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Letting Go, Coming Out, and Working Through: Queer *Frozen*

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Abstract: This article builds on an already established understanding of Disney's *Frozen* as a queer text. Following Judith Butler, however, it works against a notion of 'queer' that is locatable in the intrinsic truth of plot, imagery, and character, and removed from questions of performance and narration. In taking this approach, and in keeping with the focus of this Special Edition of *Humanities*, the article undertakes an extensive, fine-grained reading of 'Let it Go', the stand-out song from the first *Frozen* film. Rather than argue for or against the idea that 'Let it Go' is a Coming Out song, issues of textual perspective and textual difference are foregrounded in a way that challenges claims to the stability of identity. The pressing question, for this article, is not whether the lead character of *Frozen* truly is 'out', but the possibility of fixing identity in this way, the precise nature of the reversals and antagonisms that being 'out' and 'letting it go' require in this particular text, and how such determinations might impact on a wider understanding of 'queer'.

Keywords: *Frozen*; Let it Go; queer; coming out; Judith Butler; children's literature; deferral; literary perspective

1. Introduction: Coming Out in Neo-Liberal Times

In what follows, I will be reading the song 'Let it Go' from Disney's *Frozen* as a queer counter to any Coming Out narrative that is read as a moment of non-discursive finality, free from supplement (Walt Disney Animation Studios 2013b). In this, I understand my analysis to challenge the 'transnational dynamic' that Stephanie D. Clare terms 'coming out in neo-liberal times' (Stephanie 2017, p. 17). For Clare, there is an increasingly familiar form of Coming Out that is premised on the idea that gay and lesbian identities have long ceased to be controversial. Instead of an act that potentially brings the subject into conflict with family and society, Coming Out is seen as a confirmation of an already confirmed identity, requiring only the clear acceptance and knowledge of the subject's desires. This is taken to be a problematic understanding, not least because it:

> indexes widespread adherence to a model of the self as transparent and naturally self-interested, a model that is deeply connected to neoliberal understandings of individuality and to the conservative notions of adjustment and adaptation that are central to neoliberal governance.[1] (Stephanie 2017, p. 17)

It should not come as a surprise that Clare cites the work of Judith Butler in her discussion of the threat posed to queer politics by this apparently auditable and agential identity. It is a threat that can be understood to initiate a question asked by Butler in one of her earliest essays, 'Imitation and Gender Insubordination': 'Can sexuality even remain sexuality once it submits to the criterion of transparency and disclosure, or does it perhaps cease to be sexuality precisely when the semblance of full explicitness is achieved?' (Butler 1993, p. 309) For Butler, to fix identity absolutely, publicly, to be sure of oneself and one's desires, necessitates the falling away of the unconscious, that 'excess that enables and contests every performance' (Butler 1993, p. 317).

It is my contention that 'Let it Go', the stand-out song from the first *Frozen* film, can be read also in terms of Butler's caution as to the certainty and stability of the 'out' identity.

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The song has been widely understood as 'a coming-out anthem for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people' (Lynskey 2014), with, for example, Angel Daniel Matos quoting from the song in the title of the first academic response to *Frozen*, which he describes as ' . . . the queerest animated film ever produced by Disney . . . ' (Matos 2014).[2] The initial justification for this assessment is made in the following terms:

> Queen Elsa [one of two central characters in the film, and the singer of 'Let it Go'] is approached by some viewers as a queer or gay character, not only because she doesn't engage in a romantic relationship in the film, but also because she is forced by her parents to suppress and hide the powers that she is born with. Although the movie implies that her parents desperately try to conceal Elsa's powers because of the danger that they impose to herself and to others, this does not justify the degree to which they prevent Elsa from having any human contact whatsoever. Furthermore, the fact that Elsa's parents view suppression and isolation as solutions further emphasizes notions of the infamous queer closet. (Matos 2014)

In concluding his essay, however, Matos shifts his focus, connecting the queerness of the film to its ability to offer a 'visualization of grey areas' and the 'deconstruction of binary thinking'. (Matos 2014) Not the least of my issues here is that 'queer' and 'deconstruction' are understood only at the level of content or plot. Take, for example, the following: 'this movie invites the viewer to collapse the dichotomous views that are often in-grained within our collective consciousness. *Frozen* presents a world in which snowmen can exist during the summer [. . .]' (Matos 2014). Within this formulation, despite the viewer having to act to collapse dichotomous views, there is a counter sense in which this work has already been achieved. Here, I am not thinking simply of an act that stays within the bounds of a request, but the construction of 'presentation' as prior to audience engagement. In other words, I take presentation and visualization to be—surprisingly—'straight' for Matos: there is no uncertainty or 'collapse' in visualization or presentation, only in what is to be presented or visualized.

