

“We hear the Wilderness, and It hears us”: The Queer and Feminist Wild in *Yellowjackets*

(Journal Article)

&

***Yellowjackets*’ Female Representation Bites Back**

(Public-Facing Piece)

by

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Master’s Thesis

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Abstract

Representations of femininity in survivalist television have historically relegated women to the margins of the narrative, centering men and masculinity, and deeming them central to survival. Showtime's *Yellowjackets* reframes the survival genre to encompass representations of femininity that are volatile, monstrous, and chaotic. In doing so, this paper argues that *Yellowjackets* invokes the queer and feminist "wild," where feral expressions of femininity and feminine sexuality are privileged. Specifically, the queer and feminist wild manifests itself through *Yellowjackets*' narrative as (1) a queer geographic space where an "unmaking and unbuilding [of] worlds" (Halberstam, 2020; p. 4) occurs, (2) a feminist-focused state of mind that the characters adopt to help them survive both in the wilderness and in reality, and (3) a queer re-enchantment that transforms the characters' relationship to and perspective of the world (Moore, 1997). To explore the queer and feminist wild, this study conducts a close textual analysis of *Yellowjackets*' first two seasons, along with a paratextual analysis of interviews with the writers and actors, critics' reviews of the show, and the *Yellowjackets* subreddit (r/yellowjackets). *Yellowjackets*' representation of femininity and feminine sexuality ultimately pushes the traditional boundaries of television, opening the door for more subversive representations in future television programs, while also providing women in the current moment with new subjectivities to explore and embrace.

Introduction

A young girl is sprinting through the forest, snow crunching under her bare feet as she panics and gasps for air. Surrounding her are trees carved with mysterious symbols when she suddenly hears screeching and cawing in the distance, making her freeze. Her lips tremble as the animalistic noises continue to grow closer. In her panic, she stops to double over and cry. Upon hearing the howls and screeches once more, her head shoots up to see strange wooden figures and animal skulls hanging in the trees around her. Hearing the screeches and howls closer than ever, she sprints off. As she reaches a clearing, the ground suddenly falls out from under her, and she falls into a large pit. Panning over her bloody footsteps towards the pit, it is revealed that she fell into a booby trap, where she has been impaled by sharpened tree branches stuck into the bottom of the hole. Her body is mangled and disfigured by the many perforations that litter her body, and upon closer inspection, her hand, now pierced by a tree branch, is shown to twitch ever so slightly.

The caws, screeches, and howls that filled the air have been replaced by the sound of the wind whipping amongst the trees. Suddenly, a figure wearing animal furs, a ski mask made from a cut up sweater, dirty pink converse, and a “co-ed naked soccer” t-shirt walks up to the edge of the pit. Quickly, the scene cuts to blood-soaked hair and mangled feet tied with rope being dragged across the bright white snow. The young girl’s body, now stripped of clothing, is hoisted up in a tree, hanging upside down and another masked figure walks up to the young girl’s body, bowie knife in hand, and slits her throat, bleeding her dry.

Cut to various pieces of meat being butchered and put on skewers above a raging fire. The same masked figures, now a group of eight, are sitting around the fire waiting for the fruits of their labor. One of the figures is shown to be sitting centrally in front of the fire, wearing a white gown adorned with locks of hair, and a pair of deer antlers on their head, covered in

netting. One member walks towards the rest of the group carrying a wooden board that holds the meat. Upon the approving nod of the antler-wearing leader, they all take a piece of meat and voraciously rip it apart, baring their teeth violently. After their feast, one of the figures takes off their fur mask and it is revealed to be a disheveled young teenage girl with chapped lips and broken glasses.

Scenes like this are common throughout Showtime's *Yellowjackets* (2021-Present), often taking the blind leap past virtue and into wild ferality, highlighting queered and wild representations of femininity and feminine sexuality. While this representation has been deemed provocative (Horton, 2021; Granger, 2022; Bundel, 2023) and compelling (Newsome, 2021; Chaney, 2021; Justin and Hewitt, 2021), critics and fans alike have not delved further into why *Yellowjackets* evokes such strong responses. To fill that gap in understanding, I argue that *Yellowjackets* invokes what I deem the queer and feminist "wild." Away from the strictures of everyday life, *Yellowjackets* crafts a representation of femininity and feminine sexuality that allows young women to take up feminist knowledges and queered ways of life. Ultimately, the young women of *Yellowjackets* embrace a wild and feral existence that that conveys immense independence along with hyperbolic monstrosity as previously described. As those young women become adults, that wildness is shown to lurk within them and fester until it is unable to be kept quiet.

To better understand exactly what is meant by the queer and feminist wild, it is best to first dissect the term's individual parts: "queer," "feminist," and "wild." The term queer will be used in two different ways. The first, and predominant, use of "queer" will reflect foundational queer theorist David Halperin's (1995) definition of queer, denoting "whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant" (p. 62). The second definition of queer I use will refer to any sexual identity that is not heterosexual, following Teresa de Lauretis' (1991) definition of

queer that works to transcend the minute variations in how individuals identify their sexuality (p. v). To make this distinction more apparent, the term queer will be formatted in different ways that reflect the term's different definitions. "Queer" will be used in reference to queer sexuality, and "queer" will be used in reference to non-normativity. The definition of "feminism" and "feminist" is often understood to involve some type of political intent as the navigation of politics is necessary to achieve gender equality (Pateman, 1989). Although, for the purposes of this research, "feminism" will refer to scholar Sara Ahmed's (2017) conceptualization of feminism that denotes "acts of refusal and rebellion as well as...not holding on to things that diminish [women]" (p.1).

Building upon the interwoven understandings of wildness and queerness as deemed by Jack Halberstam, the wild will be understood as an extension of queerness and the non-normative, cementing the intersections between the two. Halberstam (2014) notes that "queerness without wildness is just white homosexual desire out of the closet and in sync with a new normal" (p. 140). By inextricably linking queerness and wildness, Halberstam is bringing together the utopic nature of unrestricted queerness with the often dark, animalistic, and non-normative nature of wildness to show how together queerness and wildness can help one better understand the unknown and the disorderly. In his book devoted specifically to exploring wildness, Jack Halberstam (2020) positions the wild, and wildness more broadly, as

"a challenge to an assumed order of things from, by, and on behalf of things that refuse and resist order itself. Wildness names simultaneously a chaotic force of nature, the outside of categorization, unrestrained forms of embodiment, the refusal to submit to social regulation, loss of control, the unpredictable... a space of potential, an undoing that beckons and seduces" (p.3).

With these definitions in mind, I argue that the queer and feminist wild is primarily a state of mind that the women adopt through a uniquely feminist and inherently queer disidentification with the dominant social structures that position women as subordinate to men (Muñoz, 1999). As a practice in disidentification, the queer and feminist wild is embraced when the young women deconstruct and reinterpret the governing social structures of their everyday lives. In doing so, they craft a new existence for themselves where they are the ones with power and privilege. These reinterpretations allow the young women to survive and thrive as they resist the oppressive structures of their everyday lives and in the process discover freedom and agency not previously afforded to them. Moreover, the queer and feminist wild is also a location; an expanse of opportunity and possibility where one's imagination is the only limitation. In *Yellowjackets*, the location of the wild is represented by nature, or the literal wilderness. Through this return to nature and embrace of the wild, the women of *Yellowjackets* take up Sherry Ortner's (1972) conceptualization of women and nature. Ortner positions women as the inverse of men, and by extension culture, with women embodying a close relationship to nature itself. The women of *Yellowjackets* are ultimately shown to utilize conventional social practices until they no longer serve them, refashioning them into a way of life that incorporates and celebrates the monstrous, the chaotic, and the wild.

Furthermore, this paper argues that the queer and feminist wild manifests itself through *Yellowjackets*' narrative as (1) a queer geographic space where an "unmaking and unbuilding [of] worlds" (Halberstam, 2020; p. 4) occurs, (2) a feminist-focused state of mind that the characters adopt to help them survive both in the wilderness and in reality, and (3) a queer re-enchantment that transforms the characters' relationship to and perspective of the world (Moore, 1997). I will support this analysis with reception from audiences and critics, as well as commentary from the actors and writers themselves. Through this research, understandings of

feminine representation on television will be expanded to encompass a new female subjectivity, wildness, and paratextual studies will be broadened to encompass new forms of digital reception studies that position audiences and their commentary as paratexts.

