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Indifference and queer television studies: distinguishing norms of existence and coexistence

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ABSTRACT
This paper deploys a case study of the first transgender lead character in Flemish television fiction—Kaat Bomans in the soap opera Thuis [Home] (één, 1995–)—to engage an underexplored distinction between the televisual dissemination of identity norms that regulate the embodied difference of sexual and gender minorities and ethical norms that prescribe moral modes of interacting with social difference. Conceived of as a representation normative to transgender existence, Kaat reifies identity norms that dictate how transpeople may legitimately embody difference. These reduce the diversity of transgender subjectivities into a singular and stable identity premised on binary gender conformity. Approach as a narrative that produces normative frames for cisgender people too, however, the case study shows that Kaat’s storyline propagates ethical norms on moral modes of coexistence and the negotiation of difference. Prescribing ethical indifference as a moral framework to negotiate difference in interpersonal interactions, Thuis invites viewers to acknowledge others’ difference without centralizing it as the central modality to social interaction. Supplementing identity-based television critique with reflection on ethical frameworks, the essay argues in conclusion, allows scholarship to not only critique what television is doing wrong, but to formulate what television should be doing to make things better.

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Introduction
Analyzing the first trans woman lead role in Flemish television fiction—Kaat in Thuis (één, 1995—present)—this essay explores how queer television scholarship engages with normativity. Drawing on critiques of the relation between portrayals of and embodied trans existence (e.g. Barker-Plummer, 2013; Lovelock, 2017; Vipond, 2015), it shows how Kaat and adjacent discourses reiterate reductive identity norms. Confining legitimate trans subjectivity to a single, intelligible identity, the character perpetuates ontological scripts premised on notions of “authentic femininity” (Lovelock, 2017)—obfuscating other trans experiences and reiterating gender binarism (Stryker, Currah, & Moore, 2008). Aligning with established frames of critique in queer scholarship (e.g. Avila-Saavedra, 2009; Doran, 2013; Kies, 2016), the essay first deconstructs this particular representation—unpacking its nefarious function in the perpetuation of sexual and gendered
normativity. Acknowledging that such interventions are themselves implicitly normative (see Hesmondhalgh & Toynbee, 2008; Wiegman & Wilson, 2015), however, it subsequently grapples with queer television scholarship’s own prescriptive orientations.

Cognizant of the foregoing analysis’ implicit perpetuation of norms, the essay then explores its normative dimension and the consequences of its analytical focus on identity norms. Pointing out that approaching Kaat exclusively as a disseminator of identity norms vis-à-vis trans people is a negative normative proposition—primarily explicating its orientation in the rejection of certain portrayals—the essay turns to work on queer ethics (e.g. Dave, 2016; Menon, 2015; Serano, 2013) as a resource to supplement critiquing identity norms with affirmative interventions in queer television scholarship. Revisiting Kaat with attention for the character’s dissemination of norms on co-existing with trans people points to the prescription of “consensual gendering” (Serano, 2013, pp. 243–251) and assuming “indifference” towards gender difference (Dave, 2016; Menon, 2015) as desirable frames for social interaction. Focusing on ethical norms outlining scripts to interact with difference—as opposed to identity norms perpetuating scripts to legitimately embody difference—the essay argues, offers queer television scholarship opportunities to assume affirmative normative stances. Explicating what television should be doing alongside critiquing what television is doing, this demonstrates, is a crucial supplement to queer television scholarship’s current orientations.

**Difference, regulating existence and identity norms**

Like other fields associated with cultural studies and concerned with themes of identity and difference, queer television studies focus on the production and regulation of identities through and by popular media (Avila-Saavedra, 2009; Chambers, 2009; Joyrich, 2014). It is critical of the power televisual representations exert over which forms of existence are considered normal, and, conversely, which are not. Rooted in queer theory (e.g. Jagose, 1996; Warner, 2000), concepts like heteronormativity (e.g. Avila-Saavedra, 2009; Battles & Hilton-Morrow, 2002; Dow, 2001) or homonormativity (e.g. Doran, 2013; Kies, 2016; Ng, 2013; Papacharissi & Fernback, 2008) offer analytical lenses to deconstruct television portrayals in their relation to embodied subjectivities (see Dhaenens, 2014). On the other hand, theoretical ideas on queer politics (e.g. Butler, 1999; Seidman, 1995) inform scholarly reflection on how popular television characters and narratives articulate queer resistances to normative modes of being and deconstruct hetero- or homonormativity (e.g. Chambers, 2007; Davis & Needham, 2008; Dhaenens, 2014). Less engaged with how television representations construct assimilation and conformity as legitimate forms of LGBT+ [Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Non-Binary]² existence, this strand of research shows how television portrayals can enact queer cultural politics, and validate non-normative ways of embodying sexuality and gender.

