

Acting Out

Straight Performers Permissibly Portraying Queer Characters

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Abstract

When is it morally permissible for performers to portray characters from marginalized groups of which they are not a member? Although this question is philosophically underexplored, it has been commanding increasing attention in the public sphere, especially with respect to straight performers portraying queer characters. While the demand for increasing self-representation from marginalized communities is laudable, we argue that demanding performers to disclose their social identity is, in general, morally counterproductive. We make our case by focusing on recent instances where fans demanded that a performer disclose their sexual orientation, putting vulnerable performers in a harmful trilemma. In short, it will force many to either out themselves against their will, subject themselves to intense public backlash by taking the role without outing themselves, or forgo taking a role they want and at which they would excel. Instead, we propose that performers have a general (epistemic) obligation to learn about what their characters' corresponding real-world experiences would plausibly be like, representing what they learned in their performances. We will argue that meeting this obligation typically entails learning about the values, broadly construed, of the community in question. If we are right, there is not even a general obligation that performers only take roles that correspond to their own social identity.

Just as importantly, there is a strong moral reason not to demand that performers disclose aspects of their social identity in order to take on a role.

Keywords

applied ethics – LGBTQ+ philosophy – group representation – cultural appropriation

Introduction

When is it morally permissible for performers to portray characters from marginalized groups of which they are not a member? Although this question is philosophically underexplored, it has been commanding increasing attention in the public sphere, especially with respect to straight performers portraying queer characters. In 2022, for instance, Kit Connor played Nick Nelson in *Heartstopper*, a queer coming of age story on *Netflix*. While Connor played a bisexual character, he was later cast in a straight romantic comedy. Indignant at the possibility that he was “taking” a bisexual role away from a bisexual performer, fans demanded to know if Connor was, in fact, bisexual or if he just played one on television. Although he initially refused to answer the question, fans badgered and pressured Connor until he responded on social media, “Back for a bit. I’m bi. Congrats on forcing an 18-year-old to out himself. I think some of you missed the point of the show. Bye” (Mack 2022). Connor’s angry response indicates the degree to which this demand for authenticity is morally charged. While it is aimed at the laudable goal of increasing self-representation from marginalized communities, we argue that demanding that performers disclose their social identity is, in general, morally counterproductive. We make our case by focusing on recent instances where fans demanded that a performer disclose their sexual orientation, putting vulnerable performers into a harmful trilemma. In short, it will force many to either out themselves against their will, subject themselves to intense public backlash by taking the role without outing themselves, or forgo taking a role that they want and at which they would excel. Instead, we propose that performers have a general (epistemic) obligation to learn about what their characters’ corresponding real-world experiences would plausibly be like, representing what they learned in their performances. If we are right, there is not even a general obligation that performers only take roles that correspond to their own social identity. Just as importantly, there is a strong moral reason not to demand that performers disclose aspects of their social identity in order to take on a role.

This article is structured as follows. We start with a brief history of some of the harmful moral effects that result when characters negatively portray characters with marginalized sexual orientations in popular culture. We pick sexual orientation as a case study for a variety of reasons, including that a number of contemporary – and historically recent – cases involve a performer disclosing their sexual orientation in response to playing a character with a marginalized sexual orientation. We use our historical analysis to distinguish between what we call *Character Authenticity* and *Performer Authenticity*. Character Authenticity obtains whenever a character accurately represents what their real-world counterpart's lived experience would plausibly be like. Performer Authenticity obtains whenever a performer's social identity matches their character's identity.¹ In Section Two, we show that the demand for Performer Authenticity actually subjects vulnerable performers to a harmful trilemma and, unless there is sufficiently weighty moral reason to subject marginalized performers to this harm, should be avoided. In Section Three, we consider and rebut the justifications given for demanding and enacting Performer Authenticity. Though the arguments for Performer Authenticity do not succeed, we suggest that they do collectively make a good case for the aforementioned general (epistemic) obligation. We conclude in Section Four by addressing three notable remaining objections: (1) why our argument does not generalize to *reductio* cases, (2) regardless of public demands, performers should voluntarily not take on such roles, and (3) we should instead focus on combating bigotry in general.

1 Historical Context and Character Authenticity

We begin by showing how the demand for Performer Authenticity emerges from earlier concerns about Character Authenticity in media and popular culture. This history also illustrates why Character Authenticity is so important. Before we delve into this history, however, a qualification is in order. To make our argument as strong as possible, we focus specifically on cases where “authenticity” is supposed to matter by the lights of its strongest proponents. This is primarily cases where characters are treated as group representatives, which are only a subset of roles for gay, lesbian, and bisexual characters. Authenticity is, at least implicitly, assumed not to matter in many cases where characters are *not* supposed to be, and will not be taken to be,

¹ Each type of authenticity is gradable and can be obtained in different degrees along different dimensions.

representative in any way. For instance, Geoff, the two-dimensional gay robot skeleton sidekick to Craig Ferguson appeared in sketches on Ferguson's late-night show. Geoff was devoid of gay stereotypes, and far too cartoony to raise any concern that the comedian who voiced him might be straight. To take a very different example that illustrates the same point, *Netflix* released *Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story* (2022). Dahmer is not just a character, of course, but was an actual necrophiliac cannibal serial killer. Although Dahmer was also gay, he is obviously not representative in any way of the gay community, and so the fact that he was portrayed by a straight actor seemingly raised no concerns. Furthermore, along these lines, there is likely some correlation between the presumption of Character Authenticity and genre. The cases we just gave notwithstanding, characters in serious dramas and biopics are more often taken to be representative than, say, characters in parodies or spoofs. The latter are typically two-dimensional silly characters that are not meant to, and will not, be viewed as representative of their real-world counterparts.

One reason to be so vigilant about good representation of marginalized groups in popular culture is that, historically speaking, these representations have often been morally awful. For a long time, characters with marginalized sexualities in movies (Russo 1981) and television (Tropiano 2002) were cast as serial killers, sexual predators, social outsiders, or tragic figures who would, by the end of the story, die by suicide rather than live with a "deviant" sexuality.² In his history of queer representation in horror films, Harry Benshoff (1997) traces how these cinematic images both instantiated and perpetuated political anxieties about same-sex attraction and activity. Whether they were monsters with a human form, alien body-snatchers from outer space, or double-life folk devils who lived next door, each of these unnerving representations suggested that people with a "deviant" sexual orientation posed a covert threat to individuals and society itself because there was no way to tell who was one of "them."

During heightened political tensions, this ignorance turned into paranoia and persecution. It is widely known that government officials, legislators, and law enforcement agencies hunted down subversive un-American political activities during the Red Scare. It is perhaps less well known that state actors

2 This happened with such frequency, in part, because of the Motion Picture Production Code (1930–68), which prohibited depicting "sex perversion." While the Code was not legally enforced, many studios chose to follow it, believing that self-regulation would avoid stricter restrictions from any government agency or public outcry (Vaughn 1990). Writers and directors often skirted the Code's prohibition on showing "sex perversion" by having characters enact stereotypes (e.g., men as preening sissies, women as aggressively butch) which the audiences could easily recognize.

were equally concerned about gays, lesbians, and bisexuals working for the state or in the armed services (Johnson 2006). Drawing on the prevailing psychiatric consensus at the time, law enforcement agents and politicians believed that because gays, lesbians, and bisexuals were pathologically incapable of conforming to (hetero)normal American values, they were equally susceptible to other un-American ideologies (e.g., communism). In turn, this psychological deviance supposedly indicated a weak moral character, making gays, lesbians, and bisexuals vulnerable to blackmail and, *eo ipso*, security risks. As per Benschoff's historical claim, cinematically portraying gays, lesbians, and bisexuals as hard-to-detect threats to the social order made the public more receptive, even grateful, for the political persecution that would keep them safe from the supposed threat they saw in the headlines and on the silver screen.³ While these cultural representations certainly did not single-handedly cause the prevailing attitudes, they did concentrate them into sinister archetypes that the general public could then recognize and utilize in political discourse.

