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From Disney to LGBTQ tales: The South-American Snow White in *Over the Rainbow: Um Livro de Contos de Fadxs*

Priscila Mana Vaz, Janderson Pereira Toth and Thaiane de Oliveira Moreira

In that cruel mirror, she began to see her deformed face and hated herself more than ever, even more than the stepmother, who had left her.

'THE RESURRECTION OF JULIA', LORELAY FOX.1

Across the internet one finds a huge number of memes highlighting the wealth of Disney animated characters connecting them to LGBTQ motifs. However, despite a strong popular desire to see such progressive characterizations, the Disney studio has not yet produced any animated films with a LGBTQ theme or character. However, in 2016 a book came to the attention of Disney fans titled *Over the Rainbow: Um Livro de Contos de Fadxs* (Over the Rainbow: A Book of Fairy Tales). The book, written by a group of Brazilian authors, blends famous stories such as *Snow White* and *Cinderella* together with LGBTQ motifs, answering something of a popular desire among Disney fan culture to see this engagement with identity. The



book has no connection with Disney in institutional terms, but, as social media revealed, it proved to be 'a mind blow to fans'.²

The mixing of Disney characters with LGBTQ themes had certainly proliferated on the internet since the release of the film Frozen (Chris Buck and Jennifer Lee, 2013). The narrative of a princess who comes to the throne without having to marry a prince was well-received by the LGBTQ community, who saw it as an opportunity to be represented in Disney's animated movies. Due to Elsa's attitudes and actions in the film, some fans suggested that the princess could be gay.³ This movement resulted in a lot of related content circulating on the web produced by Disney fans that began to explore LGBTQ identities through the Disney style of animation. It is in this context in which the story A Ressurreição de Júlia - Branca de Neve (The Resurrection of Julia - Snow White) was released. The story is the last tale in the Over the Rainbow book and concerns a transsexual girl by the name of Júlia. The narrative is based on a mix of references from the Brothers Grimm version as well as Disney's 1937 animated feature. However, to understand the context of Over the Rainbow's release, it is first necessary to look back at the historical relationship between Disney's films and fairy tales, as well as the international release of Snow White outside of Hollywood.

Disney's *Snow White* first arrived in Brazil in 1938. The film had an impressive worldwide circulation and was re-released several times in the United States.⁴ Due to its positive reception, Disney's feature-length animated cartoon strengthened the circulation of the *Snow White* tale across various parts of the world. In fact, the film began a tradition in the Disney studios of adapting the fairy tales to the cinema and helped to construct what would become the great empire of Disney, albeit in a sanitized and infantilized mode. Jack Zipes considers how Disney subverts the original fairy-tale stories as part of his adaptations, by bringing together moralizing questions with utopian universes. However, in doing so, Disney conquers viewers from around the world and consolidates, once and for all, animation's place in the twentieth century. The success of Disney's adaptations therefore depends not only on the tale but also on its use and distribution in society, as we will see in the Brazilian case analysed in the following paragraphs.

In *Over the Rainbow*, the creative universe that the authors inhabit is imbued with multiple references and allusions to Disney animation. One of the authors, Lorelay Fox, who also is a YouTuber, shows her references in a video produced to coincide with the release of *Over the Rainbow*. Alongside Disney's moralizing subversion of established fairy tales, its animated productions have been further re-appropriated by different audiences and in different contexts, including LGBTQ communities. The purpose of this chapter is therefore to understand how Disney's fairy-tale features have been adapted by the LGBTQ community and across Brazilian social media





and to examine how online users represent LGBTQ narratives through the Disney animated style.

Fairy tales, entertainment, LGBTQ and the need to be represented

According to a study presented by GLAAD, an organization that aims to analyse how the media portrays LGBTQ communities, Disney still has multiple steps to take in the process of building a more inclusive image of LGBTQ characters.⁵ Their study, called the Studio Responsibility Index Report, examines how the major film studios represent LGBTQ people/characters in their productions.⁶ One of the interesting points highlighted in this study is the 'straightwashing' phenomenon, where there is the omission of a character's LGBTQ experience by turning it into heterosexual one and/or eliminating their identities or love interests. A good example of this practice is adaptations of the characters who are openly LGBTQ in comic books, yet who end up straightjacketed in heteronormative roles, such as the characters of Valkyrie and Korg in the recent Marvel adaptations of *Thor: Ragnarok* (Taika Waititi, 2017) and Ayo and Aneka in *Black Panther* (Ryan Coogler, 2018).