Accordingly, the interest queer television studies take in television representations is informed by popular culture’s regulative or emancipatory power on individuals external to the televisual image (see Fejes & Petrich, 1993). As Guillermo Avila-Saavedra (2009) notes, LGBT+ characters and storylines construct commonsensical knowledge on embodiments of gender and sexuality (7), sustaining uneven social hierarchies based on sexual and gender difference. The overrepresentation of affluent white gay men in LGBT+ representation on television, for instance, simultaneously reflects and reproduces racial and
class inequalities in the LGBT+ community (Avila-Saavedra, 2009; Ng, 2013). The sustained reiteration of well-off, gender-conforming male gay characters on popular television renders them a synecdoche for a highly diverse community. Wendy Peters (2011) illustrates that this privileges the few over the many: “the ‘acceptable’ and ‘valuable’ queer tends to be, or is imagined, White, middle- to upper-class, gay or lesbian” (p. 208). Such portrayals sustain existing power relations in society, and disseminate norms on “natural” modes of being non-heterosexual and non-cisgendered. In the case of transgender subjectivities, for instance, prominent trans portrayals and narratives affirm rather than resist gender binarism (see Stryker, 2004; Stryker et al., 2008). They ascribe essential notions of man- or womanhood to trans people and negate the diversity in trans experiences (see Barker-Plummer, 2013; Lovelock, 2017; Vipond, 2015). Some television portrayals nevertheless undermine this self-evidence. Samuel Chambers’ (2009) reading of HBO’s Six Feet Under (2001–2005) shows how certain characters legitimate subjectivities incongruent with dominant logics regarding gender and sexuality, falling out of established categories altogether (pp. 64–65). Ideas on queer resistance (see Dhaenens, 2014) illustrate pop-cultural potential to validate subjectivities beyond norms, deconstructing the self-evidence of established identity categories.

Identity norms are premised on difference (see Dhamoon, 2010, p. xi; Hall, 1997), and structure how difference can be legitimately embodied in society. Consider transnormative representations, and their regulation of non-cisgendered subjectivities. Work by Evan Vipond (2015) or Michael Lovelock (2017) convincingly illustrates that differences embodied by trans people are socio-culturally validated insofar as they conform to established gender scripts and expectations. By consistently framing people on the male-to-female/feminine spectrum (Serano, 2013, p. 19) as searching for “authentic femininity” Lovelock (2017) shows, popular media construct hyperfemininity as a norm to legitimately claim a trans woman identity (pp. 676–677). Logically, legitimizing one particular subjectivity comes at the cost of the erasure of others. Identity norms are consequently a discursive containment and regulation of difference. Therefore, whether the focus of queer television scholarship is on the regulation or emancipation of certain subjectivities through representation, it discusses identity norms. Some unpack how certain ways of representing LGBT+ people are forms of containment—legitimating the embodiment of sexual and/or gender difference exclusively in the framework of certain privileged identities (e.g. Battles & Hilton-Morrow, 2002; Ng, 2013; Peters, 2011). Others illustrate how particular portrayals subvert identity norms—exposing their constructed nature and legitimizing embodiments outside of hetero- and/or homonormative conceptions of sexuality and gender (e.g. Chambers, 2007; Dhaenens, 2014; Joyrich, 2014).

**Just like a woman: identity norms in Thuis**

The first recurring trans character in Thuis, Kaat Bomans, is a productive case to explore identity norms governing the embodiment of gender difference. As a lead character in Flanders’ most popular daily soap opera, Kaat represents the most prominent and widely disseminated trans narrative in the Dutch-speaking northern part of Belgium. Approximately 1.5 million daily viewers (CIM, 2016) have become acquainted with Kaat since her entry into the series in February 2016, a fair share of whom have likely had their first introduction to something beyond a cisgender identity. When Kaat’s
introduction was announced in June 2015—not coincidentally a year of unprecedented attention for trans subjectivities (Owen, 2016)—the production’s decision was met with predictable popular acclaim. As a community soap opera (see Geraghty, 2005), Thuis has always fostered attention for contemporaneous social issues (see Vanlee, Dhaenens, & Van Bauwel, 2018b; Dhoest, 2009). Kaat emerged in an established tradition of diversity-as-banal (see Vanlee et al., 2018b) in public service broadcaster VRT’s decades-old soap opera, and a trans character was a natural addition.

