

“We Will Make It Our World:” Musicals and Queer Cultures at the Turn of the 21st Century

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## Abstract

This dissertation examines developments in the relationship between musicals and queer cultures since the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Building on existing work that has studied the rich queer history behind the genre of the musical, this project explores how this history relates to recent developments. The project is also interested in the many ways that aspects of queer history have managed to persist in light of cultural shifts. Looking for both contrasts and continuities, I hope to better understand the often tenuous relationship between queer communities of the past and present.

I focus on the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century as a time when issues of visibility, disclosure, accessibility, mainstream dissemination, technological developments, and assimilation were central to discussions surrounding queer cultures, musicals, and the intersections between the two. The turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century saw both a rise in the prominence of the “mainstreaming” of queer cultures, and similar attempts by Broadway to increase its mainstream presence and appeal. At the same time that marriage debates were happening and *Will and Grace* was airing, Broadway was building a Toys “R” Us in Times Square and transforming a theatre district associated with crime and sex into a Disneyfied, gentrified, family-friendly space. This dissertation looks at these two developments in tandem, examining a moment when both queer cultures and the musical genre were experiencing major changes in their relationships to mass culture. I examine both benefits and dangers that come from changing queer relationships with publicity, disclosure, and popular culture, and I explore how both these moments of possibility and these risks are expressed through the ways that queer communities engage with the genre of the musical.

## Résumé

J'examine l'évolution de la relation entre les comédies musicales et les cultures queer depuis le début du 21<sup>e</sup> siècle. S'appuyant sur des travaux existants qui ont étudié la riche histoire queer derrière le genre de la comédie musicale, ce projet explore comment ces pratiques historiques sont liées aux développements récents. Le projet s'intéresse également aux nombreuses façons dont certains aspects de l'histoire queer ont réussi à persister à la lumière des changements culturels. À la recherche de contrastes et de continuités, j'espère mieux comprendre la relation souvent ténue entre les communautés queer du passé et du présent.

Je me concentre sur le tournant du 21<sup>e</sup> siècle comme une époque où les questions de visibilité, de divulgation, d'accessibilité, de diffusion grand public, de développements technologiques et d'assimilation étaient au cœur des discussions sur les cultures queer, les comédies musicales et les intersections entre les deux. Le tournant du 21<sup>e</sup> siècle a vu à la fois une augmentation des politiques d'intégration des cultures queer dans la culture de masse et des tentatives similaires de Broadway pour accroître sa présence et son accessibilité. En même temps que les débats sur le mariage et *Will and Grace* se déroulaient, Broadway construisait un *Toys «R» Us* à Times Square et transformait un quartier de théâtre associé au crime et au sexe en un espace <<Disneyfied,>> gentrifié et familial. Cette thèse se penche sur ces deux développements en tandem, examinant je un moment où les cultures queer et le genre musical connaissaient des changements majeurs dans leurs relations avec la culture de masse. J'examine à la fois les dangers et les avantages qui découlent l'évolution des relations queer avec les politiques de publicité, de divulgation et de culture populaire, et j'explore comment ces chutes et ces moments de possibilité se concrétisent à travers la manière dont les communautés queer s'engagent avec le genre.

*For Sheila and Joyce Greenwood*

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## Introduction

### It's Not Just for Gays Anymore

So, put down your Playboy and go make a plan

To pick up a Playbill and feel like a man

- Neil Patrick Harris

In 2011, Neil Patrick Harris opened the 65<sup>th</sup> Annual Tony Awards with a number proclaiming that Broadway is “not just for gays anymore!” Inviting every “breeder” to the “theatre” and asking every “hetero” to “get to know us better-o,” Harris’ song announces the arrival of an era where straight audiences are now welcome to Broadway shows. Of course, by declaring this a new era of hetero-friendly Broadway, the song also asserts a historical narrative in which Broadway was, at one point, exclusively for queers. Harris’ performance thus manages simultaneously to disrupt and to reinforce an association between queer audiences<sup>1</sup> and musical theatre, reminding audiences of Broadway’s queer history even as it seems to announce that tradition’s end. Furthermore, Harris’ performance ironically embodies and asserts the very queerness that the lyrics ostensibly say is “over:” he skips in a circle with a group of sailors who then flex around him and pick him up while thrusting their hips provocatively, lets out a squeaky, high-pitched “fabulous,” welcomes audiences to “a big Broadway rainbow,” and finally ends the performance in a purple, glittery suit and ascot, notably feminizing his mannerisms after the costume change. The song, thus, performs the ironic function of embodying and emphasizing a tradition even as its lyrics seem to identify that tradition’s end<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> In this song, Harris mostly alludes to gay, male, mostly white and cisgender audiences, although this project attempts to push past that narrow frame.

<sup>2</sup> Big thanks to Kat Langdon for being the first person to introduce me to this performance, as well as the person to introduce me to Todrick Hall’s Disney fan videos, which make up a large portion of my fifth chapter.



This performance is, in many ways, the inverse of what D.A. Miller says about the Broadway premiere of *La Cage Aux Folles* in 1983. Miller argues that the explicit representation of gay characters on Broadway at the time served the seemingly contrary function of denying much of the queerness of Broadway as a whole. In other words: by creating a few examples of explicitly gay characters, musicals could draw attention to them as examples of a “small minority” of Broadway audiences and performers. They thus contained Broadway’s queerness within a few gay characters so they could then suggest that Broadway as a whole is a normative institution with only a few queers in the mix, rather than a fundamentally and structurally queer one. Discussing the gay characters in *A Chorus Line*, Miller argues that “what [the disclosure that some of the dancers are gay] really counters, of course, is the widely suspected fact that, where the chorus of a Broadway musical is concerned, gay men do not form a minority at all... three [chorus members]<sup>3</sup> come out so that *the chorus as a whole* may remain in the closet” (130). He then criticizes *La Cage* for solidifying this process: in presenting itself as “a ‘gay version’” (130) of the Broadway musical, he suggests that the show thus “works against recognizing the homosexualizing fantasmatic structure of the Broadway musical in general” (130). In 1983, a show that was ostensibly about raising queer visibility actually harmed this visibility by “caging” queerness within one play to disavow its centrality to all of the rest. Three decades later, Harris’ performance does exactly the opposite: the performance seems to declare the end of Broadway’s queerness, but is actually designed to foreground and celebrate it.

This dissertation explores the cultural, political, social and technological changes that provided the contexts for both of these moments, in which both the avowal and disavowal of Broadway’s queerness are performed, but in substantially different ways. I aim to explore the

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<sup>3</sup> Miller’s text uses the term “Gypsy,” which I have chosen not to use due to its history as a slur.

question of how Broadway transitioned from a 20<sup>th</sup> century theatre scene that denied the queerness central to its history – to the point where even shows with queer characters only served to “quarantine” them as if they represented only a small minority of artists and patrons – to a 21<sup>st</sup> century scene that does the exact opposite, explicitly celebrating the queerness central to its entire history, only to then use this celebration as a launchpad to make Broadway more palatable to a larger audience.

I focus on the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century as a time when politics of visibility, disclosure, accessibility, mainstream dissemination, assimilation, and representation were central to discussions surrounding queer cultures, musicals, and the intersections between the two. The turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century saw both a “mainstreaming” of queer cultures and attempts by Broadway to increase its mainstream presence and accessibility. At the same time as marriage equality debates and *Will and Grace*, Broadway was building a Toys “R” Us in Times Square and transforming a theatre district associated with crime and sex into a Disneyfied, family-friendly space. This dissertation looks at these two developments in tandem, examining a moment when both queer cultures and the musical were experiencing major shifts in their relationship to the mainstream, arguably attempting to “clean up” their image for mass consumption. I will consider the implications of queer cultures’ changing relationship to visibility and the mainstream, exploring both the dangers of these developments and the possibilities for resistance that have emerged. Examining both the queer dynamics of recent musicals on stage and screen, as well as the practices and communities formed by queer audiences in response to them, I will provide a detailed analysis of the ways that queer relationships to the musical have changed in response to these larger developments in queer cultures at the turn of the century.

### What is the “Turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century?”

Spring will turn to fall

In just no time at all

- *Pippin*

Any attempt at periodization must acknowledge the fact that there are no clear-cut boundaries that distinguish time periods from each other. Despite the fears of Y2K panic, the world did not, in fact, change dramatically and immediately at 12:01AM on January 1, 2000. Similarly, this dissertation does not refer to the 21<sup>st</sup> century in the hyper-literal sense of “everything that takes place after January 2000,” but rather to the decades on either side of the millennium, which saw major cultural and political shifts. I am referring to the period that saw the development of the World Wide Web (released to the general public in 1991), its progression into Web 2.0 (often placed around 1999) and the rise of social media (MySpace launched in 2004); 9/11 (2001); the gentrification of Times Square (which largely became noticeable in the 1990s); the increase in celebrity “coming outs” (k.d. lang in 1992, Melissa Etheridge in 1993, Ellen DeGeneris in 1997, George Michael in 1998, Rosie O'Donnell in 2002, both Lance Bass and Neil Patrick Harris in 2006, and Chaz Bono in 2008); wide public response to the deaths of Brandon Teena (1993) and Matthew Shepard (1998); a series of “first gay kisses” on television (*L.A. Law* for women in 1991, *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* for a more emotionally-weighted kiss between women in 1995, *Dawson's Creek* for a meaningful kiss between men in 2000 and *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* for a sustained relationship between women who kiss in 2001); both the institution (1993) and repeal (2011) of Don't Ask Don't Tell (which was later followed by Donald Trump's bigoted ban of transgender people in the military); the Defense of Marriage Act (Clinton 1996) and the first president to openly support marriage equality (Obama 2012). These

last two points (Don't Ask Don't Tell and marriage) identify a movement from one position to its complete opposite. However, I identify each side of this movement as part of the same era because both the phobic and affirmative choices demonstrate a public, visible interest in debates and discussions that had previously remained mostly unspoken.

Neil Patrick Harris is not, after all, the first person to stand on a professional stage and discuss what musicals mean to gay men: Neil Bartlett did so in 1993 with the West End musical *Night After Night*. However, there is a major difference between a short-running, relatively niche show at the Royal Court theatre in London that never transferred to Broadway (or saw any further major performances until a Fringe revival in 2013) and a performance by a mainstream celebrity at the most well-known and publicized theatre awards ceremony in the world. Bartlett's show began to make a sustained, public discussion of queer (or at least gay male) musical theatre history feasible in 1993, establishing that "musical theatre is not only gay now, but that it was gay even when it seemed most straight" (Clum 4). However, the implications of this show were not fully manifested in a large-scale public way until 2011<sup>4</sup>; thus, the issues I'm talking about developed over a period that began a decade before the year 2000, but continued to develop a decade after.

### Use of "Queer"

This project balances two, seemingly paradoxical goals in the way it approaches queer histories. The first is to create an inclusive, coalitional framework that connects with a broad variety of people who experience non-normative relationships to gender and sexuality in varying ways, and to find commonalities and moments of connection between many different people who

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<sup>4</sup> Despite the fact that Clum refers to the show as "mainstream," it hardly had a wide dissemination or mass audience outside of regular London theatregoers.

find the term “queer” empowering<sup>5</sup>. The second goal is to foreground specific differences between the varying identities that exist under the umbrella of “queer” in attempt to avoid a paradigm that generalizes one queer experience as “universal” and, in doing so, implicitly erases others. My desire is to foster a pluralistic and collaborative spirit that creates connections and allows parts of this project to resonate and connect with a variety of different queer experiences, without erasing important differences or claiming to speak for some sort of universal “queer” perspective, which of course does not exist.

Attempts to speak from a general, universally “queer” perspective typically result in the normalization of the most privileged queer voices, falsely presenting white, cisgender, middle-class, gay male experiences as being the standard, singular “queer experience” and ignoring or subjugating those whose experience of queerness does not fit this norm. In the context of musical theatre scholarship, Steve Swayne criticizes influential accounts of queer Broadway fans by D.A. Miller and John Clum for their choice to universalize a specific subculture and to suggest that their way of relating to musicals queerly is the only (or at least best) way to do so. He particularly critiques Clum, whom he argues privileges his own type of gay culture and “identif[ies] other cultures as deficient” (101). Susan Stryker points out how “all too often, *queer* remains a code word for “gay” or “lesbian,” and all too often transgender phenomena are misapprehended through a lens that privileges sexual orientation and sexual identity as the primary means of differing from heteronormativity” (214). While “queer” attempts to bridge gaps and make connections between different identities, too often it ends up simply centering a privileged few voices that drown out or attempt to “speak for” the rest through a framework designed with cisgender white men in mind.

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<sup>5</sup> This also includes moments of connection and alliance with those who do not consider themselves queer but still relate to practices in this project.

As a white, cisgender, working class, gay man, I have a very specific subjectivity through which I view and experience queerness that can not speak from a universal standpoint. My working-class background and experience as the first member of my family to attend university has heightened my attention to areas where middle-class values have informed much of contemporary queer scholarship. I outline in my later discussion of “mainstreaming” how this specific subject position has put me at odds with certain trends in academia that assume a university-educated, middle-class, urban queer subject as their basis. My experience of white privilege, cisgender privilege, and male privilege also mediate my perspective, and it is important for me to acknowledge the ways that this perspective is not a universal one, but a very specifically situated one that can not speak to a generalized, unspecified account of “queerness.”

While I want to ensure that it is clear that I can’t speak to some universal, general “queer” experience, I also want to keep this project open to potentially fruitful moments of overlap, coalition, connection, and community between various groups that find power in the commonality expressed through the term “queer”. Thus, I want to encourage moments where, for example, my discussion of gender deviance in a YouTube video has the potential to apply to many different queer groups with varying types of non-normative experiences of gender, while also recognizing that it will relate to each of these groups differently, to different extents, and that many parts of it may not even relate to some of them at all. I am deeply invested in what Cathy J. Cohen refers to as “spaces of shared or similar oppression and resistance that provide a basis for radical coalition work” (38).

In the attempt to balance a collaborative, coalitional impulse with a respect for the importance of differences, I am influenced heavily by Amber Jamilla Musser’s 2016 analysis of Audre Lorde’s writing, where she advocates for a balance between coalition politics and an

acknowledgement of the particularities of Lorde's positioning as a Black lesbian feminist. Chapter Two engages with Musser's work in much more detail, particularly her response to attempts to use Lorde's conception of the erotic to speak for feminist and queer work that deviate from a focus on specifically Black women's experiences. She argues that "this impulse to have Lorde's words embrace as many people as possible speaks to an optimism about coalitional politics and community that honors Lorde's legacy in an important way. Yet, I would like to read further into what we might gain from taking the erotic as a specific site of feminist resistance for black queer women" (351). One of my major goals as a researcher is to simultaneously develop coalition politics and connections between related – but different – groups, while also respecting the importance of the specific communities and subject positions from which ideas develop.

This balance is also particularly important to audience studies work. In 2015, Rebecca Wanzo addressed the pervasive whiteness that informs the base assumptions and frameworks of much of fan studies, pointing out how white perspectives are often treated as universal. She aims to decenter this white gaze, outlining how white-centered fan studies do not properly acknowledge the experiences of people of colour. In this project, I draw particularly from her account of the varying ways that a group can connect with – and resist – subjectivities that are similar to, but not exactly the same as, their own experiences:

James Spooner's documentary *Afro-Punk* (2003), which explores African Americans involved in the punk music scene, demonstrates the varied relationships people of color can have to predominantly white fan communities. For many black<sup>6</sup> fans, the white punk community is their community because they may have been raised in a predominantly white community. Being part of the punk community is normative. For others, the anger expressed in punk music speaks to their identity, and perhaps their black identity specifically, which demonstrates the way many texts hail people ideologically even if a text ostensibly appears to be produced for people not like themselves. For some, participating in the Afro-punk community means being part of an alternative black community. Others thus sometimes may be choosing otherness or sameness in their

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<sup>6</sup> While my own writing in this project capitalizes the word Black when referring to a group of people, I keep the author's original capitalization when citing Black authors who choose to keep a lower-case b.

participation in a fan community. These complexities become most visible when scholars focus on particular identity groups when examining fan communities (2.7).

As Wanzo argues, the connections and differences between the varying and intersectional subgroups within a larger group are vast and complex. Similar, I am aware that no experience discussed in this dissertation can claim to speak to or for all queer folks (or even all white, cis, gay men), but that each experience has the potential for varying degrees of connection and intimacy with varying different queer groups, just as much as there are likely some queer Broadway fans who may not identify with anything in this dissertation at all.

### **Queer Broadway – an Overview**

It's my world that I want to take a little pride in.

My world, and it's not a place I have to hide in

- *La Cage Aux Folles*, "I Am What I Am"

At this point, the connections between queer audiences and musicals have been analyzed, theorized, and historicized in substantial detail, and there is significant precedent for understanding musicals as a historically and formally queer genre. Stacy Wolf has explored in-depth the ways that musicals have historically appealed to lesbian spectatorships and sensibilities. Her arguments include, amongst many others, the ways that female duets in musicals create a space for intimacy between women in performance that is often denied elsewhere (a concept I explore in detail in Chapter One), and the varying ways that divas such as Mary Martin and Julie Andrews have performed gender, sexuality, and relationships with other women in ways that invite lesbian readings. D.A. Miller and John Clum have both explored ways that musicals have historically cultivated communities of gay men, focusing on queer identification with the performances of the divas who rule the world of the musical and the queer structures of feeling underlying the musical. Miller discusses musical theatre divas' celebration



of non-normative femininity, as well as the way that their performance style invokes a call to audience members to join in with and embody this non-normative gender expression (a concept which I also unpack in much more detail in Chapter One).

Steve Swayne follows up his critique of Miller's and Clum's analyses for being too narrow-focused and prescriptive by illuminating forms of gender subversion in musicals like *Rent* that don't as easily fit Miller's and Clum's models. As Swayne argues: "many of their peers approach the musical with different criteria than they do. Younger gay men have different ways of relating to the musical... and then there is the great sea of straight men and women who genuinely love the musical, some of whom can queer musicals with the best of them" (111). Swayne thus offers a model for studying the queerness of musicals that does not overly privilege or center one particular group's practices.

In opera studies Wayne Koestenbaum and Susan J. Leonardi and Rebecca A. Pope discuss the queerness of the diva figure, who also has a strong presence in the Broadway musical. Significant books in queer studies that aren't explicitly about musicals (such as Alexander Doty's *Making Things Perfectly Queer*), nonetheless, dedicate sections to discussing the queerness of musicals, and important books on musicals that aren't explicitly about queerness (such as the second edition of Jane Feuer's *The Hollywood Musical*) devote sections to their queer reception. My project thus builds on a long scholarly tradition of analyzing the significance of musicals to queer audiences.

What makes this project distinct is its temporal focus. While the scholarship listed above provides a substantial critical body of work on the Broadway musical, most of it focuses on two specific temporal periods: the "Golden Age" of Broadway from the 1940s to the early 1960s, and the post-Stonewall but pre-Clinton era from 1969-1993. While Wolf's more recent *Changed For*

*Good* has chapters on the 1990s and 2000s, and Clum accounts for some of the early 1990s, the bulk of these book-length studies focuses on musicals released before the mid-1990s; while there has been queer work done on more recent musicals, this work consists of individual articles and chapters. This project aims to provide an extended, dissertation-length analysis specifically focused on the area immediately following the point where Miller, Wolf and Clum stop: the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. My comparison of *La Cage* and *A Chorus Line* to Harris' Tony Awards performance emphasizes that there has been a major shift in the way that musicals function in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. While Miller discusses 20<sup>th</sup> century Broadway's desire to hide its historical queerness by quarantining "gay musicals" from the rest of Broadway, the 21<sup>st</sup> century sees moments like Harris' performance, or musicals like Mel Brooks and Thomas Meehan's musical adaptation of *The Producers*, where Roger DeBris calls attention to the historical queerness of Broadway and urges theatre practitioners to "Keep it Gay." Picking up on Swayne's assertion that queer musical theatre audiences are changing, this project examines how they're changing, as well as what those changes can tell us about contemporary queer cultures. Comparing and contrasting 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century musical theatre reception, I hope to better understand the present by unpacking its relationship to the past. The primary focus of this dissertation relates to two major thematic concerns. The first of these is the relationship between private and public, exploring how queer communities' shifting relationships with notions of privacy and public declaration become a primary point of tension when 21<sup>st</sup> century audiences meet 20<sup>th</sup> century practices. The second is the issue of "mainstreaming" and assimilation that comes with queer culture's changing engagement with mass culture. The following two sections are dedicated to outlining these major topics and theoretically situating my discussion within them.

### **Private and Public**

“Caption: I leapt out of the closet.”

- *Fun Home*

Many assume that post-Stonewall queer cultures, in their emphasis on pride, visibility, and “coming out,” constitute a substantially different experience from early 20<sup>th</sup> century queer life’s reliance on secrecy, codes, and the closet. George Chauncey and Heather Love complicate this distinction; Chauncey shows how pre-Stonewall queer culture was often more “out” than people like to think it was, while Love demonstrates how contemporary queer life is more impacted by the shame and secrecy of pre-Stonewall life than people pretend it is. Love gestures to Miller, who identifies Broadway musicals in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century as one of the places where a contemporary queer practice was still primarily defined by experiences of secrecy, privacy, and shame. According to Miller, Broadway spectatorship in the 1970s and 1980s had not quite followed larger trends, remaining attached to pre-Stonewall affect and experience: as John Clum argues, the closet was the “breeding ground for show queens”. At the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, however, this affect has begun to change, with piano bars like Marie’s Crisis now being featured on popular mainstream television shows, people uploading queer Broadway covers to YouTube, and songs like Harris’ Tony Awards performance gaining popular attention. It is becoming increasingly difficult to apply Miller’s argument that structures of secrecy persist as the primary affect of the show queen experience, since queer Broadway fans have begun participating more in audience practices based on visibility, declaration and public expression. A major component of this dissertation is the examination of what happens to Broadway spectatorship in the context of this shift.

It is important to note that there are major threats that come with an increased emphasis on visibility and on public declaration as a primary form of audience practice. In Chapter Five, I

discuss in detail the problems that Adam Tilford, a pianist at New York piano bar Marie's Crisis, expresses in relation to a new generation of patrons who are more interested in performing for a crowd than they are in disappearing into one, as contemporary audiences are interested in securing individual moments in the spotlight. Tilford points out how this practice has led many patrons to disconnect from the larger community of the piano bar, as their interest in solo performances puts them at odds with a larger cultural scene that is more invested in a form of collective bonding that does not highlight individual members. He also points out how these newer patrons often end up being rude and disrespectful to staff and other patrons, harming the safety of the space.

Miller highlights the importance of the ability to “disappear in a crowd” at a piano bar, and how it produces a sense of power and safety through the anonymity that a community practice can provide. In Chapter Five, I also connect this importance to spaces such as bathhouses and organizations such as the Mattachine Society, who prioritized ways that members could belong to a political and social community while maintaining the anonymity and secrecy of individuals. Newer patrons, inspired by YouTubers and social media, are often more interested in audience practices that place individual fans visibly and publicly in the spotlight, which can make the community a less secure space for those who desire the secrecy and anonymity of historical queer practices.

The pressure for contemporary queer folks to declare and disclose details about themselves publicly is also particularly dangerous for those most vulnerable to violence. Transgender people and people who are HIV positive often have a much more complicated relationship to privacy than simply “coming out and publicly declaring who they are.” One of the most popular transgender documentaries recently released is Sam Feder's *Disclosure* (2020), and

its title and themes clearly demonstrate how the pressure to publicly disclose and discuss personal information can be harmful and dangerous to transgender people. These dangers are also central themes of many major transgender media projects, such as the popular web series *Her Story* (2016) starring Angelica Ross and Jen Richards. Sam Levin has detailed how Facebook's increased rules around using "real names" (part of a larger shift in Internet culture away from the anonymity of screennames towards the use of online spaces to cultivate a public image) has caused problems for transgender users, particularly with its emphasis on legal documentation and naming. Rhetorics of visibility and declaration also often come close to mainstreaming (which I explore more in the next section): to be out and visible, for many, is directly related to the desire for larger mainstream public visibility. Public declaration, in this context, contains further risks. For example, while transgender people are becoming more visible in media and representation, Mia Fischer has extensively studied the ways that visibility often happens in media portrayals that "continue to stereotype or fetishize" trans people rather than "providing in-depth or critical coverage of issues trans people face in society" (2).