Yellowjackets follows the lives of a high school girls' soccer team in 1996 on their way to the national championship when their plane crash lands in the Canadian wilderness, leaving them stranded for 19 months where they ultimately are forced to succumb to cannibalism. The show follows a myriad of main characters, but most salient to this discussion are **Jackie**, the stereotypically popular team captain; **Shauna**, Jackie's best friend; **Taissa**, the star player and a known perfectionist; **Van**, Taissa's secret girlfriend and overall comedic relief; **Natalie**, the stereotypical 1990s "burnout;" **Travis**, the head coach's son and Natalie's boyfriend; **Javi**, Travis' younger brother; **Lottie**, the shy girl who is secretly on anti-psychotic medication; **Misty**, the team's equipment manager and stereotypical nerd who is bullied by the rest of the team; and **Coach Ben**, their assistant coach who loses his leg in the plane crash and is secretly gay.

While in the wild, the team comes across an abandoned cabin where they take refuge. Jackie, the team captain, accidentally freezes to death during their first winter, and while Natalie and Travis do learn to hunt, they run out of food once winter comes, and game has scattered. Out of desperation, the team is forced to cannibalize Jackie's corpse to survive. Once they are starving for the second time, the group resorts to pulling cards and ritualistically hunting one another for survival. Javi, Travis' brother, is the first to be killed in such a manner, and while his body keeps them alive until spring, the team is shown to continue the ritual the following winter.

Yellowjackets utilizes dual and interconnected timelines in their narrative, so the show also follows the lives of the survivors 25 years later when their past begins to haunt them in the form of a blackmail scheme. While they have all taken vows of silence to never discuss "what

happened out there,” they constantly face threats of exposure. The known living survivors through season two are: Shauna, Taissa, Natalie, Misty, Van, and Lottie. As the adults are forced to confront their trauma head on, many of the survivors are shown to fall back into patterns and ways of life that they practiced while stranded in the wild, showing that they are not as well-adjusted as they lead on to be. The end of season 2 culminates in the adults hunting one another as they did when they were teenagers where Natalie is tragically killed.

Literature Review

In this section, I will review the relevant scholarship about the historic portrayal of women in scripted television narratives throughout the 21st century and theorizations of queer and feminine monstrosity, giving particular attention to the female cannibal. I will end with a review of scholarship that utilizes paratexts, which will lead into my discussion of my methodology that includes textual and paratextual analyses.

Feminine Representation in 21st Century Scripted Television

The late 1990s and into the 2000s have been deemed an era of “quality television,” (McCabe and Akass, 2007) with shows like *The Sopranos* (1999-2007), *The Wire* (2002-2008), and *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013). The concept of “prestige” associated with these programs conflate a certain type of audience that is envisioned as highly educated, sophisticated, and upper middle class (Thompson, 1997). Newman and Levine (2012) complicate this argument to note that this “prestige” is also highly gendered, where quality television is associated with masculinity, while programs that are more formulaic and have lower production qualities are inherently feminized, such as soap operas. These differences in narrative and representation are explicit with the shows previously listed all having male leads and focusing on the lives of men. Even though these programs include strong and complex female characters like Carmela Soprano (*The Sopranos*) and Skyler White (*Breaking Bad*), these women are often vilified by fans

(Pinedo, 2021), expressing strong sentiments of anti-fandom (Click, 2019). As such, women in this era of “quality television” and the “male anti-hero” are forced to face a double standard where they are hated for not supporting the male lead’s (often criminal) activities but also are judged for being complacent (Pinedo, 2021). Where the male lead gets to transgress social boundaries within the narrative (Vaage, 2015), the women in this era of serial programming are left in a double bind. It is important to note though that during this era there were still programs that were considered “quality television” that starred and centered women in their narrative with programs such as *The L Word* (2004-2009), *Nurse Jackie* (2009-2015), and *Weeds* (2005-2012). These programs were simply the few exceptions to an industry dominated by male-centered programming.

The 2010s marked a shift in understanding of “quality television” as the United States entered an era of “Peak TV” (Koblin, 2015) that was defined by an overabundance of television programming. During this time, “quality television” was no longer defined solely by male anti-heroes, but rather, women were taking center stage in the narrative. Shows like *Girls* (2012-2017), *Game of Thrones* (2011-2019), and *Veep* (2012-2019), centered the lives and experiences of women, offering the post-feminist sensibility (Gill, 2007) that women can and should be resilient. Much of this representation of women during this era boils down to what Press and Tripodi (2021) call “media-ready feminism.” Media-ready feminism expresses empowerment but does so through an expression of femininity that is primarily white, heterosexual, cisgender, middle class, and able-bodied. While these representations are an important steppingstone to more expansive representation, like in *Yellowjackets*, ultimately these representations create a more palatable form of feminism that “strips [feminism] of its political content” (Press and Tripodi, 2021, p. 5) by implying we now exist in a post-feminist world.

Moving into the late 2010s and the mid-2020s, the rise of streaming television has vastly changed the ways that television is created. Streaming television allows for less reliance on advertising for financial support, now using subscriber funding that gives streaming platforms the freedom to produce more niche programming (Lotz, 2018). This shift towards niche programming is particularly salient as it greatly expands the representations of women on screen, allowing programs to feature more subversive and non-normative forms of femininity, while still being considered “quality television.” Particularly, this means that many older women who often “age out” of rewarding roles can take up unconventional roles that expand female subjectivities on screen, moving past the stereotypical roles of mother or wife (Pinedo, 2021). Shows of this era, such as *Sharp Objects* (2018), *The Handmaid’s Tale* (2017-2025), and *Grace and Frankie* (2015-2022), push beyond the representations of neoliberalist post-feminism of the early-to-mid-2010s, and embrace the messiness of life and difficulties that women face. It is important to note that streaming television did not just allow for expanded representation of women in front of the camera, but behind the camera as well with women increasingly taking roles of executive producers, writers, and directors (Pinedo, 2021). Most notably, Shonda Rhimes, famous for creating popular network shows such as *Grey’s Anatomy* (2005-), *Private Practice* (2007-2013), and *Scandal* (2012-2018), has begun working with Netflix, creating the popular period piece *Bridgerton* (2020-).

Yellowjackets continues this narrative of niche female representation in the streaming era, pushing the boundaries of how femininity is represented. While the examples discussed here are expansive representations of femininity that work against postfeminist sensibilities, *Yellowjackets* pushes past simply expansive and niche to embrace the subversive, feral, and most importantly, wild, crafting a new chapter in this history of 21st century female representation on television.

Female Cannibals and The Monstrous-Feminine

Monsters in film and television have been called “meaning machines” (Halberstam, 1995; p. 21), whose depictions are used to reflect the historical and cultural fears of the time, while also working to uphold dominant ideals around gender, sexuality, race, etc. Thus, the horror genre, where most depictions of monstrosity exist, acts as a vehicle for social and cultural commentary. The genre’s depictions of monstrosity and, conversely, normality, often hold deeper meanings than what is simply shown on screen.

Prior to the early 1990s, women in horror films were often only theorized through frameworks of victimhood (Clover, 1992), but Barbara Creed (1993) looked to challenge that idea by arguing that women in horror films are monstrous figures that she calls “the monstrous-feminine” (p. 8). The monstrous-feminine expresses her monstrosity through abjection, which are actions that do not “respect borders, positions, rules,” and “disturbs identity, system, order” (Kristeva, 1982, p. 4). Most salient to this concept of abjection is the maternal figure who horrifies her audience through an embrace of the female reproductive body and matriarchal ideals (Creed, 1993, p. 8). Thus, Creed conceptualizes femininity and female power as an “Other” that goes against dominant patriarchal values. The otherizing of femininity and female power takes on a hyperbolic form when discussing the figure of the female cannibal in horror media.

The female cannibal is an excessively monstrous figure and whose actions undermine the patriarchal order by behaving as the inverse of stereotypical femininity (Creed, 2022). In their subversion of femininity, the female cannibal is the one that objectifies others, often men, using their cannibalistic consumption to gain dominance and power that they would not have access to otherwise (Flockhart, 2019). Through her consumption, the female cannibal literally eats away at the symbolic order of the patriarchy (Creed, 2022). Moreover, the figure of the female cannibal

is complicated when cannibalistic actions are done in a group setting, as is the case in *Yellowjackets*. The shared act of cannibalism amongst a group of women constructs a homosocial bond within the group that allows them to explore other formations of community and family that can potentially center feminist values that they would be unable to assert normally in a patriarchal society (Flockhart, 2019).