A question, then: if 'Let it Go' is indeed to be understood as a 'coming out anthem', and thus as a disclosure of queer identity, what, if anything, might work against the *transparency* of that disclosure? To partially quote Butler, if the text 'can so determine itself', then is it the case that what 'it excludes in order to make that determination remains constitutive of the determination itself' (Butler 1993, p. 309, my italics)? In other words, what must be in play for a given identity to be fixed? What excesses—occluded, inadmissible—are required if one is to be 'out'? This question leads me to three more: If a character is to come out on screen, what divisions are necessary to the confirmation of their identity? What framing perspective does this identity require? And to what extent is this identity, even at the point of its fullest presence, ghosted by the closet (where the concealing of the queer closet is not simply imposition, the other to queer identity)?

I realize that to call on Butler in this way, and from the first, might suggest I have fallen behind the times in queer debates. Indeed, at a recent conference I attended in Germany on Feminism and sex-education, the one thing all attendees agreed upon was that Judith Butler, especially early Judith Butler, represented all that must be overcome in discussions of sexuality and gender.[3] Here, the appeal was generally to a Lacanian understanding of the Real of sexual difference (see also, for example, Žižek 2011; Copjec 1994), but whether the rejection of Butler comes from a Leftist investment in class over identity (Nagle 2017; Cohen 2011), a knee-jerk rejection to woke culture from the right (Sanchez 2021; Pluckrose and Lindsay 2021), the kind of commitment to an aesthetics of realism that supports the work of most 'gender critical' adherents (Lawford-Smith 2022; Stock 2021), or a transgender critique of fluid gender or identity as supportive of neoliberalism in its failure to acknowledge 'realness' (Draz 2022; Prosser 1998), what seems intolerable is the sense in which, for Butler, identity is: unfinished and elsewhere; not dependent on a prior, intentional actor; symbolic; retrospective.[4] Certainly, as Butler repeatedly acknowledges, the idea that such an understanding should lead to the erasure of identity, or to an idea that gender is in

some sense unreal, is mistaken (Butler 1988, 1993). Butler offers an account of identity, after all, of what must be in place for it to be fixed. The issue instead is that this fixing, and its pre-history, is never final, never available divested of its supplements and constitutive others, never to be achieved without repetition and retrospection.

To confirm what is at stake here, we can turn to a comparable, but different, critical tradition, the kind of historicizing intervention into queer history offered by, for example, David Valentine in *Imagining Transgender* (Valentine, 2007). In this text, Valentine questions the self-evidence of 'same sex-attraction', understood as threatened by a gender identity that is wholly its other, arguing that what, amongst many other things, needs to be returned to arguments around such claims is the history necessary to the division: the establishment of a split between sexuality and gender in mid-century America, but then also the way this introduces antagonisms that are both necessary and anathema to the divide. Just as Butler offers a reading of identity that brings to light what is necessary and yet excluded from it, Valentine returns constitutive yet excluded antagonisms to an opposition between sexuality and gender. Therefore, too, in what follows, I will be offering a necessarily fine-grained reading of the various 'determinations' that are required by, yet undermine, the transparency of Coming Out in *Frozen*.

2. . . . a Kingdom of Isolation . . .

It is not hard to imagine a reading of 'Let it Go' as a narrative of transition. Elsa begins the song isolated, dwarfed by the mountains around her: unsure; despondent. By the final verse, however, she has joyfully embraced her powers, is resplendent in a princess dress, and lives in a castle of her own making. The four-minute performance moves from shame to acceptance; from Elsa trudging alone through the snow with her arms wrapped round herself, to those arms flung wide as she fills a great expanse with her voice. Another way to look at this, and in keeping with Matos' reading, is that the transformation brings into question the oppositions through which it is structured: Elsa swaps isolation for privacy, despair at being alone for joy at its pleasures.[5]

Turning to the start of the song, however, even such a compromised shift can be questioned. For example, rather than simply staging a final return as independence, I read isolation as never quite isolated from its others. Take the first lines of the lyric:

> The snow glows white on the mountain tonight,
>
> Not a footprint to be seen
>
> A kingdom of isolation
>
> And it looks like I am the queen. (Walt Disney Animation Studios 2013a)

In so far as isolation is ironized within the lyric as belonging to a 'kingdom', there is something beyond Elsa: a structure. Certainly, the words can be understood as the narrating I's perspective: it is for this 'I' alone that the snow glows white, and no footprints can be seen, and for it too that there is a kingdom, and 'it looks like I am the queen'. It is a perspective, nonetheless, that constructs isolation in terms of wider social organizations, and in a way that appeals to alienation: what I am is what *it* looks like, and thus my being is bound to a perspective, one not, perhaps, wholly my own. As the queen, it is unclear if I rule the *king*dom, or if another is absent; as 'it looks like I am the queen', it might be that I have no place within the kingdom of isolation, that the kingdom is itself isolated from, or at least other to, my reality, or, again, that if I rule there, it is because something more rightful is missing.

The strange excesses necessary to Isolation—the structure of monarchy; the looking that is not quite my own—can be read elsewhere in the narration: the sequence begins, after all, not with Elsa, but snow, the sound of the wind, then, as the first few piano notes strike up, the camera moving to the mountain upon which Elsa is walking (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Elsa on the mountain (Walt Disney Animation Studios 2013a).

