2008; Formby, 2015; Gilbert et al., 2018; Marshall, 2010; Quinlivan, 2002; Talburt, 2010; Talburt & Rasmussen, 2010). Our purposive sampling of SC episodes also spoke to the field's emphasis on tapping into the emotionality of teaching and learning about so-called "difficult knowledge" in ways that are pedagogically generative and world-building. In this vein, we deliberately selected episodes that employed comedic modalities like irony, sarcasm, slapstick, and camp with the

view to curating opportunities for students to experience the kinds of emotions and reactions (for example, joy and laughter) they may not often liken to encounters with difficult knowledge in classrooms (Boler, 1999; Rosiek, 2003; Zembylas, 2012). Staying with the theme of difficult knowledge, we lastly selected episodes from the series that could allow for the coming together of seemingly unresolvable ideas and/or differences in classrooms, in this way exposing other, perhaps more unifying, modes of being and relating in the world. On this, our episode sampling was motivated by a sensitivity to the power of comedy, humor, and laughter to diffuse potentially difficult affect (Mayo, 2010; Stengel, 2014), as well as by a more fundamental concern for cultivating a queer educational ethic in classrooms where relationships can be built beyond polarizing, either/or binary thinking (Greteman & Burke, 2017).

Following this sampling process, we met online via a video conferencing platform to watch these episodes together. (We were prevented from meeting for the screenings in person due to ongoing pandemic protections.) Each screening was followed by a conversation among the authors, where we gave our initial responses to the clips in question and discussed their potential value (or otherwise) for the teacher education classroom through the lens of each of the concerns listed above. These conversations were recorded for further analysis and accompanied by analytic memos that were typed into a shared file by one of the authors and circulated among the group. These measures were complemented by reflections some of the authors had on "trialing" clips from the series in their own teaching and in discussing these practices with other teacher education colleagues. These recorded conversations, analytic memos, and reflections were then used to iteratively refine the selected list of episodes from six to four, and to finalize the theoretical framework underpinning the study (i.e., Muñoz's queer utopianism). Muñoz's utopianism was chosen as a theoretical framework for analysis given its capacity to speak to each of the three core concerns from the field that motivated our purposive approach to sampling. The adoption of an iterative, discursive approach to this work allowed us to reflect both individually and collectively and to revisit each episode on multiple occasions in order to gain additional insight.

Following these initial stages, we studied the four episodes selected again and each wrote a short, initial analysis of these in a shared file. This analysis was then further refined in response to a number of theoretically informed analytic questions that—drawing from the core concerns from the field—sought to expose constraints in dominant discursive constructions of queer lives and the range and extent of action for change that is considered possible within these dominant framings. These analytic questions were as follows:

- How are taken-for-granted understandings of various aspects of queer lives (e.g., coming out, fitting in) reflected, depicted, worked through, resisted, subverted, and so forth?
- What dominant frames or lenses through which queer lives are typically represented are invoked and/or problematized?

- What framing devices, comedic modalities, and so forth are mobilized to challenge these understandings and to cultivate "astonishment" on the part of the audience?
- What limitations do these moments of astonishment reveal about how queer lives are typically thought about and what "other-worldly" possibilities do they afford?

Further conversations on the practical pedagogical potential of each clip ensued, homing in on the practicability of engaging with each episode to address our three core concerns. From this, we finalized the sample to three episodes in total, namely Season 1, Episode 11 ("Little Sister"); Season 5, Episode 11 ("Meet the Parents"); and Season 6, Episode 14 ("Happy Ending"). In-depth written analyses of these episodes were composed, alongside a set of classroom prompts to accompany their exploration with student teachers. The outcomes of this work are presented in the following accounts.

Exploring *Schitt's Creek* and Its Queer Pedagogical Potential

Season 1, Episode 11: "Little Sister"

The episode "Little Sister" contains a number of discrete plotlines, one of which centers around David's attempts to counsel Connor, a self-described "gay kid living in a town that makes [him] wanna throw up." Jocelyn Schitt—a teacher at the local high school and wife to the mayor of Schitt's Creek, Roland Schitt—believes that Connor is "struggling with his sexuality" and having "a little trouble fitting in." Having identified David as "the sort of person who had a hard time in high school," she approaches him (while he is purchasing toilet paper in the local store) to ask if he would talk to Connor to reassure him that "things only get better." Preoccupied with his own problems—most notably the complexities of his "friends with benefits" arrangement with Stevie—David is reluctant to offer life advice to anyone else, but is cajoled by Joselyn into becoming a mentor to the "troubled" teen.