Representing gays and lesbians as sexual predators, for example, perpetuated the "recruitment" stereotype. Since gay men and lesbians did not procreate, they supposedly had to "recruit" the next generation by sexually preying upon teenagers or children. Since this narrative was embedded in our political and cultural discourse, there was little to no resistance when news reports alleged that gay men infiltrated high schools or prowled around parks in order to molest children (Gerassi 2001). This belief was so entrenched in society that public school teachers regularly had to sign contracts with morality clauses, affirming that they did not have a "deviant" sexuality (Connell 2014). In the late 1970s, U.S. voters went to the polls in several cities to decide if teachers could be fired from their jobs for being gay or lesbian. In Miami, Minneapolis-St. Paul, Eugene, and Wichita, proponents of firing out teachers successfully invoked the predator trope under the banner of "Save Our Children" or "Protect Our Children." Proponents did not even need to fill in the "from what" part of the slogan, as it unambiguously implied that children needed to be protected and saved from out teachers (Fejes 2008). One reason why popular artistic representations of marginalized groups matter, then, is that they can inform important political and real-world decisions that affect marginalized groups.

These sinister archetypes sat alongside less menacing stock characters that audiences could easily recognize as gay or lesbian by their behavior, dress,

3 These political hazards deterred people from coming out, both in society and in the entertainment industry, because being openly queer often resulted in family rejection, imprisonment, or institutionalization. For these reasons, among others, employment opportunities for openly queer performers were practically non-existent.

or occupation. While these stereotypes (e.g., effeminate queens, hypersexual gays, overly butch lesbians) had been pervasive for a while, they began to soften in the 1970s, when gays and lesbians “became characters rather than types,” albeit not all at once (Villajero 2014, 22). Up until the late 1990s, gay and lesbian characters were largely confined to “Very Special Episodes” or were only really on the show to teach the protagonists (and by extension the audience) an important lesson about coming out, gay bashing, or other daily perils confined to that week and never mentioned thereafter (Tropiano 2002). After all, restricting gay and lesbian characters or coming-out plotlines to a single episode or a two-to-three-episode arc does not leave much room for character development, especially if the character with a marginalized sexual orientation is written in for the benefit of the straight main characters. In addition to these practical constraints, writers truncated Character Authenticity because they were catering to, and influenced by, general social norms that disapproved of marginalized sexualities. These constraints, of course, also limited the number of roles in the industry available to those who openly had marginalized sexualities.

Gays and lesbians were first cast as main characters on primetime television in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Characters such as Jack McPhee (*Dawson's Creek*, 1998–2003) or Tara Maclay and Willow Rosenberg (*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, 1997–2003) showcased coming out in high school and college, while Ellen Morgan (*Ellen*, 1994–1998), Will Truman and Jack McFarland (*Will & Grace*, 1998–2006; 2017–2020) drew attention to what life was like for out gays and lesbians as adults. Its shortcomings notwithstanding, *Will & Grace* had a particularly large impact in shifting the American public towards a greater acceptance of gay people.

Increasing the airtime for these characters gave writers and actors more conceptual space to demonstrate what life looked like for someone who was out of the closet. In a lot of ways, life looked pretty ordinary. Network executives were also happy with this “just like straight people” lesson because gay story arcs and characters were edgy enough to attract socially liberal, urban-minded professionals who wanted to be hip, sophisticated, and more enlightened about gay issues than their parents, but not so edgy that viewers would be thought of as gay or lesbian if they watched them (Becker 2006). In contrast, shows such as *Queer as Folk* (2000–2005) and *The L Word* (2004–2009) were aimed at gay and lesbian audiences, but were also confined to *Showtime*, a premium channel. Since both shows were marketed as gay programs and sequestered behind an upcharge, the content was grittier, sexier, and less afraid of alienating sponsors. But it also exerted less influence on mainstream (straight) America. Importantly, then, while these new three-dimensional gay

and lesbian characters improved Character Authenticity by changing how we conceptualized what it meant to be gay and lesbian, their existence required that they stayed in the confines of what would entice, but not alienate, viewers and sponsors.

These limitations indicate another reason why Character Authenticity matters: they unduly constrain how society thinks about the issue in question (in this case sexual orientation). Kate Wojtkiewicz (2023) has argued that these conceptual limitations result in a hermeneutic injustice⁴ because they often prevent people with a marginalized sexual orientation from accurately recognizing their own experiences. Even though the characters from the 1990s and early 2000s were more three-dimensional, they still converged on a largely white, middle-class, and able-bodied set of experiences (Avila-Saavedra 2009). The teenager coming out episodes were appropriately dramatic and uncertain, but the shows rarely covered living on the streets or turning to the illegal economy to make ends meet. The grown-ups worried about healthcare, but HIV/AIDS never showed up on their radar (Hart 2000). Gays and lesbians who do confront these issues in the real world end up both identifying and dis-identifying with these representations because those images are all that they have and, at the same time, not enough (Medina 2003). Moreover, most of these characters represented gays and lesbians at the expense of bisexuals. When bisexual characters were sometimes included, they were dismissed, by gay and lesbian characters, as “going through a phase” or would later “discover” that they were gay or lesbian all along. In addition, when bisexuality did show up as a topic or theme in a show, it was often degraded as a punchline (Filippo 2013). Other orientations, such as pansexuals, were not even mentioned. So, by restricting Character Authenticity to gays and lesbians, audiences with distinct marginalized sexual orientations were left with limited and undesirable ways to recognize their own experiences.

Wojtkiewicz concludes, then, that writers have a responsibility not only to create marginalized characters, but to do their epistemic due diligence and learn about their characters’ real-life counterparts. Naida Mehdi (2023) similarly emphasizes that this kind of due diligence takes work. It requires far more than just having a single conversation with a friend or acquaintance from the relevant marginalized group or asking a single member of the marginalized group to “approve” the story or characters. These one-off attempts to address the hermeneutical injustice are insufficient because they only give the writer

4 In her terms, hermeneutical injustice “occurs when a person’s inability to make sense of a lived experience ... is felt, due to unnecessary, socially encouraged, and epistemically vicious conceptual blockages or absences” (2023, 156).

a limited range of experiences to draw on when they create characters. Importantly, Wojtkiewicz and Mehdi each clarify that writers do *not* have to get things perfect. What matters is that they make a substantive effort and take their epistemic apprenticeship seriously. As we will discuss below, this gets tricky in cases of intersectionality.

In this section, we have offered a brief historical look into the portrayal of those with a marginalized sexuality in film and television. In so doing, we identified two reasons that Character Authenticity matters morally. First, audiences' beliefs that these characters are representative of ordinary real-world people can inform laws, policies, and interpersonal interactions. Second, if real-life counterparts look to mass media to help them understand their sexual orientation, then an overly limited (perhaps wholly inaccurate) depiction of a marginalized group can limit how people understand themselves. Though the demand for Performer Authenticity is often rooted in the more than reasonable demand for Character Authenticity, it is important to recognize that the described negative effects are due to a lack of Character, not Performer, Authenticity.