This, then, *is not Elsa's narration*. There is a framing prior to her arrival, and her isolation is confirmed by a perspective that is not her own, zooming in on her in a way that confirms the lack of others around her. The pathos of isolation requires a perspective other than that of the isolated subject.

In what follows, I am interested in thinking through how such constructions might impact on a narrative of Coming Out. If isolation requires another, are there other structuring oppositions that are similarly compromised? Is Coming Out self-authored? Additionally, how might such questions lead to a problematization of Coming Out as final, present, and complete?

3. The Wind Is Howling Like This Swirling Storm Inside

At this stage, we might think that what we have is simply a problem of an external other necessary to the production of the self. As the subsequent lines of the song suggest, however, the question of externality is not straightforward:

The wind is howling like this swirling storm inside

Couldn't keep it in, heaven knows I tried. (Walt Disney Animation Studios 2013a)

The storm inside is swirling, but it is 'like' the howling of the wind. If an opposition is maintained through simile, in so far as the wind's howling is not the swirling storm inside, only 'like' it, the howling is also constructed in terms of what it is not. And what is inside is not *like* a swirling storm, it *is* one, hence the difficulty of a narrative of pathetic fallacy: this storm is not internalized nature, so much as simply *internal*. The storm inside is not out of place, in other words, but other to the wind, and in a different place to it.

Despite the words of the song constructing a swirling storm that is like the howling, neither the swirling storm nor the wind can be heard at this moment. The sequence begins with the sound of the wind, as mentioned above, but this is soon overtaken by music. To think of what is overtaken *as* a 'howling' 'wind' is, however, to read a retrospective construction, a framing of the initial sound by the subsequent word narration that constructs the inside in terms of an otherness: the words of the song are indeed not the internal howling. Through their appeal to an excess, something other than them, the words testify to their own limit. It is not, for example, that words express the inside of the subject, as they claim neither to repeat the sound of the inside, nor its swirling movement. These can no longer be heard. The word perspective, again, constructs itself as other to 'this storm' and the 'inside', narrating them, not coinciding with them.

It is not only a notion of an inside that is problematized by the words, but also one of speaking. The words do not change in volume as the camera travels towards Elsa during the opening shots, and as such work against a notion that they come 'from' Elsa. There is a visual perspective on Elsa, and a soundtrack that does not match this, and there is thus something unaccountable about these words. They are not on the inside, according to the word perspective, but they are also difficult to locate elsewhere within the visual frame,

having a continuity and consistency that is at odds with the movement and cutting of the camera.

The visual perspective on Elsa at this stage brings its own difficulties (Figure 2):

Figure 2. 'The wind is howling like this swirling storm inside' (Walt Disney Animation Studios 2013a).

The 'inside' is constituted as other to a word perspective that is, as I have suggested, at odds with the visual frame, a frame that I read as not offering access to this inside. If something occluded is to be read here, it is not free of its framing. Rather, the inside, such as it is, is constituted through a failure to access the inside. If the inside is thus, ironically, the visual perspective *on* Elsa, a perspective not hers, it should be remembered that this perspective works against that constituted by the words on the soundtrack, which construct an 'I' that is other to both Elsa as seen and—let us say—unseen.

The inside can be problematized further still in the lyrics quoted above, however, as what is 'in' is also not 'in': 'Couldn't keep it in, heaven knows I tried.' According to this construction, being 'in' is the result of the action of the 'I'. The 'in' is *kept* in. This returns us to the problematic position of the word narration: there is an acted upon 'it', and an agential 'I', and these are not the same. The 'in', as read above, is, however, occluded. The word narration testifies to it, whilst eclipsing it also, yet this 'in', that is certainly not the 'I', is also not in, and thus the word narration finds itself in an impossible position, constructing a repressed 'in' that is neither in nor repressed. Where then is it? What would it mean to think of the 'in' as available in the repressive narration of its failed repression?

4. Conceal, Don't Feel

At this stage, a further difficulty arises: what *is* this 'it' that 'I couldn't keep [. . .] in'? One answer, surely, is the 'swirling storm inside'. Despite my problematization of the internal storm in the previous section, I can certainly see how this might suggest the storm to be emotion, or some aspect of the self. There is a further issue here, however, in so far as 'feeling' and 'concealing' are, at one stage, taken to be mutually exclusive: 'Conceal, don't feel'. Now, these words are a repetition of a phrase Elsa was taught by her father when young, a mantra of self-control, but I think they need to be rejected by her, in part, because of the possibility that they might be effective: if one really were to succeed in concealing, there would be no feelings to hide.

Perhaps the song is less about concealment than 'let[ting] it go', therefore. Because the 'it' *cannot* be kept in, it is not concealed, and thus can be read as 'feeling'. According to the lyrics, it is only concealment that forecloses feeling, whereas the letting go—the inability to 'hold it back anymore'—produces, in my reading, a prehistory of concealment, and in such a way that what is concealed is always now loose, and thus not opposed to feeling. Not the least of my issues here is what I would term the *extension* of 'let[ting] it go': Elsa is always in the process of 'let[ting] it go' in this understanding, and thus the moment of Coming Out continues, in some way, the earlier condition of the closet.