David's first (and only) mentoring session with Connor—which takes place in the school's science lab—doesn't quite go as he had expected. Just as Connor enters the room, David accidently knocks over a display of the solar system, making his discomfort with his mentoring role all the more palpable. Adopting an uncharacteristically serious tone, David awkwardly states that he is aware that Connor is having some difficulty "adjusting" and "fitting in." Connor is quick to reject this impression of him, but not before ridiculing David's fashion sense and questioning his suitability for the role ("Who *are* you?"; "Why would I talk to you?"; "Look at your pants!") Demonstrating a remarkable level of candor, maturity, and self-assurance, Connor informs David that "The issue is not me not fitting in. It's me not wanting to fit in!" Rather than David helping "a teen in crisis" to "turn his life around" as he originally imagined, Connor ends up being the one to counsel David about his relationship

difficulties with Stevie, thereby upending the familiar scenario of the stable adult offering advice to an insecure and confused teen. He chastises David for his failure to do something about the fact that his girlfriend is currently "on a date with someone else" saying "instead of doing something about it, you're here talking to me, a kid who practically has no respect for you." The scene ends with David asking, "You're gonna be okay, right? You're stable?," which Connor refuses to dignify with an answer, instead asking him to buy him some beer for a party he is attending later that night. That he later acts on Connor's calling him out for not putting an end to his "friends with benefits" relationship with Stevie further helps to convey that youth have the capacity to see things very clearly, to act on their own desires, and to work against forces that are obstacles to their flourishing.

This scene's primary pedagogical potential lies in its capacity to invoke more reflexive, expansive understandings of what it means to be queer, and in particular what it means to be young and queer against a backdrop of problematic mainstream depictions of queer youth as automatically vulnerable, at risk, isolated, unstable, and unable to fit in or adjust by virtue of their sexuality and/or gender identity. Refusing to fit in, and actively rejecting the protectionist, homogenizing logic of mainstream discourses of queer youth, Connor embodies and exudes queer youth agency while illuminating the misguidedness of well-meaning initiatives premised on a homogenizing logic of queer youth vulnerability or overly simplistic portrayals that suggest that It (necessarily) Gets Better. Indeed, David's pained facial expression in response to Jocelyn's invocation of IGB as she recruits him to be Connor's mentor can be read as a subtle takedown of the decontextualized "triumph over adversity" storyline underpinning the IGB Campaign.

In the context of our concern for overcoming at-risk discourses of vulnerability and victimization, this episode instructively brings into relief the dominant appeal of such logics within educational thinking and practice (represented, perhaps most obviously, in the well-meaning interventions of school teacher Jocelyn), while also exposing possibilities for thinking and feeling otherwise. Returning to Muñoz, the episode brings to the fore alternative ways of imagining queer lives through those moments of astonishment that it curates for audiences, moments that are astonishing by confronting viewers with a future in the present, a sense of the otherworldly made manifest in the here-and-now. Such moments include Connor's matter-of-fact embrace of not wanting to fit in, coupled with the episode's inversion of the typical adult–child relationship, where Connor goes against conventional expectations by counseling David (rather than David counseling Connor). In both cases, a utopian future (where, for example, queer youth are not invariably at risk or vulnerable) is made concretely present through those feelings of joy and surprise some audiences might experience being exposed to Connor and his resistance to Jocelyn and David's protectionist behavior. In a sense, Connor makes alive for audiences a utopian future for queer youth that enters the "now" through those feelings of astonishment or anticipation that are evoked by the coming together of seemingly incongruous representations (in Connor's case, representations of being queer and representations of being an agentic young person).