Heather Love also warns against certain trends within "pride culture" with its constant emphasis on loud, proud, public declarations of queerness. While there is, of course, power in this sort of activity, she warns that politics that mandate (or at least heavily pressure) queer communities to engage primarily in declarations of public pride have their downsides. As Love argues, shame and secrecy continue to be issues within queer communities, and too much hyper-emphasis on pride and celebration can make it more difficult for queer folks to navigate harder issues such as trauma and internalized homophobia and transphobia. Love notes that there are many ways in which "the affective lives of queer subjects continue to be structured much as they were before gay liberation" (494), and it becomes harder for queer people to process, recognize,

and deal with these issues when there is constant pressure to participate in pride-based celebration. As Love argues, “celebration gets us only so far, for pride itself can be toxic when it is sealed off from the shame that has nurtured it” (515). Love, obviously, isn’t suggesting that queer cultures need to stop being loud and proud; rather, she suggests that declaration, disclosure, and pride should not be constantly expected and demanded of queer cultures, and that there needs to be room for more moments to process and explore secrecy, shame, and the harder parts of queer life.

Despite these issues, however, there are also merits to the increased desire for visibility and public disclosure. Being able to declare one’s queerness proudly and publicly has obvious benefits and can be reassuring and empowering. Outside of the more apparent benefits that come from pride-based rhetoric, however, an increase in public declaration also brings about new ways to process trauma and shame. This project is interested in breaking apart the concepts of “secrecy” and “shame,” which are often conflated. Love’s and Miller’s writing often conflates these two terms, using them almost interchangeably when they mean very different things. Their arguments construct a binary between “secret shames” and “public pride,” which overlooks the existence of experiences such as “public shame” and “secret pride.” Part of my argument here – which I develop most substantially in Chapter Five – is that, while contemporary queer culture is placing an increasing emphasis on publicness and declaration, that doesn’t necessarily mean that this rhetoric is always bound up with an obsessive emphasis on pride and a disavowal of shame. While Love effectively highlights many circumstances in which the two phenomena do go together. I argue that the specific trends towards publicity and declaration that I observe are not synonymous with the sort of sugarcoated pride rhetoric that Love critiques. Rather, I observe moments where queer communities are becoming open about harder topics, using public

declaration as a platform to discuss trauma and shame as much as they use it to spread messages of pride. This phenomenon also has its benefits and dangers: *RuPaul's Drag Race* is notorious for exploiting performers' trauma for entertainment and Emmys (Brocklehurst). However, it is important to emphasize that shifts towards publicity and away from secrecy are *not* synonymous with movements away from shame or trauma, but rather towards a different way of addressing and processing these issues.

The types of public declaration that I highlight also carry concerns of an increase in self-serving individualism reflective of neoliberalist frameworks. As audiences become interested in having their moment in the spotlight, there is a risk that they will become increasingly interested in a sort of individualism and self-fashioning that separates them from deep community bonds. In Chapter Two, I explore the dangers of neoliberalism, and how increased understanding of liberation as a project focused on isolated individualism over community connections is a major threat to the well-being of those most vulnerable in society. As Maurya Wickstrom argues, freedom has become increasingly imagined as the pursuit of an individual, economic well-being that detaches and alienates people from each other. However, I also highlight ways where individual liberation does not always have to come at the cost of community, exploring ways that the concepts of “the individual” and “the community” can operate hand in hand. Referencing work by Audre Lorde and David Román, I explore how narratives of self-discovery where individuals break free from oppressive social systems can happen in tandem with narratives that prioritize an increased connection to others; it is often bonds with other people and with larger communities, rather than alienation, that allows people to better understand themselves. In looking at contemporary audience practices in Chapter Five and the Coda, I examine how a culture where everyone wants to perform on a stage and be a star is not always an isolating, self-

serving context. I examine ways that queer communities and events are using individual performances as a part of larger community connection, breaking down the binary between individual and community by showing how these two concepts can actually reinforce each other.

If it wasn't already clear from my citation of Heather Love, this project attempts to avoid a teleological approach to history. A project that charts a development from a closeted 20<sup>th</sup> century musical theatre spectatorship to an open and public 21<sup>st</sup> century one risks a blithely celebratory tone and an inaccurate, linear view of history. I want to emphasize two foundational principles of my discussion in this project. First: "out" is not simply synonymous with "good." While I often celebrate the possibilities and pleasures that come from the avowal and public acknowledgement of Broadway's queer history, I attempt to just as often highlight the new dangers and concerns that come with that development. Second: even as I identify general shifts in audience behaviour, I acknowledge that this behaviour is never homogenous and these shifts are never absolute or total. There will, inevitably, always be examples of moments when historical spectatorship was more public than contemporary spectatorship, and examples of unexpectedly private and secretive experiences of spectatorship now. I do not attempt to make claims for an absolute, total change to all queer Broadway spectatorship; rather, I attempt to track general shifts and "structures of feeling" (Williams 128) that characterize the current moment of Broadway spectatorship, and the turn-of-the-century shifts that led here.

### **Mainstreaming**

Is anyone in the mainstream?

- *Rent*

The second major thematic concern of my dissertation is the issue of "mainstreaming." As queer cultures interact more closely with mass culture, they risk abandoning some of their



radical politics, falling into trends such as what Lisa Duggan refers to as homonormativity, or what José Esteban Muñoz refers to as assimilationist queer politics. Lisa Duggan's influential account of homonormativity as a "politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption" (179) is a central concept in this dissertation. The mainstreaming of queer cultures can come at the price of normativizing demands that require these cultures to sacrifice their potential for meaningful political work in exchange for "a kind of political sedative – we get marriage and the military then we go home and cook dinner, forever" (189). Homonormative movements give up the potential to criticize the harms of dominant institutions, instead appealing to them for the relative privilege that they can gain from this normative appeal, leaving harmful structures unchecked. Queer scholarship in this moment is heavily invested in resisting homonormativity and assimilationist politics to call for a queer politics more invested in structural change and un-assimilated, bold queerness, and this is an investment that I share.

However, avoiding a simple binaristic distinction between "radical" and "assimilationist" politics, I recognize that many practices and communities have a more nuanced relationship to mass culture and notions of "the mainstream." I attempt to work through the complicated space of "continuing tension" between resistance and containment that Stuart Hall argues is always at play in popular culture. Thus, I resist the tendency to see an increased presence of queer artists and communities working within popular culture and mainstream institutions as an inherently negative phenomenon, and I remain open to the possibilities for meaningful change and queer-positive work that can be done from a negotiated position with mass culture. There is a space

between pure opposition and uncritical assimilation, and the majority of the artists and practices I examine in this dissertation fit somewhere in that space.

This in-between space is theorized in different ways in the work of E. Patrick Johnson, Miguel Gutierrez, Cathy J. Cohen, José Esteban Muñoz, Qwo-Li Driskill, Mary L. Gray and Waawaate Fobister, whose arguments I detail below. Most of these studies are particularly interested in the way that intersectionality complicates the idea of oppositional politics. The idea of separatist politics that position queer life as being opposed to all “non-queer” communities becomes problematized, as it ignores the ways that someone can simultaneously belong to multiple marginalized groups.

E. Patrick Johnson discusses how certain institutions important to Black communities, such as churches or family structures, can nonetheless have problems with homophobia and heteronormative frameworks. However, rather than rallying wholesale against these communities and developing exclusively external, oppositional positionings against them, Johnson instead argues that change has to come from within a place of belonging to these communities. This belonging matters because these communities have done important work in resisting racism and white supremacy, and are thus not worth abandoning because of their problems with gender and sexuality. He argues that “some queer activist groups... have argued fervently for the disavowal of any alliance with heterosexuals, a disavowal that those of us who belong to communities of colour cannot necessarily afford to make,” (6) and elaborates:

I do not wish to romanticize this site by dismissing the homophobia that circulates within  
homeplace or the contempt that some of us... have for ‘home’.... We may seek refuge in

homeplace as a marginally safe place to critique oppression outside its confines, but we must also deploy quare theory<sup>7</sup> to address oppression within homeplace itself” (19).

Johnson suggests that what may seem like assimilation is often a more nuanced, negotiated situation than some extreme oppositional stances may suggest, particularly when working from a position of intersectional oppression.

Miguel Gutierrez echoes similar concerns when he recounts a moment in which his white professor casually suggested he “divorce his parents” and he responded: “That is not an option for a kid in a Colombian family. You don’t get it.” Cathy J. Cohen also resists queer calls to reject all straight people, emphasizing the importance of straight and cisgender working-class Black people living in poverty whose lifestyles are often far from heteronormative. She argues: “in those stable categories and named communities whose histories have been structured by shared resistance to oppression, I find relative degrees of safety and security” (35). Discussing how Two-Spirit people within Indigenous nations work to resist colonialism, Qwo-Li Driskill argues that “the stance that we are – and should be – an integral part of our communities, that our genders and sexualities are something that actually *are* normal within traditional worldviews, marks Native Two Spirit Queer politics as very separate from non-Native movements.” (81-83). Writing in the field of rural queer studies, Mary L. Gray similarly argues that queer communities in rural spaces simply do not have the funds or numbers to produce oppositional communities, but that “LGBT-identifying youth and their allies use their status as familiar locals... to rework the public recognition and local belonging,” (4) and that they “live and work in communities and legislative districts that prioritize solidarity, rely on familiarity” (3). Muñoz is similarly “wary of separatism because it is not always a feasible option for subjects who are not empowered by

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<sup>7</sup> “Quare theory” refers to a specific approach to queer theory that Johnson develops in the article.

white privilege or class status” (13-14). His notion of disidentification (which I work with in more detail in Chapter Five) highlights the importance of balancing politics of belonging with politics of resistance, avoiding assimilation without fully abandoning communities that are not entirely centered around queerness: “disidentification is not an apolitical middle ground between the [assimilationist and anti-assimilationist] positions espoused by intellectuals such as Washington and Du Bois. Its political agenda is clearly indebted to antiassimilationist thought” (18).

While I benefit from white privilege and thus do not experience anything nearing the struggles against racism and racist structures that Johnson, Muñoz, Gutierrez, or Driskill do, their ideas relate to and inform my own understanding of belonging and assimilation. Following Musser’s guidance, I hope to here take inspiration from these scholars, working in coalition and solidarity. I aim to find connections with them while avoiding false equivalencies and recognizing how my situation is, of course, different from the very specific histories from which their concepts stem.

Unlike my more class-privileged colleagues, it is not as easy for me to “divorce my parents” as it is for people like Gutierrez’s professor. My working-class background, and the way that my working-class family and community inform my resistance to classism, is not something that I am willing to abandon because some people in that community have struggled to accept my sexuality. My family has a history of resistance against right-wing politicians<sup>8</sup>, greedy

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<sup>8</sup> After a Conservative MPP told my mother that the province didn’t have “a slush fund for people like you” when she called about financial concerns during a health crisis, she became politically motivated. She often approaches elected officials directly to address issues and advocate on behalf of her community, and has become a leader in church and community organizations, acting as an active voice against oppression.

capitalists,<sup>9</sup> labour violations,<sup>10</sup> and of supporting each other and their community during times of economic hardship, labour exploitation, mental health and addiction, food and housing instability, and health issues stemming from poverty<sup>11</sup>. This community solidarity against hardship and oppression is something worth cherishing, and I see the value in a claim to belonging with that community, even as I still actively refuse assimilation and push them to challenge some of their misinformed perspectives on gender and sexuality. Their history of class resistance is not something that I want to abandon to join in a separatist queer movement directed largely by wealthy middle-class leaders<sup>12</sup>.

I also intend to break apart the often-conflated concepts of cultural belonging and cultural assimilation to highlight the ways that a rhetoric of belonging does not always require one of assimilation. I highlight scholarship that points out how radical reshaping and restructuring of a community can actually be synonymous with belonging to that community: that part of someone's role in a group can be that of the "valued disruptor" whose very value to the community comes from their constant refusal to allow it to calcify or naturalize norms. The claim here is that reshaping and challenging a community's norms in radical ways is an act that benefits the members of said community; if radical opposition can be framed as a valued part of

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<sup>9</sup> After the owner of my grandfather's trailer park evicted permanent residents so he could profit more from seasonal rentals, my grandfather spoke to the press and led resistance against the owner. Before this, he was also an important leader in the park community.

<sup>10</sup> My mother is also currently working to advocate for better treatment of employees at privatized nursing homes, and has been an important figure in working to improve PPE access and employee welfare at the home she currently works in. My grandmother also has a history of struggle against exploitative employers and wage theft.

<sup>11</sup> My grandmother took in and raised many family members in addition to her own daughters due to the death of other parental figures.

<sup>12</sup> My relationship to Christianity is informed by similar principles. While the Christian church as an institution has a history of bigotry and discrimination, our community church was also the organization that kept my family from starvation when congregation members would bring groceries to my mother when she couldn't afford to buy her own. Knowing the value of the community and faith of Christianity to my family's literal survival and the ways that our community church embraced the more socialist principles of early Christianity, it is hard to entirely reject the institution, even with a knowledge of its myriad of problems.

community belonging, then it is possible to *belong* to a group without *assimilating* to its norms. In fact, anti-assimilation itself can be part of what makes someone belong.

The thinking behind the idea of this “valued disruptor” initially came from my reading of Bonnie Honig’s *Democracy and the Foreigner*<sup>13</sup>. In it, Honig provides a history of democratic societies that were founded by outsiders. Examining texts that range from Rousseau’s *Social Contract* to the 1953 western *Shane*, Honig identifies a pattern in democratic societies where a community in peril requires an outsider to come in, solve their problems with corruption and stagnancy, radically re-shape their systems and ways of living, establish a new social order, and then leave. The community’s strength and unity is thus synonymous with their radical reshaping by an outsider; it is exactly the force that is conventionally seen as a “threat” that proves the very structural foundation for that community’s thriving. However, in all of these narratives, the foreigner then leaves, allowing the community to begin calcifying new norms and standards that will inevitably develop into another normative (and possibly corrupt) system: “as long as Shane stays in town, life cannot be restored to its routine heteronormative safeties” (23). Thus begins a cyclical process whereby a community becomes stagnant and corrupt, then gets “saved” by an outsider who can shake things up and change the system, only for the outsider to leave and allow the community to begin forming new norms that will inevitably become stagnant and corrupt again. This outsider is also inevitably treated with a combination of exoticizing and dehumanizing reverence, as well as suspicion and hatred, both of which are acts of violence that cause harm to the outsider and ultimately result in their scapegoating if they don’t leave the community fast enough. Reading Honig’s account, I couldn’t help but think: what would happen if the destabilizing figure of the outsider stayed in the community? What if the community didn’t

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<sup>13</sup> A big thanks to Gale Coskan-Johnson, whose choice to assign Honig’s text, along with Harsha Walia’s *Undoing Border Imperialism*, inspired the basis for a large portion of my political perspectives and stances.

have to re-establish normalcy, but incorporated destabilization constantly into its everyday way of life? What if the outsider was viewed as a valuable member of the community who belongs in a way that is embraced, but doesn't require assimilation – if the destabilization of norms was a valuable part of community belonging instead of a position that always required some sort of outsider status?

My interest in this idea of the “valued disrupter” is also informed by the way that Waawaate Fobister articulates the role of Two-Spirit identities within Indigenous nations in the play *Agokwe*. As the narrator Nanabush says of Two-Spirit people, specifically the Agokwe of the Anishnaabe, “if they did extraordinary things in their lives that broke with tradition it was assumed that they had the spiritual authority and power to do so” (101). Craig S. Womack identifies Southeastern Indigenous nations as having tradition of “incorporating into the belief system beings who go against what is normal... anomalous beings can also be powerful; queerness has an important place. Phenomena that do not fit ‘normal’ categories are ascribed special powers” (381). Qwo-li Driskill elaborates: “Two-Spirit critiques see Two-Spirits as valuable participants in struggles for sovereignty and decolonization, even while they call into account the heterosexism and gender oppressions taking place in Native communities” (81). These examples articulate a way that someone who opposes the status quo and destabilizes a community's norms can be celebrated as an important, meaningful member of that community *because* they do so: their destabilization is in service of the community. These examples articulate a sense of opposition *as* belonging, rather than opposition in spite of belonging, and demonstrate how belonging and opposition do not have to be contrary concepts.

I do not, of course, suggest that Two-Spirit identities function in the same way as the type of community role that I articulate in this dissertation. I am not a member of an Indigenous

nation, and I am not qualified to claim an in-depth understanding of the nuances of the roles of Two-Spirit people within different Indigenous nations, especially since these roles vary from nation to nation. Thus, I want to make it clear that my formulation is not the same as Fobister's, Driskill's, or Womack's, and the phenomena I discuss are not the same. I cite these critics because they fundamentally shifted and inform the way that I think about community roles, but there is obviously a distinction between the communities that they study and the work that I am doing here. Referring again to Musser, I am attempting to engage in a coalitional politics while acknowledging the importance of distinct traditions and communities that cannot be generalized or universalized<sup>14</sup>.

My primary figure of the “valued disruptor” in this dissertation is Lana Parilla's character Regina from ABC's *Once Upon a Time*. Chapter Four examines Regina's transition in the series from a villain to a hero. A plot arc that follows a radical outsider – whose outsider status is primarily associated with deviant expressions of gender and sexuality – who becomes accepted as a member of the community that she once opposed is obviously at risk of following an assimilationist trajectory. However, I argue that Regina's relationship with the community that she joins is much more complicated; rather than assimilating to that community's norms, Regina's position consists of constantly destabilizing and disrupting that community, particularly when its members become too enraptured by heteronormative values. Characters recognize that Regina's disruptive presence actually helps improve their lives by preventing them from stasis or stagnancy, and it is exactly her opposition to the crystallization of normative structures that

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<sup>14</sup> It is important to state that the idea of belonging without assimilation has its limits. I certainly do not believe that there is room for a “valued disruptor” relationship to foundationally harmful things like the prison industrial complex, ICE, confederate military history, American imperialism, neoliberalism, colonialism, or white supremacist groups. There are some cases where a clearer oppositional stance needs to be taken; if someone's family consists of Trump supporters, it's hard to make a case for trying to belong to that community while disrupting their norms from within. Sometimes, the violence is too deeply entrenched for anything but outright opposition.



makes her valuable. As a valued community member, as well as a mayor and queen, Regina queers notions of authority and community belonging; Chapter Four examines this role in more detail, as well as arguing for the way that the show's use of a musical episode is particularly important to its articulation of queer possibilities for understanding structures of family, community, and relationships.

One additional way that I approach the concept of “mainstreaming” in this project is by foregrounding queer readings as central and primary, rather than alternative or against-the-grain. Accounts of queer culture and the mainstream are often focused on the absorption of the former into the latter. However, this dissertation makes a case for what can happen if that relationship is reversed. Rather than queer cultures shifting to fit into normative mainstream models, what if queer ways of thinking presented themselves as if they *were* the mainstream models for understanding mass culture, forcing previously dominant modes of thinking to take on the position of alternative or secondary<sup>15</sup>? In this claim, I'm reminded of Alexander Doty's comment: “I've got news for straight culture: your readings of texts are usually ‘alternative’ ones for me, and they often seem like desperate attempts to deny the queerness that is so clearly a part of mass culture” (xii). This approach is also informed by Muñoz's argument that whiteness needs to be looked at as an “other,” with other racialized positions being placed at the centre: “whiteness claims affective normativity and neutrality, but for that fantasy to remain in place one must only view it from the vantage point of US cultural and political hegemony. Once we look at whiteness from a racialized perspective, like that of Latinos, it begins to appear flat and impoverished” (“Feeling Brown” 70). In Muñoz's argument, a Latino perspective becomes the default position, and whiteness becomes the strange “other” in his analytical framework.

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<sup>15</sup> Thanks to Derek Nystrom for suggesting this inversion of what “mainstreaming” means as a way to help articulate some of my ideas about “holistic queerness”

Mainstreaming, in this sense, could be positioned as what happens when queer perspectives – like Latino perspectives in Muñoz’s argument – are positioned as the most obvious, primary, intuitive perspectives (or the “mainstream readings”), while heteronormative readings become positioned as the contingent, non-standard, subjective interpretations that they are. This approach refuses to allow heteronormative readings of popular texts to take on the status of default or universal, but rather forces them to acknowledge their own contingency.

This approach to mainstreaming manifests in Chapter One as my discussion of what I call “holistic queerness,” or a recognition of the structural embeddedness of queer histories, styles, and experiences in every aspect of the musical genre. Rather than producing “queer readings” of musicals, it is my goal to demonstrate how queerness is a fundamental structural component of these musicals. If we take it for granted that Elphaba and Glinda in *Wicked*, or Adelaide and Sarah in *Guys and Dolls* are obviously the real couples of their respective shows, and that the members of the men’s Olympic team in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* are obviously more interested in each other than they are in Jane Russell (and that Russell doesn’t care because she is more interested in Marilyn Monroe), then readings of these texts as heterosexual stories take on the status of alternative interpretation so often assigned to queer readings.

This project explores how newer musicals provide the material for this sort of position, where queer readings of Broadway *become* the mainstream ones. This is not to say that these newer musicals attempt to appeal to mainstream values; rather, they demonstrate how queer traditions are so fundamental to their stories and formal structures (and, by extension, those of musicals more generally) that it is counter-intuitive to read them as anything else. Queerness is holistically embedded into the fabric of the shows, demonstrating how Broadway history and queer history are inextricable.

## Methodology

When you know the notes to sing

You can sing most anything

- *The Sound of Music*

My methodological approach derives from Stacy Wolf's claim that musicals do "double duty – to promote conservative values *and* to provide empowering representations of women, sometimes simultaneously" (Wolf, *A Problem Like Maria* viii). As Wolf suggests, a prominent feature of musicals is that they often create some of the most conservative narratives available in popular culture despite concurrently producing visible queer and feminist reception communities. Discussing *Mary Poppins*, Chris Cuomo notes the strange disjunction between Poppins' common reception as a feminist figure, and the comparatively conservative direction of the film's narrative. Thomas G. Endres similarly points out the sharp contrast between *Rocky Horror*'s association with decadent, hedonistic sexuality and the "obvious undercurrent in the film that has a surprisingly conservative message" (207). The Golden Age musical was characterized by plots that prioritized marriage and heterosexual union, yet it was also heavily associated with queer subcultures.

Wolf's answer to this disjunction is to point out that there is a difference between the message communicated by a musical's literal narrative and that signified by its music, choreography, performance, and other formal elements. While the story may seem to produce a conservative meaning, its music and visuals may be communicating something completely different on an emotional and affective level. For example, Wolf examines in her later *Changed for Good* how a character who seems weak and passive in the plot may still read to audiences as powerful and active because of their singing and dancing: "What a character is like, the character

type, matters, but her actions, what the actor does, matters, too. Musicologist Carolyn Abbate argues that in opera, although some female roles are narrow, demeaning, passive, or long-suffering and convey weakness, the performer sings with incredible strength” (7). Christine in *The Phantom of the Opera* may not be a particularly agential character in the narrative, but people don’t go to see Christine’s actions in the story: they go to see her sing. The empowerment that spectators feel comes from her voice and her performance during the musical numbers, so audiences are able to overlook the fact that, in the literal narrative, she is what Wolf calls a “stereotypical muse” with “two emotions, love and fear” (129), who is “ultimately too passive for the character to emerge as anything other than a fetishized object of desire” (154). The queer, decadent Frank N’ Furter may be punished in the narrative of *Rocky Horror*, but he is the high point of the show’s music and visuals, which explains why he is the character with whom audiences end up siding, rather than the narrative protagonists Brad and Janet.

Methodologically, this “double duty” means that I will be focusing more on the musicals’ affective drives – communicated through visuals, music, dance, and vocal performance – than I will on their literal narratives. In fact, I am most interested in moments where these two things are in tension, when a musical seems to be communicating something very normative in its narrative, but its music tells a different emotional story. I am drawn to Wolf’s discussion of *Guys and Dolls*, where Sarah and Adelaide barely interact in the plot, but still read as very close because they sing so well together in “Marry the Man Today.” After watching a musical, an audience member is more likely to be humming a song than quoting lines of dialogue: music is often what lingers in the mind after a show or film ends. Fans buy cast albums more frequently than they buy published scripts, and are likely to repeatedly listen to songs outside of their narrative context; if someone has seen *Wicked* once, but listened to “Defying Gravity” on iTunes

every week for years, they're more likely to remember the song in detail than they are the narrative of the show. Because of Broadway ticket prices, it is also hard to see stage shows more than once, while it is extremely easy to listen to their cast albums repeated or watch recordings or covers of specific songs on YouTube. Many fans of musicals have never even actually seen some of their favourites due to geographic or financial barriers. Before *Hamilton*'s release on Disney+, there were countless fans with a dedicated love for a show that they had never seen. This dissertation thus makes a distinction between a musical's narrative plot and what I call its "musical plot," which consists of everything that is emotionally expressed by the music of the show, even if it conflicts with what seems to be communicated by the narrative. I would also go so far as to suggest that the musical plot is often *more* significant, because more people have access to the soundtracks and songs than they do the entirety of the show. I thus look to the musical plot as a source of queer potential in the shows.