For Disney as a corporation, it is strategic to think of multiple markets, creating productions that are successful both in the East and in the West. An example of this differing acceptance can be detected in responses to their live-action version of *Beauty and the Beast* (Bill Condon, 2017), which featured the character LeFou, and was banned in several markets, mainly those in Asian, after the director Bill Condon declared in the premiere that the character was gay.⁷ The PinkNews portal conducted an analysis suggesting that the movie *Beauty and the Beast* was heavily impaired in conservative markets compared to the release of *Spider-Man: Homecoming* (Jon Watts, 2017), for example, although the first film surpassed the latter in more liberal markets, for example, the first movie made \$504 million at the US box office and the second made 'just' \$278 million.⁸

According to the GLAAD survey, in 2017 Walt Disney Studios released eight films, of which only one included LGBTQ representation. The only movie that has passed on the Vito Russo Test (a kind of adaptation of the Bechdel test for the LGBTQ cause, named in honour of LGBTQ activist and filmmaker Vito Russo) was their version of *Beauty and the Beast*. The report insists that Disney historically has the worst market history when it comes to the representation of LGBTQ characterization from all the studios tracked in the report.

The adoption of policies for the insertion of LGBTQ characters is something that Disney needs to apply in its productions, in addition to









the possibility of profiting from sales of products for LGBTQ consumers, a practice known as Pink Money. One example of this capitalization is the sale on the official website of Mickey Mouse ears in the colours of the rainbow flag, a symbol created by Gilbert Baker and adopted by the LGBTQ community shortly before the month of LGBTQ pride. Another example of pink money capitalization is the 'Gay Days' at Disney events. These events take place every first Saturday in June and bring more than 100,000 people to Disney's theme parks and resorts annually (CLOUD, 2010). With its first edition being held in 1991, the event brings together thousands of people dressed in red shirts, a proud symbol of a non-normative presence at Disney.

It is interesting to think of this displacement of LGBTQ community representation that is often linked to Pride Parades and now, with many having children, are occupying traditional spaces of family fun, such as Disney. As much as the event brings thousands of people to the Disney theme parks, the event was not recognized officially in the Disney calendar until 2019. However, while Gay Days have long been an unofficial tradition at Disney parks in the United States, Disneyland Paris will host the company's first official LGBTQ pride event. The issues presented in this chapter have as their main point the representation of LGBTQ people in literary or media works. The story chosen to be analysed in this chapter helps us reflect on these needs of public representation for certain kinds of identity. As pointed out by Fox,

It's cool that we always look at the movies trying to see something beyond the obvious that they show. I believe that nowadays more and more drawings shows this kind of thing [representativeness]. They try to be more inclusive. They talk about various issues of gender, sexuality, even in an almost subliminal way. But who is affected, perceives the marks and identifies itself and feels happy.¹¹

In this sense, it is interesting to observe how the culture of films and other works permeates consumption by linking a sense of community, belonging and sharing of affections. Fox continues that 'I think the big difference when you read fairy tales and you are the LGBTQ audience, you never really identify with those tales. You see a little boy who met the little girl and they lived happily ever after, but you want to find a little boy too. But there was never a stories like that, so we rewrote the stories.'12

Among the strategies to meet this need for representation, fanfictions (better known by the abbreviated forms 'fanfic' or 'fic') that are, as the name intuitively indicates, 'fictions created by fans' appear as the best alternative. These are stories that appropriate the characters and/or universe existing in an already published work (a book, an anime, a manga, a movie, a TV series and so forth) but follow a different script, created by a fan of such work and made available in online spaces.¹³ As they do not depend on the





original author's permission, these stories are spreading faster and faster on the internet and can give the dimension of success of a work based on the amount of fanfics it produces or inspires. One of the points in creating these fanfics is the creation of relationships that are not present in the original work. The new interweaving of characters can reconfigure the story giving new perspectives, including the creation of LGBTQ couples. Through an analysis of these materials on social media platforms (such as Twitter) and video sharing site YouTube, it is possible to identify the creation of such threads and videos, respectively, that mix Disney stories by changing the sexual orientation of characters (Figure 12.1).¹⁴

The launch of *Over the Rainbow* presented similarly creative possibilities for the representation of characters and the transformation of their narrative. Through a search on Twitter for the references to the book (in Portuguese), few direct mentions were found, since the name of the book is long and diffuse, but qualitatively the main observation in all the social media mentions is that of representation. Tweets mention reactions like 'Oh my god! I can't believe a just found a book that mix fairy tales and LGBTQ motifs!' and 'Over the rainbow: a book of fairy tales is a Brazilian book that mix fairy tales and real life. It was written by the LGBTQ community and it is GREEAT!' The editorial decision to invite only members of the LGBTQ community to write the book made it possible to write and describe characters and stories that contained personal experiences of members of the community, providing greater connections between the characters and the author of the story.