In helping teacher educators build on the potential utopianism of this episode with student teachers, we suggest asking student teachers to engage with the following questions:

- As a prospective teacher, how might you have handled a request like Jocelyn's? Would you have approached Connor differently? If so, why?
- How does David react to Jocelyn's request that he speak to Connor to reassure him that "things only get better"? Why might he have reacted in this way? What are the effects of discourses targeting queer youth with the message that "It gets better"?
- What does Connor mean when he says: "The issue is not me not fitting in. It's me not wanting to fit in!"? What are the implications of thinking of LGBTQI+ youth in terms of wanting to fit in? Whose interests are served by these framings? Who is disadvantaged by them?
- How would you describe Connor? (Think of at least three qualities you would associate with him.) Is he how you expected him to be, based on how he was earlier described by Jocelyn and David? What possibilities exist when more expansive portrayals of LGBTQI+ youth are offered on screen?
- Is there anything you would have done differently if you were responsible for creating this storyline?

Season 5, Episode 11: "Meet the Parents"

This episode sees Johnny welcoming Patrick's parents, Clint and Marcy, to the motel ahead of Patrick's surprise birthday party. Presuming that Patrick's parents know that he and David are in a relationship, Johnny shares that he originally had reservations about them "mixing a business relationship and a romantic relationship." The Brewers are visibly thrown by the revelation that Patrick and David are in a romantic relationship and retire to their room. Meanwhile, a panicked Johnny runs to the café to find David, hoping that he hasn't "outed" Patrick to his parents. David laughs off the absurdity of the suggestion at first, but it quickly becomes apparent that David isn't sure whether Patrick's parents knew about their relationship.

David goes home to talk to Patrick and he quickly confirms his suspicions. David asks: "So all this time your parents thought that they were just talking to your business partner?" Patrick is visibly nervous and his voice breaks with emotion as he confesses: "David, I know my parents are good people but I can't shake this fear that there is a small chance that this could change everything; that they might see me differently or treat me differently." David is tender, loving, understanding, and emphasizes the "very personal" nature of coming out, reassuring him that it is "something you should only do on your terms." When he reveals the surprise party plan to Patrick, he even offers to be introduced to his parents as "*just* his business partner." But Patrick says: "I can't have you do that. I owe it to us to tell them.. . . I want them to know—maybe this whole thing is a blessing in disguise," resolving to tell his parents later that evening.

David then visits Patrick's parents to introduce himself and apologizes for how they found out about Patrick. Clint asks: "Was it something we did?" David meets this question with the assumption that Patrick's parents are reacting badly, and tries to explain that Patrick is "still the same person." Marcy quickly clarifies that they are not upset about Patrick being gay; they are upset because he felt he couldn't tell them.

Later, at the party, as the Rose family watches from the wings, and Patrick's parents do their best to pretend not to know anything, Patrick tells his parents about his relationship with David. He explains that he has never been happier in his life and says, "I hope you guys can accept that." As the emotion and anticipation build, Marcy says, "You are the only thing in the world that matters to us. And if David makes you happy, that's all we care about." When Patrick looks to his Dad for his reaction, Clint says, "I like him. I like him a lot. . .I don't understand his clothes but. . .," inducing collective laughter of relief.

"Meet the Parents" plays queerly and disruptively with the kind of fixed, binaristic narratives of coming out that Muñoz (2019) and Duggan (2002) allude to in their critiques of homonormativity. The episode deliberately sets up, veers toward, and rejects commonplace coming out narratives, bringing alternative queer imaginaries into view. Once again, affect is central here in a series of intensely emotional scenes that induce both laughter and tears simultaneously. David's reaction to the fact that Patrick hasn't told his parents about their relationship might surprise us, in part because we have been encouraged to associate David with progressiveness and looseness around gender and sexuality. However, there is a certain utopianism in David's response to Patrick. His response avoids a moralistic lesson about Patrick's failure to come out to his parents, replacing expected emotions of anger and betrayal with compassion and understanding. Furthermore, as if to immediately diffuse the sentimentality (Horeck, 2021), this is cleverly juxtaposed with David's reference to his own coming out story: "I brought this couple home one day in college, and just told my parents to deal with it." The multiplicity of coming out stories conjured here—coupled with the unexpectedness of David's reaction—offer alternative imaginings of queer relationships beyond the presentist binaries of out or in, acceptance or rejection. Furthermore, returning to the disruption of at-risk discourses, David's humorous retelling of his own coming out successfully brings into the now other ways of figuring coming out, in which the affective landscape of the closet (typically associated with strife or melancholy) is expanded for audiences through David's own irreverent lightheartedness. David's relaxed (almost nonchalant) attitude during his own coming out gives audiences permission to feel another dimension to the closet, one that is less serious and more frivolous. Through such lightheartedness, alternative, perhaps even utopian, ways of imagining queerness come to the fore, displacing the dominance of at-risk representations.