This is not to say that I completely ignore narratives. If the narratives didn't matter at all, then musicals would have all been replaced by song cycles, reviews, and cabarets by now: obviously, people do care about the plot. While my analysis is primarily focused on the shows' musical structures, choreography, and visuals, I do still talk about their narratives. Chapter Two in particular mobilizes Northrop Frye's discussion of common theatrical narratives to explore how *Into the Woods* presents a particularly queer articulation of the "green world" story that Frye outlines. Chapter Four looks to the narrative openness or "volatility" (a concept I take from Jack Zipes) of fairy tale narratives as a way of better understanding the musical episode of *Once Upon a Time*. Thus, while the bulk of my analysis is built on a combination of queer cultural studies, queer political and cultural history, and a formal analysis interested in composition, arrangement,

vocal performance, acting, *mise en scene*, visual framing, staging and cinematography, I also occasionally apply narratology in my discussions of the larger narrative structures of the shows.

Finally, this analysis is as interested in what queer audiences actually do with musicals as it is in the queer possibilities of the musicals themselves. Because of this broader cultural context, my methodological approach looks beyond what is present on the stage or screen to study audience practices. This research takes on several forms. Chapter Five and my Coda primarily examine reception as its own kind of performance. I explore ways that fans react to musicals by producing their own media in response (YouTube covers, sing-alongs, live performances based on the musicals). I look at these fan activities similarly to how I examine the musicals themselves, viewing them as performances in their own right. I also examine social media posts, forum posts on sites like [broadwayworld.com](http://broadwayworld.com), and comment sections on YouTube videos for a general sense of the concerns and interests that audiences are articulating. I also engage in a combination of participant-observation (attending live events myself) and analysis of published accounts of audience activities (including an interview with the pianist for one of the piano bars I discuss) to better understand how queer spaces and social scenes built around musicals function.

### **Chapter Overview**

Each chapter of this dissertation focuses on a different articulation of the musical at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century to examine how it relates to the dynamics of publicity and mainstreaming in contemporary queer cultures. My first chapter, “Diva Duets and Dancing Through Life: Queer Structures in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Broadway” looks to new Broadway musicals to see how their structures and forms relate to the queer structures that scholars have identified in the past. The chapter explores *Wicked* and *The Color Purple*, viewing each as a new development on a

specific, historical queer Broadway structure. Connecting *Wicked* to D.A. Miller's discussion of divas and gender expression, and *The Color Purple* to Stacy Wolf's analysis of lesbian affect and women's intimacy in musicals, I argue that both of these shows develop upon their historical precedents to establish a new articulation of a previously-established queer tradition. This chapter builds on my discussion of mainstreaming and holistic queerness, where queer readings *become* the "mainstream" way to see musicals, and queerness is holistically woven into the fabric of the shows instead of quarantined off as the expression of a small minority group of fans. *Wicked* takes the feminized male performance that Miller identifies in 20<sup>th</sup> century musicals and gives it a new realization that more fully integrates it into the structure of the show; this approach allows Broadway's historic subversion of gender roles to find a new degree of impact and influence over the form of the musical. *The Color Purple* expands upon the historic queer potential of diva figure and female duets by mobilizing them in different ways to set up intimacy between mutually-empowering women as an ingrained part of the show's fundamental musical and dramatic structure. As Deborah Paredez argues, the politics engaged here are directly connected to Alice Walker's concept of Womanism, directly linked to Black women's activism. Both of these arguments make a claim for the structurally ingrained – or holistic – queerness of the shows, foregrounding how they celebrate queer identity, desire, and expression in a way that is inextricable from the rest of the shows' larger structures (and Broadway as a whole). The section then ends with a brief overview of other contemporary queer musicals like *Head Over Heels* and *Fun Home* to examine the state of contemporary "Queer Broadway."

Chapter Two, "'I'm the Witch: You're the World.' *Into the Woods* and Queer Reception" is similar to the first; however, rather than comparing new musicals to older ones, the chapter examines two different productions of the same musical in different temporal settings. I put the

initial 1987 Broadway production of *Into the Woods* in dialogue with its 2002 Broadway revival, examining how changes made to the revival reflect social and political changes between the late 1980s and the early 2000s. While Chapter One examines the potential benefits of this mainstreaming of queer dynamics, Chapter Two focuses more on its dangers. Tackling issues of homonormativity and assimilation that come with mainstreaming, I examine how the changes that director James Lapine made in 2002 reflect some of the more insidious implications of Broadway's relationship to the mainstream, discussing how much of the revolutionary queer energy of the original becomes muted or disrupted in its revival. However, I also look to moments of resistance that persist in the revival, particularly Vanessa Williams' portrayal of The Witch as a space that maintains queer and feminist rage even in an otherwise depoliticized, watered-down revival.

Chapter Three, "Creating a *Place for Us* in Disney Films" looks at how the adoption of Broadway traditions by Disney films in the 1990s resulted in a structural incorporation of queer styles and sensibilities into these films. The choice to bring Broadway writers Howard Ashman and Alan Menken to oversee Disney's animated musical films in 1989 led to a large-scale structural change in how these films were written. This began a phase referred to as the "Disney Renaissance," where Disney musical films were restructured with a "generous dose of musical theatre" (Kayvon) largely attributed to Ashman and Menken. While Disney has always produced musicals, its pre-1989 animated musicals were comprised of structures and musical styles that differ greatly from both Broadway musical theatre and other Hollywood musicals (Rick Altman even refused to categorize them as musicals because they were so different from the rest of the genre). In 1989, however, Disney's animated musicals began to resemble more closely what was happening on Broadway. I argue that, rather than queer writers trying to appeal to mainstream



sensibilities, the Disney Renaissance involved the inverse relationship, whereby a mainstream film genre (the Disney children's film) had its sensibilities challenged and fundamentally shifted by a writing duo steeped in a queer tradition (including a gay, HIV-positive Jewish man – an unlikely person to be the major driving creative force behind Disney during 1989 when Reagan and Bush were still in office). I further argue that the structure of Disney musicals before 1989 specifically excluded the Broadway and Hollywood musical structures that allowed for the most substantial queer identification and potential. While there were still rich communities of queer Disney fans before 1989 (Sean P. Griffin), these communities functioned and attached to Disney differently than other musical fans. As Disney began to sound more like Broadway, I argue that this shift brought structural avenues for queer identification and celebration – including powerful singing divas, more determined “I Want” Songs, and more prominent experiences of gender and sexual deviance – resulting in a more vocal, visible, and active queer contingent of Disney audiences.

Chapter Four, “The Song in Your Heart:” *Once Upon a Time* and the Musical TV Episode,” looks to the recent proliferation of musical episodes in television shows, examining how these episodes function in relation to other, non-musical episodes. My argument here is similar to my argument about Disney: by bringing Broadway structures and sensibilities into a serialized narrative, musical episodes are able to provide new avenues for queer investment and attachment. This happens in two ways. First, a musical can enhance and bring out queer potential that is latent in a series, responding to under-articulated or under-developed themes and concerns by giving them the expression and development that they are denied in other episodes. Secondly, a musical episode can act as a critical reflection on the ways that characters and plots are featured in non-musical episodes, as the musical genre forces the show to approach things in a

different way that queers some of their more normative tendencies. While I briefly mention other shows such as *Riverdale*, my analysis is particularly focused on ABC's *Once Upon a Time*. I will trace the underlying queerness of the way the series represents authority, redemption, and belonging, and then explore how the series' underlying queer subtext is developed and further articulated in the Season 6 musical episode, "The Song in your Heart." The musical episode forces *Once Upon a Time* to shift the way that it features characters and narratives, allowing the episode to articulate and draw out the series' queer potential in a way that is less possible in its other episodes.

Chapter Five, "Queer Broadway YouTubers," looks directly at fan practices themselves, exploring covers, mashups, and other fan videos produced on YouTube. While the first four chapters incorporate audience research and perspectives, my attention is primarily directed at the musicals themselves, looking at what they do formally and structurally to open up avenues for queer audience identification. The fifth chapter changes that gaze, analyzing reception cultures themselves to see what queer fans are doing with the potential that the first four chapters outline. This chapter looks to YouTube performances by queer artists Todrick Hall and Superfruit to see how they articulate queer responses to musicals. Hall's and Superfruit's videos respond to Disney films, stage musicals and film musicals, re-working them in explicitly queer ways and demonstrating an active use of the queer potential that I examine in the first four chapters. While it is useful to demonstrate queer possibility and potential in a text, this approach is limited unless it can move on to show how people are actively picking up on, responding to, and using this potential to create explicitly queer practices, performances and communities.

My argument here is related to my dissertation's focus on secrecy and declaration, as I argue that a major feature of contemporary queer Broadway fans is an outspoken, public

declaration of queerness. Contemporary queer musical audience practices are often based on public performance rather than the anonymity that Miller addresses in 20<sup>th</sup> century fan practices. Responding to Love's concerns about an overly-celebratory and uncritical pride-based discourses in queer communities, I argue that this outspokenness and investment in the public is not synonymous with a disavowal or denial of shame and hardship. As I argue earlier in this introduction, queer audiences are engaging in public declarations of shame and trauma as much as they are public declarations of pride; public declaration is not always prideful, and I argue that this new focus on openness is not necessarily engaged in a disavowal of negative or shameful affects. My dissertation closes with a brief coda where I discuss the Montreal queer and musical theatre communities that inspire a lot of my work, tying them into the dissertation's larger issues of mainstreaming and publicity.

As this chapter outline indicates, my project is interested in how the musical as a genre functions across different media, as my analysis moves between theatre, film, television, YouTube, and live events like singalongs and drag shows. Rather than seeing each medium as producing its own distinct, isolated tradition (Hollywood musicals as different from film musicals as different from musicals on TV, etc.), I'm interested in how they are connected by their commonalities as musicals. I do make a point of acknowledging medium specificity when relevant, and I discuss the particularities of media most explicitly in my analyses of *The Color Purple*, the Disney Renaissance, and Superfruit; however, I am more interested in seeing how musicals in different media grow and develop in conversation with each other, rather than seeing them as entirely different things. My third chapter, for example, is particularly interested in the convergence that happened when two Broadway composers started writing Disney movies, examining how this moment complicates the distinction between the two traditions by allowing

them to inform and shape each other. While medium-specific traditions have historically developed, these different media have frequently overlapped and converged; these traditions have since shaped and transformed each other enough that I argue that it is more useful to look at them in conversation to see how they inform each other than it is to look at them in isolation.

I engage, then, with what Henry Jenkins refers to in *Convergence Culture* as “the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences” (2). As Jenkins emphasizes, this convergence is not simply the result of technological development (being able to watch live broadcasts of theatre shows on television, or other situations where different media intersect through technology), but rather “a cultural shift as consumers are encouraged to seek out new information and make connections among dispersed media content” (3). Consumer behaviour is as important to convergence as industry and technology. Musical theatre fans often focus on the broader genre of the musical more than the medium through which any particular musical is presented. It is not uncommon to go to Broadway-themed events (including the Broadway Café event that I discuss in my coda) that feature songs from film-specific musicals like *The Greatest Showman*; the term “Broadway” is often used to refer to musicals that are exclusive to film and have no actual Broadway theatre counterparts. In this sense, media convergence in musicals goes beyond industry choices such as Menken and Ashman’s work for Disney or the adaptation of film musicals for stage (and vice versa), towards audience behaviours that blur the distinction between the two. Technology, industry, and audience dynamics thus all inform my decision to focus on points of convergence and connection between musicals of different media rather than taking an approach that is more bound by medium-specificity.

This dissertation is invested in advancing knowledge about how queer communities use popular media and performance as a foundation for community building, identity formation, connection, and expression. The musical has historically been one of the most important sites for all of these things for many queer individuals and communities, and this project adds to the wealth of scholarship on this historical connection between a genre and a community. It is my goal to expand on the important work that has documented the resistant, powerful, and nurturing queer community practices that have arisen out of musicals, moving this work forward into the 21<sup>st</sup> century to see how these practices are being realized now. In connecting developments in musical theatre to developments in queer cultures, I also hope to use this dialogue to better understand developments in queer communities' relationships to the mainstream and to acts of public performance and declaration. I trace these developments as queer audiences structurally and foundationally assert their belonging in media that has long worked to marginalize them, assimilate them, or reject their presence altogether.

## Chapter One

### **Diva Duets and Dancing Through Life: Queer Structures in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Broadway**

Is that me? I don't recognize.

- "What About Love" from *The Color Purple*

Because this dissertation is concerned with the relationship between past and present, the first chapter begins by highlighting two new musicals – *Wicked* and *The Color Purple* – that directly adapt and develop past conventions and structures. These shows bring the 20<sup>th</sup> century into the 21<sup>st</sup>, transforming the historical structures that they inherit as they bring them into a new context. I chose these two shows because each expands upon a specific historical structure identified by D.A. Miller and Stacy Wolf in their influential studies of queerness and 20<sup>th</sup> century musicals. The relevance of each show to a direct, well-established 20<sup>th</sup> century precursor makes these particularly fruitful case studies. Furthermore, both resist the trend that Miller identifies of quarantining “queer” musicals off from other musicals, putting them in their own separate category that thus denies the queerness innate to Broadway as a whole. Despite *The Color Purple* foregrounding a romantic relationship between two women, it is not marketed specifically as a queer musical, allowing it to engage with the queer structures of Broadway in a way that extends to the queer history of all of Broadway, rather than the selection of shows specifically cautioned off as “queer Broadway” shows. This chapter then concludes with a third section that locates these shows in the larger context of more explicitly “queer musicals” of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This section examines *Head Over Heels*, *Fun Home*, *The Prom*, and *A Strange Loop* to give a slightly broader sense of Broadway at the turn of the century.

The first section demonstrates the queer potential and pleasure produced by the character Fiyero in Stephen Schwartz and Winnie Holzman's *Wicked*. I mobilize two primary frameworks

to examine Fiyero's queerness; my first approach examines his relationship to heteronormative rituals and social structures, while my second approach responds specifically to Miller, arguing that Fiyero acts as a potential fulfillment of a decades-old longing that Miller identifies. This analysis produces both theoretical and historical implications of Fiyero's character as I explore how his representation disrupts heteronormative traditions, as well as how he produces a valuable new development in dramatic representation for the communities of gay men that have historically developed around musical theatre.

The second section focuses on *The Color Purple*. My analysis here builds on claims made by Deborah Paredez about the musicals' representation of diva relations, tying them into my larger discussion of queer cultural shifts. Stacy Wolf argues that part of the appeal of musicals in the 20<sup>th</sup> century for lesbian spectators (and women's representation more generally) is their use of music to develop relationships between women that are not given room in the plot. While women's relationships with each other were typically underdeveloped in the narratives of popular entertainment (and still are, as they continue to fail even the extremely low bar set by frameworks such as the Bechdel Test<sup>16</sup>), Wolf argues that women singing duets together allowed for their relationship and intimacy to develop through song in a way that it wasn't permitted to in the script. I examine how this history of female duets, and other Broadway song types identified by Wolf, is mobilized through *The Color Purple* in the way that it frames the focus of desire and intimacy to prioritize women's bonds both narratively *and* musically. This analysis builds on Paredez's argument, expanding on her discussion of the ways that diva depictions in the show highlight and foreground intimate connections between women who empower each other: I will be focusing in more specifically on duets as a historical formal device that *The Color Purple* has

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<sup>16</sup> The Bechdel test, named after lesbian cartoonist Alison Bechdel, requires two named women to be present in a narrative, and for them to have a conversation about something other than a man.

developed into a contemporary context. The show's mobilization of queer Broadway history also informs its depiction of the relationship between Shug and Celie, which has been notably desexualized and de-romanticized in adaptations of Alice Walker's much more sexually explicit novel. I argue that the show's portrayal of the couple responds to their ill-treatment in former adaptations (specifically Steven Spielberg's 1985 film), using its musical structures as a critique of Celie and Shug's historical representation.

The third section then connects my analyses of each show to a larger context, particularly highlighting *Head Over Heels* and *Fun Home* as indications of general trends in queer Broadway now. Key to all three sections – but developed most explicitly in the third section – are the two primary concerns I outline in my dissertation's introduction: mainstreaming and the related concept of “holistic queer representation,” and contemporary queer Broadway's relationship to visibility, avowal, and disclosure. In terms of holistic queerness, this chapter charts ways that queer representation is not simply incidental to the shows that I outline, but something that fundamentally informs the shows' underlying structures in a more substantial way. In terms of visibility, I argue that the shows operate in a way that is more self-conscious about their queer politics, and about the queer history of the stories that they tell, than the historical counterparts to which I compare them<sup>17</sup>.

For the most part, my claims in this chapter produce an account of history that risks teleology. Miller and Wolf each identify a structure in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and I then show the 21<sup>st</sup> century extension of each structure and how it has been pushed further and grown into something more complex or more satisfying than its older formation (Miller's chorus boys finally have a happy ending, and Wolf's lesbian intimacy has grown into something even more powerful). In

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<sup>17</sup> This is less of a feature of *Wicked*, where my analysis is much more focused on the first issue of holistic queerness. However, it is a central point of my discussions of *The Color Purple*, *Fun Home*, and *Head Over Heels*.



doing so, I risk sounding almost as if I'm making a painfully trite analogy where 20<sup>th</sup> century queers planted a seed which has now blossomed into a super-queer flower. While this structure is appealing, its implication of pure teleological progress is both too easy and inaccurate: as Josh Groban sings in *Crazy Ex Girlfriend*, "life doesn't make narrative sense." The rest of this dissertation – beginning notably in Chapter Two – spends a lot more time tempering this possibly more celebratory tone by discussing the issues that still remain in queer relationships to Broadway (and new ones that have arisen) in a 21<sup>st</sup> century context.

### **Say There's No Future: The Queer Potential of *Wicked's* Fiyero**

Say there's no future for us as a pair,

And, though I may know, I don't care.

- "As Long as You're Mine"

Stephen Schwartz and Winnie Holzman's *Wicked* is, ostensibly, a very different beast than the Gregory Maguire novel from which it is adapted. Maguire's *Wicked: The Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West* is an explicitly political novel is not shy about its exploration of non-normative experiences with gender and sexuality. The Broadway adaptation, in contrast, is positioned as a family-friendly musical marketed towards teenagers, which resulted in the removal of the novel's explicitly sexual scenes and much of its exploration of complicated gender experiences. This transformation of *Wicked* has led to criticism from some, who argue that its politics are "muted" and that "the complexities of the novel necessarily fade" (Raab 245). However, Stacy Wolf has produced a lesbian reading of the relationship between Glinda and Elphaba that emphasizes how the show mobilizes musical theatre conventions in a queer way by producing a love story with "two women as the musical's couple" ("Defying Gravity" 2). She stresses that the love story between Glinda and Elphaba is so central that "one would need to

read *Wicked* ‘against the grain’ to enunciate a straight interpretation” (5). My analysis is aligned with Wolf’s paper, resisting the centrality of straight readings of *Wicked*. In this section, I turn to the men of *Wicked*, exploring Fiyero in particular as a figure of queer potential.

I begin by examining Fiyero’s relationship to queer ways of understanding social structures. I argue that Fiyero acts as a force that disrupts normative rituals and narratives from school dances to conventional love stories, demonstrating the ephemerality and instability of these mythical structures. Fiyero’s role ultimately emphasizes the need to break from the enforcement of what normative understandings of relationships and love are supposed to look like and to explore the viability of other experiences. Pivoting from this theoretical positioning to a more material approach to gender expression and sexuality, I then move to *Wicked*’s position within musical theatre history. Turning to D.A. Miller, I argue that Fiyero serves as an articulation of a feminized gay male performance fantasy that has characterized Broadway musicals for decades; however, I also contend that Fiyero gives this fantasy an unconventional ending that opens up queer potential for *Wicked* that is often denied in other musicals. While *Wicked* lacks explicit queer representation – a lack which sadly characterizes too much of contemporary media – it manages to maintain an underlying queerness, particularly in its approach to normative social structures and gender expression.

As a gay man whose investments in femininity and musical theatre form a large part of my cultural identification as gay, it always seemed strange that *Wicked* – a show with no explicit queer representation – spoke to this identification so much. While D.A. Miller’s *Place for Us* illuminates the larger relationship between musicals and gay subcultures, even when those musicals contain no gay characters, the question remained for me: what is it about *Wicked* specifically that kept me (and so many other gay men) so attached? Wolf’s 2008 article

highlights how *Wicked* contains substantial avenues of queer pleasure and identification, particularly through the development of Elphaba and Glinda's relationship. Doris Raab's 2011 article furthers the discussion of the complex ways that gender expression happens in both *Wicked* and Maguire's initial novel. These articles began to answer the queerness of my pull to *Wicked*.

Current criticism, however, has been reluctant to address in any sustained way Fiyero's characterization in *Wicked*. The purpose of this section is thus to explore the queer potential figured by Fiyero, as well as to provide a brief critical engagement with the show's other male characters. It seemed odd to me that critics have rejected Fiyero as insignificant to the show's queerness, as I continued to find more points of identification with him that resonated with my cultural positioning as a gay man. There is a point during "Dancing Through Life" when Fiyero and Glinda delightedly exclaim "you're perfect!" to each other, and Norbert Leo Butz and Kristin Chenoweth's gleefully effeminate delivery of these lines resonates with interactions with my female friends that have always read as particularly gay (a type of relationship that is not just limited to my personal experience, as it has become popularized by media representations such as Jack and Karen in *Will and Grace*, who express similar exchanges). His iconic, tight "Fiyero pants," his flamboyant choreography, and the way that some actors who portray him subtly flirt with Boq while singing "Dancing Through Life," always seemed to possess a queer energy, and I found myself defending my attachment to Fiyero's musical numbers in response to other critics' ready dismissal of them. "As Long as You're Mine" is described as a "typical pop love song with unspecified lyrics" (19) in Wolf's article and has yet to be analyzed as anything else. Wolf positions Fiyero as the show's "nominal male interest" (14), with a "pale presence... [who] merely exists to foreground the women's strong connection and attachment" (18). Raab takes an

even more dismissive approach to Fiyero; while she condones a moment in which he tells Elphaba that she does not have to feminize herself or become “like Glinda” to be happy (255), she ultimately describes his presence as the way through which “Elphaba cements her devotion to heterosexuality” (254). I intend to contest this critical disregard for Fiyero by producing an analysis that explores the queerness of his role.

Current critical understanding of Fiyero in *Wicked* as normative is also odd considering his role as a figure of otherness in the novel, where he is introduced as “a new student, oddly dressed... with a pattern of blue diamonds tattooed on the dark skin of his face and hands. No one had seen him before, or anyone like him” (171). Fiyero is clearly racialized and marked as a non-normative character, whose appearance and cultural difference is emphasized. The blue diamonds on his skin associate him with Elphaba’s otherness, an association that is made explicit when they first have sex, an act described as “blue diamonds on a green field” (234). Fiyero’s association with Elphaba is consistently expressed through non-normative understandings of sex; when Fiyero discovers Elphaba’s genital scar – which Raab has clearly identified as a marker of Elphaba’s gender non-conformity in the novel (249) – he briefly wonders “if some of his blue diamonds had, in the heat of sex, been steamed onto her own skin” (239). Fiyero is thus not only associated with Elphaba’s marginal cultural positioning, but also her sexuality and gender nonconformity. It seems strange, then, that such a non-normative character in the novel would be transferred into the musical as either a completely insignificant character or an agent of heteronormativity.

Of course, this issue also highlights one of the major problems with *Wicked*: the complete erasure of Fiyero’s racial identity. In the novel, Fiyero is clearly described as a character with darker skin than the others, and the marginalization and violence he faces because of his racial

and cultural otherness is a focus of his storyline. Characters compare his skin colour to “shit” (175), and refer to him as a “Winkie,” which is identified as an offensive slur used to identify citizens of the Vinkus (480). The racial violence inflicted on Fiyero and the Vinkus population is a central concern of Maguire’s novel that is not maintained in the stage adaptation. *Wicked* removes nearly all signs of racial or cultural otherness from Fiyero, and a large number of the men cast to play him have been white. While I claim that some of Fiyero’s queerness is present in the musical, the erasure of the novel’s racial representation and themes is a major problem with *Wicked* that seriously limits and disrupts its radical ambitions. The queer potential of Fiyero’s characterization is thus tempered by the production’s whitewashing.