But Kaat was cause for critical concern too, notwithstanding the soaps’ praiseworthy inclusion of a lead trans woman character—not only because the character would be a trans woman, the least “invisible” trans identity in Flanders (see Vanlee, Dhaenens, & Van Bauwel, 2018a) and contribute to the sustained cultural erasure of other trans experiences. Critiques could also be mounted against the casting of a cis actress—a controversial practice effacing trans visibility and opportunity in the (U.S.) popular entertainment sector (Copier & Steinbock, 2018; Ford, 2016). Naturally, casting trans people for trans roles would be preferable, but it should also be noted that production worked closely with the Flemish advocacy group Transgender Infopunt (see Leemans, 2016) to get feedback on the storyline and to get (eligible) trans actors to apply for the casting call (see Droeven, 2016, p. 4). Arguably, the casting was a pragmatic choice in a rather small television industry, the size of which might inhibit trans people from taking a highly visible, full-time job in Flanders’ most popular soap opera. Kaat was not exactly a new character, however, and her previous embodiment in the soap was certainly cause for concern. Before her transition, she was known as Franky Bomans, who had been present in the series since his birth in the 1996–1997 season. Crucially, Franky had outed himself as a gay man in the 2010–2011 season. By having Franky—of all people—undertake a gender transition, Thuis risked scrambling sexual desire and gender identification, articulating a natural link between desire for men and a feminine gender identity. Franky’s diegetic announcement itself further troubled his future embodiment as a woman. Years earlier, Franky married Tibo Timmermans, and in 2013 (due to the actors taking a sabbatical), the couple moved off-screen to California. Franky’s reemergence converged with his parents’ anniversary, an occasion conspicuously attended alone. After stating that they separated some six months ago, Franky came out—again:

I have to tell you something, something that has been going on for a long time. I’ve realized that I’ve never felt comfortable in my body. Because I have never felt like a man, because I feel more like a woman. I started hormonal treatment some time ago, and I will be a woman in a couple of months.4 (Thuis Se20Ep213, 24/06/2015)

Here, Thuis immediately deals heavily in “wrong body” tropes. Evan Vipond (2015) and Michael Lovelock (2017) argue such tropes support a reductionist discourse on trans subjectivities that obfuscates the diversity of trans experiences and privileges “legible” transsexuality over non-binary identities. In his phrasing, Franky explicitly employs the sex-dichotomy of “man” and “woman” to describe the affects underlying his decision. This emphasizes biological determination (“male” and “female”) and obscures gender’s performative nature (Butler, 1993). Sex takes preference over gender, naturalizing the belief that someone should be either of both. The promise to be Kaat “in a couple of months” is centralized, obfuscating spaces “between genders” and highlighting the resulting identity as female. The cosmetic and hormonal transition took place in the U.S., again undermining...
a dynamic conceptualization of trans experiences in favor of a binary frame based on man and woman. Surgical gender reassignment surgery, however, was narratively saved as a proverbial cherry on the cake to take place on screen in Belgium. This allowed viewers to witness Kaat’s eagerness to undergo the procedure and partake in her exhilaration upon awakening as a woman. Downplaying the legitimacy of intermediary spaces between binary gender identifications, it accentuated Kaat’s compliance with Flemish expectations of trans people: a “complete” physical and performative transition from one binary constructed gender to its counterpart.

This shows in Flemish written press coverage on trans identities since the announcement of the storyline.\textsuperscript{5} Not only does coverage focus predominantly on trans women, but disseminates rigid, normative outlooks on legitimate transgender subjectivity too. Articles featuring trans women explicitly emphasize surgical transitions to render trans identities intelligible in Flanders. These transnormative discourses centralize “authentic feminine performance” to highlight a supposed “intuited feminine ontology” (Barker-Plummer, 2013; Lovelock, 2017). Feminine bodily work of trans women is a core interest, which is testified to by frequent articles related to physical beauty. They report on trans women competing in beauty pageants, partaking in modeling shows or being featured in fashion magazines. These accentuations of physical appearance’s importance assign to transwomen a deep-rooted dysphoria—which can of course be rectified through corporeal alterations (Barker-Plummer, 2013). More importantly, they discursively stabilize trans identities. The fundamental subversions trans identities symbolize to the binary gender order are disconcerted (see Stryker, 1994, 2004; Stryker et al., 2008) in favor of norms that “contain” gender difference. Both Kaat and coverage on trans issues in Flemish newspapers forward hyperfemininity as the legitimate identity framework for trans people, obfuscating trans men and non-binary identifications. The introduction of a lengthy article on trans children and young adults in Het Laatste Nieuws (“The Latest News”), a popular Flemish newspaper, is a telling example:

Everything in her little bedroom is turquoise and pink. The dress she is wearing is adorned with flowers. And if you ask Sanne Wijnants from Geel [a town in Flanders] what she loves most, she says: “High heels, make-up, nail polish, dresses and Sponge Bob.” This is not a pose. […] This is how she feels, and how she looks. (“Zeker weten: ik wordt nooit terug jongen” [I will definitely never become a boy again], 2015)\textsuperscript{6}

Embodied and performed gender align, discursively solidifying a stable trans identity. Sanne’s hyperfeminine gender performance becomes a commonsensical expression of her desire for female corporeality. Similar dynamics linger in the character changes after Kaat’s transition. Before transitioning, Franky worked in plumbing and looked the part—with unkempt looks and a hint of machismo. Kaat turned nonchalance into elegance, giving up on fixing broken toilets to start a waffle business. Subjecting her to the gaze of male characters (Mulvey, 1975) cinematographically underscored her precipitous hyperfemininity—visualizing Kaat in traditional scripts of womanhood. Scripts of hyperfemininity pertain to emotions too. Where Franky had been taciturn and secretive about his feelings, Kaat quickly established herself as an emotional open book and someone to confide in. Again, this emphasizes a strict alignment between embodied gender and performed gender, rendering Kaat’s trans subjectivity intelligible by articulating notions of traditional femininity to signify a trans woman identity.
These representations reflect normative identity discourses offering intelligibility and legitimacy to one particular mode of subjectivity at the cost of others. They reduce and homogenize the complexities and incongruences of trans experiences to those of one particular subjectivity to the point that “transgender” becomes a synecdoche for “hyperfeminine post-operative transsexual woman.” Problematically, this representational system situates legitimate subjectivity with ontology rather than performance (Keegan, 2013), delegitimizing those that cannot or do not wish to be. Its reproduction of identity norms is exemplified by the value it ascribes to identity as a stable category serving as a central organizing social principle. In this system, there is something like “the trans woman” “the bisexual” or “the heterosexual”, and membership in these categories is defined by a particular ontology. It contains the gender difference exemplified by trans people and regulates acceptable modes of transgressing the norm. Naturally, this is fundamentally exclusionary, as the homogeneity of the representational system does not only deny others modalities to explore, understand and shape the self (Fejes & Petrich, 1993), but also because it reifies a normative system drawing on arbitrary criteria: being or not being.

**Critiquing identity norms, affirming ethical norms**

Kaat and the broader discursive context disseminate identity norms impelling trans people to abide by binary gender configurations. Identity norms invite non-cisgendered people to mediate difference by conforming to dominant gender norms and assimilate to traditional constructions of “men” or “women” (Butler, 2004). The identity norms articulated by the Kaat storyline and coverage in Flemish media regulate the existence of trans people by emphasizing the necessity of one intelligible identity. Like many examples of queer television scholarship (e.g. Avila-Saavedra, 2009; Doran, 2013; Kies, 2016), this analysis—emphasizing identity norms and formation—considers two components. On the one hand, it takes into account the portrayal of a particular subjectivity commonly understood as different, and the implications hereof on embodied subjectivities external to representation on the other. Applied to Kaat’s case, it considers the discontinuity between media reflections of trans people, their reduction of the diversity of trans subjectivities and the overarching logic behind this. In political terms, it opposes a normative system coercing people that do not experience linear identification with their biological sex to adopt one particular gender script.

It is crucial to do so, and the following attempts at reflecting on what happens when (queer) scholarship approaches television representations as expressions of (oppressive) identity norms does not detract from its value. Rather, it is meant to supplement it with other perspectives on the relation between representation, marginalized identities and norms or normativity. Particularly, it takes seriously often underacknowledged contradictions cultural critiques display in relation to norms and normativity (e.g. Seidman, 1995, p. 135; Vanlee et al., 2018b; Wiegman & Wilson, 2015). By unpacking how normative representations of a certain perceived difference regulate how comparable subjectivities can legitimately embody difference, such analyses are themselves normative—if justified—claims. Critiquing the nefariousness of certain characters or narratives is a normative intervention, albeit a negative one. Its draws from the rejection of certain portrayals and representational strategies rather than from the proposal of desirable ways to portray
socio-cultural difference. This neglect in explicating the standards to which evaluation holds—normative ideals—moreover amounts to crypto-normative judgment (see Abbott, 2018; Worsnip, 2017). To scholarship determined to effect tangible societal change, crypto-normativity impedes practical implementations of theory to practice (see Hesmondhalgh & Toynbee, 2008). The question then is how queer (television) scholarship can be explicitly normative.