As a starting point for the investigation of the LGBTQ themes in relation to Disney, data collection and analysis methods were developed based on social networks analysis. Such analysis marks an intersection of Sociology, Social Psychology and Anthropology, and seeks to highlight the structures which represent actors (which can be any relational entity, though in the case of this chapter, videos) and the relations between them, understood as edges that represent the interactions between nodes. ¹⁶ We next set out to go beyond the metrics offered by YouTube, such as 'likes' and dislikes of a video, to understand how networks of content related to the LGBTQ universe and Disney are formed and consolidated. We also tried to understand what types of content are being offered and what languages are involved in these productions. For these fans, Disney and fairy tales become correspondent terms as most know fairy tales through their adaptation by the Disney studio into animated features.

To acquire the data needed, we used YouTube Data Tools, a collection of tools for extracting data from YouTube via API (v3), created by Bernhard Rieder of the University of Amsterdam and researcher of the Digital Methods Initiative. The first phase consisted of a survey of the 175 videos considered most relevant by the algorithm of YouTube itself from the search for the terms 'Disney' and 'LGBT'. Based on this data, we used the Video







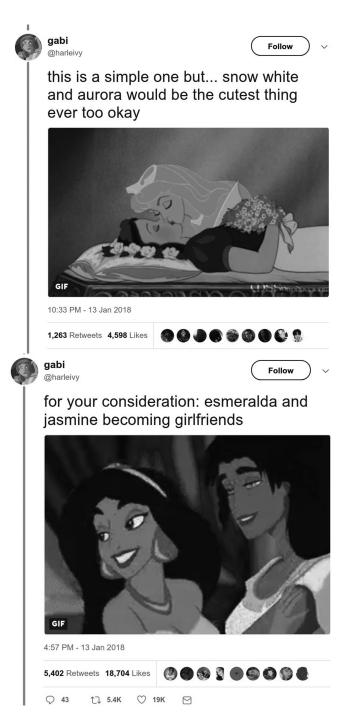


FIGURE 12.1 Disney animated characters as gay couples created by fans.







Network tool with a 0-depth search depth to understand the formation of connections made by YouTube between relevant videos and videos linked through the 'recommended videos' functionality of these videos. This survey also allowed the identification of video communities from the profiles used, offering insights concerning the circulation of content related to the theme in different networks of authority. By using algorithms that identified the connectivity of the clusters, we identified four communities (or clusters) of videos. To better understand these clusters, we categorized them from behaviours and profiles, which Fábio Malini presents as one of the aspects of network perspectivism.¹⁷ For grid perspectivism, this aspect allows us to analyse the clusters from the point of view based on affinity relations, 'which analyzed separately operate discourses, images, social bonds and internal discussions'. Thus, clusters were identified by their profile strengths and/or behaviours (Figure 12.2).

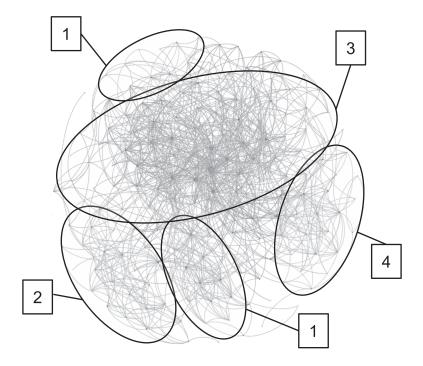


FIGURE 12.2 Cluster from YouTube data collection from 175 videos related to the terms 'Disney' and 'LGBT'.







Although the search parameters were set to Portuguese, the largest cluster, labelled as cluster 3, and with ninety-two videos, is formed by videos in English. This cluster has the most viewed and most central videos on the network.

Title	Channel	Views Count
10 Famous People Who Recently Came Out	TheTalko	5.006.525
10 Gay Characters on Disney Channel and in Disney Movies	TheTalko	4.119.437
10 Disney Channel Stars Who EMBARRASSED Disney	TheTalko	2.891.505
Did Disney Cut a Gay Kiss from Descendants 2?	Clevver News	2.384.588
6 Disney Stars You Didn't Know Are GAY!	Celebrity Statz	1.857.180

The fourth cluster comprises expressions of affection and LGBTQ community themes, such as drag queens presentations and wedding requests, most of which have taken place during Gays Days at Disney.