2 The Trilemma

Even our brief historical overview should suffice to illustrate why Character Authenticity has been so morally important. Moreover, it is easy to see how the demand for Character Authenticity naturally leads to demands for Performer Authenticity. In the next section, we consider the positive arguments given *for* demanding and enacting Performer Authenticity and respond to each in turn. Before we do that, however, it is necessary to first make our argument *against* Performer Authenticity, which provides important context for rebutting the arguments in its favor. That is what we do in this section.

Although demand for Performer Authenticity laudably tries to increase self-representation from marginalized groups, it actually puts performers in a trilemma that inadvertently works against that goal. Performers who are not ready to be publicly out will be forced onto one of the following horns: (a) out themselves before they are ready and incur the risk of harm from bigots, or (b) take on the role without outing themselves, thereby incurring the wrath of fans who believe that their performance is not "authentic," or (c) miss out on the role altogether. Each horn is clearly bad for any performer subject to the trilemma. Moreover, publicly putting performers in this trilemma will plausibly have even worse downstream consequences for actual and aspiring performers from marginalized groups. Let us work through each horn.

2.1 *Publicly Outing Oneself Before One is Ready*

The first horn is for the performer to publicly out themselves before they are ready. While this option would satisfy fans (as it did in the case of Connor), it is harmful for a number of reasons. First, sexual facets of one's identity are a deeply personal matter; coercing one to divulge such information will violate this personal space.⁵ Divulging, even under the "best" circumstances can be immensely emotionally challenging. It clearly was for Connor, who was a minor when he took on the role in *Heartstopper*, and he was coerced into coming out under far more traumatic circumstances. Of course, the potential for trauma does not magically disappear when one becomes an adult, and even the prospect of being outed to a large public can be, again, immensely emotionally challenging. This should be obvious, but may be found in the testimony of nearly any celebrity who discusses the pressure of dealing with public speculation about their sexuality, ranging from Nathan Lane (Vilanch 1999) to Elliot Page (2023). Moreover, being denied the ability to share, or not share, what one wants on their own timeline violates what should typically be a fully autonomous choice of the person in question.

Second, outing oneself also exposes performers to a backlash from bigots in the public sphere. Just focusing on sexual orientation, some may assume the supposed widespread social acceptance of marginalized sexualities means that it is no longer risky to identify as gay in the public sphere. Yet, such assumptions are misguided. Even performers in the most liberal circles in Hollywood face homophobic abuse regularly, especially if they have social media accounts. It is important not to turn a blind eye to this or ignore the very real psychological, and sometimes physical, harm that it imposes. At the same time, it is also important to keep in mind that performers are not even primarily located in California and New York, but exist everywhere in the world. In many places, insinuations, much less accusations, of having a marginalized sexuality can have tragically fatal consequences.

Third, and just as worrying, outing oneself not only exposes one to potential bigotry from strangers, but from friends and family members as well. When Michael Cimino (straight) played Victor Salazar (gay) in *Love, Victor* (2020–2022), he faced death threats for taking the lead role and encountered unexpected homophobia from some of his family members who assumed that he was gay (Schnurr 2021). Those who have the privilege of having supportive

5 This extreme psychological difficulty is regularly present, even if there is a moral obligation to come out. While Richard Mohr (1994) unflinchingly argues that agents need to come out in order to live a dignified life, even he recognizes the psychological and emotional costs of doing so.

open-minded kin can easily forget that not everyone does. Outing oneself can lead to irreparable damage within a family unit, to performers being ostracized from those whom they depend on most, and sometimes even worse. As Elliot Page shows in his memoir, even coming out as gay to parents who would self-identify as supportive, but do not know how to shed their internalized homophobia, can produce lifelong trauma. Being forced to come out on someone else's timeline denies one's agency and autonomy, which creates an additional harm, even if everything else goes well.

Fourth, in addition to physical and psychological harms, coming out can result in career setbacks. While DeGeneres' coming out on her sitcom and in real-life was a milestone in 1997, it also led to a loss of work and public backlash (Cragin 2006). While other celebrities reported similar career losses, DeGeneres professionally recovered in 2003 by being cast in *Finding Nemo* and then launching a successful talk show. But it is important to remember that each of these were far from guaranteed. In fact, reflecting on his own acting career's constrained trajectory, Christopher Bradley cites these losses as reason for performers to be out from the beginning since then "everything you have is really yours. It can't be taken away" (2009, 53). We think there should be a better option than telling marginalized performers to pre-emptively hurt their career trajectory.

While the stigma around coming out has gotten better in the twenty years since DeGeneres came out, other performers have reported similar advice from their managers – that coming out as gay (Haynes 2022; Page 2023) or trans (Page 2023) would hurt a performer's career. Keep in mind, also, that these experiences are in memoirs of performers who already had successes behind them and have gone on to have successes after. Those hurt most by these norms do not even get to write memoirs. We recognize that the industry norm that encourages closeting is unjust, but it is not obvious that hounding performers who are still building their resumes to come out is the best way to change that norm. As these examples show, performers often do come out when they judge that they are in a strong enough position to do so. While this strategy will not instantaneously change the industry norm around closeting, it will preserve someone's autonomy to come out and signal to up-and-coming performers that they will not have to prematurely choose between their career and being open about who they are.

2.2 *Take the Role Without Coming Out*

Let us turn to the second horn, which is that performers from a marginalized group do not come out when they play a corresponding marginalized role. The problem with this horn is that the performers then face backlash from fans

for not being an identifiable member of the marginalized group. The backlash itself can take the form of verbal, and sometimes physical, abuse and can be traumatic to deal with, as it was for Connor. It will often hurt the performer's career prospects, as conservative producers will avoid casting performers perceived to alienate people in a way that hurts their bottom line (of course, sometimes controversy brings more profit, but typically not in cases like Connor's).

The backlash comes with a demand to either step down from the role or to publicly come out as a member of the marginalized group. Stepping down means that the performer loses out on a potentially career-boosting role. If a performer really is a member of the group, and chooses to sacrifice the role rather than publicly disclose their social identity, then they are not building their professional resume and so not even getting to the position where they could come out later on (as did DeGeneres and Paige). Often, stepping down is not even a choice. Unless they disclose their identity, the public backlash from a vocal minority will often lead to their firing by those with a vested financial interest in the project in question.

This may not seem so bad to people who care about Performer Authenticity since the original performer (whether or not they have a marginalized sexual orientation) would be replaced by someone who is open about their marginalized sexual orientation. We believe that this response does not give proper weight to the interests of marginalized performers who are not yet out. We also think that plausible downstream effects of this demand should be seen as bad by everyone's lights. This will be discussed more in the next section. But, for now, let us suppose that Robin Williams (straight) had stepped down from his role as Armand Goldman (gay) in *The Birdcage* (1996), and was replaced with a gay performer. Maybe this loss would not seem like a problem because Williams was not gay and would no longer be "taking" a gay man's role. *Perhaps* Williams stepping down would have been a short-run victory, but it is not obviously a victory in the long run. Why? Well, first, by excluding straight performers from taking on these roles, it makes it near impossible for gay, lesbian, and bisexual performers to take on the roles without implicitly coming out both publicly and to their family.⁶ This generates the same problem as the first horn above. Only allowing gay performers to portray gay characters effectively outs any gay performers taking on the role of a gay character,

6 Starring opposite Williams, Nathan Lane (gay) recounts that during an interview with Oprah, he was not ready to address her questions about his sexuality and was grateful that Williams intervened on his behalf to steer the interview away from Lane's sexual orientation (Bergeson 2023). Building on Lane's anecdote, the more that straight performers play gay, lesbian, or bisexual characters, the more cover that people in Lane's position would have.

regardless of whether they do so explicitly and regardless of whether they are ready to be out.