In the following section of this article, I will develop this reading of what is being let go, and what such a reading might suggest about feeling. Before that, however, I wish to offer a further problematization of the construction of the 'it' from a different angle, as I believe this might indicate something of the extent to which notions of presence and identity are undercut within the text, and this in a way that questions a clear and contained 'outness', and the ability, therefore, precisely, and once and for all, to settle *Frozen*'s queer status in some way other than its own impossibility.[6]

Let us then move towards the end of the song, where Elsa, exultant in her powers, and in the thick of 'let[ting] it go', sings: 'I am one with the wind and sky'. Certainly, oneness at this stage can be read as a move against deferral, an all-of-a-piece-ness that might suggest the certainty of a wholly 'out' identity. As a testament to the dangers of concealing, the 'I' is now not only fully externalized but, I would contend, at peace with, rather than alienated from, its surroundings. Only this will not quite do, as I read the 'I' as inevitably other to the wind and sky in being *with* them, even if this is to be *one* with them. The wind, of course, was previously constructed as 'howling like this swirling storm inside', and thus the 'I' is now 'one with' what was previously not inside, although known in terms of being 'like' it. This can be taken as an overcoming of oppositions, with likeness replaced by oneness. Crucially, as already read, it can also be understood in terms of the disappearance of the 'it': initially, there is a difference between the 'I' and the 'it', as the former tries and fails to keep the latter 'in', but now the 'I' has replaced the 'it', or there simply is no 'it'. Instead of a likeness between inside and out, claimed by an 'I' that was neither, there is an 'I' that is one with a sky that no longer is constructed as an outside, but instead is other to the 'I' that it is nevertheless one with.

Certainly, if one is to read Coming Out in this instance as a displacement of a problematized opposition between in and out onto a problematized opposition between 'I' and 'sky', then we are in the realm of repetition as much as difference. What falls outside of this repetition, however, is the 'in'. Should it follow from this that 'let[ting] it go' is to be understood as the disappearance, occlusion, or suppression of the 'in' or 'inside'? Not the end of a split subject, but the end of the inside as it relates to or constitutes the subject?

5. Let It Go . . .

With this problematization in mind, let us return to concealment's end, the act, we might suppose, of letting it go:

> My power flurries through the air into the ground
>
> My soul is spiraling in frozen fractals all around. (Walt Disney Animation Studios 2013a)

In keeping with the analysis offered in the previous section, I do not read 'feeling' here, but rather the flurrying of 'my power', the spiraling of 'my soul'. *I* do not spiral. If I let go, I do not let go of possession. I remain, in so far as I possess, but movement and agency are only now a matter of my possession. My power is 'it', in the sense that this is what I must let go of, must, I think, lose control of, but this loss of control is not a complete loss of possession. It is a loss of control that also sits oddly with the later claim that:

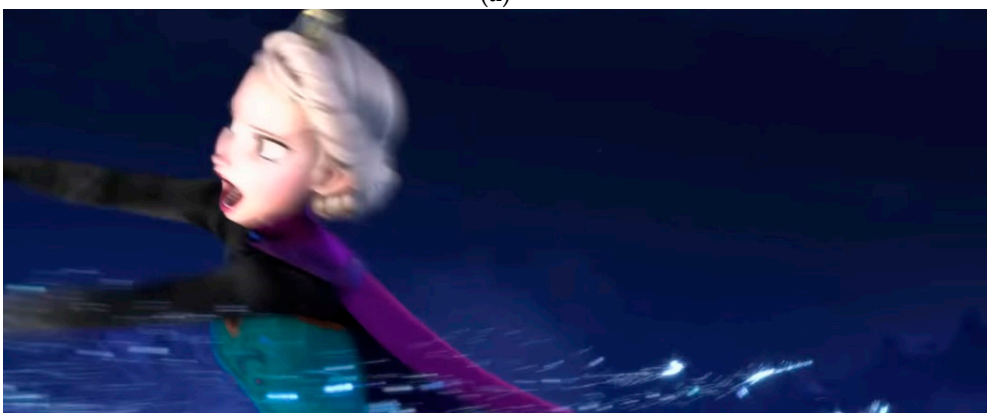
> It's time to see what I can do
>
> To test the limits and break through. (Walt Disney Animation Studios 2013a)

In this case, it is 'I that is about to act, about to 'do', not my soul, and it is time to see this (a time that is not timely, in so far as the seeing has yet to occur, although the time for it is right, *or*, a time that is timely, but the time is one of anticipation, that this is the time not of seeing, but 'to see'. What is the time of Coming Out? Can the act ever be fully contained within the present now?). What I can do must be witnessed, although the identity of the witness is not confirmed. The challenge, for letting go or Coming Out is, then, that at one stage it is about the 'I' letting go of its property and the 'I' determined only through its property, with this property having an agency and an ability to act on its own whilst elsewhere it is the 'I' that acts, with this act understood to be other than the witnessing of it.