Yellowjackets' most provocative storyline is the group's descent into cannibalism as teenagers. While cannibalism is treated as a monstrous act within the narrative, I do not position their cannibalistic acts as the inverse of stereotypical femininity that undermines the patriarchal order as Creed does. Rather, cannibalism acts as a manifestation of the queer and feminist wild state of mind that they adopt, which grants them the freedom to explore new subjectivities and possibilities away from the constraints of everyday reality.

Paratexts

Paratexts were conceptualized in 1987 by French literary theorist Gérard Genette (trans: 1997) who looked to assert that literary texts are made up of not just the source text, but paratexts that help to determine or influence how the source text is going to be received. Moving away from the literary sphere and into the digital realm, the concept and definition of paratexts were broadened and expanded. Paratexts in this sense are generally thought of to be any of the "add-ons" to the source text (Gray, 2010; p. 6). Paratexts "tell us what to expect" and "shape the reading strategies that we will take with us 'into' the text" (Gray, 2010; p. 26). Paratexts are often deemed either "entryway" and "in media res" paratexts. Entryway paratexts are texts that are experienced prior to the source text, while in media res paratexts are experienced while one is watching or interpreting the source text (Gray, 2010; p. 18). Some of the most common paratexts one encounters are posters, reviews, merchandise, podcasts, websites, billboards, toys, and trailers.

Working from the transmission view of communication (Dewey, 1981-1992; Carey, 1992), media texts, such as television programs and films, are used to transmit information or messaging to their audience, often for the purposes of control. Paratextual analyses thus help to understand the marketing motivations of networks and studios and how they believe the source text “should be” consumed. While early scholars of paratexts, such as Genette, saw paratexts as an extension of or threshold to the source text, modern film and television scholars note the fluid boundaries between paratexts (Gray, 2010; Consalvo, 2007). Paratexts may move between acting as a paratext and a source text themselves, particularly in the case of video games (Consalvo, 2017) where the game may become a paratext or take on a life of its own and become its own source text. Related to this is the process of intertextuality, which occurs when a media text relies on other media texts to reveal and comprehend their meaning (Gray, 2018). This often occurs in media texts that parody cultural touchpoints, such as *Saturday Night Live* (1974-) whose humorous content comes from parodying different genres of media, including news reports and commercials. To understand their humor, the show relies on the viewer’s intertextual knowledge of these other media genres.

In the era of streaming television, audiences’ understanding of paratexts is reconceptualized. Popular paratexts that were common viewing rituals when watching television in the cable era, like episode recaps and commercial bumpers are either rendered invisible or removed entirely (Zündel, 2019). The strategies of streaming television refashion and reinvent paratexts, and more broadly, television itself (Bolter and Grusin, 2000; Jenner, 2018). Not only has streaming changed the act of watching television but has also changed how audiences interact with media texts outside of streaming platforms. The mid-to-late-2010s were an era of technological and media convergence with the boom in popularity of streaming platforms and the normalization of social media use (Jenkins, 2006). Audiences can now communicate their

opinions and thoughts directly to showrunners, networks, and actors thanks to social media platforms like X, Instagram, and most salient to this research, Reddit (Waggoner, 2018). At the same time, in a post-network television industry, programs are also curated towards audiences' interests (Burroughs, 2019), in part through discussions happening on social media, but also through algorithms that track how long users interact with content on platforms and suggest programs and films that align with their interests (Frey, 2021). These modern conversations that happen between audiences and networks, studios, and streaming platforms disturb our modern understandings of what paratexts are. Previous research has argued that creative fan works are themselves a paratext (Gray, 2010; Leavenworth, 2015), but not simply online audience discussion about the source text. Because of this, my research seeks to redefine what paratexts are to include discussion amongst audiences online, both between each other and with showrunners, actors, and studios.

Research Question and Method

Television programs offer their viewers stylized and purposeful representations of social realities and subjectivities, but nevertheless, television programs are texts that represent our social reality (Mikos, 2014). Like any text, the representations within cannot be separated from the institutions or individuals that construct them, making them site of power negotiation and meaning making (Orgad, 2012). By textually analyzing a television program's visual and dialogic elements, researchers can granularly decode the denotative and connotative meanings of representations and dialogue encoded within the program's narrative (Hall, 1973). To explore how the queer and feminist wild is represented and expressed in *Yellowjackets*, I conducted a textual analysis of the show's narrative and dialogic elements in all 19 episodes of seasons one and two. Thus, one of the questions this study asks: **How does *Yellowjackets* enact the queer and feminist wild through its narrative and dialogic elements?**

To be specific, I focused on moments where the queer and feminist wild was represented in *Yellowjackets*, including instances of queered femininity and feminine sexuality, queered social realities, and feminist-focused actions. By queered social realities, I am referring to representations of non-normative social interactions that become social roles that individuals inhabit (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). By feminist-focused actions, I am referring to actions that prioritize the perspectives and ideologies of women, while decentering normative masculine ideologies (Gamble, 2001). These representations of the queer and feminist wild manifest themselves as (1) the shift to the queered geographic space of the wild where the teenagers are forced to build out their own means of existence, (2) a distinctly feminist and wild state of mind that the young women adopt while stranded that ultimately follows them into adulthood, and (3) a queered social reality underpinned by re-enchantment (Moore, 1997). It could be understood that this analysis is attempting to idealize the very serious and traumatizing predicament of being stranded in the wilderness, but rather, this analysis is to highlight how the show invokes the queer and feminist wild through its diegesis. By going beyond just the provocative nature of the show, the textual analysis I conduct will work to unearth the ways in which *Yellowjackets*' narrative works to provide novel and wild representations of women on television.

In addition to textual analysis, I have also conducted a paratextual analysis of the program as these items "serve as *extensions* of a text" that "fill [a text] with many of the meanings that we associate with them" (Gray, 2010; p. 3, 6). With this mind, I analyzed paratexts to comprehend if the queer and feminist wild is recognized by those at the various stages of production and consumption of *Yellowjackets*. For the purposes of this study, paratexts will refer to the periphery materials that are associated with the source media text (*Yellowjackets*). My paratextual analysis includes interviews with the actors and writers, critics' reviews, and the audience reception of *Yellowjackets*. The purpose of including these analyses in

this study is to confirm whether the queer and feminist wild is recognized and considered by the actors, writers, critics, and audiences, or if the subversive representations of femininity and feminine sexuality are not realized and why that may be. This study then also asks: **Is the queer and feminist wild realized by the writers, actors, critics, and audience, and if so, how?**

From the perspective of production, the analysis of interviews with the actors and writers of *Yellowjackets* comes from press and promotional interviews, both in print and on screen. In looking at the show from the perspective of the actors and writers, I am grasping the creative decisions that went into the writing and acting that is seen on screen. It should be noted though, that there are some limitations related to this kind of analysis. The interviews that the actors and writers conduct for press or promotional materials are not always going to be representative of that individual's true thoughts on the show. Often, formal press interviews are used by showrunners and actors to express sentiments that will help to garner more viewership for the show in the future. As I will note later though, facets of the queer and feminist wild are imbued in the actors' and writers' commentary, so even if the actor or writer is not disclosing their true thoughts on the show, they are still utilizing the show's representations of the queer and feminist wild to their promotional advantage. Their promotion highlights how representations of subversive femininity and feminine sexuality are what networks believe interests potential viewers, rather than something that would dissuade them.

In looking at the reception of *Yellowjackets*, I am using critics' reviews from major entertainment news magazines, like *Entertainment Weekly*, *The Hollywood Reporter*, and *Variety*, along with smaller online popular culture publications like *IndieWire*. These sources help to understand how the show is received and understood by those in roles tasked with cultural production within dominant institutions of popular culture (Lotz, 2008). Similar to the press and promotional interviews done by the actors and writers, these critics reviews are

products of institutional agendas and influences that may not necessarily reflect the true thoughts of that individual.