Second, if only gay, lesbian, and bisexual performers take on the roles of gay, lesbian, and bisexual characters, then this increases the chances that they will be seen as lacking the range to take on the role of straight characters (where the majority of work is), no matter how obviously unjustified that assumption. So, demanding Performer Authenticity increases the chances that gay, lesbian, and bisexual performers will be boxed out of straight roles. As a result, this social norm can decrease the number of roles given to gay, lesbian, and bisexual performers even if it does not affect the number of gay, lesbian, and bisexual characters created. When these goals are at odds, it is not obvious that it would be better to sacrifice the jobs of gay, lesbian, and bisexual performers in order to insist on Performer Authenticity with respect to gay, lesbian, and bisexual characters.

Even if we are incorrect about that, these goals likely will not be at odds. Rather, the probable result would be a decrease in the number of characters with a marginalized sexuality. Performers gain power in the entertainment industry by getting work and, once they have established an impressive resume, are more likely to be able to obtain financing for projects where they have more creative control. Once they have more creative control, they can create more gay, lesbian, and bisexual characters. The above effects on insisting on Performer Authenticity create a bottleneck in the industry by enforcing social norms that reduce the number of roles that go to gay, lesbian, and bisexual performers. This bottleneck will likely ultimately result in fewer gay, lesbian, and bisexual characters than the public would otherwise get.

2.3 *Forgo Taking the Role*

At last, we can turn to the third horn, which is for closeted gay, lesbian, or bisexual performers to forgo taking on any roles portraying gay, lesbian, or bisexual characters. While this decision avoids the first two horns, it comes at a significant cost. First, not only would it prevent performers from getting roles, but it would prevent them from getting roles that they, by hypothesis, are most suited to play. This harms them and, often, the art that would have been created with their participation. The problem, however, is not just that some gay, lesbian, and bisexual performers will relegate themselves to straight roles, forgoing playing some characters they may be the most qualified to play. The deeper problem is that such a social norm could discourage aspiring performers from even pursuing a career in the entertainment industry. Aspiring performers who see the frequent demand for Performer Authenticity, but are not ready to be out, will be deterred from pursuing their passion. This

is terrible for them, and it means that there are comparably fewer gay, lesbian, and bisexual performers, many of whom would come out on their own timeline if given the opportunity to first establish a firm place in the entertainment industry. The exclusionary effects are, of course, bad for these performers and for the audiences who miss out on what they could have produced. But they are also bad because an overall smaller number of performers are “out” and able to serve as “role models” for gay, lesbian, and bisexual fans. We will discuss this more in the next section, but note that limiting the range of possible performers as role models works against a common rationale for demanding Performer Authenticity.

To recap, in this section we have argued that demanding and enacting Performer Authenticity puts marginalized performers in a harmful trilemma. As such, absent some very strong moral reason to subject marginalized performers to this harmful set of options, the widespread demand for Performer Authenticity is wrong and should stop. While demanding Performer Authenticity is aimed at the laudable goal of increasing representation in the entertainment industry, it can actually work against this goal. Now, proponents of demanding Performer Authenticity may acknowledge the potential downsides of the trilemma, yet insist that the moral reason to demand it is simply stronger than the moral reason *not* to subject marginalized performers to this trilemma. We address this concern in the next section by considering the best arguments given in favor of Performer Authenticity. We argue that existing arguments for Performer Authenticity fail. However, they do provide compelling reason to believe that performers have a general (epistemic) obligation to learn about what their characters’ real-world counterparts’ experiences would plausibly be like and incorporate that into their performance. Meeting this epistemic obligation enables performers to enact Character Authenticity, which there is typically good moral reason to do.

3 Arguments for Performer Authenticity Best Support Character Authenticity

Do the moral reasons for demanding Performer Authenticity outweigh the moral reasons to avoid putting marginalized performers in the aforementioned trilemma? We think not. Moreover, as we will show, the arguments in favor of demanding Performer Authenticity often work against their own goal. This does not mean that there is nothing to these arguments, however. On the contrary, the concerns they raise provide good reason for performers to typically enact Character Authenticity and meet the epistemic obligation that

we identify. In this section, we review each of the four common rationales given for demanding Performer Authenticity and respond to each. So as not to bury the lede, these arguments concern whether (i) Performer Authenticity best ensures Character Authenticity because of performers' lived experiences; (ii) Performer Authenticity lets marginalized communities tell their stories on their own terms; (iii) demanding Performer Authenticity prevents non-marginalized performers from "taking away" roles from marginalized performers; and whether (iv) Performer Authenticity creates role models for fans and younger or aspiring performers.

3.1 *Prioritizing Performer Authenticity for Performers' Lived Experience*

The argument in (i) is now among the most popular, although it appears to not have held weight in performers' and audiences' minds until very recently. A series of interviews with entertainment stakeholders suggests that the shift in demand for Performer Authenticity is largely motivated by the idea that only marginalized performers have the requisite experiences to authentically portray the characters in question (Cover 2023). Notice that while this rationale references Character Authenticity, it draws a connection to Performer Authenticity as being, at the very least, a valuable means to achieving Character Authenticity. The performer's lived experiences are supposed to infuse the character and story with Character Authenticity.

The first point that bears mentioning is that however intuitive (i) is, it is not clear that Performer Authenticity is the only way to ensure Character Authenticity. Tom Hanks (straight) won an Oscar for playing Andrew Beckett (gay) in *Philadelphia* (1993). In an interview almost 30 years after the film, Hanks affirmed that his performance would not be considered acceptable today because he believed that Performer Authenticity was paramount (Marchese 2022). Looking back at *Philadelphia*, however, it is not clear that anything was lacking in his performance. If someone had no idea who Hanks was, they would not be able to spot a tell in Beckett's Character Authenticity. The historical examples from Section One pose a similar problem. When Kerr Smith (straight) played Jack McPhee (gay) in *Dawson's Creek* and Eric McCormack (straight) played Will Truman (gay) in *Will & Grace*, their roles had a transformative effect on "normalizing" gay men in the cultural imagination. Nobody dismissed the shows or characters as not really indicative of what gay life was really like *because* Smith and McCormack were straight. In fact, the critiques that we covered in Section One, that McPhee and Truman are ambivalent characters because they limit the hermeneutical resources people rely on to interpret their experiences, only work if the people who would be drawing on them recognize their gay Character Authenticity, at least to a

non-trivial degree. What was limiting was not the performance of McPhee and Truman, but the story arcs imposed by the time and content restraints of network television.

Further, Hanks' performance as Beckett indicates a deeper, intersectional problem with the demand for Performer Authenticity. Beckett's company fires him when they find out that he has AIDS. Hanks' actual serostatus notwithstanding, there is not anything in his performance that compromises the Character Authenticity. People with AIDS did face employment discrimination and struggled to find legal representation. True, Beckett's story was rosier (and more chaste) than many other real-life cases were (Hart 2000), though Hollywood narrative films almost invariably focuses on stories with "uplifting" endings.