My argument about Fiyero’s queerness is largely informed by Linda Hutcheon’s discussion of adaptation, in which she notes that “being shown a story is not the same as being told it” (12). As Hutcheon elaborates: “in the move from telling to showing, a performance adaptation must dramatize: description, narration, and represented thoughts must be transcoded into speech, actions, sounds, and visual images.” (40). I thus focus a large portion of my analysis on visual and auditory elements, demonstrating how the musical allows for *Wicked*’s politics to be *shown*, rather than *told*, functioning differently from the novel. Thus, much of my analysis is driven by “non-representational signs” (Dyer 20) particular to the medium of musicals; for example, I pay close attention to Fiyero’s choreography and vocal performance, which I argue align him visually and auditorily with the musical’s women, allowing for an association between his performance and the musical’s representation of femininity. I assert that this medium-conscious approach to adaptation can better comprehend *Wicked* than one that focuses primarily on its plot and narrative.

Central to my analysis is a reading of Fiyero as a force that disrupts the social order. It may seem strange to describe the charming, popular Fiyero as socially disruptive; however, close analysis of his musical numbers suggests that any engagement with the social order that Fiyero enacts functions simultaneously as a reminder of said order's constructedness and limitations. Fiyero's introductory song "Dancing Through Life" seems to be a carefree exploration of the "unexamined life". However, while ostensibly a participation in the normative ritual of a school dance, Fiyero's lyrics and vocals produce a constant reminder of this social ritual's intimate relationship with death. After deciding to go dancing at the Ozdust ballroom, the chorus sings about how they will be dancing "down at the Ozdust." Fiyero's voice then emerges from the chorus, singing "if only because dust is what we come to," introducing a reminder of death into the otherwise nonchalant lyrics. This line is clearly meant to grab attention as it rises out of the chorus, reaching the top of Fiyero's range; as Fiyero's voice emerges, he sings the line in an ascending phrase with only two descending intervals, and an upwardly mobile motion that takes the vocalist from the bottom of his range to the top. While the chorus delights in their revelry, Fiyero's voice emerges from the crowd to highlight the inevitability of death that constantly lurks behind the *carpe diem* persona that the song represents. Later in the song, this line is then taken up by the entire chorus; in reprising Fiyero's line, the other students are forced into a bleak acknowledgement that they will eventually "come to dust" that stands at odds with the song's ostensibly blithe celebration of life. While he engages in the social order, Fiyero does not let this celebration go unmarked by the spectre of death that inevitably underlies it.

Fiyero's social disruption in "Dancing Through Life" resonates with Lee Edelman's discussion of the death drive. Lee Edelman argues that "the death drive names what the queer, in the order of the social, is called forth to figure: the negativity opposed to every form of social

viability” (9). In other words, queerness’ primary function for Edelman is to disrupt any attempt at solidifying and crystalizing any particular social order by figuring its gaps and flaws. Fiyero’s disruption of the normative social ritual of the high school dance by introducing a reminder of death into the revelry provides a queer perspective to his “nothing matters/ but knowing nothing matters,” positioning by highlighting its opposition to normative comfortability. As the chorus becomes unable to continue their song without reprising Fiyero’s line, “if only because dust is what we come to,” they are forced to constantly recognize the instability and impermanence of the very normative ritual that they enact. As the reminder of the social’s inviability becomes incorporated into its very performance, Edelman’s insistence that queerness “disruption is “inextricable” (26) from the very order it disrupts is enacted through the song.

Fiyero’s queer role continues in his second major song “As Long as You’re Mine.” Ostensibly a standard love duet “As Long as You’re Mine” is, like “Dancing Through Life,” haunted by the ephemerality of the social structure it seems to enact. While filled with conventional lines such as “see how bright we shine,” the song also contains constant reminders that Fiyero and Elphaba’s encounter is temporary, most notably Fiyero’s “say there’s no future/ for us as a pair.” Like the “dust” line in “Dancing Through Life,” this line is set apart from the rest of the song; Fiyero and Elphaba sing the second chorus as a duet, but Fiyero sings this one line solo, distinguishing it from the rest of the chorus. This line ascends to the top of his range, culminating with a falsetto on the word “pair,” marking it as his vocal high point for the song, as well as the last and highest solo line he sings in the entire musical. Fiyero’s role as a solo vocalist cumulates and concludes with a reminder that his relationship with Elphaba does not have a guaranteed future, and will likely (to reference Edelman’s terms) have “no future at all” (30). The pair spend the entire song sitting and kneeling on the ground, an odd choice of choreography

that is visually distinct from the (literal) flying and floating that makes up most the show's visual plane, serving as a reminder of the sadness lurking behind the surface of a seemingly conventional love song. Rather than an ode to heteronormativity, then, "As Long as You're Mine" functions as a disruption of heteronormative notions of romantic closure, and a reminder of the insufficiency of conventional, normative love stories by foregrounding the ephemerality of Elphaba and Fiyero's connection.

While "As Long as You're Mine" figures the inviability of normative romantic conventions, Fiyero's representation does not exist solely in opposition to social structures, but also remains open to potential alternatives. While Fiyero meets Edelman's understanding of queerness as anti-normative, his relationship to the social order does not stop at disruption. Edelman positions queerness as a "negative force" (117) that does not attempt to replace the social order with something else but instead functions as a force defined solely by its oppositionality (4-5). *Wicked*, on the other hand, may disrupt social structures, but it does so with an understanding that there may be hope for better, viable (if not still unstable and transient) alternatives. In this sense, Edelman's conception of queerness does not entirely capture what Fiyero figures, and it becomes pertinent to turn to utopia-focused queer theory to fully examine how the Fiyero/Elphaba love story develops utopic potentiality.

José Esteban Muñoz argues that queerness as a conceptual force can "dare to see or imagine the not-yet-conscious" (*Cruising Utopia* 21). Muñoz outlines a queer utopic impulse as the search for something that is "not yet here... to live inside straight time and ask for, desire, and imagine another time and place" (26). He advocates for a queerness that is willing to imagine alternatives to current social structures; these alternatives are not prescriptive and do not offer "a fixed schema" (97), but instead offer alternative ways of thinking and feeling that open



up possibilities for living not offered by normative worldviews. Fiyero's disruption of normative structures tends to take on this form, figuring the inviability of current social structures without entirely abandoning hope for alternatives.

While Fiyero constantly introduces the spectre of death into conventional songs, his claims are never definite. Both of Fiyero's major disruptive lines – "*If* only because dust is what we come to" and "*Say* there's no future" – are protases, or conditional statements. While Fiyero disrupts the social order, he is never willing to fully commit to its dissolution, speaking in conditional statements that leave room for hope: he never says "we *do* only come to dust" or "there *is* no future," but insists on the conditional modifiers "if" and "say." The statements take the form of ascending phrases, ending with high notes, as the music is (literally) uplifting, and also resembles the verbal uptakes that indicate questions, rather than definitive statements. The affective sense of hope produced by the musical ascension and brightness in these lines resonates with Richard Dyer's understanding of utopia in genres of mass entertainment which demonstrate "what utopia would feel like rather than how it would be organized" (20). While figuring the death of the social structure, Fiyero also introduces an unspecified feeling of hope, both through the conditionality of his statements and the musicality of his lines, producing an affective utopian impulse.

It is worth noting that Fiyero's predictions (that he will "come to dust" and that he and Elphaba have "no future") do not come true: the spell that Elphaba casts to turn him into the scarecrow comes with the condition that he will "never die" ("No Good Deed"), and he and Elphaba do end up as a couple. Rather than dissolving the social, Fiyero points out its flaws yet transcends these flaws. Of course, this development could be read conservatively, with Fiyero overcoming his cynicism, transcending limitations, and then simply assimilating into the very

model he initially critiques. In this sense, the show would be falling into the utopic trap that Dyer describes as happening when “entertainment provides alternatives *to* capitalism which will be provided *by* capitalism” (27), except in this case the show provides alternatives *to* heteronormativity that are provided *by* heteronormativity. Reading Fiyero’s solution to the flaws of normative structures as being simply an alternative way of joining into those very structures would also support Raab’s claim that the show ends in a “traditional heterosexual pairing” (255). However, this reading is disrupted by two important oddities in the musical’s ending: Fiyero does not end the show as a human, and the characters must live in hiding, unable to rejoin society after faking their deaths. It is hard to see a conclusion in which someone with the body of a scarecrow and someone who is legally dead begin a relationship that necessitates their exclusion from society, and interpret it as a fully normative ending.

The oddness of Fiyero and Elphaba’s relationship at the conclusion evokes the ways that queer utopia is “drawn to tastes, ideologies, and aesthetics that can only seem odd, strange, or indeed queer” (Muñoz 26). Much like the novel’s imagery of “blue diamonds on a green field” (234), Fiyero and Elphaba become an aesthetically odd couple; the image of an anthropomorphic scarecrow and a green woman developing a romantic (and possibly sexual) relationship is “odd, strange, or indeed queer.” After Elphaba sees “scarecrow-Fiyero” for the first time, he tells her she is lying when she calls him beautiful, to which she responds (quoting one of Fiyero’s earlier lines), “it’s not lying... it’s looking at things another way.” Elphaba and Fiyero both acknowledge that their appearances are not conventionally beautiful, but beautiful if “looked at another way.” Their aesthetic beauty must be looked at queerly to be understood, as it does not make sense if looked at within dominant frameworks. Unable to fit into normative models of

beauty or belonging, the two find a way that they can “be how they want to” together and develop a relationship that functions outside of these prescribed models.

The musical also avoids making it clear exactly what the future holds for Fiyero and Elphaba. They are outlaws who have faked their own deaths, with distinct features that would make hiding challenging; the musical avoids producing a clear-cut resolution, as it trades the conventions of closure, return to normalcy and reconciliation with community to rest instead on exile and ambiguity, a daring and unconventional choice for a Broadway musical. Their happy ending is ambiguous and never fully “comfortable,” resonating with the novel’s similar ending where the narrator states: “in the life of a Witch, there is no after, in the ever after of a Witch, there is no happily; in the story of a Witch, there is no afterword” (494), and continues, when asked if the Witch ever returns, with “not yet” (495). Both conclusions avoid closure. Any utopian imaginings in these endings are, in the worlds of Jill Dolan, “fleeting intimations” (2) and “not stabilized by its own finished perfection, not coercive in its contained, self-reliant, self-determined system, but a utopia always in process” (6). As one of the essential traits of queer utopia for Muñoz is that it is “not prescriptive; it renders potential blueprints of a world not quite here... not a fixed schema” (97), Fiyero’s ending as a scarecrow with an uncertain and unspecified future functions not as an idealistic utopia but a queer idea of potentiality and hope for something productive yet unspecified outside of the current system.

While Fiyero and Elphaba may still signify “male” and “female” at the end of the musical, preserving some elements of heteronormativity, they also represent an outlaw couple who can never belong in the social order, and who are visibly different from normative couples. It is thus hard *not* to read them as a couple with whom queer audience members – whose relationships are often similarly positioned outside the social order, and whose visible and bodily

differences from other couples often result in social othering – can identify. A green witch and an anthropomorphic scarecrow are a queer coupling indeed, and the life on the margins of the social order their unconventional relationship signifies provides a strong point of queer identification.

At this point, I turn from theoretical concepts of queerness to focus on Fiyero's position as it relates to a particular history of gay male performance in the Broadway musical. Addressing Broadway's association with gay men, D.A. Miller argues that Broadway appeals to a fantasy of feminized male performance that has historically characterized specific gay subcultures. Miller argues that, through identification with and imitation of the strong women who rule the world of Broadway, men can experience a form of feminine embodiment and performance, indulging in "the thrills of a femininity *become their own*" (90). Because musical theatre evokes the bodily participation of audiences – from tapping feet, to humming and singing songs on the way home, to singing and dancing to cast albums at home – Miller argues that audiences are called to physically imitate the performers on stage: as you feel your body yearning to sing the music and dance the choreography, it's almost as if you briefly *become* the character that you're watching. Wayne Koestenbaum makes a similar argument concerning opera divas, about whom he claims: "I distinguish between two kinds of sound: the [ones] in whose presence I remain Subject, knowing the heard voice as Object; and [those] which... become Subject, incapable of remaining the distant Object... I can't remain separate" (16). For Koestenbaum, the experience of watching a diva sing is the one of temporarily losing your own subjectivity, as it becomes blurred with the subjectivity of the performer: you are no longer an active subject watching a separate performer, but rather you find yourself blending with the performer in an inter-subjective, transitive experience. This intersubjectivity, combined with the strong presence of performing women in

musicals, encourages men to imitate and experience themselves performing *as* these strong women, “seducing them to inhabit [the socially given idea of femininity]” (89). Miller argues these gay subcultures form (at least in part) because musicals fulfill a gendered fantasy associated with a particular subgroup of gay men.

It is important at this point to stress that the subcultures Miller explores do not speak for all queer fans of Broadway, an emphasis I develop in more detail in my introduction. Steve Swayne criticizes Miller, as well as John Clum, for universalizing a specific subculture and suggesting that their way of relating to musicals queerly is the only (or at least best) way to do so. While he criticizes Clum more for this tendency – arguing that Clum privileges his own type of gay culture and “identif[ies] other cultures as deficient” (101) and “doesn’t like the idea that there is more than one way to be gay today” (104) – Swayne still suggests that Miller, to some extent, “normalizes” his experience (111). To avoid falling into this same problem, I stress that the type of audience practice that I explore does not speak for all queer experiences of Broadway, but rather speaks to a specific type of reception history. I examine the relationship of Fiyero to the reception practices of the specific gay male subcultures that Miller and Clum explore (and to which I relate) with the understanding that these reception practices are different from other queer experiences with musicals. I also examine this history with the hope that those whose relationships to musicals do not quite fit Miller’s model may still find some moments of queer identification or pleasure with some, if not all, aspects of Fiyero’s complex performance of gender.

Miller argues that, despite the musical’s appeal to feminized male performance, it prevents feminine male characters from enacting this fantasy on stage. He discusses how male leads in musicals often stand for conservative, patriarchal forces that are overturned, such as

Herbie in *Gypsy*. Alternatively, they are briefly allowed to perform in an effeminate way, but are then written out of the show. John Clum's assertion that gay men rarely get to see themselves in the male leads of musicals, but rather in the "chorus boy, who is allowed a freedom of expression and an overt sexiness denied the male star" (8) reinforces this claim. Using the example of Tulsa from *Gypsy*, Miller outlines how he briefly steals "into the sacred spot, reserved... for the girl" (94) but then "prove[s] the rule with [his] exile" (105) when he is written out of the plot shortly afterwards. Miller finds the choice to have Paul – a drag performer and gay man – become injured in *A Chorus Line*, thus removing him from the show before its iconic eleven o'clock number "What I Did for Love" to be exemplary of the general effort of Broadway musicals to limit the inclusion of feminine men onstage. Even when feminine men do have major roles, they are in some way excluded or written out of participation in the heart of the musical: The Emcee in *Cabaret* is ever-present as narrator, but barely exists as an actual character in the diegetic plot; Tulsa gets to dance around the stage and right out of the story; and Paul gives one of the show's most meaningful monologues (although, unlike Cassie, Mike, Diana, Richie, or Val, doesn't get to sing a major solo song) only to be left out of its powerful conclusion. The men who get to stay around are, in comparison, coded as conventionally masculine and, with the exception of the under-developed Greg, heterosexual.

With his iconic tight pants, and "dancing through life" catchphrase, Fiyero's depiction aligns him with the Broadway tradition of flamboyantly performing men; for a lead, he dances, sings, and acts more like a chorus boy than a classic leading man. And, like other men in the tradition, his role is gradually diminished. By "As Long as You're Mine," Fiyero is no longer dancing; his final musical number takes place entirely on the ground. Earlier in the show, Fiyero's movements are, as choreographer Wayne Cilento describes, "lanky and loose-limbed...

his movement vocabulary was coming from a scarecrow, where it was angular and without joints” (quoted in *Wicked: The Grimmerie* 135). In his final song, however, his movements are literally grounded. Musically, Fiyero also loses vocal expression, as Elphaba takes over the song. Structurally, “As Long as You’re Mine” is split up into two verses and three choruses. Elphaba begins by singing one verse and one chorus, implying that Fiyero will follow the same pattern, with the concluding chorus then coming in as a duet, as in the later song “For Good.” However, Elphaba joins in at the start of the second chorus and accompanies Fiyero to the end of the song, so that the solo parts of the song are divided unevenly. The dramatic change in Fiyero’s choreography, removing his signature dancing style, as well as the uneven division of parts in the song (in direct contrast to the clearly even division in Elphaba’s later song with Glinda) seems to suggest that Fiyero simply repeats the same structure figured by Tulsa, in which men who briefly steal into the “sacred spot” of feminine performance are then diminished or written out later.

While it is tempting to conclude on a reading of Fiyero as a simple reenactment of this tradition, the musical ends by revising it. While Fiyero begins to lose his voice and dance in “As Long As You’re Mine,” these traits are not entirely erased, but instead slowly begin to mirror Elphaba’s. One of Elphaba’s trademark dance moves is her “hand and upper-body movement – magical, spell-casting movement” (*Wicked: The Grimmerie* 135). During the song, Fiyero uses this same motion when he sings “somehow I’ve fallen/ under your spell.”<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, Elphaba does not take over the song entirely, but sings it along with Fiyero. Fiyero and Elphaba sing the same lyrics together, contrasting “For Good.” While the two women get an equal amount of solo time in “For Good,” and Wolf points out that their voices switch registers and

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<sup>18</sup> At least in the original choreography with Norbert Leo Butz. When I saw the show on Broadway in 2018, this choice had since been changed; however, the professionally-filmed version of the original Broadway cast (and thus the version that most people have seen) still contains the original choreography choice.

share turns singing alto and soprano parts (“Defying Gravity” 16), they sing different lyrics, while Fiyero and Elphaba sing the same lyrics. The choreography of the song also functions in a mirror-like way as the actors’ “bodies arch and move together” (Raab 254). Fiyero and Elphaba mimick each other’s movements, maintaining constant eye contact as they rise up on their knees, lift their hands, lean back, and descend back to the ground, all in unison. Fiyero’s last solo note is sung falsetto, aligning him vocally with the play’s women. “As Long as You’re Mine” thus functions less as Fiyero’s exit from the performance of *Wicked* and more as a dramatization of the union between him and Elphaba. Fiyero thus fulfills the fantasy that the men of Miller’s Broadway tradition fail to achieve, uniting with the lead woman and sharing in her performance space. Fiyero in this moment enables a vision of gender hybridity, as his falsetto voice and actions meld together with the female lead’s, allowing him to achieve the space of connection and identification with the feminine that Miller argues musicals have historically appealed to.

While Fiyero takes on Elphaba-like traits by the end of “As Long as You’re Mine,” Elphaba also begins to take on traits of Fiyero. Elphaba’s line “and if it turns out/ it’s over too fast/ I’ll make every last moment last” more resembles Fiyero’s *carpe diem* attitude and focus on ephemerality than anything that has previously characterized Elphaba. Elphaba’s songs up to this point have tended towards absolutes: “I’m not that Girl” presents her crush as hopeless and she tries to shut it down (“don’t start/ wishing only wounds the heart”), “The Wizard and I” and “Defying Gravity” focus on her “unlimited” potential, and even the celebration of “one short day” in the Emerald City contains the line “I’ll be back for good someday.” Elphaba has not dealt well with uncertainty or ephemerality up until this point. Her lyrics in “As Long as You’re Mine” then mark the moment when Elphaba transitions towards a recognition of non-absolutes and the validity of “not caring” if there is no future. Elphaba’s callback to Fiyero’s line about



looking at beauty “another way” at the end of the play (a line that he originally speaks after this song) further suggests that Elphaba’s character has also been changed by Fiyero. Fiyero has thus been able to both shape and be shaped by his union with the female lead, welcoming him into the performance sphere of the Broadway musical alongside the divas at the centre of it.

If Fiyero articulates a successful resolution of the performing male fantasy that has permeated Broadway history, the other men reproduce this history in a less triumphant way. Boq functions as a mirror to Fiyero throughout the show; he is in love with Elphaba’s sister, and this love results in his transformation into a non-human. Boq, however, lacks Fiyero’s skepticism towards social structures, and instead finds himself their victim. He ends up trapped in a nightmarish parody of a heteronormative relationship, as Nessa forces him into servitude in a desperate attempt to keep him from leaving her, and the two live an unhealthy domestic life until he tries to flee. Nessa then casts a spell to keep Boq with her, fails and ends up almost killing him. Boq is constantly trapped between his desperate longing for a life with Glinda and Nessa’s desperate longing for a life with him, and his position in between these two idealistic heteronormative fantasies leads to his destruction. As a foil to Fiyero, Boq demonstrates the dangers of heteronormativity as he is crushed by the desperate desire to fill the very normative structures that Fiyero eludes.

Of course, Boq’s association with unrequited love could open him up to a certain type of queer identification. David Halperin argues that “sexual deprivation is fundamental, and crucial, to the subjective experiences of gay men... early in our lives... gay men discover that most of the human beings who attract us are not the least be interested in having a sexual relationship with us” (228-229). Exploring the life and works of Lorenz Hart, whom he calls the “bard of loneliness” (66), John Clum discusses the queer relevance of songs about unrequited love. Boq’s

story, involving unrequited love in two directions, is open to queer association along the lines of Éponine's "On My Own" from *Les Misérables*.

My hesitance towards exploring Boq as a queer figure comes partially from the fact that he does not have a featured song or dance number. Elphaba already serves as a much more substantial point of identification for unrequited love, from "I'm Not that Girl," to her admission in "As Long as You're Mine" that even in her "wildest dreaming" she could not have imagined Fiyero wanting her. I am also hesitant because Boq's obsession with Glinda is marked by an undercurrent of misogyny. He ignores Glinda's lack of interest in him by continuing to pursue her after she has already rejected him, perpetrating a misogynist narrative where men are encouraged to completely disregard a women's clear expression of disinterest. He reduces Glinda to a concept, falling in love with the "idea" of her, as demonstrated by his lack of sincere connection to any aspect of her personality (a narrative far removed from Éponine falling in love with her best friend in *Les Mis*), and blatantly ignoring her bullying and disdain for him. Boq also uses Nessa, faking an interest in her to impress Glinda, making him a manipulator of others' unrequited love rather than just a carrier of unrequited love himself. Rather than the sad longing and "private forms of expression" (Halperin 338) that characterize closeted desire, Boq's actions are often misogynist and dehumanizing towards women. While his general association with unrequited love does open him up to queer identification to an extent, his sexist actions complicate this identification.

The Wizard, serving as the play's oppressive patriarch, serves as another foil to Fiyero as a site of queer identification. The Wizard is associated with Broadway history and convention more strongly than the rest of the cast: Schwartz has described his signature song "Wonderful" as "deliberate pastiche... it was the only place in the show I actually wanted to sound like a

specific place and time in our world: early 20<sup>th</sup> century Midwestern America. It's a little bit ragtime and vaudeville.” (*Wicked: The Grimmerie* 85). The Wizard is thus musically associated with vaudeville theatre, marking him as a temporally distinct character indicative of musical theatre history. The choice to cast Broadway legend Joel Grey, known for originating the Emcee in *Cabaret*, furthers this association. The Emcee is a flamboyant performing man, central to the show's music but never actually given a substantial character or plotline, falling into the same tradition as Tulsa by becoming largely irrelevant to the show's plot. If Fiyero's break from heteronormative structures accompanies his break from musical theatre conventions, then the Wizard's association with both patriarchal authority and musical theatre history provides a direct contrast. By defying the social structures and musical conventions that the Wizard enacts and to which Boq falls prey, Fiyero emerges as a new, critical response to conventional Broadway masculinity. Refusing to be a normative patriarchal force, a “nominal male love interest,” a chorus boy, or a failed attempt at feminized performance that gets disavowed by the storyline, Fiyero instead manages to queer social structures and secure a space in the narrative that welcomes him to perform alongside the show's women as a feminine man. While his role is still clearly secondary to the women (I would not attempt to claim that his role is nearly as substantial as Elphaba's or Glinda's), he is not marginal to their world, instead fulfilling the fantasy of the men of Broadway's history by finding a sense of unity with the show's women.

Fiyero produces queer possibility in the context of both queer theory and queer Broadway history. However, it must be acknowledged that this ideological queerness comes at the cost of any explicit, textual representation of queer lived experiences. As Raab critiques, the gender non-conforming Elphaba of the novel is much more explicitly gendered in *Wicked*, removing the exploration of complex gender identity and the “innovation that transcends traditional

conceptions of gender” (246) that is such an important part of Maguire’s novel. The homoerotic encounters between men in the novel (including a sex scene at The Philosophy Club and homoeroticism between the characters Croke and Tibbett) and the much more explicit lesbian aspects of Elphaba and Glinda’s relationship<sup>19</sup> are completely lost. While the musical may maintain Maguire’s queer ideology, this ideology is relegated to subtext. Fiyero produces a useful identificatory figure for queer viewers, yet there are no explicitly queer characters in the show.