The other aspect of reception I analyze is the audience's reception of *Yellowjackets*. To do so, I used the *Yellowjackets* subreddit (r/yellowjackets) as my source of audience commentary. r/yellowjackets is a highly populated subreddit, with over 183,000 members, placing it in the top 1% of all subreddits on the platform. As with the other sources I am utilizing, the *Yellowjackets* subreddit, and Reddit generally, does come with some limitations. Reddit is a popular social media platform but has a much smaller user base than other platforms. For example, 70% of US adults use Facebook, while only 24% use Reddit, meaning that a much smaller percentage of social media users utilize Reddit (Pew Research Center, 2024b). Furthermore, Reddit is predominantly used by individuals aged 18-34, making up 41% of the platform's user base. Based on a March 2024 Gallup Poll survey, 22.3% of Generation Z identify as LGBTQ+, making them more likely to identify with queer themes in the media they consume, and potentially discuss those themes online. Furthermore, a Pew Research Center (2024a) survey found that 63% of Reddit users are democratic or lean democratically, also making them more likely to recognize and potentially discuss facets of *Yellowjackets* that speak to progressive themes involving feminism and queerness. In terms of the *Yellowjackets* subreddit itself, the users and their comments will reflect only a certain, highly invested audience member that may not have the same levels of investment as the majority of fans.

While there are limitations associated with utilizing Reddit, my selection of r/yellowjackets as my source of audience reception is due to the unique affordances Reddit offers its users. Most salient is the platform's unique protection from context collapse. Context collapse occurs when multiple audiences are collapsed, or flattened, into a single context (Brandtzaeg & Lüders, 2018). For users on social media, these different audiences are navigated in particular

ways with information being shared only with certain audiences at certain times (Marwick et al., 2010). Avoiding context collapse is particularly important for marginalized users who may not be able to safely discuss, for example, queer or feminist themes openly in their everyday life (Triggs et al., 2019). Furthermore, my choice to utilize Reddit is to highlight the platform's affordances that make it useful in research on queer and feminist themes, moving beyond Tumblr as a site of queer media studies research that has been conducted previously (Cavalcante, 2020; Byron et al., 2019; Anselmo, 2018).

Furthermore, I want to highlight the unique and distinct methodology of positioning audience reception as a paratext. Previously, audience and reception studies have not necessarily positioned audience commentary as a paratext to the wider media text. By reconceptualizing the audience and their commentary as a paratext, I aim to reflect the current technological and media convergence taking place with the popularization of streaming television platforms and the normalization of regular social media use (Jenkins, 2006). Audiences now can communicate their opinions and thoughts directly to showrunners, networks, and actors thanks to social media platforms like X, Instagram, and most importantly, Reddit (Waggoner, 2018). At the same time, in a post-network television industry, programs are also curated towards audiences' interests (Burroughs, 2019), in part by discussions happening on social media, but also algorithms that track how long users interact with content on platforms (Zuboff, 2019). Because social media platforms have the potential to be influential on the narrative and stylistic choices of television programs in the streaming era (Unkel and Kümpel, 2020), audiences should be studied through a paratextual lens that positions them as an extension of the show, rather than just an audience that passively absorbs the text. In the case of *Yellowjackets* specifically, co-creator and writer Ashley Lyle has noted that she frequents the r/yellowjackets subreddit often, going so far as to say, "if I

could tell the subredditors anything, it's like, we are them and they are us to some extent" (Kantor, 2022).

Next, I will describe how the queer and feminist wild manifests itself within *Yellowjackets*. I argue that the queer and feminist wild acts as (1) a queer geographic space, (2) a feminist-focused state of mind, and (3) a queer re-enchantment. These facets of the queer and feminist wild craft representations of femininity and feminine sexuality in subversive, feral, and wild ways not often offered on network television historically. Throughout these sections, I will be utilizing interviews from the actors and writers, critics' reviews, and users' posts from r/yellowjackets to understand how the queer and feminist wild is realized during the production and reception of *Yellowjackets*, if at all. I will end with a discussion of where *Yellowjackets* will go in the future and how the queer and feminist wild can continue to be a part of the program's narrative.

Discussion

Wild as a Queer Geographic Space

It is 1996 and the teenagers' plane has just crash-landed en route to the high school girls' soccer national championship. The sounds of panicked screams and cries fill the air as they work to escape the wrecked plane. Once out of the plane, they are faced with the silence of the wild. A type of silence that no matter how loud they scream for help, no one will ever hear them, and they know it. The girls look around in both terror and awe, knowing that this may be the last place they are ever seen alive. The days of soccer games and house parties and high school drama are no longer. Their existence will revolve around the trees and the dirt and the slow deterioration of reality; the wild. The wild manifests itself as a queer geographic space that queers their normative social order, leaving only their innately animalistic and monstrous impulses to guide them. The manifestation of the wild brought on by their shift in geography

expresses itself through (1) a queering of high school hierarchies, (2) a queering of feminine sexuality, and (3) an embrace of literal queerness. These instances work to craft representations of the queer and feminist wild that extend the boundaries of femininity represented on network television by embracing the wild and chaotic.

Upon crash landing in the wild, the social norms and values of everyday life are quickly stripped away as they learn to exist in this new geographic space. Almost immediately, the teenagers begin to queer their everyday existence by subverting the high school hierarchies that guided their lives. As the group needs medical assistance due to the injuries they sustained in the crash, Misty, their stereotypically dorky equipment manager, steps up to lead the group. Misty's extensive first aid knowledge quickly leads her from being a "nobody" to being the group's leader, signaling that they can no longer abide by the high school hierarchies and power dynamics that ruled their life prior to the crash. The queering of high school hierarchies is further cemented as Jackie, the team captain and stereotypically popular girl, is pushed aside once it is made known that she can no longer lead them in this new geographic space. The literal dismissal of normative femininity and embrace of unconventional femininity, as represented by Jackie and Misty respectively, puts down the roots for the queer and feminist wild to take hold. The group's embrace of queered social hierarchies also represents an "unmaking and unbuilding [of] worlds" (Halberstam, 2020; p. 4). In this new geographic space, they can no longer rely on the values and knowledge that guided their everyday reality, forcing them to embrace the devolution they are experiencing. As one Redditor notes about the teenagers' devolution: "People can put up with a LOT when they know there's an end to it. It's much harder to stay level when you're staring into the abyss" (u/Careless_Block8179, 2023). "The abyss" is precisely what the queer and feminist wild is: a chaotic and volatile space that brings out the feral, monstrous, and wild.

As the days continue to pass, the teenagers scramble for food, water, and shelter, continuing to experience an “absence of order” ascribed by the wild (Halberstam, 2020; p. 7). The lack of social order brought forth by their change in geography allows the teenagers the freedom to explore new expressions of feminine sexuality. Through their enactment of a distinctly feminine gaze, the teenagers are embracing the privileges embedded in the queer and feminist wild that unleashes “structures of desire that reach for the feral...the unknowable” (Halberstam, 2020; p. 13). That feral and unknown desire manifests itself after the teenagers find a lake near their crash site. Two young women are shown standing in the water, ogling the only teenage boy with them, saying, “Is Travis actually *hot*?” (S1E3, 24:12-24:14). They are suddenly interrupted by one of their teammates who shouts, “it’s been three days!” (S1E3, 24:17-24:19). The narrative gives space for expressions of feminine sexuality, even if it is brief. In displaying the female gaze as the dominant sexual perspective, *Yellowjackets* queers representations of sexuality on network television by making it something that can be accessed and wielded by women in feral and animalistic ways, such as objectification. Better yet, this queering of sexual representation is not lost on the audience: “It seemed like Travis started off with some power: his choice of the girls, etc. but he is actually quite vulnerable, objectified and alone in his position” (u/LottieMIsMyNana, 2023). Furthermore, it must be noted that the explicit reference to the amount of time they have been stranded makes obvious how the shift in geography is what brings the unknowable into existence by altering how the young women view themselves and their sexuality.