Title	Channel	Views Count
Beauty and the Beat Boots by Todrick Hall	todrickhall	9.550.594
Patrick and Gavin's Disney World Proposal	Gavin&Patrick	705.888
GAY DAYS! – Jun 1	shep689	180.982
One Magical Weekend 2018 – LGBTQ Pride at Walt Disney World!	One Magical Weekend	170.914
Disney World Gay Proposal Streamed on Facebook Live	Gregory Gaige	156.838

Cluster 2 represents the videos made mostly in Portuguese. At the top of this in terms of number of views is a video about a Brazilian pastor and his views on Disney, released by the Brazilian Felipe Neto channel, one of the most popular YouTubers in the world according to the list of subscribers published by *Watchin' Today*. ¹⁹ The contents are very close to that represented in cluster 3, with the creation of lists of LGBTQ characters.







FROM DISNEY TO LGBTQ TALES

Title	Channel	Views Count
DISNEY E O SILAS MALAFAIA [+13]	Felipe Neto	3.250.252
In a Heartbeat – A Film by Beth David and Esteban Bravo	TheEllenShow	991.144
A Evolução e a Polêmica das Princesas da Disney	imaginago	732.238
5 PERSONAGENS GAYS EM FILMES DA DISNEY	Teoria TV	259.715
CASAIS NÃO OFICIAIS DA DISNEY!	Jessica Ballut	225.567

The first clusters at the top and bottom present an informational dynamic similar to the second cluster, changing only the language, in this case, to Spanish. In this analysis it is possible to observe how the lack of non-normative representation causes fans to find ways to represent themselves in stories without becoming official content producers.

Title	Channel	Views Count
7 Personajes Gays en Películas de Disney	Luan Palomera	1.440.585
10 famosos que recientemente SALIERON DEL CLOSET	nalisita	1.307.905
DISNEY CHANNEL PRESENTA a SU PRIMER PERSONAJE ABIERTAMENTE 64Y en UNA SERIE		1.070.301
HOMOSEXUALIDAD EN DISNEY	De Película ATV	1.026.365
Disney Channel Censura Escena Gay en Descendientes 2	NeiterAll	796.551

Disney's disinclination to properly represent this community of its consumers results in them coming together to build their own venues and events, such as the Gay Days at Disney. However, this also causes a lack of legitimacy in the company to create products using LGBTQ symbols without being questioned by its exclusionary trading strategies.







'The Resurrection of Júlia' and Disney's Snow White

A new version of the Snow White tale appeared in Brazil in 2016, with an idea that is, perhaps, far from traditional. In 'The Resurrection of Júlia' tale from *Over the Rainbow*, Snow White is now named Julia, a transgender girl, who is abandoned by her stepmother a day before her sex change surgery. After being lost in the streets (the modern forest), she is welcomed by a group of seven transsexual characters. The insertion of LGBTQ representation into the story brings a dimension to the narrative that helps to maintain similarities with the Disney version, but places the question of identity into a space not previously explored by Disney. This adaptation also does not engage with Snow White as told by the Brothers Grimm, the version that inspired Disney's cel-animated feature.

The tale begins by presenting Júlia's stepmother Lorena and her obsession with her body and her beauty. With a very descriptive approach, we are led to the ritual of beauty that she undertakes every night. Her body, not so young, shows her age and the problems caused by her smoking addiction. Lorena is 47 years and has to take care of her stepdaughter, but does not like the girl. Lorena wakes up in a very bad mood, looks at herself in the mirror and sees her face getting older every day. As the time goes by and Júlia grows closer to adulthood, her stepmother begins to despise her even more. She looks at the girl's beauty and becomes fixated on her own wrinkled face. Both the Disney version and 'The Resurrection of Júlia' share a similar focus on the envy that the stepmothers feel for the girls. In the latter, the motivation for the stepmother to send the girl away is the same as in Disney's animated version: she hates the fact that the young girl is more beautiful than her.