Of course, more explicit textual representation of queer characters is important, and this explicit representation should be (and is slowly becoming) more prominent on the Broadway stage. The next section explores Celie and Shug from *The Color Purple* as an example of two women whose romantic and sexual love for each other can move out of the subtext of Elphaba’s and Glinda’s, and into a space where it is explicitly foregrounded and celebrated. The conclusion of this section explores recent shows such *The Prom*, *A Strange Loop*, *Head Over Heels* and *Fun Home*, all of which have much more explicit queer representation. This improvement should be celebrated, as well as used as a starting point to push for even better representation. However, because much of contemporary media continues to lack substantial queer characters or experiences, it is important to continue to develop ways of uncovering the queerness behind ostensibly straight texts, asserting our belonging and investment in the worlds of stories that try to exclude us, at least on a literal level. This reading strategy is also an integral part of queer cultural history, and it is important that this part of history is not lost as more explicitly queer texts continue to emerge. There is a strength and a resilience demonstrated in the cultural practice of asserting how embedded queer folk are in popular culture, even in places that have

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<sup>19</sup> The two share a bed in an intimate scene that makes Glinda feel both “brave” and “vulnerable” (418)

historically attempted to disavow or exclude us, and it is important to explore and celebrate these practices while we also continue to push for more stories that more explicitly commit to putting our lived experiences on stage. I chose to dedicate the first half of this section to *Wicked* because it resonates strongly with this important practice of coded and closeted desire, and explicitly expands upon Miller's historical accounts of this desire. I similarly chose to focus on *The Color Purple* for the second half because its explicit queer representation still resonates strongly with histories of closeted desire as outlined by Wolf – even as it does not “closet” that desire onstage – in a similarly historically-relevant way to *Wicked*. These two shows not only depict new directions for queerness on Broadway, but they also clearly maintain a connection to the precedents that came before them.

### **The Color Purple and the Female Duet**

I want you to be a story for me that I can believe in

- “What About Love,” *The Color Purple*

As Deborah Paredez argues, the 2005 musical adaptation of *The Color Purple* by Brenda Russell, Allee Willis, Stephen Bray and Marsha Norman is all about diva relations. The combination of these two terms (“diva” and “relations”) demonstrates how the show's leads – Celie, Nettie, Sofia, and Shug – embody two of the most important queer Broadway traditions: the diva (who embodies a celebration of defiant, non-normative femininity), and intimate relationships between women. Paredez argues that *The Color Purple* combines both of these queer traditions, despite their seeming irreconcilability (as divas have historically been isolated from others, and thus seemingly antithetical to connection). Paredez argues that the show, particularly its revival in 2015, “stages divaness as a liberatory mode of relations among women” (44). This argument alone already establishes *The Color Purple* as a 21<sup>st</sup> century development on

a 20<sup>th</sup> century tradition, as two separate queer traditions (divas and female connections) become combined into one new structure with new possibilities for queer identifications, specifically built from Alice Walker's Black feminist tradition of Womanism, which focuses on women's empowerment as "an expression of and catalyst for collectivity rather than isolated singularity" (53). Paredez specifically identifies Womanism as a Black women's tradition, arguing that the musical's work with Walker's theory thus "does not simply offer an additive model of inclusion for a Black diva but, perhaps more significantly, offers new possibilities of diva collectivity or relationality that re-imagines traditional Broadway musical constructions of its solitary, predominantly white divas" (49). Paredez argues that white feminist divas created powerful but isolated and solitary figures: Black Womanist divas bring mutually-empowering women whose strength is informed by their collectivity and intimate connections. These connections not only empower women in the text, they also – Paredez points out – lead them to resist heteropatriarchal and racist structures, as a diva's strength allows her to support other women and "activate" other divas, allowing to then join in a resistance of oppressive structures, producing what she calls the "activating and restorative power of the diva" (55).

This section connects *The Color Purple* to this dissertation's larger discussions about 21<sup>st</sup> century queer cultural shifts. On the one hand, Paredez's article itself already outlines quite clearly how the musical develops the 20<sup>th</sup> century tradition of the solitary, white diva into a contemporary model of intimate Womanist networks of Black diva relationality. Building on this existing framework, this section further examines *The Color Purple*'s development of 20<sup>th</sup> century models. I explore how the duets Paredez discusses relate to a particular history of female duets on Broadway that Wolf outlines. Focusing, as Wolf does, on female duets and the relationship between libretto and composition – between a show's literal narrative told through

its written scenes/lyrics and the emotional narrative told through its music – I argue that *The Color Purple*'s engagement with the history of this relationship allows for it to harness a historically queer song type for a contemporary purpose. Wolf identifies ways that female duets in the 20<sup>th</sup> century provided a path for a form of female bonding through music that isn't permitted in the text; I explore the additional avenues for intimacy opened when these duets build on women's relationships that *are* clearly established in the text. In these cases, the libretto and music work together in a unique way, using female duets in particular as a multifaceted critique of patriarchal, heteronormative, and racist structures. This analysis is also distinctly connected to Celie and Shug's historical representation: one of the most frequent criticisms of Steven Spielberg's well-known 1985 film adaptation is the near-removal of the sexual and romantic aspects of these two women's relationship. I suggest that the musical's representation of this couple through its duets exists in dialogue with the 1985 film, responding not only to historic suppression of queer women's experiences (and specifically Black queer women's experiences) in popular media, but also to that suppression's specific articulation in the history of *The Color Purple*'s adaptation and reception.

Stacy Wolf argues that, historically, female duets have offered the chance for women in Broadway shows to develop connections that they are denied in the show's narrative and written text. For example, the characters Sarah and Adelaide in *Guys and Dolls* barely interact in the libretto, and "occupy completely separate spheres throughout most of the show" (36). Their limited interactions exist primarily to dramatize how different they are from each other, encouraging the audience to better understand each woman through contrast with her polar opposite. However, their duet, "Marry the Man Today," works against this narrative separation, producing a display of "intense pleasure" (39) created by the women's unison and cohabitation

of the stage. Although the narrative and libretto suggest that Sarah belongs with her male partner Sky and Adelaide with her boyfriend Nathan, the music and performance of the duet reveals that “the women are more suited and more in collusion with each other than with their men” (41).

While not connected in the narrative, the characters become bonded through music in a duet.

By the time of *The Color Purple*, it is tempting to see this historical function of the female duet as somewhat obsolete: the women are already extremely close in the narrative, so there doesn’t really need to be a song to “make up” for a lack of textual closeness. In an era when close female relationships have become more central to the books and narratives of Broadway stories (Dawn, Becky and Jenna in *Waitress*, Elsa and Anna in *Frozen*, Violet, Judy and Doralee in *9 to 5*, etc.), and romantic pairings between women feature in shows (Joan and Alison in *Fun Home*, Pamela and Mopsa in *Head Over Heels*, Emma and Alyssa in *The Prom*), Wolf’s historical duet function no longer seems necessary: do queer audiences still need the music to “make up” for underdeveloped female connections in the text when those relationships are depicted fully in the texts themselves? On the one hand, even if they’re no longer making up for a lack of intimacy in the narrative, I would argue that the duets are not obsolete because they still have the power to *expand upon* the narrative. An already rich female bond in the text of a musical can be made even stronger and more intense by the characters singing together. Furthermore, even if the songs aren’t working against the narrative of the musical, they still have the power to resist issues within the larger social system that the narrative represents and critiques: even without an oppressive libretto to work against, female duets have the ability to complement this libretto by providing critiques of an oppressive *world* that the book scenes alone don’t have the tools to do<sup>20</sup>.

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<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, not every musical is *Waitress* or *The Color Purple*, and there are still plenty of prominent shows that do not provide opportunities for female bonding in the narrative.



The narrative of *The Color Purple* doesn't resist women's relationships: in fact, it celebrates and emphasizes bonding between women. However, the world that *The Color Purple* represents and criticizes *does* function to keep women apart. Because *The Color Purple* is a predominantly representational piece of theatre (plot events are acted out on stage as if they're actually happening, literally and realistically), part of its critique thus involves actually showing this separation onstage. The show demonstrates how patriarchal and racist forces structurally work to separate Black women from each other and attempt to destroy their support systems and communities. In order to critique these systems, the musical represents them dramatically onstage, meaning that the separation of Celie and Nettie, Sofia's struggles related to her imprisonment and forced labor by a white woman, and the later separation of Celie and Shug are all visually depicted and performed onstage in a literal, realist way; as a result, Celie and Nettie barely get the chance to interact in the plot after their separation because they are literally on different continents. Unlike shows like *Guys and Dolls*, this is not an issue with writers or producers minimizing female friendships; rather, it is the result of the script's depiction of a society that attempts to break down these friendships. However, either way, the result in terms of the dramatic action and performance onstage is that the sisters are unable to interact in person throughout the majority of the show.

After Nettie goes to Africa, Nettie and Celie are unable to directly interact throughout most of the musical, resulting in a spatial separation that makes intimacy in their relationship hard to dramatize onstage, even as they begin writing letters to each other. In Walker's novel, this is not a barrier to the storytelling in the same way; because the novel is epistolary (told through letters that characters write to each other, as well as Celie's letters to God), characters are never actually depicted in the same room, and all action in the novel is represented through

writing. In this case, Walker uses the epistolary form of the novel to dramatize and foreground the connection between Celie and Nettie, showcasing the importance of their letter writing by using letters as the only way that readers are able to access any of the story. While they are physically separated, their emotional bond is presented using the same form as all other bonds in the text, giving it significance and weight equal to those between other characters. Even if Celie is in the same room as someone, the only way we learn about their interaction is through letters, putting those interactions on the same dramatic plane as her interactions with Nettie. This structure makes it so that the reader experiences Celie's relationship with Nettie in more or less the same way as they experience her relationships with Shug and Sofia, since they're all dramatically presented in the same way: through letters. In fact, because Nettie and Celie (and God) are the only characters who directly talk to each other in letters, their interactions end up being more dramatically present in the novel's form than interactions between other characters who are in the same room. The epistolary form of the novel itself thus resists the racist and patriarchal forces that keep the sisters apart by privileging their mode of communication as the novel's most visible form of bond.

In a stage production, this becomes more difficult, because scenes are literally played out in front of an audience, meaning that an interaction through writing will inherently look and feel different from an interaction between characters in the same room. Without breaking realism and delving into surrealist or non-representational forms of theatre (which are not typically received well on a commercial Broadway stage, where audiences expect a degree of realism and literalism in their storytelling, particularly in a show based on a popular existing text like *The Color Purple* and produced by a celebrity like Oprah Winfrey), Celie and Nettie cannot interact the same way that Celie and Shug can. Their separation is inevitably visible onstage in a way that is harder to

overcome formally than it is in an epistolary novel: when the storytelling works with physical performers, rather than written letters, the space between these performers becomes more immediately obvious to the audience. The musical attempts to overcome this difficulty in several ways. The original Broadway production features Celie's letters on a scrim that is visible onstage before the show starts and during the overture, thus foregrounding the letters visually as an important part of the storytelling. The 2015 revival opts for a more minimalist, less representational set and props – what Paredez calls “non-mimetic staging” (53) – that allow for more moments of abstraction, direct audience address, and somewhat non-realist storytelling that breaks temporarily from the representational structure of a Broadway show. However, the rules of a Broadway show still mean that Celie and Nettie can't be shown hugging, touching, making eye contact, directly talking to each other, or acknowledging each other's physical presence: even as they occupy the stage at the same time, and are occasionally physically close to each other onstage, the actresses must pretend that they don't actually see each other. Their existence on different continents in the diegesis maintains a “wall” between them that proves a barrier to dramatizing their connection in a staged performance.

However, musicals do not rely as much on the representational and dramatic planes of storytelling as other forms of commercial theatre because they have another equally-weighted plane: the musical one. As Dyer argues, the production of meaning in musicals comes as much from their non-representational elements as their representational ones (20). *The Color Purple* uses female duets to maintain a close physical connection between characters who are geographically distant. From the beginning of the show, *The Color Purple* takes an unconventional approach to one of the most standard Broadway song types: the “I Want” song. The “I Want” song happens near the beginning of a show and is designed to introduce the

protagonist and clearly establish their primary goal. In contrast to standard musicals, however, *The Color Purple* features a “We Want” song – appropriately titled “Our Prayer” – where Nettie and Celie both sing about their desires. Nettie wants to learn about the world and be a schoolteacher (a desire that she fulfills in an unexpected way when she becomes a missionary), and Celie wants to take care of her sister and children, and have a peaceful life with a idyllic, bird-filled garden (one that she also fulfills unexpectedly by starting a business that gives her financial independence, ultimately living in a place with a garden where she can host a community picnic, where she is reunited with her sister and children). Most notably, these goals are not independent, but intertwined: part of Nettie’s stated goal involves getting to visit Celie, braid her hair, and hear her birds sing. Part of Celie’s goal is to hear Nettie’s school bell ring and to take care of her. Slightly altering the classic “Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep” bedtime prayer, the characters sing: “When I lay me down to sleep, I will say my prayer, that God love me so deep, He will promise our souls to keep, together.” The modification of the last line from “I pray the Lord *my* soul to keep” to “He will promise *our* souls to keep” changes a conventionally individualistic prayer to center a relationship. It’s not enough for God to keep one of their souls; He has to keep both *together*, establishing that the two sisters’ souls and journeys are intertwined as one.

The show uses the historical function of the “I Want” song – which cues the audience to the driving motivations behind the plot and gives them a sort of “guide” to the protagonist’s main goals and anticipated trajectory through the story – to instead establish the two sisters’ journeys as inseparable. Eventually, the plot separates the two: Nettie flees from sexual assault and goes to Africa as a missionary, and is able to communicate to Celie only through letters. Celie also does not receive any of these letters until the end of the first act because her husband hides them

from her. However, because of the strength of the “We Want” song from the beginning, Celie and Nettie’s relationship becomes integral not just to the dramatic and representational aspects of the show, but also to its musical vocabulary. The song “African Homeland” – in which Nettie narrates the letters that she has been sending Celie, and Celie sings her responses – confronts the major issue about demonstrating their relationship onstage: because they’re only communicating through letters, it becomes difficult to show their intimacy on-stage in the same way that Walker’s novel can through its epistolary form. However, “African Homeland” resists this separation by referencing the lyrics from “Our Prayer”: after revealing that Celie’s children (who she thought were dead) are on the missionary trip with her, the music slows down and Nettie sings “I teach your children ABCs/ For a missionary family,” a callback to “Our Prayer” when she sings “I can teach all my children to spell Tennessee.” After this line, Nettie and Celie join in and sing together in a combination of harmony and unison throughout the rest of the song.

By including a lyrical reminder of Celie and Nettie’s “We Want” song in “African Homeland,” *The Color Purple* reminds the audience that these two stories are not separate stories at all, but one intertwined story. Because they share the show’s “I Want” number, the success of one sister’s goal is contingent on the success of the other’s – as Paredez argues, divas’ acts of affirmation in the text are consistently about the mutual empowerment of multiple women – and thus they are connected by a singular narrative. Reminding the audience of this through the music does the work to bring the two sisters together even as the oppressive forces that caused their separation try to keep them apart. Furthermore, having Nettie and Celie then sing lines together allows their voices to intertwine in a way that their bodies can’t. As Stacy Wolf argues, “two women’s voices, in close proximity as they hit notes within the same octave, create a particularly intimate aural relationship on which the female duet capitalizes” (“Bosom Buddies”

358). In this same article, Wolf emphasizes the bodily nature of singing, or “the delivery of music and lyrics by way of the body, the voice” (357). Celie and Nettie singing together connects them in a way that the simple reading aloud of letters does not; their voices intermingle in song, creating a “particularly intimate aural relationship” and, in a sense, connecting their bodies sonically in a setting when the plot demands the separation of the rest of their bodies.

In this sense, even a script that textually celebrates women’s relationships can benefit from the function of Wolf’s female duets. These duets can provide a solution to theatre’s limitations by telling stories that show women’s separation while musically expressing their intimate connections across this separation. Furthermore, as Wolf points out, financial and geographic limitations mean that many musical theatre fans interact much more frequently with the cast albums of shows than they do with the actual show itself: in this sense, Nettie and Celie have as many opportunities as any other pairing in the show to be featured together for listeners of the soundtrack. On the cast album, their geographic separation does not limit representation during “African Homeland,” because there is no visual or spatial dramatization required for a recording; much like Walker’s novel, there’s no dramatic hierarchy between the characters’ connection in “African Homeland” and Celie and Shug’s connection when they kiss in “What About Love?” The musical allows the artists to depict the harmful effects of Celie and Nettie’s separation without sacrificing their ability to celebrate the ways their connection still survives. *The Color Purple* shows how the female duet, far from obsolete, is as powerful as ever in its ability to create musical connections between women who are otherwise obstructed in the narrative.

Another important thing to note about female duets in *The Color Purple* is their ability to literalize the lesbian erotics that Wolf ascribes to them. In some ways, this states the relatively

obvious: if a duet between women who do not have a romantic relationship in the text of a musical can open up romantic and erotic potential for their relationship, then a duet between women who actually *do* have a romantic relationship in the text can develop and explore eroticism and intimacy even further. Like any romantic pairing in a musical, Celie and Shug sing to, about, and with each other a lot: Shug sings “Too Beautiful for Words” and “The Color Purple” to Celie, Celie sings about her burgeoning sexual and romantic feelings for Shug in “Dear God – Shug,” and the two sing the romantic duet “What About Love?” together (along with a heartbreaking reprise towards the end of the show when they break up). Singing together, the two experience romantic, sexual, and religious awakenings, and their relationship’s intimacy, sexuality, and substance are all articulated through the music itself, allowing the relationship to exist in the music independently of the libretto or staging. While they also kiss onstage and are clearly a couple in the musical’s libretto, fans who only see the show once (or who never get to see the show due to financial or geographic limitations) still experience their relationship in its nuance and complexity whenever they listen to the cast album. Rather than simply being “added on” to the show’s plot, the couple’s experience becomes integral to the experience of the musical itself, as four of its songs – three of which are very prominent, and one of which is the title song of the show that is reprised by the entire ensemble as the finale – feature the women’s relationship in a way that makes it unavoidable and inextricable from the larger experience of the show: to listen to the soundtrack to *The Color Purple*, or even to see some of its more popular songs at an open mic or variety show, is to experience Shug and Celie’s relationship. Even if the show wasn’t advertised as a lesbian musical, there is no way to interact with it without acknowledging the centrality of this relationship to the show.

The prominence of songs about and by Celie and Shug, and their inextricability from the show's musical structure, are particularly important in this case because their relationship is one that has historically been suppressed. Steven Spielberg's 1985 film adaptation – which has been many peoples' primary encounter with *The Color Purple* due to the general popularity of films over novels, especially when those films involve Whoopi Goldberg and Oprah Winfrey – is notably criticized for desexualizing Shug and Celie's relationship to the point where it is easy for heteronormative audiences to pretend that they are not a couple. While their romantic and sexual relationship is obvious to any audience who looks for it, Spielberg effectively inserts the sort of "plausible deniability" common to queer representation that enables more conservative viewers to write their intimacy and their single kiss off as "just friendship" and to disavow the romantic nature of what should be a self-evident queer relationship. For example, in the most-viewed upload of the kiss scene to YouTube ("The Color Purple: Shug Kisses Celie") the user who uploaded it set the description as: "to boost Celie's confidence, Shug becomes affectionate with her," suggesting that the kiss was a brief confidence boost, rather than part of an ongoing romantic and sexual relationship. The comments section of this video mostly consists of debates surrounding the nature of the characters' relationship. This criticism of the film is so widely accepted that Spielberg openly apologized, saying he "was the wrong director to acquit some of the more sexually honest encounters between Shug and Celie" and that he "took something that was extremely erotic and very intentional, and [he] reduced it to a simple kiss" (quoted in Kinser). *The Color Purple's* musical adaptation exists in the context of a film that explicitly attempts to distort the romantic and sexual nature of Shug and Celie's relationship.

In this sense, the musical's choice to depict Shug and Celie's relationship as integral to the story functions implicitly as a critique of the film's choice to largely remove it. Because the



most well-known adaptation of *The Color Purple* attempts to minimize a lesbian reading, it becomes a powerful act when the musical uses its form to make this minimization impossible, encoding the relationship in the very structure of the music itself. To interact with the musical in any way (including the cast album) is to avow and acknowledge the relationship that Spielberg's film tries to suppress. Furthermore, an over-reliance on physical actions and stage directions to show Celie and Shug's relationship risks the possibility that this relationship could be minimized in future productions; all someone has to do to put up an amateur or independent production of *The Color Purple* is to buy a license from Theatrical Rights Worldwide: these rights allow a director to stage the show in any way they please so long as they do not change the "music, lyrics, book, and/or switching the gender of a character or changing the period setting" ("Frequently Asked Questions"). In this sense, any physical expressions of intimacy are at the discretion of the director, and thus not entirely safe from removal in productions of the show. Even in the 2015 Broadway revival – directed by a white man – the relationship's intimacy is significantly toned down from the original Broadway production. In the original, Celie and Shug spend "What About Love?" touching, embracing, and sharing close physical intimacy: in the revival, they spend the majority of the song standing far apart from each other, and even when they do come close they barely touch. Their relationship is almost entirely carried by the music and the performers, as the blocking and action never gets particularly romantic or sexual beyond a single kiss. Physical intimacy in each production of the show is at the discretion of individual director. However, any love songs or musical expressions of intimacy are guaranteed to stay in any production of the show. Thus, by viewing *The Color Purple* in the context of the novel's prior adaptation, and Celie and Shug's historic struggle to find visibility as two queer Black women in love, we can see how its use of duets and love songs becomes particularly powerful.

A final aspect of *The Color Purple*'s duets between queer lovers is their comparative rarity elsewhere, even in explicitly queer Broadway shows. *Fun Home* contains a song *about* queer sex, where Alison sings after sleeping with Joan, but she never sings any duets with other women besides her mother. *Kinky Boots* notoriously denies its queer lead Lola anything resembling romantic or sexual desire, despite her singing about how "The Sex is in the Heel." The sexual and romantic moments from the *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* film are removed from its Broadway adaptation due to the staging of the show as a concert where Hedwig tells stories, rather than a film where those stories are depicted. Maureen and Joanne in *Rent* only sing a fight song together, and never sing about their positive feelings for each other (even Collins and Angel's love duet "I'll Cover You" is later reprised as a funeral dirge, as the show's only queer love song is also a song of mourning). Frank N' Furter from *The Rocky Horror Show* sleeps with almost every principal character, yet has no duets. As hard as it is to find queer couples in mainstream musicals, it's surprisingly more challenging to find musicals where these couples then sing together; therefore, having Shug and Celie sing to, about and with each other so frequently is a more radical act than it may seem considering the dearth of queer duets in other shows – even those with queer characters.

Paredes discusses scenes of "staged spectatorship" in *The Color Purple*, where characters onstage watch other characters as they do things, creating a sort of diegetic on-stage audience. In the revival, ensemble members watch Celie and Shug during their romantic scenes; she argues that "these scenes of staged spectatorship semiotically incorporate Celie and Shug's private, non-normative bond into the larger public world of the play, thereby transforming, or more precisely, queering, the community in which Celie is embedded" (53). I suggest that this incorporation of queerness into the larger community – not as a form of a queer couple assimilating to that

community's norms, but rather as a queering of the community itself – is central to the 21<sup>st</sup> century musicals that I analyze. In *Wicked*, Fiyero's diva-loving, effeminate male spectatorship is no longer isolated from the realm of the feminine in which it longs to join, as Fiyero's queerness is incorporated into the musical's larger structure. In *The Color Purple*, Celie and Shug's queerness becomes an integral, inseparable part of the show's musical structure, ensuring its embeddedness as a central aspect of the narrative. In both cases, queer characters are not simply "represented" onstage as part of the show; they are a core part of the underlying structure of the show itself. The next section examines this specific trend more specifically as it extends across a variety of shows.

### **Our Beat is Divine: Trends in Queer Broadway Now**

I can't abide romantic notions of some vague long ago

I want to know what's true.