In many ways, Patrick's anxiety about telling his parents strikes to the core of what coming out feels like for many people: the fear of being seen or treated differently and losing the people you love. Patrick's nervousness—and then his palpable relief as his parents are wholeheartedly accepting—is very emotionally arresting, and we are invited as the audience to be relieved with him. We are drawn at the same time to notice how

the coming out scene is gently mocked via Patrick's parents' choreographed attempt to pretend they don't know about their relationship already, and his mother's clunky attempts to demonstrate to Patrick that they are positively predisposed to what he has to say. There is queer potentiality, too, in Patrick's sexuality not being central to the story. He doesn't make any identity declarations, rather, he says: "we're together. . .he's my boyfriend. . .and I've never been happier. . .in my life." Indeed, the episode title avoids the homonormative logics of coming out, choosing instead to focus on David meeting Patrick's parents. Furthermore, the motif of the closet is employed as a humorous queering device throughout in disrupting narratives of coming out. For instance, David tells Patrick he is going to "laugh his way out of the closet on this one" as he prepares to tell him about the surprise party and his parents' imminent arrival. And he later concocts a plan to keep Patrick in the closet until the surprise party.

This episode manages to side-step repressive, melancholic narratives of coming out. At the same time, it seems crucial that the specter of a "dark" alternative to this story lurks through the episode as a nod to the difficult coming out experiences of so many people the world over. We can't fail to notice the heteronormative imperative to come out as being in a queer relationship, the anxious wait for acceptance, the hope for a "good" reaction, and how all this inevitably invites judgment and assessment from the one being informed. In this way, this episode again enacts a queer utopianism by signaling queer futures beyond the "quagmire of the present" (Muñoz, 2019, p. 24) while avoiding a rose-tinted, over-the-rainbow imaginary.

In exploring this episode with teacher education students, we suggest asking student teachers to consider the following:

- Can you think of examples of coming out stories from (1) media stories, (2) research around the theme of coming out, and (3) anecdotal stories from everyday life in schools or otherwise?
- What does coming out mean? What does coming out involve? Who needs to come out? Who gets to come out? What are the different ways that people come out? Is coming out a straightforward process?
- Think of Clint's question: "Was it something we did?" What does he mean? What did David think he meant at first? What does this scene tell us about the power dynamics of coming out?
- Reflect on David's reaction to Patrick not having told his parents about their relationship. Did this surprise you? Why or why not?
- Discuss Patrick's explanation to David about why he hadn't told his parents. What strikes you about his response? What does this tell us about the coming out process?
- Examine the scene where Patrick tells his parents about his relationship with David. How did this scene make you feel? Discuss Marcy's and Clint's separate roles in this scene. What stood out for you from what they did/said? What is your assessment of Patrick: the buildup, the way he told his parents, and his reaction afterward. What does all of this tell us about the coming out process?

Season 6, Episode 14: "Happy Ending"

"Happy Ending" is the concluding episode to the series. It begins with David waking up on the morning of his and Patrick's (outdoor) wedding to the news that their officiant has canceled due to the storm engulfing Schitt's Creek and the neighboring Elmsdale. Facing the prospect of no venue for their big day, Patrick and the Rose family rally the townspeople to source and decorate an alternative, indoor locale for the wedding. Preparations underway, Patrick arranges a massage in his apartment for the panic-stricken David, leaving a note for the masseur to "take very good care" of his fiancé. Unbeknownst to Patrick, the massage transpires to be an erotic one, with David recounting his "happy ending" to Patrick and his best friend Stevie when they return to Patrick's apartment. Initially outraged by the mistake, Patrick is calmed down by David's assurances of his love for him, though this does not prevent David from covertly communicating his enjoyment of the happy ending to Stevie from behind Patrick's back.