The changes in the stories begin when we examine the main characters. Despite the name of the films, the Evil Queen holds a more prominent place in the narrative than Snow White, who is presented with no great emphasis in her personality or backstory. We only met a dreamy girl who sings while doing her chores, while a Prince sings about his love for the character without complication. The sequence showing the Prince's arrival is depicted as rapid, showing too the anger of the Evil Queen. From this point the Queen decides to have Snow White killed. Despite the Queen's central place in the narrative, the fairy-tale structure as proposed by Vladimir Propp shows how Snow White remains the protagonist.²⁰

The Queen is the villain of the story and remains in opposition to Snow White. She occupies an important role into the narrative, motivating the princess to become a heroine. As Zipes argues,

In contrast to the humble characters, the villains are those who use words and power intentionally to exploit, control, transfix, incarcerate, and





destroy for their own benefit. They have no respect or consideration for nature and other human beings, and they actually seek to abuse magic by preventing change and causing everything to be transfixed according to their interests.²¹

In the next sequence, the Evil Queen asks one of her employees – The Huntsman – to take Snow White into the forest to meet her death. The Queen demonstrates 'no respect for other humans', asking The Hunter to bring Snow's heart in a box.²² At this moment she consolidates herself as a villain

However, in 'The Resurrection of Júlia', the duality between the girl and her stepmother is not what guides the narrative. The tale is more concerned with Júlia's journey to find herself than any battle with a villain. From this perspective, the story begins to connect more directly and effectively with LGBTQ themes. When the tale presents Júlia, about nine pages of the story are used just to introduce the girl and her backstory. We are introduced to a young rich girl who attended the best schools. She begins to find (and identify) herself as different when she travels with her father to Disneyland. Here is the first direct reference to the Disney universe. The girl meets the Disney Princess and returns to her school telling her friends that she wants to be a princess. From this moment on, we (and Júlia) understand her desire to be a transgender girl. Júlia is impacted because of the bullying she suffers, but at her home, her mother and father accept her as she is. However, when her parents die, she is forced to live with her stepmother.

For Tzvetan Todorov a fairy tale is a story where 'the hero has a superiority over the reader and the laws of nature'. ²³ In this sense, 'The Resurrection of Júlia' does not qualify outright as a fairy tale. But as Zipes tells us of such stories,

It is the transgression that makes the tale exciting; it is the possibility of transformation that gives hope to the teller and listener of a tale. Inevitably in the course of action there will be a significant or signifying encounter. Depending on the situation, the protagonist will meet either enemies or friends.²⁴

Given Zipes's definition and emphasis on the 'possibility of transformation' and despite the absence of magic in the narrative, 'The Resurrection of Júlia' can be understood as much a fairy tale as Disney's own adaptation of *Snow White*. This is because what the story presents next is a complete change in Júlia's life. From this point on, Júlia is poisoned by her stepmother (as in Disney's version) but with drugs, not with an apple laced with poison, and she is abandoned on the streets. In Disney's telling of the tale, the poisoning of Snow White occurs only at the end of the narrative and leads to the 'happy ending' and her awakening by the Prince. By comparison, Júlia









suffers throughout as she is poisoned twice, and her life is in danger during almost the entire tale.

In Disney's version, and after the hunter refuses to kill Snow White, she lives in the forest where she meets the seven dwarfs. Júlia, instead, experiences very difficult situations, including living on the streets, until she gets help. But again, there are similarities between the two representations. Both girls spend some time alone and lost. In Disney's film, Snow White is scared by the forest animals, while Júlia is scared about being alone in a different, foreign city. At this point, it is clear that Disney's adaptation is designed more for children, because the animals are welcoming and become Snow White's friends. 'The Resurrection of Júlia', however, develops more adult themes in a story that relies on the dangers of living on the street.

After eleven pages describing Júlia's difficulties, the book brings to us to the 'Seven Dwarfs': the transsexual girls who welcome Júlia to live with them. The LGBTQ community corresponds to the dwarves as they are framed as a marginalized group. It is only after meeting the girls that Júlia begins her journey towards her 'happy ending'.

The 'happy endings' are very different in the two versions discussed here. *Snow White*'s ending is satisfactory because she meets a handsome Prince who saves her life with a kiss of true love. As such, this happy ending is centred on a heterosexual union. In Júlia's tale, the character's happy ending is also motivated by a male figure, and she also get married. But in this case, her own individual happiness becomes the focus. Júlia achieves her happy ending by meeting a man (a doctor) who performs her sex change surgery. They then fall in love and marry. Júlia then returns home and her stepmother is arrested. Only at the end of the tale do we learn that Lorena wanted to kill Júlia because of her homophobic behaviour towards her own stepdaughter.