Furthermore, Halberstam (2020) notes that the “feral” and “unknowable” structures of desire act as “the disordered backdrop to all narratives of the human that seem committed to order, regulation, harmony, and stability” (p. 13). The longer the teenagers are stranded in the wild, the more that “order, regulation, harmony, and stability” disappears until it is no longer

present. The small remnants of order that guide the teenagers' existence evaporates once they decide to throw a "doomcoming." The doomcoming party is a final celebration of existence before they descend into their first winter with a quickly dwindling food supply. The celebratory mushroom soup ends up including psychedelic mushrooms, causing the entire group to hallucinate. The hallucinogenic fuels the young girls' expression of animalistic, feral, and wild sexuality more than ever before, causing them to act in monstrous ways. Specifically, the young girls trap and hold down Travis, the only teenage boy with them, and they each kiss him ravenously before he escapes their grasp. As he runs away, they hallucinate him as a stag, and hunt him, ultimately capturing him once more and putting a knife to his throat to kill him for food. It is in this moment that the queer and feminist wild is enacted once more. Leaning into the chaotic and volatile, these moments represent feminine sexuality as savage, brutish, barbaric, and wild, going against normative conceptualizations of femininity. As one critic reflects bitinglly, "Want to believe that women are gentler, kinder, more circumspect? How nice for you" (Soloski, 2021). That said, I want to make clear that I am not inferring that this is positive representation of sexuality, but rather, it goes to show the ways in which feminine sexuality is centralized in *Yellowjackets*' narrative in ways that other network television programs do not attend to. Through these representations, *Yellowjackets* works to queer our understandings of the ways in which feminine sexuality can be expressed, even if it is horrific and monstrous.

While I have shown that the geographic space of the wild queers high school hierarchies along with representations of feminine sexuality, *Yellowjackets* also exhibits literal Queerness through their inclusion of multiple queer female characters. Halberstam (2020) asserts that "the dyke" is "the symbol of negation against which the whole order of nature is levied" (p. 22). With this framework in mind, the dyke, or the queer woman, is the epitome of wildness. The most visible queer characters in *Yellowjackets* are Taissa and Vanessa who, when they crash land, are

not out to their teammates. They eventually come out to their teammates, finding comfort in the queered geographic space of the wild where they can leave the normative order of everyday life and enter a more expansive, and less constricting existence (Halberstam, 2020). Their coming out is particularly important as it expands representations of teenage sexuality in America during an era (the 1990s) where there was less acceptance of Queer identities as there is today.

Yellowjackets' representation of young Queer sexuality subverts normative representations of queerness on network television that often code queer narratives as "trauma narratives" that stem from their queer identity (Caprioglio, 2021). Affirming this positive and expansive representation, Nicole Maines, an openly trans actor in *Yellowjackets*, notes that Queerness in the show is treated as "unremarkable" and "not the end all, be all, of these character's stories. It's very just part of the backdrop of the story that's being told" (Logo TV, 2024). By treating "the dyke," the epitome of wildness, as normative, *Yellowjackets* continues to call attention to the queer and feminist "wild."

The queer and feminist wild as a geographic space, manifests itself through the stark realignment of the teenagers' social reality, an emphasis on feminine sexuality, and the normalization of Queerness. After leaving their known social reality, the teenagers adopt a new wild state of mind that centers women through the privileging feminist knowledges and ways of being. This feminist-focused mindset sets the groundwork for them to express their monstrous actions and embrace the queer and feminist wild.

Wild as a Feminist State of Mind

The teenagers' plane has just crashed in the wilderness and the young women are running around the crash site, screaming and crying, with a few unscathed members tending to the others' wounds. Their head coach is dead, having been impaled in a tree after falling out of the plane mid-crash. Misty, the team's equipment manager hears their assistant coach, Ben,

screaming for help. She finds him with a plane wing pinning down his leg. The rest of the team who are able come to help lift the wing off him and they see that Ben's leg is in tatters. Misty returns with an axe from the plane and proceeds to swiftly amputate his leg, blood splattering across her face and glasses. It is at this moment that the teenagers realize they must fend for themselves. Their coaches: leaders on the field and in life, are no longer. In order to survive, the young women must rely on themselves and each other, adopting distinctly feminist states of mind that manifest themselves in wild and monstrous ways. In enacting a new feminist state of mind, the young women display what Sara Ahmed (2017) calls a "feminist snap." A "feminist snap" is "a way of thinking more creatively and affirmatively about breaking points" and in doing so, centers women and feminist knowledges (Ahmed, 2017; p. 187-188). Specifically, the feminist state of mind that the young women adopt is shown by (1) the distinctive centering of women in the wilderness, (2) the embrace of cannibalism to support their newfound feminist-focused existence, (3) the rejection of male authority, and (4) the continued embrace of feminist values as adults. In these moments, the queer and feminist wild displays itself through the monstrous, chaotic, and volatile nature of their existence that embraces their newfound feral freedom and centers the wild feminine.

It is clear from the teenagers' first moments in the wild that feminist knowledges and ways of being are what will guide their existence and modes of survival in the wilderness. The only two male coaches are either killed or rendered disabled in the plane crash. In this sense, the crash itself signals their first feminist snap: "the start of something, a transformation of something" (Ahmed, 2017; p. 188). The crash takes power and focus away from the male authority figures and puts it in the hands of young women. In doing so, the show crafts a feminist narrative in which young women are the key to survival, while male authority exists on the periphery. Ashley Lyle, one of *Yellowjackets*' creators, echoes this sentiment, saying, "so many

[survivalist] stories are about being a woman in a man's world, and we wanted to try to create a story where that wasn't the point" (Highfill, 2023).

The teenagers experience their second feminist snap when they reach "the end of the line" (Ahmed, 2017; p. 192), specifically when they run out of food and water a few days after the crash. This is a point where Ahmed notes, "life unfolds from" (Ahmed, 2017; p. 192). The young women find a dilapidated cabin a few miles from their crash site and begin to build their own world for themselves. It is in these moments that the teenagers fully embrace their wild and feminist-focused mindset as they know it is their only chance at survival. Most salient to this concept of embracing a feminist-focused state of mind is when two of the young women become the group's hunter and butcher, roles traditionally reserved for men on television, such as Daryl Dixon in *The Walking Dead* (2010-2022) and Declan Hart in *Frontier* (2016-2018). The rapid narrative realignment within the first few episodes is a feminist snap for both the characters within the show, as well as the audience. One Reddit user values this representation because it shows young women that have "embraced the non-traditionally-feminine roles...rather than stitch[ing] up clothes and wait[ing] to be rescued" (u/emerald_stargazer, 2023). By placing young women in stereotypically masculine roles, *Yellowjackets* is embracing the queer and feminist wild by crafting expansive representations of femininity that offer female viewers new subjectivities for audiences.

The starkest and most provocative shift in the young women's state of mind is their descent into cannibalism. At the start of their first winter in the wilderness, their team captain freezes to death after sleeping outside the night of the first snowfall and they store her corpse in the shed outside until spring when they could bury her. But, to put an end to the grief and strife caused by her death, they decide to cremate her mid-winter. Under mysterious circumstances not clarified to the characters or the audience, snow falls on their team captain's funeral pyre,

effectively roasting her corpse, and setting up the malnourished group's first foray into cannibalism. Their decision to succumb to cannibalism is a form of feminist snap that is a "violent moment; the unbecoming of something" (Ahmed, 2017; p. 188). The editing of the scene even illustrates this "unbecoming" by intercutting the teenagers' cannibalistic actions with a dream-like bacchanalian feast to show how feral the mindsets of these young women have become as they embrace the queer and feminist wild. Moving forward, the teenagers ritualistically hunt one another for food as they only know survival through wild ferality. Thus, the teenagers' embrace of the queer and feminist wild is what allows their feminist-focused existence to continue and thrive as they descend deeper into the volatile and monstrous. This signals an almost symbiotic relationship between their wildness and their feminist state of mind. While this sounds like the makings of a show that could potentially disgust and put off its audience, *Entertainment Weekly* celebrates it, saying, "finally, a story about *girls (sic)* becoming brutish, violent savages" (Baldwin, 2021). This critical acclaim shows how the depiction of the queer and feminist wild is something that audiences have been previously lacking and want to keep seeing on network television.