HBO's (2014) remake of Larry Kramer's *The Normal Heart* featured mostly gay performers as gay characters. While some people did complain about Mark Ruffalo (straight) leading as Ned Weeks (gay), there was no similar demand to verify if seronegative performers were taking roles away from Poz performers. Like other social identities, HIV/AIDS dramatically changes how someone self-identifies, interacts with others, and (cannot) participate in social practices or legal institutions (Dean 2009; Baumgartner and David 2009). Further, *when* someone was living with HIV/AIDS matters from a hermeneutical and historical perspective. Medical treatments, (lack of) institutional resources, and levels of social rejection or acceptance changed over time: early experiences with HIV/AIDS marked it as a death sentence, while people living in a world defined by HAART or PReP understand it more as a chronic condition. These generational differences indicate a further intersectional difficulty for possible performers. As we increase the diversity of Character Authenticity (e.g., serostatus, generational difference), we necessarily decrease the number of performers who have the corresponding lived experiences that would be able to ensure Performer Authenticity. Acting is an incredibly complex art form and as these numbers dwindle so too do the number of people who could even approach a level of performance that would allow their audience to suspend their disbelief for extended periods of time.

Perhaps the most damning objection is that the public's frequent inability to tell whether they are witnessing Performer Authenticity suggests that it is not necessary for Character Authenticity. Go back to our opening example: Kit Conner was bisexual and so did have Performer Authenticity. If Performer Authenticity is what enables Character Authenticity, then fans should have been able to tell from Conner's performance that it was authentic. Since they demanded to know his sexual orientation, fans clearly did not recognize the connection between Conner's Performer Authenticity and his Character

Authenticity when he played Nick Nelson. Complementing Connor's case, Natasha Lyonne (straight) played Megan (lesbian) in *But I'm a Cheerleader* (1999). Lesbian fans recognized themselves in Megan, so Character Authenticity was met, but they were uncertain if Lyonne was a lesbian, and so were not certain if Performer Authenticity was met. In both cases, Character Authenticity was met, though fans were unable to tell whether Performer Authenticity was met. In Connor's case, it was, and in Lyonne's case, it was not. So, Performer Authenticity itself is not necessary for instantiating Character Authenticity.

Recall that what matters for Character Authenticity is whether the character or story accurately represents real life. If performers consult and learn from members of the relevant community, they can gain the epistemic resources needed for Character Authenticity.⁷ In fact, the most talented performers are often able to do a better job of conveying Character Authenticity than those with the relevant lived experience, but more limited acting ability. Ryan White, the sympathetic poster child for AIDS education, played a background character in his own biopic, *The Ryan White Story* (1989), while Lukas Haas played White. White worked with Haas on set, educating him about what living with AIDS was like and how he felt when his hometown turned against him (White 1991). The result is a performance that reads as having maximal Character Authenticity and surely far more than would be on the screen were White to try and play himself, a point which White himself articulates.

An additional upside of this practice is that it would bring many more marginalized voices into the entertainment industry, giving voice not only to trained professionals (e.g., writers, actors, producers, editors), but also to marginalized citizens as consultants who would otherwise remain outsiders to the industry. By contrast, focusing on Performer Authenticity narrows the range of marginalized voices that get heard to the performers themselves. This not only shuts out the voices of non-performers with their own histories, but also runs the risk of the viewers overgeneralizing from the performers' particular experiences.

3.2 *Telling Stories on Their Own Terms*

Another rationale for Performer Authenticity is that it lets members of marginalized groups "tell their stories on their own terms." Self-representation

7 It seems to us that they can also provide sufficient resources for trust in aesthetic sincerity, while an overt focus on Performer Authenticity can break that trust, though we will not argue for that claim here. See Nguyen (2021) for an account and discussion of aesthetic sincerity.

matters, in large part, because (per Section One) people tend to take characters in media or popular culture as fictional stand-ins for real-life members of the groups in question. When the Character Authenticity is distorted, or non-existent, it can erase self-representation by assuring the members of dominant groups that they “already know” what life is like for members of marginalized groups and so do not need to learn anything from the members themselves (Young 2011; Medina 2012). Self-representation that avoids these harms is thus morally important.

As we argued in the first section, there is a great deal of truth to this last rationale. At the same time, it does not show a need for Performer, over Character, Authenticity. One concern with this rationale is that it is not clear who comprises “their” in “their own terms.” Demographically speaking, the number of people with a marginalized sexual orientation who are also involved in the writing and directing process for any show or movie is a fraction of a single percent of the group of people who have a marginalized sexual orientation. So, at best, only a small subset of the group is actually telling the stories, which means that writers are drawing on a limited range of their own lived experiences, which may or may not match up to whatever performers can bring with them in terms of Performer Authenticity. As discussed above, this could be mitigated to some extent by performers learning about, and incorporating, the lived experiences of non-performers.

Another concern with emphasizing self-authorship is that it conflates what writers or directors do with what a performer does. Performers unquestionably personalize their roles by adding their own distinct emotions and energy. But by and large, performers are mostly realizing the combined vision of the writer(s) and director(s). Of course, in some cases, performers can command more artistic control over the role or develop their own creative projects. In order to do that, however, one must first gain power in the industry by building up a resume, and that requires them to be willing to take on a range of starting roles. As we showed in Section Two, making Performer Authenticity the norm will impose career costs on performers by limiting the number of roles they will likely be cast in, thereby limiting the total output of marginalized artists telling stories on their terms. A better option is to let performers decide for themselves when they can come out career-wise, which gives them time to develop resources and contacts in the industry so that they can procure financing for projects that they have more creative control over, which will in turn allow them to create stories that spotlight marginalized characters. Doing that would allow for more marginalized people to tell stories on their

own terms. But doing that requires focusing on Character, over Performer, Authenticity.

Crucially, writers and directors can still tell their own stories that positively and honestly reflect life in their marginalized group without relying on Performer Authenticity among the actors. Greg Berlanti (gay) wrote and directed *The Broken Hearts Club* (2000), a gay romantic comedy that emphasized supportive friendships and ordinary relationship problems rather than coming out, discrimination, or AIDS. To date, Billy Porter is the only performer in the movie who has come out as gay, but, as above, the fact that the other performers are (presumably) straight does not vitiate the Character Authenticity. Nor does the film depend on Porter's performance. He is *a*, but not *the*, main character. Berlanti managed the feat of telling the story that he wanted to with the cast that he wanted. Moreover, the cast did their epistemic due diligence to ensure that their performances were infused with Character Authenticity.

In response to these considerations, one might offer an alternative defense of self-representation. Perhaps it is good because it disrupts, challenges, or counters the disparaging dominant beliefs. Here we agree, though we will note that this justification shows that self-representation is extrinsically valuable. It is valuable insofar as it achieves this other good, a good which may also be achieved by ensuring that performances contain Character Authenticity regardless of whether they also contain Performer Authenticity. Neither Annie Proulx nor Ang Lee are gay or bisexual men, but their literary and cinematic versions of *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) effectively challenged the belief that gay or bisexual men were sissies or effeminate (Patterson 2008). Heath Ledger's (straight) and Jake Gyllenhaal's (straight) performance as Ennis Del Mar (gay or bisexual) and Jack Twist (gay or bisexual) respectively prompted social conversations and reflections on masculinity and sexuality. Their Character Authenticity was not in doubt, even though the film lacked Performer Authenticity and self-representation.

Echoing Mehdi and Wojtkiewicz, we hold that performers can access the epistemic resources necessary for Character Authenticity by doing their epistemic due diligence with members of the marginalized communities in question. This due diligence can, but need not, result in members of that community physically appearing on stage and screen. Like Mehdi and Wojtkiewicz, we think our epistemic obligation is defeasible in light of context-sensitive considerations. Fulfilling this epistemic obligation typically requires performers to learn about the norms in the group in question, to be better prepared to detect which performance choices would perpetuate inaccurate, harmful stereotypes, and accurately portray what their characters' real-life counterparts would plausibly be

like.⁸ Importantly, though we are focusing on performers, we wish to emphasize that we do not take this epistemic obligation to be limited to performers. It applies at least as much to writers, directors, producers, editors, and anyone who plays a pivotal role in the shape of the project in question.