- *Fun Home*

Both *Wicked* and *The Color Purple* premiered relatively early in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (2003 and 2005). This section moves forward 10 years to 2015 to give a sense of a "post-*Fun Home*" Broadway. *Fun Home*'s 2015 premiere was a major milestone in queer Broadway representation for quite a few reasons: it was the first lesbian-focused musical to win the Tony Award for Best Musical, the first show written by an all-female team to win the Tony Awards for both best score and best book, and the first musical by acclaimed lesbian playwright and performer Lisa Kron. 12-year old Sydney Lucas captured hearts by singing about lesbian identification at the 2015 Tony Awards ceremony in the song "Ring of Keys," giving centre-stage to the experiences of queer youth and children, a demographic vastly underrepresented in mass culture. And since *Fun Home*, Broadway has seen a large amount of self-consciously queer theatre that is pushing queer

representation on Broadway in interesting (although not always productive) directions, including 2018's *The Prom* resulting in the first kiss between women in the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade. This section begins by looking to *Head Over Heels* and *Fun Home* as examples of queer Broadway's recent attempt to take what I'm calling a more "holistic" approach to queerness. As I mention earlier in this project, by "holistic," I refer to a musical that situates queerness structurally within the fabric of the show itself, seeing queer experiences and perspectives as something that fundamentally informs every part of the show and its idealized view of the world. This approach firmly rejects the type of minoritizing "quarantine" mentality (using "queer musicals" as an excuse to pretend that all other musicals are, by opposition, straight musicals) that Miller so fiercely opposes. This discussion extends through my discussion of *Head Over Heels* and *Fun Home*, and is then complicated in my later discussions of *The Prom* and *A Strange Loop*.

*Head Over Heels* was marketed as a landmark in queer representation: drag performer Peppermint was advertised as the "first openly transgender woman to originate a major role on Broadway" (Schulman) and the musical – from choreography to narrative to costume design – is an unapologetic celebration of queer politics, styles, and culture. Its significance to queer audiences was astounding: the producers chose to keep the musical open for months longer than expected despite the show's box office struggles that resulted in it losing money (Paulson). People were surprised that the producers kept renewing the show, considering that standard practice would have been to close it much earlier because of its lack of profits: the show expressed a rare act of Broadway prioritizing social and political goals over profits. When I saw the show in January 2019, I met a person at the stage door who had seen the show over 20 times in its 7-month run, and the show in general produced an extremely dedicated – if niche – fanbase

of people who returned for many repeat visits to see queer experiences, ideologies, and aesthetics on a Broadway stage in a way that they had not been able to before. For a brief period in 2018 and 2019, the Hudson theatre became an undeniable site of queer passion and energy.

Significant to *Head Over Heels* is the central message that mere acceptance and tolerance of queer folks are not sufficient. For *Head Over Heels*, queer lives need to be recognized as integral, central parts of any society, able to fundamentally inform basic social structures in a way that goes past simple, additive inclusion. The plot is fairly straightforward: Pythio, the Oracle of Delphi (played by Peppermint) gives Basilius, the king of Arcadia, four prophecies, declaring that his kingdom will fall if he does not prevent all four of them. In a predictable fashion, all four come true, and his kingdom does fall. It is then rebuilt from the ground up by his wife, Gynecia, into a stronger and better kingdom, after Basilius concedes the throne to her. The kingdom loses its “beat” – a form of protection and stability granted by the gods that keeps the nation prosperous so long as everyone stays “in line” and follows “the norm” – only to then gain a new one built out of the love and compassion that Gynecia is able to produce from the citizens’ hearts. It is thus revealed that the prophecies’ fulfillment resulted in a fundamentally better kingdom, as Arcadia had to fall before it could be restored and improved.

Of the four prophecies, two end up with explicitly queer resolutions. One prophecy involves his daughter Pamela discovering that she is a lesbian and “consummat[ing] her love” with her lover Mopsa. Another prophecy’s fulfillment involves Musidorus/Cleophila discovering that they are not cisgender<sup>21</sup>, comfortable living both as the man Musidorus and the woman Cleophila, declaring: “I’ll include then he with she, and thus a son and daughter both to you I’d be. A Musidorus in totality.” The other two prophecies, while less explicitly queer, do challenge

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<sup>21</sup> The show does not provide a specific label like genderfluid or nonbinary for the character’s gender identity, but simply has the character declare that they are comfortable as a man and a woman.

patriarchy and heteronormativity: one involves Basilius conceding his crown to Gynecia, and the other involves Basilius and Gynecia renewing their love in a moment where they believe that they are cheating on each other (they have sex with each other in a dark cave, and each of them thinks the other is a different person: they then realize that it is “only as strangers” and outside the bounds of conventional marriage that they could fall in love again). All of the prophecies are also given by Pythio, a non-binary character played by a transgender woman. The fact that a Black woman plays the most fundamentally powerful and structurally significant character in the show – the character who literally orchestrates all major events – is also a significant change from the historical sidelining of Black women in Broadway shows, a trend which I examine in more detail in Chapter Three when I discuss *Hercules*. The very structural pillars on which the new, thriving Arcadia is built are fundamentally queer, and the thesis of the show is essentially that a society needs, on a structural level, to be built on anti-patriarchal, gender-deconstructive, queer, and generally anti-oppressive foundations, even if this means the complete dissolution and overhaul of the existing social structure. *Head Over Heels* is a rally against additive, liberal, homonormative, and assimilationist approaches to gender and sexuality that attempt to expand existing social structures to “include” more marginalized identities without having to change much of anything about their otherwise still-oppressive social structures in the process. Rather than simply learning to begrudgingly accept Pamela’s love for Mopsa, Basilius must recognize that their love is an essential building block of the new kingdom that Arcadia needs to become: the two do, indeed, make it “their world.” It is thus not that surprising that the show was not financially successful on Broadway, a platform known for its much milder narratives of liberal tolerance<sup>22</sup>.

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<sup>22</sup> Although the show’s blank verse script, use of Early Modern English, and the generally hard-to-market combination of Sir Phillip Sidney and the Go-Go’s likely didn’t help.

The title of this dissertation is taken from a moment in *Head Over Heels*, in which lesbian lovers Pamela and Mopsa sing the line “we will make it our world,” before sharing a passionate kiss. The line – taken from the Go-Go’s song “Beautiful,” although sung here as part of “Our Lips are Sealed” – is musically distinguished as the song’s climax. The upbeat pop rock song briefly turns into a soft, lullaby-like ballad while Pamela and Mopsa declare their love for each other. The music then gradually crescendos and accelerates back to its driving pop-rock style: the powerful declaration “we will make it our world” is then sung at the culmination of this crescendo, indicating the end of the soft ballad section and the transition back into a powerful rock anthem. The moment’s musical and emotional high point is punctuated by this line and this kiss, and the music develops into what the Broadway Licensing published score refers to as “Big Rock Power Chords!” The singers harmonize in tight thirds (Mopsa moves between B and C#, while Pamela moves between D# and E), and Pamela’s E stands out the highest note sung in the song. The section progresses chromatically upwards, one step at a time, from Ab major, to A Major, to a B Major at the end (skipping Bb major), making “we will make it our world” stand out as the cumulation of a gradually-ascending modulation, the vocal high point of the song, and the introduction of Pamela’s D#, which manages to sound distinctive and somewhat jarring even when sung as part of a tight harmony thirds. In sum, the Act 1 finale of *Head Over Heels* is punctuated by a musically distinctive moment that stands apart from the rest of the song, where two lesbians declare that they will make the world “their world,” a sentiment that informs the musical as a whole.

While *Fun Home* is not a story about nation building and social overhaul like *Head Over Heels*, it advocates for a type of holistic, structural queerness in a slightly different way. *Fun Home* tells the story of three distinct stages of lesbian cartoonist Alison Bechdel’s life: we see

Alison as a young child living in small-town Pennsylvania, Alison as a college student discovering her sexuality, and Alison as an adult writing a graphic memoir about the other two phases of her life. As Adult Alison writes the memoir, she serves as narrator of the events from the other stages in her life, but she is also still a character since the audience follows her journey of memory and writing. The show begins with a declaration that Alison Bechdel is a truth-seeker. She goes through a box of family heirlooms, trying to remember her past so she can write and draw about it, and declares (echoing a former statement by her father): “I can’t abide romantic notions of some vague ‘long ago.’ I want to know what’s true, dig deep into who and what and why and when, until now gives way to then.” Alison, like her father, wants to access history in a concrete, clear, and firm way. However, as her story develops, she learns that history is often much more complicated than her father’s simplistic notion of truth, and that sometimes “romantic notions of some vague long ago” can have an affective truth that is more powerful and meaningful than more solid, indexical pieces of evidence.

Alison’s first lesson that her father’s emphasis on conventional ideals of literal realism and indexicality are not always the most accurate way of understanding the world comes when she is a child working on a school project where she has to draw a map of all of the places her family has been. She opts for a metaphorical, creative, cartoony map: she draws Pennsylvania as a keystone because it’s the Keystone State, and she draws herself and her siblings floating in bubbles because the map represents a time before they were born. Her father gets angry because he wants her to draw a map that follows a clearer, realist form, eventually pressuring her into giving up her vision to draw it in his more conventional way. Looking back on this memory, Alison questions if she knows anything that’s not “[her] dad’s mythology.” Throughout the play, Alison’s father desperately attempts to control everything around him to fit into an easily-



understandable narrative or pre-existing model of what's right, and Alison often falls into a similar trap. She is uncomfortable when she is faced with alternate interpretations of literature in college because they don't fall into the "correct" readings that her father told her, and she gets frustrated throughout her attempt to write her memoir because she can't conjure up memories exactly as they are. However, as the musical progresses, Alison begins to realize that memory and history do not always fit into normative models, and the truest moments she can conjure are ones more like her cartoon map: abstract, personal, emotion-based, and – to use José Esteban Muñoz's term – ephemeral.

Muñoz argues in "Ephemera as Evidence" that queer history "is often transmitted covertly... instead of being queerly available as visible evidence, queerness has instead existed as innuendo, gossip, fleeting moments, and performances" (6). Similarly, Ann Cvetkovich argues that "in the absence of institutionalized documentation or in opposition to official histories, memory becomes a valuable historical resource" (8). When exploring queer history, Muñoz points out that queer scholars cannot always work with evidence in the same way as other historians, because queer history is not preserved in the same way. Because of histories of oppression, queer lives have faced dangers that have required expressions of queer life and desire to be communicated secretly or in code: "leaving too much of a trace has often meant that the queer subject has left herself open for attack" (6). Even in situations where queer communities *have* tried to create clear evidence, this evidence is often then destroyed or distorted by oppressive forces, ranging from events like the 1933 burning of the Institut für Sexualwissenschaft by Nazis, to more contemporary issues such as transgender people being misnamed and misgendered at their own funerals because their families refuse to acknowledge and attempt to deny their identities. Either way, queer historians as a result have a strong

imperative to look to less conventional forms of evidence, since conventional evidence has been consistently denied us.

Rather than simply an unfortunate necessity caused by a lack of “better” evidence, however, Muñoz points out how ephemeral evidence can actually be more useful than conventional appeals to indexicality and officiality. He criticizes historians’ “imperative to maintain the stability of evidence *despite* the acknowledgement that evidence is always already contingent” (8) and points out how ephemeral evidence “simultaneously disrupts the very notion of officially subsidized and substantiated institutions” (6). Ephemeral approaches to evidence, then, can point out how *all* forms of evidence are, in some way, contingent and insufficient. This isn’t to say that official histories are useless, and that all of history is entirely subjective and unreliable – this kind of complete distrust in conventional forms of evidence leads to things like flat Earthers, Holocaust deniers, climate change denial, and COVID-19 anti-maskers, and sometimes concrete evidence matters. However, while conventional evidence is still *useful*, it is not infallible, and approaches to history can benefit from a recognition of the kinds of knowledge that the ephemeral can produce. Ephemeral pieces of evidence like stories, rumours, vague memories, and seemingly insignificant items can bring in perspectives, feelings, fragments, and knowledge that can never be fully articulated by more official forms of “solid” archival evidence. A queer approach to history – due to both the historical destruction of queer evidence *and* the importance of fleeting experiences, feelings, and vague, unspecified moments of connection to much of queer experience – is one that better captures it in its beauty and its complexity.

*Fun Home* shows Alison slowly develop from a focus on conjuring up the indexical “truth” of her past, towards an acceptance of the ways that her truest moments are often those

without indexical proof. Young Alison's showstopping solo – and the one that was chosen for the show's Tony Awards Performance – “Ring of Keys” resonates as one of the most profound moments of lesbian identification in the show. It is one of the most important – and also the most ephemeral – of the memories that Alison conjures. However, in a literal sense, very little actually happens in this scene: Alison is at a diner with her dad, a butch lesbian delivery woman walks in, Alison looks at her, and the two never interact. Alison is also not reminded of this memory by a physical encounter with anything that actually existed during that moment: unlike the photographs and artefacts that conjure up the rest of Alison's memories, this memory is inspired by a ring of keys that reminds her of the one that the delivery woman was carrying. There is no literal series of events, and no object or piece of proof to index the moment: no “what and why and when” to “dig deep into.” For a conventional historian, this memory wouldn't matter, because no events technically “happen” during it. Yet, this memory resonates as one of the most powerful and meaningful moments in Alison's queer history: it is the first time that she feels a sense of identification with another lesbian. Experiencing a queer awakening, she feels her “heart saying hi” to the first person who helps her realize that it is okay to be who she is. There is a truth in the ephemerality of the fleeting feelings in “Ring of Keys,” where no external “event” happens beyond Alison seeing someone from across a room, yet more happens to Alison on an internal level than in many of the more external, “official” events throughout the rest of the play.

Much like *Head Over Heels*, *Fun Home* is not simply a story about someone who happens to be a lesbian: it is, on a fundamental, structural level, a queer story. The play is a dramatization of ephemeral history in action – framed as a series of memories as Alison recalls them rather than a realist depiction of scenes “as they happen” – that narratively charts Alison's increasing acceptance of the ephemeral nature of her queer history. *Fun Home* encourages

audiences to change their understanding of what history more generally looks like, allowing a single woman's story to queer the way that the audience conceives of history. Alison's queer experience is thus not simply "quarantined" as a single, minoritarian story, but becomes a statement for how queer stories and experiences allow us to fundamentally restructure our understanding of how things like histories, autobiographies, and memoirs function.

One major limitation to this sort of "holistic" queerness, though, is that too much focus on queerness as the primary driving force between Broadway musicals can result in shows that ignore intersectionality, as queerness (and often white-coded queerness) becomes the only axis of oppression or identity explored. As I previously mentioned, while Fiyero in *Wicked* celebrates a historically queer-coded character type, this celebration is accompanied by the erasure of Fiyero's racial identity. *The Prom* is an example of what happens when a show becomes hyper-focused on gender and sexuality as the primary axes of oppression to the point that it ignores all other markers of identity: the musical tells a story about four white, liberal Broadway stars who arrive in a small town in Indiana and teach its residents to accept a young lesbian named Emma. The stars initially do this as a PR stunt (wanting to improve their reputations rather than actually caring about Emma), and the show appears as if it is going to parody the sort of Bono-like "narcissistic star as activist" narrative. However, it ultimately ends up reproducing exactly what it claims to critique, as the four New Yorkers change their motivations, decide they really do care about Emma, and ultimately succeed in teaching the children of the town about acceptance. One of them even chooses to stay in the town as a high school drama teacher, suggesting that a drama program will somehow magically end bigotry in the town. It turns out that the New Yorkers were not wrong in having a white, urban saviour complex (which is a critique the show *seems* like it

will have at the beginning); rather, they were simply misguided about their motivations behind this narrative, needing to learn how to be sincere saviours instead of self-serving ones.

What the musical never addresses are the racial dynamics of this narrative: the four Broadway stars are all white, while the town they arrive in is racially diverse. The principal of the school is a Black man, and some of the students – including Emma’s biggest bully Shelby, and her lover Alyssa – are played by actors of color, yet nobody addresses the problems with a bunch of white people driving into this community to “educate” them on diversity and acceptance. Homophobia is depicted as the only form of discrimination in the world of the play and Shelby, a young woman of color, is shown to be one of the show’s biggest homophobes, until a white Juilliard grad teaches her and her friends to be loving and accepting in the song “Love Thy Neighbour.” *The Prom* thus imagines that youth of color in a red state don’t understand anything about discrimination, and need to learn a lesson about acceptance from a white man with an R1 education. The town is depicted as a hateful and oppressive place, plagued by discrimination: but discrimination only for the gays, who are – in the musical’s logic – the only group that faces any form of bigotry. Apparently, the universe of *The Prom* has solved racism<sup>23</sup>. In reality, the principal and all of the Black students and other students of colour at James Madison high school would likely understand certain types of oppression far better than four white New Yorkers, but the white people in this narrative get to be the experts on oppression, inclusion and tolerance. *The Prom*’s complete absence of intersectional thinking or racial awareness results in a set of dynamics that position white queers as the experts on oppression.

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<sup>23</sup> There is one brief allusion to racism (the principal calls the PTA’s attempt to prevent Emma from going to prom as a “civil rights issue”) and a brief comment about race (he also makes a short joke about not looking like other musical theatre fans because he is Black), but otherwise the show never acknowledges race.

*The Prom* demonstrates the dangers of a holistically queer approach that centers white, urban, middle-class experiences. Michael R. Jackson's Pulitzer Prize winning musical *A Strange Loop*<sup>24</sup> confronts this privileging of white queerness as the face of Broadway by asserting the integral importance of Black queer voices to the genre. *A Strange Loop* highlights the experience of a queer, Black man named Usher as he attempts to make it as a Broadway playwright. His explicit goal, stated in the opening song, is to write a "big, Black, and queer-ass American Broadway show." This goal emphasizes a major contradiction that Usher must navigate throughout the show: as a gay man, his experiences should be central to Broadway – America's quintessential gay male performance space – but as a Black man his experiences are constantly sidelined and subjugated in that space. Referring to a Black character with AIDS as an "un-HBO special, Un-Oscar Award winning, abnormal-hearted, Un-Angel in American Black queer," Jackson criticizes the association of AIDS plays on Broadway with white queer stories that sideline or ignore Black queer experiences by constantly centering whiteness in stories about AIDS and queer life. People living with AIDS get compassion on Broadway so long as their stories are structured around a prestigious, HBO special-style sensibility, which is informed by white privilege: otherwise, those stories remain marginalized, even in a so-called "progressive" space like Broadway. As Warren Hoffman argues, "community [in the Broadway musical] really means *white* community, while people of color are often absent from the utopia that many musicals present" (6).

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<sup>24</sup> While the rest of this chapter is exclusively focused on Broadway, I choose to focus on this off-Broadway show because it is explicitly invested in Broadway as a place (the protagonist is an usher for *The Lion King* and discusses Broadway frequently). Producer Barbara Whitman has also expressed intention to transfer it to Broadway, meaning that it will likely become a Broadway show soon; if not for the COVID-19 pandemic, it likely would have already transferred considering its popular and critical acclaim.

As an artist, fan, and community member, Usher is constantly marginalized in spaces that are commonly perceived as queer. “Exile in Gayville” demonstrates Usher’s struggle navigating racism on gay dating apps, and “Inwood Daddy” takes this to its logical end-point by depicting a sexual encounter with a man who quickly gets aggressively racist. Even when he *is* given the chance to participate in this community as an artist, he has to produce material that positions Blackness in a way that appeals to white audiences (as alluded to in his working as an usher for *The Lion King*): as “Intermission Song” states: “if you can’t please the Caucasians, you will never get the dough! ‘Cause critics clinically deny us then deny implicit bias with their vanity supported by a system that’s distorted.” He is also constantly pressured to write a homophobic gospel play, as he is pushed into a narrow view of what Black Broadway writers should write. On Slate’s podcast *Working*, Jackson discussed mainstream expectations of Black Broadway writers, and his choice to disrupt these expectations by depicting a homophobic gospel scene: “people are constantly... wanting some Black people to take them to church. To which I say, you wanna go to church? Well, grab your Bible.” (“The Pulitzer Won’t Change Playwright Michael R. Jackson”). Black artists are expected to conform to certain expectations on Broadway, and these expectations marginalize them from being able to tell certain types of stories, particularly queer and subversive ones. Spaces that are culturally considered queer – like Broadway, gay dating apps, and New York’s gay scene – are shown as being only accepting to a specific type of white (and also thin or muscular, normative) gay man, as racist structures prevent them from being accessible to queer folks who do not fit this mold.

Jackson’s comments on the restrictions placed on Black creators on Broadway resonate with the historical production of *The Color Purple*. Stacy Wolf argues that “as a commercial entertainment product, *The Color Purple* at once wants to address African American women and

everyone” (162) and examines how its promotional campaigns constantly emphasized a liberal message that universalizes Celie’s experience, framing it explicitly as something anyone can relate to (“there’s a little Celie in all of us!”). While there is, obviously, value in coalition, solidarity, and connection, there is a disproportionate amount of pressure on artists of colour to do extra labour to make their work relatable to a white audience, when white audiences aren’t asked to do the same. There was, for example, no pressure the producers of *Falsettos* to make its story relevant to Black audiences, or for the producers of *Fun Home* to demonstrate how Latina lesbians can connect to Alison Bechdel: however, the producers of *The Color Purple* had to stress constantly that white audiences can connect to Celie. Her story is not presented as being implicitly valuable unless it can be made of use to a white audience, while white stories are seen as inherently meaningful even if the only people they attempt to reach are white<sup>25</sup>. An appeal to the “holistic queerness” of Broadway is dangerous if it centers or normalizes a vision of queerness as white, middle-class, and urban, or if it that ignores intersectionality and positions gender and sexuality as the only meaningful axes of identity or oppression.

### Conclusion

This chapter expands upon two central ideas from my introduction – those of holistic queerness and public disclosure – although it is most explicitly interested in the former. As expressed through *Wicked*, *The Color Purple*, *Fun Home* and *Head Over Heels*, a common

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<sup>25</sup> My awareness of this issue with *The Color Purple* initially came from a student in a 2019 course I taught. Shadaye Cousins commented that it is strange that Celie sings “I’m beautiful and I’m here” in the musical, when she never calls herself beautiful in the novel, and her most iconic line is about her owning her ugliness: “I’m pore, I’m black, I may be ugly and can’t cook... but I’m here.” I still don’t have a definitive answer about the implications of change – and as a white critic I’m certainly not the right person to provide that answer – because it opens itself up to both a powerful and positive reading (an ownership of Black beauty) and a more conservative reading (the musical, as a mainstream entertainment product, is uncomfortable with the complicated concept of “celebrating and owning ugliness” as a form of resistance, and has to articulate it as the easier-to-understand discovery of one’s beauty). This issue is not one that I am properly positioned to navigate; however, Cousins’ initial observation, which led to this line of thinking, made me think about the audiences to whom *The Color Purple* may be pressured to appeal.



experience with musicals during and after the turn of the century is the development from a liberal politics of “inclusion” towards a fundamental queerness that impacts the base structures and assumptions of the shows. Issues of visibility and publicness are slightly less at the forefront of this chapter (although they’re the focus of Chapters 3 and 5): however, the two issues are fundamentally connected. For Miller, part of the function of having queer characters onstage in the 20<sup>th</sup> century is to present them as a minority group – thus denying the holistic dependence of Broadway as a whole on queer labour, experiences, aesthetics and ideologies. Therefore, a show’s decision to “de-minoritize” queerness, showing its fundamental necessity to Broadway, is inherently linked to issues of visibility, as it is a choice to visibly and explicitly affirm something that Broadway has disavowed for decades, taking queer spectatorship (for better or for worse) “out of the closet.”

Discussing *The Color Purple*’s revival, Paredez argues that “the performers in these songs do not just sing out *towards* the audience but sing out *with them*, ‘as if’ Doyle remarks ‘everyone is in the same church at the same time’” (53). This practice – of the audience feeling like they’re singing *with* (or even *as*) the performers onstage is similar to Miller’s discussion of the diva calling the audience to experience themselves *becoming* her, as the wall between viewing subject and viewed object collapsed. The difference here is that Miller speaks of an “unpublicizable work” (90) that takes place “in a secret space of undisclosable fantasy” (87), while newer musicals wear this call to participation on their sleeves.