The 'I' is not made fully present by Coming Out, but is instead divided, receding at some points, resurgent at others. Such tensions only become more pronounced if this sequence is understood through the readings introduced above. Thus, for example, is a narrative of continuity available in which 'my soul' is the 'storm inside'? Is the 'it' that could not be kept in really and only the 'it' that is now let go?

Turning to the visual narration at this point, we can problematize notions of an 'out' identity through a different, yet comparable, reading (Figure 3a–c):

(**a**)



(**b**)

(**c**)

Figure 3. (**a**) Elsa with snow magic. (**b**) Elsa controlling snow magic. (**c**) The snow magic Elsa has made (Walt Disney Animation Studios 2013a).

In the first shot (a), Elsa could, I suppose, be read as holding her soul or power. Certainly, the letting go is achieved through first holding the magical snow or frost, or at least having hands proximate to it, before this snow is framed on its own (c). The second (b) and third shots (c) here could form something of a shot-reverse shot, with the shot of the

snow curling upwards seen by, or at least produced by, Elsa in the previous shot: in terms of classic *suture* (Heath 1976), the shot of Elsa (b) lacks what she is seeing, or lacks what she is producing, and the subsequent shot offers what might seem completion by making up for this loss. If ownership is constructed here, however, it is only in such a way that takes the ground from under it. What is extraordinary, for me, is that in the shot of the snow (c) there is, as it were, nothing of Elsa. Ownership, if we read it as such, is the disappearance of the owner, rather than its persistence. Again, Coming Out, if that is what we are reading here, requires, at certain stages, the disappearance of the subject, yet this is somehow that self's confirmation, its Coming Out, less a repression of Elsa, and more her repetition or revelation. The snow is her 'soul'. Only, it is not, of course, as the soul is 'in' the frozen fractal. That does not necessarily mean the soul is internal, but it is nonetheless 'out' only so far as it is 'in'. The revelation, then, can be understood to variously repeat the problem of the splitting of the subject. What would it mean for me to be my property? How can my property constitute both the persistence and the disappearance of me? Am I out, or does that apply to my property only, and if the latter, what are the implications of my property being bound to something I do not own?

I read some of these tensions repeated in the scene in which Elsa constructs a castle around herself, with an initial shot of a diminutive Elsa cutting to one of the building as it rises through its changes. To come out, again, if that is what is occurring, is, at one stage, to be framed from a distance, and then replaced by something else. Additionally, in so far as the Ice Palace can be read as surrounding Elsa, it repeats another aspect of 'let[ting] it go', the creation of the princess dress (Figure 4):

Figure 4. Elsa creating her dress (Walt Disney Animation Studios 2013a).

Here, however, there are differences also: the perspective remains on Elsa, and the Ice Palace and the princess dress are within the same shot. I read this dress against a still further aspect of 'let[ting] it go', the unfurling of the hair, and also the letting go of the comb that is necessary to this operation (Figure 5):

Figure 5. Elsa freeing her hair and letting go her comb (Walt Disney Animation Studios 2013a).

The dress surrounds Elsa as an addition, the hair is loosened, yet remains, and the comb is lost.

What, then, does it mean to 'let it go'? If 'let[ting] it go' is repeated through difference—loss, addition, eclipsing; a reliance on an 'it' that is already lost; feeling and its other; the agency of property; the compromised revelation of one thing in another, and the like—how are we to come out in 'let[ting] it go', if Coming Out is simply a securing of identity? A further, if already established, issue can be read here, if we turn to another letting go, that of the glove flung off just before the start of the first chorus. This glove, of course, has been gifted by Elsa's parents to limit her power. Throwing it off could be read as a revealing of a hand, or a letting go of property (but in a way that is not about the continuing ownership of that property). Crucially, the change that I read here, the change, we might say, from doubt to confidence, from in to out, is one that is constituted through a change in perspective. The previous shot is tracking Elsa as she walks across the snow, but now Elsa is framed from above (Figure 6). The change, then, is not from Elsa's perspective. There is a necessary excess to Coming Out, just as a third perspective was necessary to the construction of isolation. For *Frozen*, we are not who we are alone, an otherness being required even in the moment of our self-confirmation.

Figure 6. Elsa letting go her glove (Walt Disney Animation Studios 2013a).

As Elsa lets go of the glove, she sings 'well now they know', the final line of a verse partially quoted in an earlier section of this article:

> Don't let them in, don't let them see,
> be the good girl you always have to be.
> Conceal, don't feel. Don't let them know.
> Well, now they know. (Walt Disney Animation Studios 2013a)

Coming Out entails 'their' knowledge (Elsa's parents already know about her powers, of course, her trek on the mountain is the result of her unintentional and public display of them). In one sense, such knowledge suggests a complete reversal, involving also their seeing, their being let in, as well as the 'I' now feeling and no longer being a good girl. I take such concerns to no longer matter, however, as they are the 'it' that must be let go. Sure, the parents know, perhaps they see, but this is of no concern. Elsa's construction by the third perspective can be read to undercut this indifference. If Elsa is visible to her parents, yet also alone and not visible to anyone (other than Olaf, the snowman, perhaps), she is also, as I have suggested, constituted as such through a perspective other than her own. To whom do we come out? Is it ever possible to consider such an action prior to, or apart from, this other?