Those who do not take this epistemic obligation seriously will predictably cause harm. Is this a reason to demand Performer Authenticity? No. After all, the risk of harm does not disappear when Performer Authenticity is met, especially when the performers do not take these epistemic concerns seriously. Jon Robin Baitz (gay) and Roland Emmerich (gay) respectively wrote and directed *Stonewall* (2015), dramatizing the Stonewall Riots. Critics panned *Stonewall* because it whitewashed history, notably erasing Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson's contributions. Performers of course cannot guarantee that their performance will not harm members of the marginalized community.⁹ What matters, then, with respect to their culpability, is whether they took reasonably appropriate steps to minimize the chance of harm.¹⁰ This generally involves focusing on Character Authenticity by learning about the community being represented, whether or not one happens to be a member of that community.¹¹

8 It is worth noting that this epistemic obligation may conflict with other obligations, including the possibility that accurately portraying some culture may perpetuate harmful generalizations about that culture. Young (2008, 113–114) discusses such cases. The epistemic obligation is defeasible and, for the purposes of our argument, we do not take a stance on how, exactly, it weighs against other types of obligations.

9 See Arvan's (2023) arguments about authors' culpability for causing harm for a parallel discussion.

10 Baitz and Emmerich later asserted that they were only trying to tell a story about one (white) man's self-discovery, but *Stonewall* was more of a dramatized account of what happened, rather than a coming-of-age story. If Baitz and Emmerich were only interested in telling Danny Irvine's (gay) story of self-discovery, then they could have folded his story into how he joined the riots rather than having him being the heroic instigator. Instead, *Stonewall* shows Johnson absconding for almost all of the riots because she was handcuffed to a mafia manager – she shows up as the riots end to *support* Irvine's trying to save their friend, Ray, from arrest. Baitz and Emmerich got other historical details about the riot right, so it is not that they did not do the research. But what matters for the epistemic obligation we identify is that they did not consider how writing Irvine as the hero of *Stonewall* erased the historical heroics of trans and queer activists. Proponents of self-representation, however, do not have many resources to criticize this erasure because Baitz and Emmerich were telling the story that they wanted to on their own terms. The failure here, then, was how the characters were (not) representative of reality, showing that the moral effects are grounded in Character Authenticity.

11 Presupposing, even implicitly, that Performer Authenticity guarantees Character Authenticity runs another risk. It might lead to some performers with Performer Authenticity being more careless about ensuring Character Authenticity, taking their experiences to be more representative and exhaustive than they in fact are. No one knows *all* there is to know about the communities of which they are a member.

3.3 *Employment Opportunities*

A third rationale for demanding Performer Authenticity is that it provides employment opportunities for younger marginalized performers. This rationale seems *prima facie* plausible, yet it is far from clear that it would produce more employment opportunities than demand for Character Authenticity with the general epistemic obligation that we identify. This is so for a number of reasons. As we argued in Section Two, requiring Performer Authenticity in hiring or employment decisions will, counterintuitively, likely reduce these opportunities in the long run, even for those who are out.

By contrast, if the epistemic obligation we identify were internalized as a broad social rule, this would provide a number of employment opportunities for younger, marginalized performers. Why? Well, it would first open the bottleneck, allowing more marginalized artists to gain power within the industry. There is a second, often overlooked, benefit too. Non-marginalized performers with power are deterred from pursuing projects with marginalized characters for fear of a backlash from an overly rigid demand for Performer Authenticity. To avoid this risk, they may use their power to instead create yet another story focused on, say, white cisgender men. If the broad demand for Performer Authenticity were replaced with a demand for fulfilling the epistemic obligation that we highlight (with the goal of ensuring Character Authenticity), it would open a path for these artists to create more roles representing marginalized groups without falling into the horrific traps of the past.

Again, meeting this epistemic obligation often requires learning about stakeholders' lived experiences. This can often, but not always, be most effectively done by meeting with stakeholders. Depending on the context, it may require learning via watching recorded interviews with, seeing art created by, and reading works from the relevant stakeholders. The possibilities here are extensive. As we showed in the Ryan White example, such stakeholders may not be in the entertainment industry, but would be brought in by the artists doing their research.¹² Some people who may have no aspirations to get into the entertainment industry will be given a voice, partake in the creative process, and see the fruits of their labor on the stage or screen. This would also help ameliorate the demographic concern that we talked about above, viz. that only a very tiny fraction of the population with a marginalized sexual orientation are employed as writers, directors, or performers.

¹² To avoid worries about epistemic exploitation, these consultants should (of course) be paid.

A final consideration is that replacing the demand for Performer Authenticity with a demand for this epistemic obligation would promote intersectional Character Authenticity. Our concern is that since Performer Authenticity requires performers to have similarly lived experiences to their characters, there will necessarily be fewer performers who have those lived experiences as the entertainment industry diversifies. By allowing performers to find people with the relevant lived experiences and bring those experiences to life, following the epistemic obligation we defend opens up the door for these stories to be told. Moises Arias (straight) played Poe (gay) in *Five Feet Apart* (2019). While most teenagers struggle with romantic relationships, Poe has cystic fibrosis (CF), a rare genetic condition that complicates his love life, causing him to leave his boyfriends when things get serious. He did so to prevent them from being financially burdened with his care. Poe diversifies Character Authenticity by showing how disability raises important questions about what happens to someone when they age out of their parents' insurance. Requiring Performer Authenticity would require the performer playing Poe be a gay Colombian teenager with CF serious enough to warrant extended and recurrent stays in hospital. It is unlikely that for such specific intersectional roles, amateur (non-)performers with the relevant lived experience would do a better job than professional performers that act in accordance with their epistemic obligation.¹³

3.4 *Role Models*

The fourth rationale for demanding Performer Authenticity is that it spotlights marginalized performers who serve as role models for similarly marginalized youth. While requiring Performer Authenticity does do this to some extent, it is worth reiterating that it does so at the expense of forcing performers to come out. Self-described non-consequentialists should oppose this means even if it produces the most "good." More importantly, it almost certainly does not produce the most good. Connor, for instance, *may* now have lots of gay, lesbian, and bisexual children look up to him. Of course, that does not show

13 One might worry that our epistemic obligation is subject to a similar problem. Taking intersectionality seriously requires understanding that one cannot, for instance, figure out what it is like to be a gay Columbian teen with CF by interviewing teenagers, Columbians, gay people, and people with CF. This is right, though we should reiterate that the epistemic obligation that we posit is defeasible, and the extent to which anyone is obligated to act in accordance with it depends on context-sensitive factors, such as the time and resources available. Moreover, ought implies can, and *if* there is really no one with the relevant intersectional lived experience whom performers can learn from in preparing for their role, then they cannot be obligated to learn from them.

that demanding Performer Authenticity is the best (or most effective means) of achieving this goal. Suppose that people had not demanded to know whether Connor was enacting Performer Authenticity. What might he have done? He would have still drawn on his own experiences with being bisexual to inform his characters and done the additional epistemic work to ensure that his performances were infused with Character Authenticity. He also likely would have come out on his own timeline and so still have served as a role model for youth, albeit a little later.¹⁴ Is this comparably less good? Perhaps, but that is not obvious. The delay might actually have allowed him to be a better role model, as he would have occupied that public role by choice and not be thrust into it after a traumatic invasion of privacy. What actually happened is that audiences (including his countless fans who are children) saw a vicious industry force someone to come out, and subject himself to harm, so that vocal proponents of Performer Authenticity could feel more comfortable watching him on television. That does not seem inspiring and is likely to deter closeted youth from pursuing a career in the entertainment industry.¹⁵

The bigger issue with this justification is that it can reduce the overall number of marginalized performers who can serve as role models. If more marginalized performers are brought into the industry, even when closeted, then more will be there to come out on their own timeline. They can then serve as public role models in the indirect way that proponents of Performer Authenticity seem to have in mind. Moreover, closeted or not, marginalized performers can serve as role models in a much more direct and interactive way with marginalized youth at their discretion. A lesbian performer does not need to be *publicly* out to personally connect with lesbians online, or in person, to mentor them as a lesbian. One can disclose their identity to their mentees at will. Forcing them to make their identity public, then, is not necessary for the admirable goal of spotlighting mentors.