The main difference here is that 20th century musicals attempted to keep the queerness of Broadway in the closet, even as they represented queers on stage; 21<sup>st</sup> century musicals, on the other hand, wear their queer history proudly and openly, even as the shows themselves attempt to open themselves up to a broader commercial audience. In other words, while Broadway is

attempting to attract more non-queer audiences and reach out to a broader demographic, they simultaneously celebrate and explicitly avow their queer foundations. This chapter has mostly presented these trends as a good thing, exploring the benefits that come from a willingness to openly talk about the queer structures behind Broadway, and the potential for fulfilling and satisfying developments on 20<sup>th</sup> century sites of representation. Chapter Two, though, discusses some of the assimilationist tendencies that a “holistic queerness” risks. While the fundamental queerness of Broadway is openly discussed, it is accompanied by a commercial imperative to commodify Broadway and market it to a broad audience. While this dissertation outlines ideas of “belonging without assimilation” (outlined most clearly in my introduction and in Chapter Four), and I show how queerness can assert its importance to belonging within a social system without assimilating to this social system, I also acknowledge that this is a dangerous line to walk. In the next chapter, I will outline how Broadway risks simply producing liberal, homonormative assimilationist politics. I also acknowledge how – even without assimilationist politics – exposure, disclosure, and public visibility are not always good things: this is the focus of Chapter Five. However, as much as scholarship is quick to insist on the critical and the negative, particularly when talking about popular culture, it is also important to celebrate hope and potential (as Stuart Hall argues, popular culture is always a site of both containment *and* resistance), and this chapter largely sees the hope produced by these new musicals’ developments on 20<sup>th</sup> century queer structures.

## Chapter Two

### **“I’m the Witch: You’re the World.” *Into the Woods* and Queer Reception**

The trouble with fables is everyone looks for symbolism.

- Stephen Sondheim

This chapter aims to give a sense of two distinct moments of queer life and Broadway history in New York City by examining similarities and differences between the original 1987 Broadway run of Stephen Sondheim and James Lapine’s *Into the Woods* and its 2002 Broadway revival. The two Broadway runs of one of the “key musicals of the Broadway canon” (Jubin) were staged in two extremely different contexts, both in terms of how Broadway and Times Square functioned, and what queer cultures in North America looked like. The original Broadway production opened in the Times Square of the 1980s, heavily associated with crime, danger, drugs and sex, while the revival was staged in the middle of the “Disneyfied,” family-friendly Times Square of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, the original Broadway production originated in the midst of the AIDS epidemic, and the same year that ACT UP was founded. The revival, in contrast, premiered the same year that Lisa Duggan published “The New Homonormativity,” describing the prominence of assimilationist queer politics that abandoned the radical goals of organizations like ACT UP in favour of attempts to appeal to normative values. I will examine these two very different productions of the same musical and the production contexts that surrounded them, both in terms of Broadway theatre and queer cultures.

This chapter has three goals, separated into three sections. First, I outline the queerness of *Into the Woods* in its original format, comparing its structure and themes to queer theatre,

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<sup>26</sup> The official Times Square website at <https://www.timessquarenyc.org/history-of-times-square> details the increase in crime rates through to the late 1980s, as well as the general reputation of Times Square at the time.

culture, and politics of the 1980s. I then explore how changes made to the revival align with changes in Times Square and queer culture in the 21<sup>st</sup> century that tend towards normativity, demonstrating how assimilationist, homonormative politics are reflected in the 2002 revival. The third section then complicates the claims made in the second, examining how the show's ideological landscape is much more complex than a reductionist account of queer cultural shifts can allow for. Thus, like the goal of this dissertation as a whole, this section looks to trace changes in queer culture from the 20<sup>th</sup> into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, while also resisting any teleological stories about unambiguous “progress” in queer life.

As a Sondheim musical produced in 1987, *Into the Woods* belongs to a series of queer traditions. As I establish in my introduction and Chapter One, the connections between musical theatre and the networks of queer artists, performers, and audiences who surround it have been extensively studied. The Broadway diva – who is a central figure of many of these queer networks – is fully present in established diva Bernadette Peters' performance as The Witch. Peters' Witch embodies the diva's proud outsider status, powerful voice, gender ambiguity, and confident embodiment of unconventional femininity and beauty, which are all important aspects of queer Broadway history. Furthermore, Sondheim's career has been marked by incessant pressure from audiences and media to position everything he writes as being grounded foremost in gay male life, even in cases when he insists that it is not. Steve Swayne discusses the ironic tension between Sondheim's frequent disavowal of homosexuality as a primary focus in his work and life, and his fans' insistence on foregrounding it as a core component of everything he does. While Sondheim was “never easy with being a homosexual” (Secret 181), frequently denied implications that his shows were allegories for gay life (Swayne 109), and became “irritated” (Swayne 110) by questions of his characters' sexuality, audiences insisted on claiming him and

every one of his shows for a queer aesthetic and culture anyway. As John Clum argues, “Sondheim’s great following, his core audience, is the dwindling army of show queens who care about musical theatre... to us, Sondheim is something of an icon, a composer-lyricist who speaks to us” (213). The fact that queer audiences held so strongly to Sondheim even when Sondheim himself tried to distance himself from their interpretations of his work speaks to the dedication of these audiences. These shows are so important to queer networks and communities that they persist in claiming them, even when it means pushing against statements made by their composer.

While *Into the Woods* exists in this already-established queer context of both musical theatre and Sondheim’s oeuvre, its significance to queer politics and communities is particularly salient because of its initial reception as an AIDS allegory. Despite Sondheim’s disavowals of any connection between the play and AIDS (Weinraub), this interpretation was and remains extremely common and popular<sup>27</sup>. This makes sense: the show is about characters whose ordinary lives are suddenly thrown into chaos and tragedy when an unexpected force begins indiscriminately killing everyone, destroying communities and families, while the government proves to be apathetic and useless. Lines like “Wake up! People are dying all around you! You’re not the only one to suffer a loss,” spoken by the Witch, would resonate particularly strongly with a queer, Broadway-attending New York audience in 1987. While it may not literally or intentionally be an AIDS play, *Into the Woods* has a meaningful historical and contemporary relationship to the epidemic that queer communities were facing when it premiered.

One of the primary issues with many popular queer readings of Sondheim – and the one that likely causes a lot of Sondheim’s “irritation” and frequent desire to disavow them – is their

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<sup>27</sup> As outlined in Schulman, Bloom, and Stevens.

insistence on direct allegory. Swayne outlines (with a healthy dose of skepticism) the many queer Sondheim readings that Clum performs: *Into the Woods* is a coming out allegory, *Merrily We Roll Along* is impossible to understand without a knowledge of unrequited gay love circa 1957, *Sweeney Todd* is about the corruption and hatred of the straight world, and *Company* is about a character who is obviously supposed to represent a gay man. These readings often look for a clear-cut “A equals B” allegorical structure, where each fictional event is intended to directly stand in for an equivalent real-life event. It is not surprising that Sondheim would respond to these claims with frustration and comments like “the trouble with fables is everyone looks for symbolism.” These types of allegorical readings often put a lot of pressure on the will and intention of the author. They also typically aim for a singular, clear-cut “solution” to what the play “really means” instead of a more open-ended discussion of how the text’s more nuanced implications and themes may or may not resonate with various possibilities for meaning and reception. My reading here goes beyond direct allegory: unlike many other interpretations of Sondheim’s work, I am not trying to “prove” that he was “really writing” about AIDS or queer experiences. I instead aim to look for underlying structural reasons why a show like *Into the Woods* resonated so strongly with queer audiences, and why it was particularly important to them during the AIDS crisis, without claiming it is a direct parable for AIDS.

For the second and third sections, I will discuss the 2002 revival of the show because it offers a rare opportunity to see how the same show, in the same geographic location, directed by the same person (Lapine), can look vastly different depending on the historical moment in which it was staged. While *Into the Woods* has been produced many times – in both amateur and professional contexts – the 1987 and 2002 productions are the only two times it has appeared on Broadway. Comparing these two productions thus allows for insight into a single theatre scene

and urban space in two different temporal periods. Because of *Into the Woods*' historic queer significance, this comparison then also gives insight into how its queer resonances function in these different contexts.

As Jeff Turner argues, the process of revival situates a musical as an “ever-evolving text not limited by its sequential place in the canon but framed by any given historical moment” (62), and provides “an opportunity to reconfigure ‘canonical’ texts for new audiences” (65). Turner concedes that revivals are often commercially motivated: new shows are risky investments, but audiences won’t buy tickets to a show they’ve already seen, so a revival (a new staging of an existing show with notable changes to things like direction, orchestration, and even sometimes the script) provides the perfect balance of novelty and familiarity to maximize chances of profit. However, an interesting side-effect is that they allow for a single show to exist in multiple different forms – each legitimized and given “canonical” status due to its production on a Broadway stage – giving a sense of how specific historical moments inform the interpretation and resonance of that show’s narrative.

### **The Queerness of 1987’s *Into the Woods***

Everything’s right,

And you know that you’ll never belong

- “On the Steps of the Palace”

My analysis of *Into the Woods* looks primarily to the show’s narrative structure as a site of queer potential, relating it to Sondheim’s popularity as a queer figure, and *Into the Woods*’ particular reception as a response to AIDS. In particular, I look at how the titular woods act as a space of growth for the characters, where they develop a particular relationship to social structures that relates to historically queer ways of thinking about community, family, and

gender. I look to Audre Lorde's constructions of the erotic, and David Román's discussion of AIDS theatre (specifically *Angels in America*) as queer ways of thinking that help unpack the underlying ideological concerns of *Into the Woods*' narrative structure. I also situate my argument in relation to Kath Weston's studies of queer kinship; *Into the Woods* ends with a sort of "chosen family" structure that is formed after many of the characters' family members die. While it is tempting to look at this family at the end (which consists of an adult man, an adult woman, two young people, and an infant) as a simple attempt to re-create the same heteronormative families that were lost, I look to Weston's framework to demonstrate how the unit instead functions as a queer reformation of what "family" means and looks like outside of heteronormative frameworks.

*Into the Woods* has a relatively straightforward structure. Act 1 sees standard fairy tales played out in (more or less) conventional ways. The characters from these stories occasionally overlap<sup>28</sup>, but they more or less follow their own individual trajectories until they reach narrative closure with the "happy ever afters" of their separate stories. These individual trajectories are represented visually by each act beginning with a tableau of the central characters sectioned off separately on stage in their own separate "worlds". Near the beginning of Act 2, The Narrator who is telling these stories is killed, and the stories begin to unravel as a giant threatens to kill everyone<sup>29</sup>. Before dying, The Narrator warns: "you won't know how the story ends! You'll be lost!" Consequently, with the narrator gone, characters frequently end up "in the wrong story," as the stories get mixed up with each other and lose the conventional drives towards narrative

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<sup>28</sup> For example: Jack only steals the harp from the giant because Little Red Riding Hood dares him to, and the Bakers have to collect various ingredients from the other characters to make a potion that will break a spell preventing them from having a child.

<sup>29</sup> While the connection between the narrator dying and the stories losing their logical trajectories should be quite obvious, I somehow didn't initially consider it until a friend pointed it out to me while he was performing in a production of the show in 2018.



closure that they had in Act I. The story then ends with peoples' homes destroyed, many characters dead, and Cinderella, The Baker, Little Red Riding Hood, Jack, and the Baker's infant child surviving and deciding to start life anew as a family unit. Throughout both acts, "the woods" and the moments where different fairy tales overlap serve as a space of awakening for characters, where they break from their everyday routines to grow and learn, but only do so at the risk of great danger.

This structure, at its most basic, is a slight variation on what Northrop Frye calls the "green world" narrative (borrowing the term from Andrew Marvell), where "the action of the comedy begins in a world represented as a normal world, moves into the green world, goes into a metamorphosis there in which the comic resolution is achieved, and returns to the normal world" (182). In the case of *Into the Woods*, the characters go to the green world, are transformed, then return to the normal world, only to then return to the green world a second time after their normal world has been destroyed, and re-establish a "new normal". Regardless, the typical structure of "characters breaking from everyday life, learning more about themselves, and then returning as their newly-developed selves" is not particularly novel or unique, and it would be hard to claim this plot structure on its own as particularly distinctive or queer. An easy reading of *Into the Woods* could simply conclude that the musical, like nearly all "green world" comedies, shows the importance of breaking free from the familiar and safe to grow and develop, even as these classic journeys from "innocence to experience" require danger and sacrifice. As Little Red says: "isn't it nice to know a lot? And a little bit... not."

However, two distinct features of the way this plot structure develops in *Into the Woods* open it up to particularly queer potential. The first is the way that the characters' growth is distinctly linked to their breaking from prescribed gender and sexual roles and heteronormative

family structures. Character growth is thus specifically gendered, and characters can only develop if they understand the ways that their limitations and restrictions are grounded in restrictive cultural expectations specifically linked to gender and sexuality. However, simply having characters break free from gender norms alone is not quite sufficient to make a musical notably queer. Mainstream films ranging from *A League of Their Own* to *Mulan* to *Wonder Woman* celebrate women who challenge patriarchal expectations about their place in society, and it has become relatively commonplace to focus on a protagonist who finds freedom through the rejection of gendered social structures<sup>30</sup>. While these work as progressive narratives, they have become standard enough to mainstream storytelling that something more complex needs to take place to claim a narrative structure as notably, distinctively useful for queer critique.

What fills *Into the Woods* with a particular queer potential is the way that it understands the relationship between personal freedom and social responsibility in relation to these gender and sexual roles. Popular liberal narratives where characters break free from social norms to “find themselves” often focus around a hyper-individualistic ideal that is complicit with neoliberalism’s privatized, anti-social orientation. Liberation for the neoliberal framework is an individualistic freedom, which disregards social responsibility, interpersonal networks, and compassion and care for others. To break from gender and sexual roles, but to do so through a neoliberal structure, is to also break away from a sense of society more generally.

The proposed solution of neoliberalism to a harmful society is for powerful individuals to transcend or overcome marginalization, rather than for anyone to actually fix the system that causes that marginalization in the first place. As Richard Dyer argues, in much entertainment

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<sup>30</sup> Although this is, almost always, represented as women challenging gender stereotypes to take up “masculine” roles, with far fewer stories about men taking up “feminine” roles, which speaks to cultural misogyny (thanks to Lynn Kozak for pointing this out).

under capitalism, the solution to society's problems is simply presented as being *more* capitalism (*Only Entertainment* 27). Rather than imagining new systems of care and social organizing that allow for collective freedom from an oppressive system, individualistic solutions simply celebrate those with the means to "rise above" hardship. They thus abandon those without the relative privilege and opportunity to do the same, implicitly blaming people for their own oppression instead of acknowledging its systemic causes<sup>31</sup>. *Into the Woods* premiered in a 1980s context, where this sort of hyper-individualism embodied through Ronald Reagan's politics was literally killing marginalized people as it was used to justify the neglect of people living with AIDS and the slashing of social support systems. This focus on isolated individuals overcoming barriers through "hard work," rather than communities developing supportive networks of mutual liberation, was leaving vulnerable groups open to harm. In this context, a story of individualized liberation would reassert – rather than challenge – the racist, homophobic, cisnormative, heteropatriarchal status quo, even as individual characters manage to transcend it by "finding themselves" outside of a community context.

I assert that the structure of *Into the Woods* goes past simple stories of self-discovery and individualized growth. While characters learn to break free from socially-prescribed gender roles, this sort of break is not presented as antithetical to community, but rather as something that actually requires community to achieve. Self-discovery in the woods can only come from sincere connections to others. Lapine and Sondheim therefore create narratives that simultaneously push characters to develop a sense of independence and individual subjectivity *and* a recognition of

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<sup>31</sup> Interestingly, Disney films and other mainstream narratives have begun moving away from this structure. *Brave*, for example, seems to be about a woman who runs into the woods to "change her fate," only to learn that her independent self-discovery is dependent on her developing a more mature relationship with her mother, rather than her running off on her own. As usual, Disney narratives prove promising even as their corporate practices remain concerning.

community and an interconnected world. As The Baker's father tells him in the woods, "the farther you run, the more you feel undefined:" it is movement away from others that also leads him to move away from himself, and he can only find himself by finding community. Maurya Wickstrom points out how anthropologist Harri Englund found a discrepancy between neoliberal notions of privatized, individual freedom and the Malawian communities with whom he worked, who "understood freedom and rights as something that can only be achieved through social relationships, not as individuals in pursuit of their own interests" (9). *Into the Woods* formulates freedom as a communal, rather than individual, goal: as I explore in connection with Audre Lorde and David Román, this understanding of freedom articulated in the show aligns with 1980s queer political goals, particularly those developed in response to AIDS.

If characters' self discovery happens in tandem with community connections, the question arises: why do they need to leave their community for the woods in the first place? Why can't they just stay in the community where the play begins, if their self-discovery comes from community? What I emphasize is that, while self-discovery is not set up in opposition to community, it *is* set up in opposition to *heteronormative* community, which is different. There is a false dichotomy between classically conservative "repressive communities" and a newly liberated "individual subject." This dichotomy overlooks the fact that it is possible to be opposed to both of these things simultaneously. To resist both tightly regimented and constricting communities while *also* resisting an extreme individualism devoid of communal responsibility, allows space for a wider variety of options to emerge. It thus becomes important to distinguish between two different definitions of the word "community:" coercive, restrictive notions of "community values" and less prescribed communities based on the unstructured, often unexpected connections that come from listening to, caring for, and understanding others in ways

that don't follow pre-established rituals or rigid enforcement. To find themselves, characters do need to find connections to each other; however, these connections have to happen outside of pre-existing narratives, and they end up being very different from the heteronormatively structured connections in which they initially find themselves. The underlying function of both the woods and the narrative scrambling is thus to encourage characters to explore the potential of alternative and non-normative gendered and sexual arrangements. Heteronormative community values are not replaced with self-seeking individualism, but rather with more authentic connections to both the self *and* others.

Common interpretations of *Into the Woods* often ignore this community-centered understanding of collective freedom, instead setting up an opposition between “community values” and “the self” as the central driving conflict behind the narrative. Olaf Jubin, for example, positions the characters’ journeys as quests from a purely self-centered narcissism towards community responsibility: for Jubin, characters learn to move away from themselves and towards the community. Jubin’s reading follows what Sondheim has said about the show, as he told the *New York Times* that it is about “community responsibility,” as well as parents and legacies (Weinraub). However, Jubin overlooks the ways that characters’ harmful actions at the beginning of the play are actually much more in line with heteronormative community structures than they are with pure individualism. Characters end up in a bind where their attachment to what they think is community responsibility is actually pulling them away from each other. Rather than choosing between community and self-centeredness, *Into the Woods* demands a reformulation of what “community” means and looks like in the first place. Jubin’s description of characters as learning more about the value of community as the musical progresses is thus not that different from my seemingly contradictory argument that they break away from pre-

existing community structures as it progresses. Both of these developments work collaboratively against the isolating and normalizing instincts of a heteronormative and prescriptive social system that harms both individuals and communities.

My thoughts here are informed by Audre Lorde's writings on the erotic. Amber Jamilla Musser discusses how Lorde's "Uses of the Erotic" identifies how "the route to subjecthood is community, and that objectification is experienced as a form of antisociality" (348). Thus, to separate oneself from others is also to separate oneself from one's own subjectivity; to be antisocial is to turn both the self and the other into an object. E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson make a similar claim when they discuss the goal of the edited collection *Black Queer Studies* as "fundamentally a liberatory one—in the sense that it is grounded in the assertion of individual rights balanced by communal accountability in the interest of ensuring social justice" (6). Lorde articulates this balance in "Uses of the Erotic":

To share the power of each other's feelings is different from using another's feelings as we would use a kleenex. When we look the other way from our experience, erotic or otherwise, we use rather than share the feelings of those others who participate in the experience with us. And use without consent of the used is abuse. [...] When we look away from the importance of the erotic in the development and sustenance of our power, or when we look away from ourselves as we satisfy our erotic needs in concert with others, we use each other as objects of satisfaction rather than share our joy in the satisfying, rather than make connection with our similarities and our differences. To refuse to be conscious of what we are feeling at any time, however comfortable that might seem, is to deny a large part of the experience and to allow ourselves to be reduced to the pornographic, the abused, and the absurd.

Lorde outlines the ways that racist and heteronormative culture encourages people to engage in the “looking away” from erotic drives and desires that turns what *should be* a sincere connection into a form of abuse that harms both community and individual by reducing them to the “pornographic, the abused, and the absurd.” Following from this perspective, the rest of this section explores how heteronormative culture constantly pulls characters in *Into the Woods* to “look away” from the desires, drives, and pleasures of both themselves and others, as their investment in normative society reduces them to its objects, harming both community *and* self.

As I discuss in my introduction, Musser emphasizes that Lorde is writing from a very specific subject position, and that her identity as a Black, queer woman is central to her writing and her ideas. Musser expresses concerns that Lorde’s ideas are often too far abstracted and appropriated from this specific context and made to speak for a generalized sense of “queerness.”. Thus, while my discussion of the relationship between self, community, and normativity in this chapter is influenced by Lorde’s writings, I cannot claim that I am examining the same structures since I am discussing a show written by two white men; thus, it is imperative that I recognize the ways that Lorde’s writing is directly rooted in Black women’s experiences. My introduction works through my desire to create dialogues and connections without creating false equivalences or erasing the importance of specificity and difference. I aim to acknowledge the ways that Lorde’s writing has changed the way I think about key concepts, thus engaging in what Musser calls the “optimism about coalitional politics and community that honors Lorde’s legacy,” while also emphasizing the ways that her ideas are deeply rooted in Black queer women’s experiences and thus distinct from what I am saying here, even as they are related.

One of the driving forces behind the narrative in *Into the Woods* is The Baker and The Baker’s Wife’s (collectively referred to in this paper as The Bakers) quest to break a curse that is

preventing them from having a child. Jubin points out how this quest leads The Bakers to act in immoral ways that harm others because they are “corrupted by the promise of fulfilling a desire too strong to resist... in the breathless anticipation of finally being granted what they have always wished for, their moral compass is no longer reliable” (24). He positions their corruption as being one of pure selfishness: self-obsession draws them away from community responsibility and leads them to harm others. According to Jubin, the characters have to move away from self towards community as they grow. However, what he neglects to identify is that the Bakers’ wish is not exactly based on a selfish desire to pursue something that they *actually* want. The characters are, after all, pursuing a goal that is directly in line with what is expected of them as a married, heterosexual couple: reproduction. In this sense, they are not driven to harmful and immoral behaviour because of selfish individualism, but rather because of their desperate desire to fulfill a heteronormative social role. This goal is thus driven by one sense of “community values:” the prescriptive, instrumental sense of what community means to the characters at the beginning of the play.

Obviously not all people who want children are simply following a social script; there are, of course, people who legitimately want children. The Bakers, however, never do or say anything to suggest that they really want a child for any reason other than that it’s what they’re supposed to want. While they state in the opening that they want a child, they never discuss, in any specific terms, what it is about one that will bring them joy. In a genre where characters often sing entire songs detailing why they want what they want and extolling all of the wonderful virtues of the object of their desire (appropriately titled “I Want” songs), and where songs about parenting and the joys of childhood are abundant, The Bakers have no songs or even lines detailing their maternal or paternal desires. All of the songs in *Into the Woods* about motherhood



and children are sung by The Witch: The Witch sings about her daughter a *lot*, suggesting that Sondheim was willing to write songs about emotions attached to parenting for *Into the Woods*, but didn't give any of these songs to the Bakers.

In fact, in their entire time in the woods, The Bakers almost exclusively refer to their mission as being to "break a curse" rather than to "have a child," suggesting that they constantly forget what their actual end goal is, and mistake the means (breaking the curse) for the ends (having a child). At the very top of the show, the Bakers mention their wish three times ("I wish we had a child," "I wish we might have a child," and "I want a child"): these are all brief statements, and they are never qualified by any explanation of *why* it is their wish. At the end of the prologue, the main cast lists infinitive statements about what they intend to do ("to see/ to sell/ to get/ to bring/ to make/ to lift"), and the Bakers' statements are "to make the potion," and "to lift the spell," rather than "to have a child," suggesting that they have already forgotten the arbitrary goal they outlined at the beginning of the song. They never discuss desire for parenthood: the child itself only comes up five times in the entirety of their journey in the woods in Act 1, and it's never in a way that expresses anything resembling desire. Two of these times are to facilitate a punchline, and the third time is a threat, when The Baker's Wife doesn't want to steal a cow, and her husband retorts: "Then don't steal it and resign yourself to a childless life." Finally, the other two times are both the repetition of the same line: "Do [you/I] want a child or not?" which is framed as a rhetorical question used to motivate the Bakers to their actions, but also serves a second function as a legitimate question that casts doubt on whether they actually do want one. Besides these five moments, the Bakers always refer to their quest as being one to break a spell or make a potion: as The Baker's Wife brags to Cinderella, her husband is in the woods breaking a spell for her.