After their first foray into cannibalism, the teenagers are constantly reminded of their altered and wild mindset by Coach Ben, who becomes an outsider after not partaking in cannibalism. Coach Ben thus acts as a physical representation and reminder of who they were prior to the plane crash, and mindset they used to hold before descending into the queer and feminist wild. By placing the singular male authority figure in the wild on the periphery once again, the young women are embracing a new form of feminist snap, that of snapping a bond between, not just their lives before the plane crash, but to all male authority (Ahmed, 2017; p. 193). Coach Ben recognizes this snap amongst the teenagers when he hallucinates the girls growling and cornering him, suggesting that they want to eat him. A multitude of Reddit threads

are dedicated to discussing whether Coach Ben can be considered an authority figure. Most Redditors consider him to be a figure of “ever-evolving authority” where he is neither in power nor completely powerless (u/BigVulvaEnergy, 2022). This places Ben, like the others, in the non-normative and volatile space of the queer and feminist wild, except his gender and traditional authority place him in the minority, dangerously close to being ostracized by the young women’s wild nature.

Furthermore, once Coach Ben realizes the teenagers are hunting one another for food, he finds another shelter in the wilderness but returns to save Natalie as they formed a bond while stranded. Unbeknownst to him, Natalie had just been hunted by the rest of her team, but let Javi die instead. Coach Ben’s outsider status leaves him as the moral voice of reason, telling Natalie, “You don’t have to stay here, you’re not like the rest of these girls” (S2E9, 20:29-20:32). To which she snaps back, “Actually, I’m worse...I let him die in my place” (S2E9, 20:33-20:38). The scene places the two on opposite ends of morality with Natalie ultimately invoking a personal feminist snap, snapping the strong bond between her and Coach Ben, siding with the rest of the young women. This snap is finalizing, cementing the intense shift in the young women’s state of mind that led them to commit such terrible acts of violence and embrace the queer and feminist wild.

Ahmed (2017) asserts that a feminist snap is only “the start of something” (p. 194), and that could not be truer as *Yellowjackets* shows through its dual and interconnected timelines a wild state of mind is forever instilled in the women even as adults, longing for the freedom that the feminist-focused mindset of the wilderness allowed them. The wild, feminist state of mind that they embraced while stranded is not easily shaken off, leading them into adulthood similarly bewildered as they were when they crashed in the wilderness. Shauna, the group’s butcher, is shown killing a rabbit in her garden and serving it to her family; Taissa begins to sleepwalk as

she did in the wilderness; Misty, the group doctor, is now a nurse who is shown to withhold medication from her charges; Lottie begins to hallucinate as she did in the wilderness; and Natalie is shown to once again undertake a leadership role for the group. By including remnants of the queer and feminist wild in the adults, *Yellowjackets*' narrative forces the audience to grapple with a question posed by a critic at *IndieWire*: "Did separating from the expectations of a world unfriendly to ambitious women do them some good?" (Travers, 2023). Depending on how you choose to look at it, the young women's time in the wilderness was beneficial by offering them a free and unencumbered existence away from the constricting social norms of everyday life but is also what caused them to embrace and normalize monstrous, cannibalistic actions. It is in that space of contradiction and non-normativity that the queer and feminist wild exists.

The adults' re-embrace of their wild mindset is often placed in opposition with normative femininity placed upon them. As one Reddit user noted, the feminism imbued in *Yellowjackets*' narrative "isn't about showing women only in a positive and virginal light. If anything, [the audience] want[s] the exact opposite to be told and shown" (u/scriptlectures, 2023). Additionally, audiences recognize that *Yellowjackets*' female characters are allowed the "same complexity [and] nuance that we give to bad men" (u/Jesusjones182, 2023). The actors themselves are also conscious of the non-normativity of their roles with actor Christina Ricci who plays adult Misty, summing this up perfectly, "Years ago, it was always a question with women's characters: Are you the likeable one? Are you the evil one? There was no real in between...it just shows that we are breaking free of all those stereotypes, and that real stories and honesty can be told about women" (Kuperinsky, 2022). Not only has the wilderness shifted the mindset of the characters in the show, but also for the audience and actors themselves, showing the transformative power of a narrative that embraces all facets of the human experience and portrays women in a way that celebrates their wild mindset and a diverse expression of emotions.

The embrace of a feminist state of mind offers new and expansive subjectivities for women on and off screen by portraying women centrally in the narrative, rejecting traditional male authority, and highlighting the tenuous space of contradiction that many women exist within. I have discussed the ways in which the wild as a geographic space changes the teenagers' social reality along with how feminist knowledges are privileged in that new reality. Next, I will discuss how the teenagers utilize the new geographic space of the wilderness along with their feminist-focused mindsets to transform their relationship to and perspective of the world. This is done so by embracing the wild as a queer re-enchantment where a focus on spirituality and ritual is used to justify their actions that reflect the monstrous nature of the queer and feminist wild.

Wild as a Queer Re-Enchantment

It is nine months into the teenagers' time in the wilderness, and they have split into factions of believers and non-believers in the supernatural force of "the Wilderness." Those who believe in the Wilderness have joined a prayer group led by Lottie, who the believers have deemed their spiritual leader. During a group session, Lottie asks her teammates: "What do we feel? What do we hear?" (S2E5, 6:26-6:58) to help them feel closer to the Wilderness. In the following episode, Shauna is having her baby and potentially may die from loss of blood. In an attempt to save Shauna's life, Lottie and her followers circle up, close their eyes, and repeatedly chant, "We hear the Wilderness, and It hears us" (S2E6, 27:00-28:13), calling on the force of the Wilderness. Here, the "wild" manifests itself as a queer re-enchantment that utilizes ritual to justify the non-normative, monstrous, and wild nature in the teenagers that ultimately follows them into adulthood.

To understand what re-enchantment is, Max Weber's disenchantment needs to be discussed first. Disenchantment is the belief that there are no longer supernatural forces or magic in the world, rather everything can be explained through scientific logic (Gerth and Mills, 1946).

Thus, re-enchantment is a rediscovery of magic in the world, or a reawakening of the soul (Moore, 1997). For both the teenagers and adults, this queer re-enchantment manifests itself through (1) Lottie's position as a spiritual leader and (2) the enactment of ritualistic hunting, while the teenagers also utilize (3) storytelling to justify their monstrous actions. It is in these moments that the queer and feminist wild is on display, utilizing queered understandings of re-enchantment to legitimize their monstrous nature.

Yellowjackets moves between timelines, blending the past with the present, with some of the teenagers and adult survivors making references to "It" or the Wilderness." Teenaged Lottie starts to concretize belief in the Wilderness, eventually becoming a spiritual leader for them all. Most of the group initially ignores her visions and premonitions, but once unexplained instances occur that provide them with food while they are starving, the teenagers take their first steps towards re-enchantment. This involves "mak[ing] local nature a concrete element in daily life" and "surrendering...authority and initiative to nature" (Moore, 1997; p. 3). Lottie begins praying to the Wilderness before they eat, starts a prayer circle, and even offers the Wilderness ritualistic blood sacrifices to keep the group's hunter safe. Lottie's ritualistic actions are thus "filling a God-shaped void" for the group, a core tenet of re-enchantment (Landy and Saler, 2009). Reddit affirms this representation of Lottie with many threads on the subreddit discussing how she is positioned as a "Christ-like figure" (u/shdjvjsxjv, 2025; u/Virtual_Theme, 2021). While Lottie's initial spiritual actions do not express the monstrosity and subversiveness associated with the queer and feminist wild, this spirituality opens the door to more extreme and monstrous actions that make up facets of the queer and feminist wild.

As the teenagers' time in the wilderness becomes tenuous due to a lack of food and increasingly cold weather, the group starts to fully embrace a mindset of re-enchantment to survive. In the name of "giving the Wilderness what It wants" (S2E8, 43:21-43:24), they begin

ritualistically hunting one another for food. They do so by standing in a circle and pulling cards until the only queen of hearts in the deck is chosen, signaling that person to be hunted. Natalie is the first chosen to be hunted, and Javi, the young boy with them, helps her escape, but in doing so, falls through a frozen lake and drowns. Rather than helping him out of the water, Natalie, and the rest of the teenagers stare in horror as Van yells, “the Wilderness chose!” (S2E8, 50:09-50:11). The guidance of the Wilderness becomes sacred to them and is ultimately their order, their purpose, their *authority* (Landy and Saler, 2009). It is helping them not just survive, but to find meaning and purpose in the world around them (Moore, 1997). It is at this point that the teenager’s strive for re-enchantment becomes queer as they take non-normative actions to achieve spirituality. Thus, these monstrous actions exhibit a lean into the chaotic and volatile, asserting the queer and feminist wild. Users on Reddit affirm the immense influence that the hunt has over the teenagers, noting that it gives them “thrill and purpose” (u/dusty_air, 2025).