This issue also touches on reasons of justice to be out. If aspiring artists benefit from having a particular mentor–mentee relationship, then what matters is if the mentor is out to the mentee; the mentor being out in general is beside the point. The reason we concentrate on this particular moral

14 Other performers often decide to come out later in their careers for other, non-professional reasons. Nathan Lane (Vilanch 1999) said that he came out in response to Mathew Shepard's death, to help decrease homophobia. Kal Penn (2021) came out when he announced his engagement.

15 It is worth mentioning that straight actors who play gay characters can also be role models, even if it is a distinct *kind* of role model. Choosing to play sympathetic gay characters with Character Authenticity may, for instance, combat homophobia, signaling to (straight) audiences that there is nothing wrong with being gay.

relationship is because it preserves the mentor's autonomy to decide when and to whom they should come out to as a defeasible obligation, while also foregrounding the benefit to the mentee to whom they out themselves. It is also worth noting that consultants from the marginalized groups would also be able to mentor closeted performers on non-professional matters because they are brought in precisely because they are experts on the content area. More importantly for the purposes of our argument, this discretionary practice will likely result in more people in the entertainment industry being out (and of their own volition).

Let us recap one last time. The good that can come from demanding Performer Authenticity does not justify subjecting marginalized performers to the trilemma that we identify. Demanding Performer Authenticity can often work against the very reason why people want it in the first place. We made the case that performers instead have an epistemic obligation to learn about the lived experiences of their character's real-world counterparts. Meeting this epistemic obligation gives performers the resources that they need for Character Authenticity, ameliorates demographic constraints for both casting concerns and self-representation, incorporates intersectional insights by increasing employment opportunities, and enhances the role model/mentor rationale. Fulfilling the epistemic obligation that we defend, to ensure Character Authenticity, would obviate the need for Performer Authenticity.

4 Objections and Replies

With the space we have left, we respond to the most pressing questions and objections.

4.1 *Our Argument Would Prove Too Much*

One natural (and welcome) response to our argument is to start running through additional historical examples of performers portraying characters who were marginalized in a way that the performer was not. Doing this will reveal countless examples of grossly immoral performances. As one extreme, think of Mickey Rooney doing a racist Japanese caricature in yellowface in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1961). Any argument that justifies such performances would be threatened by reductio arguments. Of course, our argument does not justify *any* such performances, along any dimension of oppression, for reasons similar to those given in Section One. The problem is not just that all such performances lack Character Authenticity; it is also that they promote stereotypes and perpetuate harm in various ways.

This much is obvious. What may be less obvious is the exact way in which our argument generalizes to other cases that do not involve bigoted caricatures and where Character Authenticity can be met. Would all such performances be permissible in our view? The short answer is “No,” since even performances that meet these conditions could, depending on the details of the case, be harmful in other ways. While the arguments that we give do apply, *all else equal*, to other cases, not all else is always equal. Marginalization is not a univocal phenomenon. Marginalized groups have different histories, there are different social effects that result from different types of representation in media, different desires of individuals within each group, and a plethora of additional morally important considerations that have to be taken into account with respect to each case. As such, we cannot *simply* generalize from the cases that we consider to all marginalized groups without haphazardly papering over this important *all else equal* condition. Fully extending our argument to other groups would require doing the kind of historical analysis that we do in Section One, while also weighing each of the morally important, context-sensitive, considerations that apply to the group in question. That is simply impossible to do for more than a single group in a single paper.

Though we cannot fully work out the details of the ways in which our view does (and does not) generalize, that is not necessary for the purposes of our argument. The reason why is that our argument, as formulated, is flexible enough to avoid under- and overgeneralization by our readers' own lights. We take this to be a feature, not a bug, of the argument. Take any marginalized group that could fall under the purview of the considerations we raise. Suppose that you think that there are morally relevant difference(s) between performers with marginalized sexual orientations and this group, such that non-marginalized performers playing characters from this group is morally impermissible. For instance, racial representation is complicated by a unique history of concerns about the aesthetic, epistemic, and moral issues surrounding the relationship between performers, characters, and their audiences (Collins 2000; Uidhir 2012; Shim 2022). A key theme in this history is depicting Black characters as hypersexual. Writing Black characters as Bucks prompts audiences to recall stereotypes that Black men are sexually rapacious and dangerous (Collins 2005). Homo Thug characters transpose this racialized hypersexuality by depicting gay or bisexual Black men as either duplicitously lying to their girlfriends or wives and having lots of sex with men on the side or as tough criminals who exclusively top other men to assert their hypermasculinity (McCune Jr. 2014). To date, DeRon Horton has not disclosed his sexual orientation, but his role as wallflower Lionel Higgens

(gay) in *Netflix's Dear White People* (2017–2021) disrupted this racializing theme because his Character Authenticity provided a different model of Black masculinity and sexuality. Andre Braugher's (straight) depiction of the hyper intellectual and masculine Captain Raymond Holt (gay) in *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* disrupted this racializing theme from a different angle.

Our conclusions about sexual orientation contribute, but do not straightforwardly generalize, to issues about racial representation. Regardless of what Horton's actual sexual orientation is, it is true that his Character Authenticity is what mattered most for this aspect of his character. Racial representation, however, is complicated by additional morally relevant considerations. Even an issue that seems as straightforward as blackface involves ethical questions about complexion, marketing expectations, and the racial identity of both character and performer (Zheng and Stear 2023). As but one example, Paul Taylor (2016) discusses the debate surrounding Zoe Saldana's portrayal of Nina Simone in *Nina* (2016). For that biopic, Saldana, a Black woman, darkened her skin for the performance. Such moral considerations may reveal additional moral reasons (e.g., connection to the immoral history of blackface) that make it wrong for performers, not marginalized along the dimension in question, to play a character who is marginalized along that dimension. If so, then there is reason to believe that our argument does not easily generalize here. To be sure, there will be such cases. Working out the details of these cases is an important extension of this project.