Conclusion

The issue of representation is vital for social groups that are historically and structurally marginalized in society. Given their international influence, the Disney studio can play a pivotal role in building and giving a voice to these otherwise invisible parts of society. However, the LGBTQ audience is not represented in Disney's productions, opening the possibility for creating parallel narratives (including in fanfiction) in which alternative and non-normative sexuality, as well as themes of identity, can be explored. The release of *Over the Rainbow* in 2016 – and in particular its tale 'The Ressurrection of Júlia' – quickly drew the attention of Disney LGBTQ's fans and communities, taking on Disney's *Snow White* not only by borrowing its narrative structure but also by exposing the need for greater representation of the minority audiences. 'The Resurrection of Júlia' functions successfully





as a contemporary actualization of Disney's film, responding to the LGBTQ audience and their desire to be visibly represented. Despite an unofficial and unlicensed Disney version, the story was positively championed by non-normative audiences for taking the familiar story and providing an alternative vision of love, romance and identity. As one YouTuber who presents himself as gay commented, 'I had never read a book with transvestites. And I think this is very, very important, that every transvestite community can get book once at least and see themselves represented there, even if just in a fairy tale, to see their story being told.'25

Despite these positive shifts towards LGBTQ representation, some questions still remain: How much longer will big companies like Disney need to incorporate the plurality of identity we see in our society? When will these companies realize the power of visibility, and that being represented makes a difference to those who watch and enjoy their products? Society has already changed. Now it is time for the dominant narratives to change too.

Notes

- 1 'Nesse espelho cruel, começou a enxergar sua face deformada e se odiou mais do que nunca, mais até mesmo do que a madrasta, que a havia deixado'. A Ressurreição de Júlia (Branca de Neve), Lorelay Fox.
- 2 Comment extracted from Twitter about the book launch.
- 3 https://www.gaystarnews.com/article/14-disney-characters-you-had-no-idea-were-gay051013/#gs.sm8zgt and https://www.buzzfeed.com/br/alisoncaporimo/o-pessoal-no-twitter-esta-pedindo-para-a-disney-da. Accessed 30 August 2020.
- 4 According to the website IMDB.com, the movie has earned more than \$415 million around the world.
- 5 Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation.
- 6 https://www.glaad.org/sri/2018/walt-disney-studios. Accessed 30 August 2020.
- 7 https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/gay-moment-beauty-and-beast-totally-unnecessary-national-council-churches. Accessed 30 August 2020.
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- 9 The amount of money earned by the companies from the LGBTQ consumption.
- 10 Tim Fitzsimons, 'Magical Pride: Disney to host its first official LGBTQ pride event this year', *NBC News* (31 January 2019). Available at https://www.nbcnews.com/feature/nbc-out/magical-pride-disney-host-its-first-official-lgbtq-pride-event-n965396. Accessed 30 August 2020.
- 11 Repensando filmes Disney com Lorelay Fox, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uXaWYbu0Rg8.
- 12 Como você imagina seu contos de fadas?, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PgaMqEwIoiQ&t=723s.









- 13 Beatriz D'Oliveira and Marina Romanelli. 'Fanfictions e o Papel do Fã na Era da Transmídia', *Revista Hipertexto* 3, no. 1 (January/June) (2013): 1–14.
- 14 https://twitter.com/harleivy/status/952252485195968512.
- 15 https://twitter.com/ltdramababy/status/1041097024710561792 and https://twitter.com/paolastefanyy/status/959197951909335044.
- 16 Linton C. Freeman, 'Some Antecedents of Social Network Analysis', Connections 19, no. 1 (1996): 39–42.
- 17 Fábio Malini, *Um método perspectivista de análise de redes sociais: cartografando topologias e temporalidades em rede.* XXV Encontro Anual da Compós, Universidade Federal de Goiás, Goiânia, 2016.
- 18 'que analisados separadamente operam discursos, imagens, laços sociais e discussões internas' (Malini, *Um método perspectivista de análise de redes sociais*, 12).
- 19 https://watchin.today/charts/channel/top. Accessed 30 August 2020.
- 20 Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1958).
- 21 Jack Zipes, Why Fairy Tales Stick: The Evolution and Relevance of a Genre (New York: Routledge, 2006), 51.
- 22 Ibid.
- 23 Tzvetan Todorov, *Introduction à la littérature fantastique* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1970), 15.
- 24 Jack Zipes, Why fairy tales stick, 49.
- 25 Contos de fadas LGBTQ | Over the rainbow | Vitor Martins, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C_bREOgkuUQ.