Soon after this, the wedding itself takes place at Town Hall. Alexis walks David down the aisle in "a white, floor length gown," with the local women's a cappella group, the Jazzagals, singing a rendition of Tina Turner's "The Best." This is the song Patrick first sang to David at their store's open mic night in Season 4, Episode 6. Moira acts as officiant in a white Alexander McQueen gown with a complementing chain belt, gold Tom Forde boots, gold gloves, and a high liturgical headpiece similar to a papal mitre. Patrick is wearing a traditional black wedding suit, while David is wearing a black suit jacket and bowtie accompanied with a black knee-length skirt, black socks, and heavy black boots. After Moira offers simultaneously comic and poignant reflections on the nature of love, fate, and family, David and Patrick exchange vows: Patrick singing parts of Mariah Carey's "Always Be My Baby" (David's favorite singer); David describing Patrick as his "happy ending." The episode finishes the following morning with Alexis, David, Patrick, and Stevie saying goodbye to Moira and Johnny as they make their way to a new life in California.

On the surface, "Happy Ending" would appear to follow the conservative marital formula found in many comedies: the Rose and Brewer families unite in the wedded bliss of David and Patrick, potentially reaffirming a homonormative image of the good life reminiscent of the gay pragmatism Muñoz criticizes. Yet, the wedding day also has significant queer utopian potential that cuts through normative/nonnormative binaries, realized less in the fact of David and Patrick's marriage per se and more in the "astonishment" the audience feels before, during, and after the ceremony. The "happy ending" Patrick organizes for David before their wedding is a good example of this kind of utopian moment in how it trespasses conventions of marriage and fidelity, without ever leaving the audience in doubt of David and Patrick's love for each other. Indeed, David's covert indication to Stevie that he enjoyed the "happy ending" brings an incongruous moment of levity into a situation that might otherwise be interpreted more seriously by audiences. It is precisely this moment of levity (achieved through David's comic eye roll and hand gestures from behind Patrick's back)

that "astonishes" viewers, exposing them in the now to a future in which normative understandings of fidelity and trust (and the binary logics upon which these are often built) are turned on their head and divested of their seriousness. In the teacher education classroom, laughter in the face of such incongruity is significant in creating a provisional sense of the collective among students (to use Mayo's phrasing [Mayo, 2010]), achieved in an indirect, nonaffronting, or slantwise fashion (Quinlivan, 2018, p. 87; Ahmed, 2006) through the experience of students laughing *together* at David's irreverence. And although not every student will find David's attitude funny (either because of personal taste or because of discomfort at the prospect of a soon-to-be-married man receiving a "happy ending" massage by a stranger), the experience of *being present* at others' positive reaction to such a moment itself stages a utopian encounter for students, bringing into the now of students' worlds an imminent affirmation of the "happy ending" scene that might otherwise have escaped the purview of their own experiences. A provisional sense of togetherness can thus be embodied between students in their collective encounter with the queerness of the scene, even in situations where the nature of their responses to this encounter might vastly differ.

The ceremony is replete with other moments of queer potential too, including the gender-nonconforming nature of David's skirt and suit jacket combination, the pop music being sung throughout the ceremony, as well as the camp over-the-topness of Moira's papal garb ("camp" in the Sontagian sense of a "love of the exaggerated," 1964, p. 3). In walking her brother down the aisle while wearing a white wedding dress, Alexis also subtly subverts what audiences might expect from a wedding by: (1) undermining the sexism often coded in conventional practices of fathers "giving away" their daughters, and (2) playing on the image of a brother and sister getting married. And although the institution of marriage remains central in these moments across the episode, assimilationist politics is nonetheless side-stepped through its utopianism: the episode's camp irreverence displaces binaries of the normative and nonnormative by exposing audiences to what it might feel like to attend another kind of wedding in another kind of town, where what one is fitting into is quite different to what an audience might typically expect.

In exploring this episode with teacher education students, the following prompts could prove useful:

- Reflect on Patrick's and David's behavior around the "happy ending" incident. To what extent is their respective behaviors to be expected? Is there anything surprising in how they react? If so, what is it that surprises you? Why?
- Identify some of the features of a conventional "happy ending" in popular representations of marriage. Who and/or what is counted as "normal" in these happy endings?
- Does this episode conform to and/or subvert these conventions in any way? What are your thoughts on David referencing his "happy ending" in his and Patrick's wedding vows?