Returning to the foregoing analysis of Kaat, it is admittedly hard to crystallize how *Thuis*—and by expansion, popular Flemish media—*should* represent trans people, other than “not like that.” Forwarding another configuration of trans embodiment and experience seems quite insufficient, and would—ironically—construct the normative substance of the argument on identity norms and simply replace one unjust system for another (Serano, 2013, p. 249). The analyses given earlier, however, only consider how Kaat invites trans people to negotiate their divergence from the cisgender norm and has less to offer concerning how the character invites cisgendered people to negotiate the difference she embodies. It is more than reasonable to assume that she does, though, and it is therefore crucial to understand how television representations not only regulate existence, but formulate normative perspectives on coexistence too. Because the relation between representation and socio-cultural difference is reductive by definition (Hall, 1997), a normative affirmation of how television representations perpetuate norms of coexistence could be a beneficial addition to the toolbox of queer television scholarship. In short, the proposition here is that the fields’ focus on critiquing the pernicious role of identity norms should be supplemented with a productive attention for the ethical norms that television representations can and should disseminate.

Conceiving of television as a moral space is not novel, of course. Its intermediary status between public and private (see Geraghty, 2005) makes it a fruitful site to reflect on ethical norms (e.g. Fiske, 2002). Dhaenens, Van Bauwel, and Biltereyst (2008), for instance, suggest that studying representations of sexual and gender diversity contributes to the formulation of queer ethics (p. 340). Scholars like Tim Dant (2012), Tonny Krijnen and Meijer (2005) and others (e.g. Barker, 1998; Kekes, 1991) conceive of television as a space wherein social behavior is negotiated and evaluated. For these authors, television contributes to a moral imaginary, pertaining as much to social interactions as it does to identities—offering possibilities for reflection on ethical sociability. Though the medium’s reliance on ontological models of subjectivity is—owing to the reductive nature of representation—simply indisputable, it not only reiterates modes of individual existence, but of co-existence too. Especially in a time of unprecedented LGBT+ televisibility, popular television may prove a fruitful site to articulate queer ethics normatively. Insofar as ethics allude to general, abstract applicability, however, it seems at odds with queer theory’s radical rejection of stability and universality. It is indeed not at all inconceivable that these tensions between the commitment to destabilize normative constructions of gender and sexuality (Joyrich, 2014) and the implicit normativity hereof sustain the tendency to articulate queer ethics in largely crypto-normative terms.

Some have nevertheless explicitly grappled with affirmative notions of queer ethics. Shifting attention from how identity norms coercively regulate the existence of some subjectivities to reflection on how broadly shared ethical norms reflect queer values, their work supports television analyses intent on articulating how the medium should engage with difference. In *Excluded*, Julia Serano (2013) argues for “a set of gender ethics that
are flexible, contextual and applicable to all situations” (p. 240). Rather than advocating an exclusive focus on challenging or destabilizing gender systems—the terrain of identity norms, Serano emphasizes the need to challenge “people when they nonconsensually project their ideology and expectations about gender and sexuality onto all other people” (p. 243). Similarly, Madhavi Menon (2015) turns to the concept of indifference to articulate queer ethics. Acknowledging queer studies’ antagonistic relation to identity, this perspective emphasizes focusing on coexistence “premised on an indifference” (Menon, 2015, p. 154). Here, indifference is not synonymous with disinterestedness and apathy, or conversely, to utopian motifs of “colorblindness”. Rather, it forwards a respectful acknowledgement of difference—be it gendered, sexual or racialized in nature—without allowing it to be the structural foundation of sociability. Crucially, both Serano (2013) and Menon (2015) offer ways to think about queer ethics—and, by extension, queer cultural politics—that focus on how difference is acted upon rather than legitimately or illegitimately enacted. In doing so, their works act as a lens for the second analysis given later in this article—focusing on how Thuis forwards scripts of coexistence that decenter gender difference without obfuscating it altogether.