6. Turn Away and Slam the Door

To conclude this reading of 'Let it Go' I will introduce one final tension.[7] As introduced above, in 'let[ting] it go', Elsa is moving away from a situation in which she labored under the injunction 'don't let them in', yet the process is achieved thus:

> Let it go!
>
> Turn away and slam the door. (Walt Disney Animation Studios 2013a)

If letting go involves a slamming of the door, this possibly endorses rather than opposes not 'let[ting] them in'.[8] Not letting them in is the situation to be avoided, yet the liberation comes from a slamming of the door. Here, we should turn, of course, to the final sequence of the song.

As Elsa ascends to the balcony of her newly created Ice Palace, she sings out: 'here I stand in the light of day'. Is this visibility? Well, if there is no darkness, we are not quite done with obscurity, as the following, penultimate line of the song sees the camera race backwards to an extreme long shot, taking in the mountains and sky around Elsa, her voice rising seemingly to fill the void. In one sense, the song moves towards its initial position, with Elsa dwarfed by the mountains, framed by the perspective as distanced. Here, however, the distance can be taken to constitute presence rather than absence or indistinctness. The next shot is a close-up on Elsa, as, in a calmer voice, she sings the final line: 'the cold never bothered me anyway' (Figure 7):

Figure 7. 'The cold never bothered me anyway' (Walt Disney Animation Studios 2013a).

And with that, she turns and slams the door, disappearing into her Ice Palace. The final shot is of a door (Figure 8):

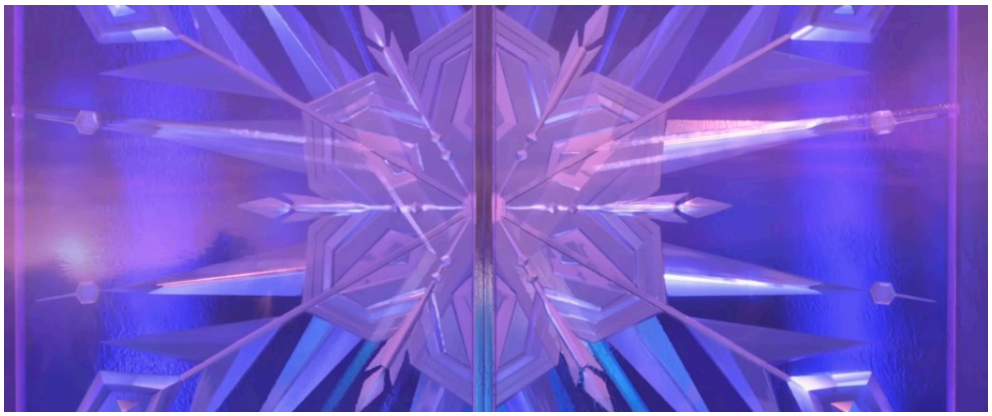


Figure 8. The door of the Ice Palace is shut.

This, then, is Coming Out, if the song is to be read as such: a perspective on a door. What to make of this?

Firstly, and to confirm: a third perspective is necessary to the independence of the subject. Rather than reading the door as an impediment to seeing the now 'out' subject, the 'out' subject is such precisely in so far as she is not seen. Or, with a little more force, we might say: the 'out' subject *is a door*. And, of course, this must be so. As long as Elsa is in the shot, or caught up in the economy of shot-reverse shot, she is constructed by a third, and thus still, in a sense, within the unwanted situation in which she was subject to the intrusion of others. To be 'out' is to be free of such interference: to be private; one's own person. What is being let go, at one stage at least, is an investment in the other. Yet, privacy's challenge to narration is that it is . . . private. How is privacy, a privacy that is 'out', to be known as such, without the subject being determined by a vision other than its own? The solution is for the narrating perspective to construct an impediment, a limit: Elsa slams the door. However, this means that the threat to independence by a narrating third is overcome through its repetition. To restate: the door that remains, constructed by the narrative third, is Elsa, who is thus necessarily split.[9] The 'public' perspective *is* Elsa's privacy. As Judith Butler has it:

> [. . . [being 'out' always depends to some extent on being 'in'; it gains its meaning only within that polarity. Hence, being 'out' must produce the closet again and again in order to maintain itself as 'out'. In this sense, outness can only produce a new opacity; and the closet produces the promise of a disclosure that can, by definition, never come. Is this infinite postponement of the disclosure of 'gayness,' produced by the very act of 'coming out,' to be lamented? Or is this very deferral of the signified to be valued, a site for the production of values, precisely because the term now takes on a life that cannot be, can never be, permanently controlled? (Butler 1993, p. 309)

At some stage, in other words, in order to come out it is necessary to let it go. Rather than 'lamenting the postponement of [. . .] disclosure', we might offer a queer reading of 'Let it Go' in terms of such postponement, and the various 'determinations' that can be returned to the scene of Coming Out: the narrating third; the prehistory of feelings or of the self, known only through retrospection; the tensions between the 'I' and its property; the veiled nature of revelation; presence in absence. Indeed, the very idea of 'Let it Go' as a Coming Out narrative, one that fixes, without excess, the identity of its subject, suggests to me a problem with such fixity, in so far as this identity can be understood to 'establish[. . .]' itself through its '*instability*', 'displaced [. . .] by what sustains it' (Butler, p. 311). If 'Let it Go' is Coming Out, then it is other than what it is. How, might we ask, is such a split identity ever fully to come to presence?