- What effect (if any) does costume and music have on you in this scene? Would you like to attend this kind of wedding? If so, why?
- "The problem for me with the gay marriage movement is it actually limits people's options rather than increasing them." Offer a response to this statement in light of your viewing of this episode.

Conclusion

We conclude our paper as we began: with reference to Catherine O'Hara's depiction of SC as "an example of what life could be like" and of laughter as a medium through which to "open [the] heart and soul." The foregoing analysis outlined SC's potential to enact a queer utopianism that signals other ways of imagining queer lives, relationships, and experiences beyond the limits of presentist, assimilationist politics. Furthermore, we highlighted its capacity to invoke—via direct pedagogical encounters with humor, irony, playfulness, and the like—a much more expansive set of emotions and sensibilities in relation to queer lives than more traditional, empathy-engendering pedagogical approaches allow. This generation of positive affect is associated with a "politics of potentiality" (Horeck, 2021) in its gesturing toward, or depiction of, a better world.

Framing our analysis of the show in these utopian terms has been helpful in allowing us to cast light on three dimensions of the sitcom that yield significant potential for teaching about gender and sexuality diversity in the teacher education classroom. With Connor in mind, the first is the capacity of the sitcom to sidestep damage-centered narratives of queerness that synonymize the lives and experiences of queer youth with victimhood and vulnerability. In this sense, the utopianism of SC allows for the agency of queer youth to be potentially foregrounded for student teachers. The second is the ability of the sitcom to displace simplistic coming out narratives that often dominate in cultural representations of queerness. In exploring Patrick's coming out process, student teachers might be provided with an opportunity to think about queer lives and relationships beyond binaristic tropes of "out" or "in." Finally, the sitcom's "happy ending," with its campy refiguring of an otherwise traditional wedding ceremony and its playful disruption of monogamy, yields generative opportunities for thinking through and perhaps reimagining what marriage means.

O'Hara's observation is also important in exposing *why* the utopianism of the sitcom is of significance for exploring queer themes in teacher education: It has the capacity to "astonish" student teachers by rendering multiple queer futures eminent through its characters, their relationships, and audiences' affective responses to these. In these terms, the utopianism of the sitcom is worthwhile for teacher education, not because it somehow chimes with a didactic urge to prescribe a "queer blueprint" for student teachers (we don't think it necessarily does), but more because of the kind of affective experiences it can afford student teachers. It offers experiences in which queer futures can be felt without being limited to narrow accounts of what these futures

should concretely look like. This latter point on the ability of SC to eschew a moralistic or didactic approach points more generally to the pedagogical potential of engaging with comedy in the context of education on social justice themes. This potential lies in the capacity of the genre to enact a pedagogy characterized less by a deliberate desire to teach lessons or prescribe approaches, and more by its potential to resist simplistic narratives and signal the multiplicity of queer futures in a slantwise, nonconfrontational manner. Crucially, such openings are enabled through feelings such as joy or playfulness that are often experienced by audiences engaging with the genre. In this sense, the affective is key in opening up the pedagogical import of comedy for education, particularly in educating around so-called "difficult knowledge."

This paper has offered practical insights on the generative potential of SC as a pedagogical resource for teaching about queer lives while also foregrounding comedy (and the positive affects generated by it) more broadly as pedagogically worthwhile for social justice–oriented classrooms. In positioning comedy as pedagogically worthwhile, however, we do not wish to situate the genre as a panacea for teaching and learning about issues of social justice. As we note earlier, comedy can reproduce structural exclusions as much as it can undermine them. This is important to recognize, not least in sensitizing teacher educators and student teachers to the need to be contextually and culturally sensitive in discerning when comedy is used, how it is used, where it is used, by whom, and why. Navigating these complexities is undoubtedly a challenge. In judging how best to proceed in such contexts, perhaps taking heed of O'Hara's view that comedy and laughter can open another's "heart and soul" is a good place from which to begin this work.

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1. In this paper, we use the term "queerness" to signify specific themes and experiences pertinent to those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, intersex, and more, as well as broader themes, experiences, and modalities that can be coded as queer given their going-against-the-grain of heteronormativity.

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