**Doing, not being: prescribing indifference**

Approached with explicit attention for how her interactions with other characters articulate ethical modes of dealing with (gender) difference, Kaat and her story display dynamics in line with Serano’s (2013) and Menon’s (2015) views discussed earlier. Identity, insofar as it is contrastively defined by difference, is neither celebrated in an indulging performance of majority tolerance nor vilified to establish moral superiority of the self over the other (see Dave, 2016). Stripped of its privileged relation to legitimate modes of existence, identity is glossed over as a given. Instead, Thuis prescribes indifference as a banal normative framework and emphasizes commonality (Lester, 2015, p. 154). Kaat is not an oddity because of her trans subjectivity, nor is she a hero by virtue of transitioning. Ethical subjectivity, Thuis posits, does not take a certain ontology as a prerequisite, but the ability to transcend self-definition in relation to a different other (Dave, 2016). This is inconspicuously enabled by the basic structure of the soap opera. Discussing Kaat’s relation to identity norms and the reduction of non-cisgendered embodiments to a stable identity necessarily ascribes considerable weight to momentary representational components. But the seriality and continuous succession of dramatic events in soap operas (Bignell, 2012, pp. 128–129; Dant, 2012, p. 93; Geraghty, 2010) effectively downplay the lasting significance of formative moments of identity formation in favor of a more fleeting engagement with characters’ individual ontologies. Initially, Kaat might have been “the transgender character”, but soon became “a character who happens to be transgender.” This positions Kaat in an established tradition in Flemish LGBT+ televisibility. Because domestic series focusing specifically on the LGBT+ community have never been produced in Flanders (see Vanlee et al., 2018a, 2018b), sexual or gender difference has never taken the center stage. Rather, non-heterosexual and—more recently—non-cisgender characters are inconspicuously introduced in stories that revolve around less overtly identitarian arcs.

This does not mean that Kaat’s new embodiment as a woman remained unacknowledged by her peers. Naturally, other characters reacted with initial surprise—acknowledging her difference—but her new gender embodiment was quickly glossed over by most.
Her first conversation upon returning, with her friend Paulien, only passingly discusses Kaat’s transition, instead focusing on their mutual affection and their recently deceased friend Jens:

Paulien: You’re Franky? I mean, Kaat! I’m sorry. I’m staring at you, but … You’re totally different, but I recognize you too.

Kaat: Yes, it will be difficult for some to see me as a woman. But that’s their problem.

Paulien: Exactly. But I’m happy you’re here! We’ve all missed you.

Kaat: I’ve missed you too. And I’m so sorry that I missed it … You know, Jens’ funeral. I think about him every day … And how are things here besides that? Can you manage it [Paulien runs the bar Franky used to own]?

Paulien: Well, some days are great, other are … I think about him [Jens] every day too … It’s such a shame how it all played out …

Kaat: Yeah … But I have to go, actually … Thanks for the chat, Paulien, I’ll see you again soon.

Paulien: Of course … You’re always welcome here.

(Thuis Se21Ep143, 25/03/2016)

Such conversations emphasize dynamic modes of feeling and doing over stable modes of being as the basis for social interaction (Serano, 2013, p. 240). Kaat’s story in Thuis contributes to a normative framework that does not deny the different gender embodiments between cis and trans characters, but treats it as inconsequential. It dictates ethical modes of address and interaction that downplay the significance of difference as structure.

Acceptable and unacceptable scripts of interacting with someone who transitioned had a prominent place in Thuis. They positively validated demeanors that decentered difference and problematized those doing the opposite. Kaat’s cousin Lowie, for instance, acted surprised when they were reunited, but gleefully accepted her suggestion to think of her as the female cousin he never had, continuing the conversation as such. Gossipy and overly curious character Nancy’s first interaction with Kaat, on the contrary, focused on inappropriate and invasive questions, which were nevertheless met with patience by the latter. Familiarity with Nancy’s established role as good-natured but a less than sensitive tattler invites viewers to consider the immaturity of centralizing someone’s difference, notwithstanding possibly good intentions. This is further underscored by the slightly comic undertone and accompanying music in Nancy’s scenes with Kaat. These do not exactly vilify her behavior, but frame Nancy’s acts of “nonconsensual gendering” (Serano, 2013, p. 251) as unseemly. Kaat’s transition is sometimes discussed with and by others, of course. But apart from Nancy’s, these conversations are not initiated by cis-gendered characters interrogating her on intimate matters. Rather, they rise from Kaat’s own puns and comic references to her transition, setting the stage for dialogue. This discursively situates the agency to initiate these conversations with trans people. It delegitimizes the seemingly natural prerogative of a majority to legitimation of a minority, prescribing an ethical sense of indifference to sexual or gendered otherness as a default normative principle for the cisgendered majority.