I will end this article simply by introducing an established queer reading of 'Let it Go', to suggest how it differs from that I have undertaken above, before introducing the

one critic I have read who offers an approach that I take to be comparable to my own. The established reading I have chosen is Moon Charania and Cory Albertson's 'Single, White, Female: Feminist Trauma and Queer Melancholy in the New Disney'. This work is possibly the most frequently referenced academic response to *Frozen*, and offers an important, questioning account of the representation of race in the seemingly more socially conscious recent Disney films. Elsa's song is described in the following terms:

> However, [the questioning account of marriage] isn't the only way *Frozen* [. . .] depict[s] queerness. In a pivotal scene from *Frozen*, Elsa reveals her ice powers to the kingdom and flees to the desolate mountainside. Folding her arms to comfort herself, she remembers her father's words to 'conceal, don't feel' and 'don't let them know.' Then, she looks down at her glove, part of her coronation gown, but more so a representation of her powers' concealment. She yanks off the glove, offering it up to the 'swirling' winds. And as the glove fades into the snow, she triumphantly admits that she is concealed no more. Snowflakes emerge from her now-bare hands. She smiles and declares in song, 'Let it go! Let it go!' With a wry grin, Elsa then removes her cape and continues up the mountainside. She continues to sing, creating stairs made of ice. They lead to a slick, snow-flake floor, the foundation for a lavish, multiturreted ice palace that is rising effortlessly. Singing 'Let it go! Let it go!' again, this time more powerfully, her hair magically flows into what has now become a trendy side-braid and her conservative coronation gown transforms into a sparkling, form-fitting outfit. With her arms wide and embracing her ice-kingdom, she walks onto her new balcony and, in song, taunts the storm to 'rage on'. (Charania and Albertson 2018, p. 139)

I quote from this 'depict[ion]' of queer outness at length to suggest the extent to which the force of Charania and Albertson's political vision requires a shift away from the kind of detailed close reading I have undertaken. The song, for Charania and Albertson, is all going in same direction: up and out. They read nothing of the closet. This is, I would contend, because they frame 'Let it Go' through retelling, rather than analysis, the clarity of the song's momentum secured through what I take to be paraphrase. The result, I would argue, is, in the above quotation at least, an understanding of the political subject as all-of-a-piece, psychologically transparent, and liberated from the gaze of others, rather than necessarily framed, and constructed through antagonisms. It is because the reading does not engage with what might be taken to be the obscurity or supplementarity of film language that Elsa can be understood finally as 'concealed no more'. It is a lack of engagement that, despite their various insights, I understand to be shared by the majority of critics responding to queer *Frozen*, including Brown (2011), Fan (2019), and Llompart and Brugué (2020). My suggestion, in this article, is that such a representational approach to the political subject—to be read in the work of Matos, Brown, Fan, and Charania and Albertson especially—runs the risk of sidelining the otherness necessary to it (the third that takes the subject out of itself, the deferral required for its fixing), and thus installs as the object of its discourse the kind of agential, unified, and commonsensical psyche that I take Judith Butler to set out to question.

Ironically, the one critic who bucks this trend, Per Esben Myren-Svelstad, begins 'The Witch and the Closet', his article on *Frozen* as an adaptation of Hans Christian Anderson's 'The Ice Queen', by stating that it 'will only to a limited extent present close readings' (Myren-Svelstad 2022, p. 2). There is some truth in this assessment: the readings offered do not engage questions of perspective, and thus the kind of disruptions to identity that have been my focus go unremarked. Despite this, Myren-Svelstad's interest in ideological antagonisms leads him to a more-than-usually detailed engagement with 'Let it Go', with the result that Elsa's status as *either* 'in' or 'out' is questioned. The central contention in 'The Witch in the Closet' is that:

> the freedom Elsa believes she has now gained is an example of dramatic irony as it depends on going back into the closet [. . .] Disney's snow queen seems to

> paradoxically embrace the warmth of the sun, but in keeping with the ambiguous message of the song, she literally turns away from the viewer and slams the door. The surface message of independence, self-assertion, and staying true to oneself is thus constantly undermined. Elsa's freedom comes with a condition that will prove to be untenable, a fact anticipated throughout the song. (Myren-Svelstad 2022, pp. 15–16)

In my understanding, Myren-Svelstad's interest is not with the dynamic of the closet, and certainly not with how narrative perspective is caught up in this, but rather with the specific situation detailed in *Frozen*; the trap Elsa finds herself within, where her initial liberation is untenable because tied to her disappearance from familial and other social structures. Our readings diverge in other ways: Myren-Svelstadt frames the film as an 'allegory' of adolescence, rather than a disruption of the secure correspondence such allegory requires; he understands the Ice Palace and 'frozen fractals' in terms of a 'psychological metaphor', rather than a problematization of the psychological; he works with textual 'messages' (however ambiguous), rather than textual difference (Myren-Svelstad 2022, pp. 15–16).[10] From the other direction, it could be argued that he has a more subtle understanding of the place of the song within the wider context of the film than that evidenced in this present article, and thinks through questions of adaptation that are beyond its scope.