In the aftermath of their first monstrous and ritualistic hunt, Van, one of Lottie’s loyal spiritual followers, begins to tell the rest of the group a story about “a place called the Wilderness” (S2E9, 44:48-44:51). Thomas Moore (1997) notes that storytelling is a key facet of re-enchantment and pushes individuals towards “genuine moral insight...about what is right and wrong and who is on the side of good.” (p.243) In an aptly named episode, “Storytelling,” Van continues her story saying that “[the Wilderness] was beautiful and full of life, but it was also lonely and violent and misunderstood.” (S2E9, 44:52-45:01). In telling this story immediately after their ritualistic hunt and cannibalizing, Van is implying that they are becoming the Wilderness, or as one Redditor calls it “nature in its primal, vast, and unforgiving form” (u/Bubb13gum, 2023). Van’s use of storytelling thus justifies their “violent and misunderstood” actions and helps them continue to find “beauty and life,” or enchantment, in the world around them, as they descend deeper into the queer and feminist wild.

These ideals of re-enchantment to justify monstrous and wild actions follows the young women into adulthood. The conflict of the adult timeline entrenches the survivors in a blackmail scheme that begins with each of them being mailed a postcard that includes references to their time in the wilderness. Out of fear of being exposed, the survivors reconnect with one another out of fear of the authoritative Wilderness. The survivors reconvene at adult Lottie's "intentional community," deep in the forest of upstate New York. It is seemingly cult-like with one character even joking, "Keep your eyes peeled for the black and white Nikes," in reference to the infamous Heaven's Gate cult (S2E6, 50:22-50:25). This framing of Lottie being a cult leader-like figure harkens back to her enchanting, "God-like figure" in the wilderness that led them to become re-encharmed with the world. This is best exemplified by Van's agape mouth and shell-shocked reaction to seeing Lottie for the first time since their time in the wilderness. Van was an ardent follower of Lottie's, so seeing her again brought back the feelings of enchantment she felt as a teenager, almost like, as one Redditor put it, "a disciple seeing that Jesus rose again" (u/postteenagebitch, 2023). Similar to Lottie's position as a spiritual leader when they were teenagers, she is not yet expressing monstrous, violent, and wild actions, rather she once again opening the door to re-embracing the queer and feminist wild for the adults.

Upon reconnecting with one another as adults, Lottie makes the point that all their lives are declining in one way or another. Using her spiritual authority, Lottie tells the rest of the survivors that the Wilderness will not stop making their lives miserable unless they "give it what it always wants" (S2E8, 43:21-43:24). "What it always wants" is in reference to the ritualistic hunt and cannibalization of one another that they performed in the wild to both help them survive, but to also appease the Wilderness. By centering rituals, the adults are continuing to defer to the authority of the Wilderness, and recognizing the enchanting power that it holds. During the hunt, Natalie is killed by mistake, with the group assuming the Wilderness was

making up for Natalie not dying during their first hunt as teenagers. Following her death, Lottie states, “We gave it what it wanted. It is pleased with us,” (S2E9, 55:37-55:44) highlighting her continued belief in the enchanting force of the Wilderness. Just as they were as teenagers, the adults are similarly using the re-enchanting force of the Wilderness to justify their enactment of the queer and feminist wild.

While the true nature of the Wilderness is something that continues to puzzle, and even frustrate viewers, it is also a source of generative commentary for critics. Richard Lawson, a critic for *Vanity Fair*, notes how the monstrous queer and feminist wild is justified through re-enchantment, saying, the Wilderness acts as “a comment on the primordial savage within us all” (Lawson, 2023). It is only through the re-enchanting belief in the Wilderness that the teenagers and adults find justification of their monstrosity. Writer Jonathan Lisco says that the teenagers’ initial descent into cannibalism is “the *least* transgressive thing they may do” in the second season of the show (Hadadi, 2023). This quote comes from promotional press for *Yellowjackets*’ second season, and by the end of season two, it can be assumed that Lisco is potentially referring to the teenagers’ ritualistic hunt as the *most* transgressive thing they do as this instance of cannibalism is done with purpose. The critics and writers are thus positioning the teenagers’ belief in re-enchantment and subsequent ritualistic hunt of one another as a monstrous, transgressive, and wild action that intensifies the queer and feminist wild. These manifestations of the queer and feminist wild work to craft novel representations of women by expanding the boundaries of spiritual expression depicted on network television to encompass the monstrous and wild.

The queer and feminist wild as a queer re-enchantment manifests itself through acts of monstrosity and wildness reflected in their faith in the Wilderness. These actions place an emphasis on ritual that works to justify their transgressive and subversive actions, up to and

including cannibalism. It is only through principles of re-enchantment that the women can learn to live with themselves and the queer and feminist wild that lurks within them.

Conclusion

Throughout this work, I have shown how the queer and feminist wild manifests itself within *Yellowjackets*' narrative. Moving past simply being a "provocative" and "compelling" program, the invocation of the queer and feminist wild highlights the ways that expressions of non-normative femininity and feminine sexuality can be used to craft novel representations of women that expand the possibilities and subjectivities for women on network television. To explore this, I conducted a textual analysis of *Yellowjackets* narrative and dialogic elements where expressions of the non-normative, chaotic, and volatile queer and feminist wild are present. I also conducted a paratextual analysis of interviews with the writers and actors, critics' reviews, and posts on the r/yellowjackets subreddit to understand if the queer and feminist wild is enacted consciously and recognized by those at the various stages of production and consumption of *Yellowjackets*. In analyzing *Yellowjackets*' narrative and dialogic elements, I found that the queer and feminist wild is enacted in three main ways: (1) as a queer geographic space, (2) as a feminist state of mind, and (3) as a queer re-enchantment. The change in geography ultimately affected the teenagers' social realities by removing them from everyday norms surrounding femininity and sexuality. Only then did the teenagers experience a devolution that allowed their monstrous and wild nature to emerge. The young women also experienced a shift in their state of mind towards feminist-focused knowledges where women were now central to survival, rejecting male authority and embracing the queer and feminist wild through the monstrous act of cannibalism. Once settled in their new environment and mindset, the teenagers experience a queer re-enchantment where an emphasis on rituals and spirituality justify their increasingly wild and monstrous actions. Furthermore, the paratextual analysis highlighted that

the queer and feminist wild is indeed realized by individuals at almost every stage of the production and consumption process. This realization points towards a televisual culture that seeks to craft more expansive representations of women that highlight the non-normative, or wild, aspects of femininity and feminine sexuality.

There are a few limitations in the paratextual analysis to consider, such as interview responses potentially not being representative of an individual's true thoughts and users on a subreddit not being representative of the average viewer. Even so, it is still telling *Yellowjackets'* centering of themes related to the queer and feminist wild are what make the show as popular as it is. *Yellowjackets'* boundary pushing representations of femininity and feminine sexuality and their comfortability in exploring the monstrous has crafted a show that will interest viewers and critics alike for years to come.

Currently, there are only two full seasons of the show released with the third airing weekly through April 13, 2025. Depending on where the program's narrative goes, future research could analyze *Yellowjackets'* teenage timeline from a Foucauldian perspective, delving into how power is socially constructed when distinctly queer and feminist knowledges are privileged. As I have shown, *Yellowjackets* lends itself well to a queer and feminist reading, so analyzing *Yellowjackets* from a Foucauldian perspective would keep in line with the program's distinctly queer and feminist themes. Furthermore, other future research could use the queer and feminist wild to interrogate other female-led survivalist programs, such as *The 100* (2014-2020) and *The Wilds* (2020-2022,) to understand if the wild and monstrous is invoked in similar ways as in *Yellowjackets*. No matter how future research may conceptualize of *Yellowjackets* and other similar programs, what will persist is *Yellowjackets'* penchant for pushing televisual norms and embracing the queer and feminist wild.

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***Yellowjackets'* Female Representation Bites Back**
(Public-Facing Piece)

In a moment punctuated by the Trump administration and radical conservatism on the rise, women across the country are panicked, feeling trapped in a system that was not made with them in mind. Wouldn't it be nice if we could all escape into the woods for the next year and a half and try to see if we could come up with something different? Showtime's *Yellowjackets* shows us that "different" may not always mean "better."