Thuis mostly deals in positive validations of indifference to prescribe a decentering of difference in social interactions. But with specific characters, the soap opera contrastively points to the detrimental nature of emphasizing difference as a frame for interpersonal
relationships. Kaat’s father Frank and her (ex-) lover Toon are crucial in this construction of ethical demeanor towards non-cisgender identities. Kaat’s father Frank had not reacted well to his son’s homosexuality before, and was far from thrilled when informed about his impending gender transition:

You’re joking, right? Cut it out with your nonsense! First you’re gay, and now this. Don’t even think about going through with it, or you’re not my son anymore! (Thuis Se20Ep213, 24/06/2015)

Ignorant of the irony in his closing sentence, Frank spends the following season unable to look past the difference in Kaat, refusing to acknowledge her existence. Logically, interactions between them are scarce, and Kaat is only tacitly present in Frank’s narrative. His storyline emphasizes his self-destructive inability to conceive of Kaat as just a person rather than an “other.” Frank’s failure to be indifferent leads him to alienate himself from friends and family, culminating in a temporary separation from his wife Simone. This does not situate the responsibility for these difficulties with Kaat; both his peers and Frank himself highlight his inability to simply accept Kaat as the core of the problems. Arguing with Simone, Frank exclaims:

I’d love to embrace my child again, but I can’t. I want nothing else, but I simply can’t … I freeze … I can’t look past it, here, in my head! [Frank is crying]. (Thuis Se21Ep160, 08/04/2016)

Explicitly situating culpability with Frank instead of Kaat, this quote highlights adverse results of framing otherness as definitional to one’s subjectivity. The narrative unfolding of Kaat’s relationship with Toon points even more expressively at the ethical undesirability of centralizing gender difference as the primary structural frame for trans–cis interactions. Hinting initially at trans deception (see Serano, 2007, p. 38), Toon entered into a relationship with Kaat after learning of her transition. He had already pursued her, but was shocked and disgusted by her being a trans woman. His reaction traded heavily in stereotypes of illegitimate passing and deception, but was harshly criticized by his friends. Crucially, rebuttals by his friend Adil or his boss Sam did not center on tolerance or acceptance, but rather explicated that Toon—as a cis male—had no stakes in Kaat’s gender whatsoever. Whereas Toon was adamant in characterizing Kaat as deceptive and unnatural, others disavowed his unfounded stance, urging him to be indifferent to Kaat’s difference. Later, overcoming his aversion, Toon grew closer to her. During their short-lived romantic relationship, Toon and Kaat slept together several times. It merits remarking that the scenes themselves were quite indiscernible from cisgender sex scenes, and emphasized physical desire between two characters, rather than a voyeuristic exposé on post-operative sexuality.

Ultimately, Toon’s desire for Kaat proved no match for his lingering inhibitions. Kaat, recognizing that some men would always find it difficult to accept her as a woman in all dimensions, simply moved on. Toon, by contrast, became a hyperbole of manliness—unsuccessfully attempting to regain the masculinity he supposedly lost by sleeping with a trans woman. Here, Thuis grappled with the nefariousness of centralizing others’ difference. Initially, Toon coped by frantically working out and drinking heavily—which constructed his inability to simply accept his desire for a trans woman as self-destructive but not necessarily as unethical. His increasingly boorish behavior towards women he seduced
into one-night-stands did signal his divergence from socially sanctioned behavior, however, culminating in a failed attempt to sexually assault a former love interest. This established overt links between nonconsensual projections of “transness” on trans women (Serano, 2013) and transgressing ethical and legal boundaries. Toon leaving the series completely shortly afterwards further characterized his actions as unwarranted to the extent of not meriting further ethical consideration (Krijnen & Meijer, 2005). Alongside the positive validations of fostering a sense of indifference towards gender difference discussed earlier, then, the Toon storyline illustrates how Thuis furnished Kaat’s narrative with articulations displaying the pernicious consequences of centralizing others’ difference in interpersonal interactions.