What reading Myren-Svelstadt's article really brings home to me, however, is the extent to which textual constructions are at present sidelined within critical responses to children's literature that pertain to the political. Despite our very different - indeed, incompatible - approaches and conclusions, I read in our work a shared yet rare interest in the contradictions to be read in 'Let it Go' and their implications for queer politics, an interest, I would contend, that arises from, and is bound to, our engagement with textual specifics.

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Notes

1 It is worth recognising that *Frozen* works against what Clare identifies as the problem of self-assertion as it is presently modelled: the film acknowledges that Elsa's problems lie with her family and wider society, their lack of understanding of her powers, not with herself. One can understand, in the film, why Elsa has found it difficult to accept herself, but why also that self-acceptance is so significant, unlike in the films Clare discusses in her article, where a running joke is that the gay subject's only bar to self-acceptance is themselves: family and friends already know all about the gay subject, and are more than OK with her. What is unacceptable, in this narrative, is not to fully know and own oneself and one's interests.

2 An alternative response sees the *Frozen* franchise not to be 'out' enough. Emily St James, for example, argues that both films 'chicken out of doing anything meaningful, in favor of winking at you and nudging you in the ribs, daring you to read queerness into properties where none exists' (St James 2018). For St James, an authentic queer reading must correspond to a queer already existing in 'properties'. My sense, therefore, is that St James joins Matos in focusing on the prediscursive when assessing the queerness of the films. For a further reading that engages a variety of approaches to *Frozen*'s queer status, see Llompart and Brugué (2020).

3 The symposium 'Sexuelle Bildung—Quo vadis? Feministische und geschlechtertheoretische Perspektiven auf Sexualität und Subjektbildung' was held at Bergischen Universität Wuppertal on the 5–6 May 2022.

4 These authors overlap, of course: Žižek privileges class over identity; Nagle writes for the Koch-funded online magazine *Spiked* (headlines this month include 'Why Liz Truss Must Take an Axe to the Nanny State' and 'How Jordan Peterson Became a Punchbag of Hollywood No-Nothings'); *Spiked* sees itself as part of the class-focused Left; many gender-critical adherents seek, or have at some stage tolerated, alliances with the Far Right. I was tempted to include the Post-Kantians in this list, but this would require an engagement with Butler's own later 'ontological turn', and I do not have space here for that.

[5] Here, I would also recommend the work of Myren-Svelstad (2022), as discussed in the conclusion to this article.

[6] In 'impossibility' I am calling upon the title of Rose (1984): *The Impossibility of Children's Fiction*, which should not be taken, I think, as the non-existence or unreality of children's fiction, but as instead children's fiction constitited through irresolveable deadlocks and disruptive excesses. Much more could be said about queer childhood in this article, yet my focus is specifically on 'Coming Out', and to introduce this further question would result in a reading at least as long as this present article (This is likewise true for a queering of, for example, 'human', 'adult', or 'female' in the text). I should note here that the fact of Elsa being twenty one does not foreclose a reading of 'child' in 'Let it Go'. To even raise the question of queer childhood requires an acknowledgment of the most celebrated account of Disney animation and queerness, Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure* (Halberstam 2011). Again, a reading of this text is outside the scope of this present article, but if I were to return to this work at a later date, it would be to follow the analysis of queer (non) readings of the child offered by Lesnik-Oberstein and Thomson (2002). For Halberstam, although childhood can be understood as 'anarchic', and thus can be called upon by queer critique, there is no doubt that childhood is anarchic in this way. Childhood is not to be queered in the way queer is queered.

[7] There are more, of course. This is a further difficulty with Coming Out: rather than mastery, a full reading, my analysis must introduce its own repressions. Or, rather, subsequent readings of my work might return to it what it has repressed.

[8] Depending, of course, on which way the door is slammed, although, in support of my reading here, the lyrics are concerned with not letting 'them in'.

[9] And, no doubt, the inside of the Ice Palace also . . .

[10] It is testament to the subtlty of Myren-Svelstadt's analysis that I instantly need to offer a qualification, although there is no problematisation of 'ice fractals' as 'psychological metaphor', their introduction leads to what I take to be a questioning of the psychological, in so far as what is of the self is at one stage othered: 'However, the conclusion to the song is also ambiguous. Elsa repeats that the cold does not bother her—it is something external to her, something she can embrace and tolerate, as opposed to the disapproving attitudes of others. This makes her different from Andersen's Snow Queen, who *is* cold, in essence (15).

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