Yellowjackets, the show that *Vox* called "the next *Lost*" (St. James, 2021), is an exploration into the unrestricted and liberated human condition, granting viewers a look into what happens when teenage girls are given the freedom to build out a world for themselves. While some may not know *exactly* what *Yellowjackets* is about, I assume that most people have heard about 'the teenage cannibalism show' where a whole bunch of teenage girls go insane and start eating each other. While some showrunners may not appreciate the oversimplification, *Yellowjackets*' creators recognized that they cornered the teenage cannibalism market when they opened their season three trailer with a voiceover: "Once upon a time, a bunch of teenage girls got stranded in the wilderness, and they hunted their friends, feasted on their flesh, and then went completely nuts" (Showtime, 0:10-0:29). It may sound like a gore-fest to most people, but in fact, the cannibalism in *Yellowjackets*, to quote creator Jonathan Lisco, "the *least (sic)* transgressive thing they...do" (Hadadi, 2023). Rather, it is the thought experiment in a gender-swapped *Lord of the Flies* that showed how teenage girls left to their own devices are some of the most brutish and savage creatures.

For those of you who have not yet seen *Yellowjackets*, let me quickly catch you up. The show follows the lives of a New Jersey high school girls' soccer team in 1996 on the way to the national championship in Seattle when their plane crashes in the Canadian wilderness. Stranded for 19 months, the team struggles to survive but ultimately succumbs to cannibalism and eventually ritualistically hunts one another for survival. The program also follows the survivors

of the crash 25 years later as they become wrapped up in a blackmail scheme that threatens to expose the brutish, cannibalistic, and murderous actions they committed in the wilderness. Through dual and interconnected timelines (one in 1996 and the other in 2021), *Yellowjackets* slowly reveals how the past informs the present, and how trauma never quite leaves you. Together, this crafts a thrilling survival drama imbued with a nostalgic essence supported by evocative needle drops and a cast of 90s darlings including Christina Ricci (Adult Misty), Juliette Lewis (Adult Natalie), and Melanie Lynskey (Adult Shauna).

To quote the queer cult classic *Jennifer's Body*: “Hell is a teenage girl,” and *Yellowjackets* bottles up that essence perfectly. From the meaningless petty drama that teenagers are known for to the ritualistic cannibalism that the teenagers partake in, the young women of *Yellowjackets* show that they are hell and then some. Unsurprisingly then, Karyn Kusama, the director of *Jennifer's Body*, also directed the pilot episode of *Yellowjackets*. Her masterclass in girlhood, gore, and grief crafted a pilot episode deemed one of the “best new television show[s] in a decade, with one of the strongest pilots ever made” (Wittmer, 2022). But how did *Yellowjackets* become the success that has become when Kusama’s 2009 film--with similar themes of trauma, girlhood, and cannibalism--was deemed a box office flop? Well, the answer lies in *Yellowjackets*’ careful construction and invocation of a type of feminine representation that works against and refuses narrow notions of femininity.

Yellowjackets’ narrative works to (literally) eat away at a long history of male anti-heroes on television. Instead of characters like Tony Soprano or Walter White, *Yellowjackets* offers up Shauna Sadecki (née Shipman) as both the stay-at-home soccer mom and a cold and calculated butcher. *Yellowjackets*’ invocation of feral and often monstrous femininity thus gives women the opportunity to explore what happens when they are provided with the freedom to live unencumbered by the patriarchal strictures of everyday life (Spoiler Alert: things do not go well

for the men in their lives, both as teenagers and adults). While I do not intend to imply that traumatic experience of being stranded in the wilderness is inherently positive, or that women should start ritualistically hunting, murdering, and cannibalizing the men in their lives, *Yellowjackets*' representations of femininity offers female audiences fresh and creative portrayals of strong women who are simply trying to survive. But it is important to remember that in a time where conservative political leaders have overturned fundamental women's rights cases, like *Roe v. Wade*, these representations of the feral feminine are needed now more than ever.

In *Yellowjackets*, the days of helpless women on screen who must be protected by the male lead are no longer. Women are the only available path to survival, and that is made clear quickly after they crash-land in the wilderness. Their two male coaches are either killed or rendered disabled in the crash, leaving their dorky equipment manager, Misty (Samantha Hanratty), who has "[taken] the Red Cross babysitting training course -- twice" (S1E2, 10:05-10:07), to lead them. While this may sound like the makings of an absolute disaster, *Yellowjackets* shows that when you give young women the space to explore and build out their own world for themselves, you would be surprised what they are capable of.

A few weeks into their stay in the Canadian wilderness, the teenagers have found shelter in the form of an abandoned cabin near their crash site, and they are already hunting game thanks to the stellar marksmanship of the group's stereotypical burnout, Natalie (Sophie Thatcher). This new and uniquely feminist existence that the young women have built for themselves is perfectly punctuated by a comedic scene where the girls have put two pots over the fire: one for their breakfast, and the other for boiling their makeshift menstrual pads as the lone teenage boy with them looks on in revulsion after getting the two pots confused.

The feminist-focused existence that the young women of *Yellowjackets* have carved out for themselves in the wild not only grant them power and agency, but the wilderness also facilitates a change in the way they structure their lives. No longer are the days of soccer games and house parties and high school drama; the young women must learn to live with the trees, the dirt, and most importantly, with each other. The harmful high school hierarchies that governed their existence back home no longer matter anymore, which can be seen when the stereotypically popular team captain, Jackie (Ella Purnell), is literally pushed aside by her team in favor of their dorky equipment manager who has advanced first aid skills. In true *Yellowjackets* fashion, nothing is ever coincidental and Jackie's isolation from the rest of the group ends in them freezing her out, literally. At the end of season one, she freezes to death after sleeping outside the night of the first snowfall following an intense fight with her best friend, Shauna (Sophie Nélisse). Just like our favorite cannibalistic teens, the wilderness is a cruel and unforgiving place where even popularity and influence cannot promise you safety.

After surviving their first six months in the wilderness, the young women's first winter finally breaks them as they give themselves over to intense and cult-like rituals and new forms of spirituality. Lottie (Courtney Eaton) becomes the group's de facto leader (think Jim Jones or David Koresh level cult-y). She holds daily prayer circles where they listen to what the wind and the trees have to say to them and makes their hunters drink tea that includes drops of her blood. The emergence of a belief system of any kind (no matter how insane it may be), signals that the young women of *Yellowjackets* have successfully met their basic needs and built out a world for themselves from the ground up that they can now dabble in their own piety. Unfortunately, though, part of this newfound spirituality includes ritual sacrifice in the form of drawing cards. Whoever draws the queen of hearts is hunted by the rest of the group and killed for food. Even though the young women's sacraments may be unconventional, what about their experiences so

far have been? If you thought the trees and the wind were speaking to you, ritualistic cannibalism might not be off the table.

Yellowjackets' third season, which is currently airing weekly until April 13, 2025, has fast forwarded through the rest of the teenager's first winter after their shelter was burned down, presumably by their coach who denounced their cannibalistic actions. Now in their second spring, they have created a utopia for themselves outfitted with small huts, a pen full of livestock, and tables to eat at. The appearance of new digs and a stable food source (that doesn't come from a teammate) coincides with the disappearance of Coach Scott (Steven Krueger). Once they locate him, they capture him and try to get him to admit to burning down their only shelter. While nothing can truly be *that* shocking in a show centered around cannibalism, it is a tough watch to see Coach Scott charged with murder, tried for his crimes, and sentenced to death. (Somehow for a group of cannibalistic teens, they still had the decency to give him a trial. Who would have thought?) After he is killed, the young women decide to "honor" Coach Scott by dancing and feasting on his flesh even though they have other non-human sources of food. As with anything else in *Yellowjackets*, once you think things could not get any darker and seedier in the wilderness, the plot is taken that one step further, granting these young women the ability to truly be judge, jury, and executioner.

While cannibalistic teenage girls are scary, provocative, and make for great television, the choices they face and the monstrosity they enact is something that in some way, shape, or form lurks within us all, just waiting to be unleashed. And maybe that's the real horror of it all.

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