Conclusion

This essay has focused specifically on queer television scholarship. Attempting to make sense not only of the field’s relation to socio-cultural expressions of normativity, but of the normativity of engaging in scholarly work too, it has nevertheless tried to offer something more broadly applicable. The proposed distinction between identity norms and ethical norms—or regulatory frameworks of existence and coexistence—in pop-cultural reflections of socio-cultural difference expands current uses of textual analysis and cultural critique. As Alan McKee (2003) notes, “doing textual analysis means making an educated guess at some of the most likely interpretations that might be made of a text” (p. 70). Had this essay focused exclusively on the norms Kaat perpetuates vis-à-vis the trans community, its “educated guess” would have glossed over several likely interpretations. Her flaws notwithstanding, postulating that the character and her narrative only does acceptance of gender difference a disservice would be too simplistic. Despite its perpetuation of gender binarism and essentializations of transness (Barker-Plummer, 2013; Lovelock, 2017; Vipond, 2015), Thuis also offers ethical guidance in a time wherein identity and difference increasingly complicate sociability (see Sardar, 2010). It invites viewers—whether gay, straight, cis or trans—to recognize the contingent difference in others, yet urges them to treat it as inconsequential to social interaction. Aside from a critical vigilance for the detrimental role of identity norms, affirmative validations of laudable ethical norms perpetuated by popular culture is a valuable addition to the toolbox of critical scholarship.

The conviction that critical cultural scholarship is in need of modalities to assume an affirmative, propositional stance towards popular culture is a central concern here. Challenging the detrimental role of popular portrayals based on identity norms—that is, by deconstructing the discontinuity between representation and embodied experience—establishes what should be off the table, but proposes few alternatives. Pointing only to Kaat’s deficits renders her into a negative example yet refuses to explicate how trans people should be represented by television makers. Such interventions are crypto-normative (Abbott, 2018; Hesmondhalgh & Toynbee, 2008), ready to critique the normativity of certain phenomena but unwilling to explicate their own normative orientations (Felski, 2015). Identity, of course, is a zero-sum game and will—like representation—always be a reductive phenomenon (see Dhamoon, 2010, p. xi; Hall, 1997). Proposing what television ought to do in a frame based on identity norms makes little sense of course, and would merely replace one iniquitous representational system with another. Hinting at the ethical norms television could and should reiterate, however, is a valuable and
necessary step to take. What is still too often lacking is scholarship that engages with the ways in which popular culture disseminates ethical norms that contribute to solidarity and respectful coexistence between subjectivities, regardless of whether they are commonly understood as different or not.

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**Notes on contributor**

Dr. Florian Hendrik Jakob Vanlee holds a BA in Stage and Media Arts from Ghent University and a MA in Film Studies and Visual Culture from Antwerp University. Since March 2015, he worked on a FWO-funded PhD project titled ‘Sexual Diversity on the Small Screen: a qualitative research into the representation of and public debate about LGBTs in Flemish television fiction series’, supervised by professor Sofie Van Bauwel and professor Frederik Dhaenens. Using a multi-methodological approach, his research analyzed the ways in which sexual and gender diversity are constructed in Flemish television fiction, how LGBT+ characters and narratives are negotiated by television professionals and how queer television theory relates to smaller national contexts. After obtaining his doctoral title, he started working as a postdoctoral researcher for ECOOM Brussels, with a focus on artistic research and its evaluation in the Flemish higher education context.

**Notes**

1. Aligning with Julia Serano’s (2013, pp. 19–20) discussion of suitable terminologies when writing about trans identities, this essay employs the term “trans woman” to refer to Kaat’s gender identity—by virtue of the fact that she socially and physically transitions on the male-to-female spectrum. Because Flemish discourses on non-cisgendered subjectivities forward surgical transition and successful “passing”, however, the essay refers to “transsexual” at times. In those instances, its use serves to accentuate the medicalization, binarism and essentialism of mainstream Flemish constructions of trans subjectivities.

2. This essay refers to “LGBT+” rather than other acronyms, because it reflects the situation in Flemish television fiction most aptly (see Vanlee et al., 2018a): domestic television in Flanders seems to favor established identity categories over less binary or fluid conceptions of gender and sexuality.


4. This quote was translated verbatim from the original lines in Dutch.

5. With a keywords-based search, we collected all newspaper articles on trans themes from June 25 2015 to June 26 2016 in the four major Flemish newspapers (De Morgen, De Standaard, Het Laatste Nieuws, and Het Nieuwsblad) (N = 127). This temporal frame corresponds to the first announcement of Kaat’s introduction to Thuis to the finale of the first season with Kaat present. Analysis showed that 89 (70.08%) of the 127 articles related to trans issues in the four largest Flemish newspapers, whether related to Thuis or not, explicitly mention male-to-female trans identities, whereas female-to-male (1.57%) and non-binary (1.57%) identifications account for two articles respectively. The 34 (26.77%) remaining articles broadly mention the term “transgender” in general coverage on diversity or in relation to policy. Notably, 79 articles (62.60%)—all related to trans women—explicitly mention surgical transitions in their discussion of trans issues.

6. This quote was translated verbatim from the original text in Dutch.
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