Now, suppose that you do not think that there are any morally relevant differences with respect to those with marginalized sexual orientations and the group in question, at least with respect to this specific question about portraying characters who are members of the group. There has recently been a resurgence of discussion in the media surrounding the ethics of gentiles playing Jewish characters. David Baddiel (2021) objects to gentiles taking on Jewish roles because many of these characters often portray antisemitic stereotypes. Drawing on Baddiel's work, Sarah Silverman (Burton 2023) publicly criticized Kathryn Hahn (gentile), among others, for playing Jewish characters, such as Rabbi Reuel in *Transparent* (2014–2019). While we agree with Baddiel and Silverman that we should be concerned about how Jewish characters are portrayed, this concern is about Character Authenticity, not Performer Authenticity. Many, if not most, of these performances receive accolades rather than criticism. This includes a number of notable recent, and historical, examples. Think of Ben Kingsley as Izthak Stern in *Schindler's List* (1993) and Nathan Lane as countless characters, including Max Bialystock in *The Producers* (2005) or Rachel Brosnahan as Midge Maisel in *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* (2017–2023) and Abby Isaacs in *Manhattan* (2014–2015). Michelle

Williams and Paul Dano played Steven Spielberg's fictionalized parents in *The Fabelmans* (2022) without controversy.¹⁶

Interestingly, most instances of gentiles playing Jewish characters seem to be regarded as permissible, even by the most vocal media critics of "Jewface," such as Silverman.¹⁷ This, of course, does not show that such performances are indeed permissible. That would have to be argued for, which we do not do here. While we do not take a stance on the ethics of gentiles playing Jewish characters, Naomi Scheman (2011) has argued that figuring out who is or is not "really" a member of a group is less morally important than who does the work and helps that marginalized community in a hostile world. With respect to this question, we infer that she would encourage the public to look at what the performance or character is doing to help the Jewish community. Here our concept of Character Authenticity is integrally important, as it can combat pernicious stereotypes and there are a number of gentile performers who have enacted Character Authenticity to great effect. Gentiles have played complex, ambivalent, and sympathetic Jewish characters without objection, in part because their performances push back against anti-Semitic attitudes and negative Jewish stereotypes.

Just as it would be too hasty to assume that our argument straightforwardly generalizes to all marginalized groups, regardless of the differences between them, it would be too hasty to assume that it cannot generalize to any marginalized group because there are morally significant differences between all such groups. While comparisons across marginalized groups are complicated, our account does not depend on *tout court* equivalency. For instance, extending what we have argued for about sexual orientation to gentiles playing Jewish characters does not imply that there are one-to-one historical, casual, or ontological parallels between being, say, lesbian and being Jewish (Sedgwick 2008). There are not, of course, and there are not such strict

16 In an even more recent example, Baddiel demurred protesting the casting of Cillian Murphy (gentile) as J. Robert Oppenheimer (Jewish) in *Oppenheimer* (2023). He did so because he was unsure of what the casting decision meant for the Jewish community (Burton 2023). As we argued above, this kind of "pause and dialogue" matters because performers have to familiarize themselves with the norms in the community that their character represents. Respectfully enacting Character Authenticity is an important way to contribute to that discussion, as a topic of conversation and as an interlocutor.

17 Though, even Silverman suggests that it was permissible for Hahn and others to play characters who are Jewish. Interestingly, her focus seemed to be on *noticing* these casting choices and providing opportunities for more Jewish performers to play Jewish characters, though not necessarily exclusively (Rowles 2022).

parallels between *any* two distinct marginalized groups. What determines generalizability is how additional, context-sensitive, moral considerations weigh against *whether* and *how* the group in question would be subject to the trilemma that we identified and the comparative goods that could be achieved by the performer in question enacting Character Authenticity.

The more general, and important, point is that our argument is not committed to under- or overgeneralizing by our readers' own lights. For any two marginalized groups, there are either additional moral considerations that make it impermissible for non-marginalized performers to portray the type of marginalized character in question or there are not. If there are, then our argument would not generalize to this group, and if there are not, then it would. Either way, our argument avoids committing itself to under- or overgeneralization.

4.2 *The Public Should Not Demand Performer Authenticity, but Performers Should Nevertheless Enact It*

Our paper has touched on both the permissibility of audiences demanding that performers enact Performer Authenticity and the permissibility of performers taking on roles that would lack Performer Authenticity. One may object that the trilemma that we identified results only from the public demand for Performer Authenticity and insist that it is still wrong for performers to take on roles that lack Performer Authenticity. In other words, one might hold that (to avoid our trilemma) the public should not demand Performer Authenticity, but that performers are nevertheless obligated to act in accordance with it.

Our response to this objection is twofold. First, if every performer only took roles where they could ensure Performer Authenticity, then the harmful trilemma would turn into a comparably harmful dilemma. This would have the effect of forcing performers to either out themselves *de facto* to secure a role (subjecting themselves to bigotry from their kin and the public) or forgo taking on the role in the first place. Audiences not demanding Performer Authenticity certainly eliminates one bad option (i.e., subjecting closeted performers to a public backlash for perceived transgression), yet performers only acting in accordance with Performer Authenticity preserves the other two harmful options without offering a third way out. Second, as we show in Section Three, the arguments for Performer Authenticity aim for goods that can be achieved just as, if not more, effectively by focusing on Character Authenticity. The burden of proof, then, lies with proponents of Performer Authenticity to either show why these arguments fail or to identify a new argument that justifies enacting Performer Authenticity in addition to Character Authenticity.

4.3 *Demand Performer Authenticity and No Bigotry*

One might object that our argument misses an important option, viz. demanding an end to the bigotry too. The thought is that if performers were not subject to bigotry, then there would not be a need for them to remain in the closet, and so would be able to out themselves ahead of taking on any role. This would supposedly avoid the trilemma by blunting the first horn.

Here, again, our response is twofold. First, there are plenty of reasons why one may not want to come out as marginalized along some dimension, even if the threat of harm from bigots suddenly ceased to exist. Issues surrounding one's (marginalized) identity can be deeply personal and it is important to both understand and respect that people will still want to divulge this information on their own timeline, not the public's.

Second, we do agree with the general thrust of this objection. More precisely, we agree that there is a group obligation for moral agents to also work to end the risk of harm from bigots. Any person should be free to correctly identify as a member of a marginalized group without subjecting themselves to danger. That noted, that is tragically not the world we live in now. This is a practical ethics paper, and the scope of our argument concerns what we should do now, holding fixed the realities of the world that we cannot change so quickly. Even the most effective attempts to end bigotry will not eradicate it in the near future. It is in light of these facts that we are asking what performers ought to do with respect to the roles they take, as well as what the public ought to demand of such performers.

5 Conclusion

We have done a few different things in this paper, all with the overarching aim of showing that the public generally ought not demand that performers disclose their social identity. We focused on marginalized sexual orientation as a case study and began with a historical overview of how those with marginalized sexual orientations have been portrayed in film and television. We did this, in part, to illustrate just how harmful misrepresentation can be and to show why the demand for Performer Authenticity reasonably arose from the historical lack of Character Authenticity. We then made a positive argument for our thesis, which is that demanding Performer Authenticity subjects marginalized performers to a trilemma. They will have to either out

themselves against their will, subject themselves to an intense public backlash, or forgo taking on a role that they want and at which they would excel. This provides a strong moral reason *not* to demand that performers disclose their social identity. Interestingly, avoiding the first horn also requires that at least some, for instance, straight performers play characters with a marginalized sexual orientation.

After making our positive argument, we considered the four arguments that have been given in favor of Performer Authenticity. Though we argued that none succeed, they did highlight good reasons to, at least typically, enact Character Authenticity. We then proposed that performers have a general (epistemic) obligation to learn about what their characters' corresponding real-world experiences would plausibly be like, representing what they learned in their performances. This would generate the goods that proponents of Performer Authenticity strove for, while avoiding subjecting vulnerable performers to the harm of the trilemma. Finally, we considered and rebutted the most pressing objections to our view.

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