In a rather telling line during the duet “It Takes Two,” The Bakers discuss how, after their journey, it will be “just the two of us, beyond lies, safe at home with our beautiful prize.” In this moment, they seem to forget that said “prize” is a child, which would mean that it wouldn’t be “just the two” of them, but rather the *three* of them. They quickly correct themselves (the next line is “just the few of us”), but their first impulse is to look forward to a life with just the two of them. This mistake suggests that they really haven’t considered the reality of having a child or thought about what that would actually look like (implicitly communicated in the rhyme between prize and *lies*), emphasizing how their goal is not connected to desire for an actual child, and is thus either arbitrary or purely informed by social expectations that married couples want children (Jack’s Mother, for example, assumes that The Baker’s Wife has a child when they first meet, and she has to correct her by stating that she is childless).

At the top of Act 2 (the first time the audience sees The Bakers with the baby after he is born), the first line they sing is about the troubles he has brought into their life because they have no room in their home. They then squabble over who has to hold him, as both seem almost literally repelled by their child. When the Baker’s Wife dies, The Baker almost abandons his child when he realizes he has to raise him alone. This moment recalls the fact that his own father left him, but it is also foreshadowed by the many moments in Act 1 where he almost gives up his quest when distracted by other things that he may want more. He almost chooses to give up one of the ingredients required to complete the spell in exchange for five gold pieces, and the only reason why he doesn’t go through with this is because the Mysterious Man in the woods steals the gold from him. In short, as much as the characters are driven to increasingly morally questionable actions in their pursuit to have a child, I would hesitate to describe this desire as selfish; rather, it seems as if the characters are driven by a goal that they don’t actually want, and

their immoral behaviour comes from their push to fulfill a socially-expected role rather than a selfish pursuit of individual desire.

My position, then, is that, if the characters' underlying interests and desires are not actually reflected in the external goal they pursue, we cannot see their actions as guided by self-interest. However, as Jubin points out, their pursuit nevertheless leads them to harm others and act cruelly with no regard for the way their actions can harm the community: they are neither guided by community interest nor individualistic, selfish desire. I suggest, then, that the characters are guided primarily by the heteronormative social order and its expectations, which is not exactly the same thing as community mindedness. While Jubin argues that *Into the Woods* "clearly is not concerned with the ups and downs of traditional romance" (9), I assert that the musical is very much invested in its downs, demonstrating how normative expectations surrounding romance and reproduction are harmful to characters; as Natalie Wilson suggests, "heteromonogamy is the true tall tale" in this show. These expectations then cause characters to lose their sense of self, while also losing connection with others as they become distracted from meaningful connections. It is not until Act 2 that their external goals actually start to match up with their desires; this harmony of goal and desire comes as a result of characters' break from prescribed structures and their development of genuine connections based on listening and understanding others rather than treating them instrumentally.

Much like The Bakers' desire to have a child, almost every character in the first act of *Into the Woods* is obsessed with the successful performance of a heteronormative social role that seems to conflict with their actual desires. This obsession harms not only themselves, but also their ability to connect with others. The Baker attempts to be the image of the patriarchal husband/father, constantly refusing his wife's help and treating her condescendingly to assert his

successful performance of hegemonic masculinity. The Baker's Wife in turn begrudgingly remains with a husband who disrespects her despite her desire for more. Cinderella is confined by heteronormative narratives of "filial duty," articulated by her deceased mother's insistence that she be kind and subservient to her stepmother and father, even as they abuse and neglect her. Even the Witch, mostly an expression of antisocial antinormativity, has an unhealthy obsession with keeping Rapunzel (her adopted child) in an idealized space of childlike purity in order to maintain a normative parent/child relationship that refuses to acknowledge the complexity of either parent or child. Jack is told many times that he is too old to be dependent on his mother for decision making and responsibility, yet both he and his mother persist in a relationship that exhausts Jack's Mother and infantilizes Jack. Little Red is the only major character who is not principally motivated by a heteronormative familial relationship, and even she struggles with the limitations that her mother places on her to go "straight ahead, not to delay or be misled," when she wants to explore. In all of these cases, characters' relationships with each other are based on successful fulfillment of gender-based family roles, and they sacrifice both a sincere connection to the other person in the relationship (who is reduced to an instrumental prop in their performance of patriarchal heteronormativity) and a deeper understanding of themselves that acknowledges desires they have that may break from these scripts.

Possibly the most distinctive example of this structure comes in the relationship between Cinderella and her Prince. In the song "A Very Nice Prince," The Baker's Wife asks Cinderella to describe the prince. While trying to answer The Baker's Wife's questions, Cinderella keeps getting distracted; she describes other things at the ball, such as the trumpets and dancing (and eventually even a beanstalk that grows in the distance). Moreover, The Baker's Wife has to remind her several times to get back on topic and discuss the prince himself, and Cinderella can

barely answer any of the questions about him, concluding that he is “very nice,” he’s tall, and that he has charm for a prince (she guesses). Despite her professed interest in marrying him, Cinderella has barely paid any attention to him, but is instead focused on everything surrounding him. Cinderella’s Prince has a similar issue. In “Agony,” a song supposedly about the Princes’ admiration for their love interests, he says nothing about Cinderella besides the fact that she runs from him, and he is unable to describe even the most superficial details about her. Notably, he spends a large portion of the song describing himself in detail: “Am I not sensitive, clever, well-mannered, considerate, passionate, charming, as kind as I’m handsome and heir to a throne?” (“Agony”). Rapunzel has a slightly more sophisticated relationship with her prince (although he is still revealed to be lusting after other women in Act 2), yet Rapunzel has her share of restrictive heteronormative relationships as she represents an idealized, infantilized daughter to her mother, a social position which Jubin argues “mainly consists of a narcissistic preoccupation with herself” (19). These characters thus dramatize the issue with relationships in the first half of *Into the Woods*, where they function as two people instrumentally using each other to position themselves socially, rather than in developing connections or mutual understanding (or even paying attention to each other long enough to remember what the other person looks like).

Despite their preoccupations with themselves, the characters end up not understanding themselves at all. While Cinderella’s Prince can’t name a single thing he likes about Cinderella and ultimately ends up unsatisfied with a marriage to her, the goal he establishes for himself at the end of “Agony” is to have Cinderella “to wife.” As is a recurring theme in the show, Cinderella’s Prince’s narrative goals do not clearly align with his affective desires, but rather with the achievement of what heteronormative scripts tell him he should want. For all of his self-

obsession, Cinderella's Prince seems to lack the self-understanding to accept when his desires do not fit easily into existing social roles.

Cinderella similarly spends the entirety of Act 1 lamenting: "how can you know who you are 'til you know what you want, which I don't." In this line, Cinderella sees identity as stemming from a commodity-oriented desire. Cinderella neurotically looks to people and life experiences as if they are objects to desire and acquire as she figures out which one is the right prop for the script she is supposed to follow, rather than paying attention to possible connections, affective experiences, and moments that do not lead to clearly-defined, normative markers of the self<sup>32</sup>. For instance: because having a female baker as a close friend does not fit into a heteronormative narrative of identity (patriarchy structurally disrupts and discourages female friendships), Cinderella does not register the potential that comes from her chemistry and connection with The Baker's Wife. Cinderella "wishes" to go to a ball and to experience "princes, gowns, castles, and things" with which she has no experience because, as the Baker's Wife says, "every girl dreams of just those things." In trying to find what she wants, Cinderella goes to the props that would help her fulfill a normative female role. She ends up in a circular situation where she sings: "what I want most of all is to know what I want." Unable to fit herself into an existing narrative, and scared to accept moments and relationships that are not easily reduced to these narratives, Cinderella ends up with no identity at all.<sup>33</sup>.

The characters' general lack of attentiveness to each other and themselves is reflected in the musical structure of the show, which Dan J. Cartmell, argues consists mainly of "throwaway

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<sup>32</sup> This is an interesting contrast to other contemporary fairy tale musicals like *The Princess and the Frog*, where Mama Odie emphasizes that Tiana cannot understand her external needs until she knows who she is on the inside first.

<sup>33</sup> It is, of course, not surprising that a woman who spent her entire life being abused and neglected by her family would have trouble connecting to people; thus, this is less "Cinderella is a self-centered character" and more "Cinderella struggles to connect to others in substantial ways."

lines, parenthetical statements, cut-off lines, hesitations and ellipses, irregular lengths, [and] varying metrical pattern” (33-34). This musical structure expresses Lorde’s concern that people are unable to connect with themselves or others under heteronormative culture because they keep “looking away” during these connections.

I “On the Steps of the Palace,” Cinderella laments her situation, stating that either “you’re safe out of sight and yourself, but where everything’s wrong, or where everything’s right and you know that you’ll never belong.” Cinderella has to choose between a hidden and isolated but stable life with a neglectful and abusive family, or a life in the public eye as a prince’s wife where she will always feel inauthentic and out of place. She is torn between two normative feminine roles (obedient filial daughter and wife), neither of which particularly appeals to her. The characters in *Into the Woods* often feel as if they have to choose between unfulfilling lives in their socially-prescribed roles, or exciting yet dangerous lives where they can pursue something greater, but sacrifice the safety of community structures where they “belong.” In other words, they feel trapped between the two binaries that I outline earlier: neoliberal quests of self-discovery that require protagonists to leave their community behind to strike out on their own, and heteronormative lives steeped in conservative community values. It is not hard to see how Cinderella’s dilemma relates to the experiences of queer audience members watching the musical, many of whom have likely faced a similar choice between a closeted but safe life in hiding (often facing everyday abuse or neglect from family) or a publicly out, yet constantly unstable and uncertain life that makes them feel like an outsider in normative society. While characters struggle with this dichotomy in Act I, there is hope for them in *Into the Woods*. Act II allows characters to find a third option, where they are neither confined by social roles nor out of

place and lost when they break from them; rather, they find personal fulfillment through community when they begin to develop non-normative connections to others.

### **Into the Woods Act II – The Union of Individual and Community**

You move just a finger

Say the slightest word

Something's bound to linger

- "No One is Alone"

Discovering that a break from a repressed, hidden life does not have to take the form of an unstable life where you'll "never belong," but can rather take the form of a new, more sophisticated experience of community, is, of course, one of the most reassuring and nourishing parts of many queer lives. Rejecting both attempted assimilation to dominant culture and hidden isolation, queer communities have historically provided a space of belonging to those who want a life outside of dominant structures but who don't want to live solitary lives. In *Gay New York*, George Chauncey argues that one of the most dangerous myths about early 20<sup>th</sup> century gay life is that it was lived in isolation: that to be gay and out meant to be alone and isolated from community. If this myth was true, then queer folks would be in a similar situation to Cinderella in Act I: either stay closeted and hidden away in a harmful family environment, or enter the public sphere openly and face rejection from a community in which you will never fully belong. One of the central goals of Chauncey's study is to debunk this myth, exploring the rich and thriving communities that gay men created in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Chauncey limits his study to gay men; however, Susan Stryker has done similar work outlining early 20<sup>th</sup> century transgender communities such as the networks organized by Louise Lawrence, and Rochella Thorpe outlines lesbian communities at this time, particularly discussing the different ways that white lesbian



communities and Black lesbian communities formed (the latter often facing discrimination in primarily white queer communities). In general, one of the most significant parts of historic queer communities is the way that their structures of family, kinship, and community have given a space to people who – like Cinderella – can’t thrive in isolation but will never feel like they belong as a part of a normative public sphere. Thus, as I track the characters’ journeys towards sincere connections in Act II, I also want to highlight why these journeys make the musical a particularly resonant source for queer response.

When Act II starts, the characters have not yet begun to seek out the meaningful connections and desires they develop throughout the rest of the act. The heteronormative structures of their Act I trajectories become more explicit than before when they’re declared in the Act II opener “Prologue: So Happy:”

CINDERELLA: I’m going to be a perfect wife

JACK: I’m going to be a perfect son

BAKER’S WIFE: I’m going to be a perfect mother

BAKER: I’m going to be a perfect father

The characters’ goals in this moment are clearly set as establishing themselves as the perfect articulations of heteronormative archetypes; while they may try to convince themselves that they are happy with this, the narrator emphasizes that they are, in contrast, simply “content” (Jubin 31). To explore how the rest of the act follows characters as they begin pursuing goals that more closely align with their actual desires, I must first outline what these actual desires *are*. In the case of the Baker’s Wife, these desires are relatively obvious: she wants to be respected for her independence, courage, and competency, and to have a relationship with a man who can recognize and admire her skills. She also desires an adventurous life characterized by change and

excitement, rather than consistency, routine and stasis. It is not hard to see how these desires are expressed in her actions; the main conflict between The Baker and The Baker's Wife in Act I is that the Baker doesn't believe that she can survive in the woods or help him break the curse, and constantly tells her to stay home. She fights throughout the entire act to convince her husband that she is better off in the woods, exploring and adventuring with him, rather than at home waiting for him. She is inspired to sing her major Act I song, "It Takes Two," when her husband finally uses the pronoun "we" for the first time to indicate that both of them – rather than just him – should be on the quest, as her biggest moment of accomplishment in the act isn't acquiring a child<sup>34</sup> but convincing her husband that she is capable of embarking on a quest. Furthermore, the song identifies her fear that she and her husband would "stay the same forever," and the song is a celebration of change and growth. Her obsession with princes and the glamour of royalty also reflects her desire for something bigger and more exciting than a routine life, as she excitedly interrogates Cinderella about her prince, and mourns: "To be pursued by a prince! All that pursues me is tomorrow's bread. What I wouldn't give to be in your shoes!" Desiring a break from the routine and structure of a baker's life, The Baker's Wife desires change and adventure, as well as respect for her independence and skills<sup>35</sup>.

Cinderella's Prince, like The Baker's Wife, desires challenge and change over stability and routine. After singing a "love song" about Cinderella where he never actually identifies a single feature of Cinderella, he then sings in Act II about his desire for Sleeping Beauty in "Agony (Reprise)", indicating that he is unsatisfied with his newfound marriage. Comically, he has never actually seen Sleeping Beauty ("When the one thing you want/ is a thing that you've

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<sup>34</sup> The Baker's Wife never sings to celebrate the child, only to complain about him. The most she ever says that's complimentary about the child is that he makes "little gurgles" at the top of Act II.

<sup>35</sup> One may argue that having a child *is* an adventure that involves a lot of change; however, the show does not do anything to make this connection.

not even seen”), so as with Cinderella he can’t actually identify any of his beloved’s features or traits beyond the fact that there is an obstacle standing in between him and her. This song again reveals that Cinderella’s Prince does not actually want what claims to; it is obvious from the songs that he is more interested in the challenges, quests, and barriers that separate him from the women than he is in the women themselves. While the women are set up as the “prize” or end-goal of these quests (as is typical to conventionally misogynist fairy tale structures that position women as objects to be won), he doesn’t actually seem interested in these “prizes” at all. Much like in the first performance of “Agony,” Rapunzel’s Prince *is* able to describe what Snow White (his new romantic interest) looks like, suggesting that he is actually interested in the women he pursues (at least on a superficial level) contrasting with Cinderella’s Prince, who is only interested in the quest itself.

By the end of “Agony (Reprise),” three clear things are clearly confirmed about Cinderella’s Prince and his drives: he is not happy with his current marriage, he is not particularly interested in “obtaining” the women he pursues on his quests as much as he is in simply the act of pursuing in itself, and his primary motivation is challenge and overcoming obstacles. However, even after the beginning of Act 2, he still does not learn to actively acknowledge or accept these things about himself, as he concludes, along with Rapunzel’s prince: “ah well, back to my wife...,” choosing to pursue a normatively-sanctioned, domestic relationship rather than a questing lifestyle that would actually make him happy.

With both The Baker’s Wife and Cinderella’s Prince (characters whose names are notably defined by their relationships to other characters) desiring adventure, challenge, and change, it makes sense that one of the major moments of “narrative crossing” in the show is between the two of them. They meet in the woods and have sex, functioning as the first moment

in Act 2 where characters break from their socially-prescribed relationships to pursue unlikely connections with others. It is also, unfortunately, a moment of missed potential, as both Cinderella's Prince and The Baker's Wife never fully realize the possibility of this "moment in the woods," but rather end it by falling back on old patterns. Each opts to return to their more normatively-sanctioned trajectories after the brief tryst (the Baker's Wife returning to her husband and the Prince returning to Cinderella) instead of seeing it as a sign that they should examine the problems in their marriages<sup>36</sup>. The moment itself is also fraught because it is, of course, a moment of infidelity; the fact that they both choose to be unfaithful to their partners while they are still married, rather than being able to express their true desires *after* leaving or reforming their unhappy marriages, may perhaps be part of the reason why it is less successful than the more sustained moments of non-normative connections that come later. However, despite its lack of sustained success, their connection in the woods speaks to the possibility for change in both characters, and (more importantly) sets a precedent for the restructuring of social relations that comes later.

When Cinderella's Prince meets The Baker's Wife in the woods, he is intrigued by the fact that she stands up to her husband, choosing to venture into the woods alone despite his insistence that they stay together. The line that starts the music of his seduction song, "Any Moment," is when he says "Your choice? How brave!" indicating that her courage and independence are the catalyst for his sexual attraction to her. It is relatively clear how this moment fulfills The Baker's Wife's desires in a way that her Act I goal of reproduction doesn't; unlike her husband, who refuses for most of the play to respect her agency, Cinderella's Prince

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<sup>36</sup> Thanks to a friend (who wished to go unnamed here) for tempering my initial celebration for this scene by pointing out that it is a much less successfully-realized moment of character development than I was initially inclined to present it.

immediately shows admiration for it. Furthermore, her ability to have a romp with a prince in the woods clearly fits her desire for experiences that break from everyday routine. Thus, through an unexpected connection between two characters who would not normally be expected to meet – as she says at the beginning of the song, she is “in the wrong story” – the Baker’s Wife finds her desires fulfilled<sup>37</sup>.

The Prince in this moment is often portrayed as much less sincere (he was, after all, “raised to be charming, not sincere”) in contrast to The Baker’s Wife. After the two have sex, his line about how he will never forget “how alive you’ve made me feel” is usually played for laughs, as an example of a typically empty statement that a man makes after a one-night stand before fleeing. However, this is a reductive approach to the moment from the Prince’s perspective: he does not, after all, try to seduce the Baker’s Wife until *after* he admires her bravery: their initial encounter is relatively disengaged and non-sexual until his amorous advances (and the music that accompanies them) are initiated with the line “your choice? How brave!” suggesting that he is attracted to something specific about her personality. Unlike his descriptions of Cinderella (he briefly calls her beautiful and fair, both vague statements that don’t even mention superficial traits like hair or skin, and otherwise never talks about her appearance *or* personality at all), he actually notices something specific about The Baker’s Wife. His moment of conversation with The Baker’s Wife, as brief as it is, thus allows him to break from his habit of pursuing women only as the arbitrary goals that come at the end of quests; rather, he pursues a woman who is right in front of him, whom he appreciates not because she is the “reward” for a challenge, but because he admires something about her. Thus, his comment, “I

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<sup>37</sup> Note that “It Takes Two” does suggest that The Baker has grown and is willing to listen to his wife and trust her more; however, he quickly backpedals on this in Act 2 when he again refuses to listen to any of her suggestions about how to find Jack and fights against her wish to go into the woods alone.

shall not forget you. How brave you are to be alone in the woods. And how alive you've made me feel," does not necessarily have to be framed as an insincere punchline, but can be easily seen as a reflection on his admiration for The Baker's Wife. Cinderella's Prince is, after all, someone who is not brave enough to pursue or admit what he really wants, but who constantly convinces himself that he wants to marry women whom he can barely describe; thus, it is not a stretch to suggest that meeting a woman who boldly does pursue what she wants would leave a lasting impression on him.

Of course, regardless of whether The Baker's Wife and Cinderella's Prince experience this moment of self-discovery, it is never allowed to be more than simply a "moment in the woods," and never leads to sustained character development. The Baker's Wife does finally acknowledge that her real wish was never actually to have a child, but is what the prince just gave her: "and to get what you wish/ only just for a moment." However, rather than allowing this to be an opportunity for restructuring, inspiring her to more actively pursue her desires, she instead chooses to allow this experience of escape from normativity to remain a moment: while she will always remember it, she will not actually use it to inspire change, as she chooses to return to her old life, somehow convinced that her brief infidelity will allow her to appreciate her marriage more: "Let the moment go. Don't forget it for a moment, though. Just remembering you've had an 'and' when you're back to 'or' makes the 'or' mean more than it did before. Now I understand, and it's time to leave the woods." In a moment that follows the same essential structure stories like *The Bridges of Madison County*, a character's response to realizing they're unhappy in their marriage is to hold onto a single memory of a time when they were happy, hoping that this makes them less miserable when they return to normalcy, rather than actually

using this moment as an inspiration to change their lives. The Baker's Wife never even has a chance to do this, however, because she then dies moments later, stepped on by The Giant.

Cinderella's Prince, similarly, returns to form after this moment: he quickly leaves The Baker's Wife, returns to Cinderella, and doesn't tell her about the affair. Once Cinderella reveals that she knows the truth (she can speak to birds, and her bird friends saw the affair happening), she is the one to leave him; he is then presented in the finale as being together with Sleeping Beauty, suggesting that he has once again married (or at least courted) a princess about whom he likely doesn't care. Much like the relationships in Act I, the first substantial non-normative connection in Act II fails to allow characters sustained connections to themselves or others; however, it demonstrates the potential that *can* come from these connections.

This moment, of course, warrants an acknowledgement of the issues that queer and feminist responses to *Into the Woods* have had with the death of The Baker's Wife since the show premiered. It is easy to read her death as being a form of "punishment" for infidelity, since she cheats on her husband and is immediately killed in a blunt and unceremonious way; Jubin points out that this "appears to express an overly moralistic statement along the lines that wives who stray will have to endure horrid repercussions" and points out how there are "no comparable consequences for the male protagonists" (41). This moment is one of the most frequently criticized aspects of the show, both in academia (Jubin's response) and in popular media: Eve Weston of *LA Weekly* – referring to it as the one issue with the show that unsettles her enjoyment of the rest (comparing it to the pea under the mattress in *Princess and the Pea*) – asked James Lapine why The Baker's Wife dies in this moment. While he insisted that he did not intend it as a moralizing punishment, he acknowledged that he is often asked if it is.

Because the last thing The Baker's Wife sings before she dies is that she is prepared to return to her husband now that "it's time to leave the woods," I am inclined to read her death as a condemnation not of her choice to cheat, but rather of her choice to return to her normative life afterwards. "Moments in the Woods" ultimately proves that The Baker's Wife is unable to learn from her "moment in the woods" and turn it to action. Lapine told Weston that her death happened simply because he wanted someone to die "for no reason," to make the musical more realistic and that character happened to be The Baker's Wife. From a pragmatic standpoint, if the writer needed someone to die arbitrarily, it makes sense to choose the character whose growth has halted. She has nowhere else to go in the story if she is going to choose to return to life as normal instead of building upon what could have been a meaningful moment of self-discovery and change. Of course, the fact that Cinderella's Prince *also* doesn't grow from the scene, and yet gets to live on as a static, but breathing, character, still suggests that punishments in the scene are doled out unequally to men and women. Furthermore, even if my reading of her death as a punishment for refusing to grow (rather than for cheating) is possible, it unfortunately does not read intuitively to an audience, who is much more likely to take away the more conservative reading. For example, while Natalie Wilson reads the scene very hopefully as "metaphorical release from the dictates of a too strict society" (if she can't leave her husband or fix her marriage in life, she can do so in death!), Jarrah Hodge points out that, as promising as this reading is, it isn't one that audiences are primed to receive. Discussing the film version, Hodge argues that "if [Wilson's reading] were the case they definitely could've done a better job visually representing that... I'm among those who think the timing *makes it really hard not* to see her death as punishment for her moment with a man who's not her husband" (emphasis mine). In this sense, I want to present my reading of The Baker's Wife's death as one that, like



Wilson's, can make it slightly more thematically satisfying, but that doesn't exonerate the script from the misogynist message that so many audience members inevitably take away from it.

While the moment between The Baker's Wife and Cinderella's Prince fails to become more than a passing moment for the two of them, it initiates a series of events that push other characters towards further development. Learning of her husband's infidelity from her bird friends, Cinderella chooses to end her marriage, allowing her to finally make a choice of her own. She then finally develops a sense of what she wants, as she says: "My father's house was a nightmare. Your house was a dream. Now I want something in-between." While "something in-between a nightmare and a dream" is not exactly the most clearly-articulated goal, it is notable that Cinderella has solved one of her major conflicts in Act I: she no longer feels torn between two worlds ("safe out of sight and yourself, but where everything's wrong," or "everything's right and you know that you'll never belong") and has found a third option. She is also finished desperately trying to figure out what she wants and constantly looking around at conventional desires like "princes, gowns, castles, and things" to identify a mold she can use as a basis for her identity. In fact, the very vagueness of her new "want" solves this issue, as she can focus on following unscripted affects and connections instead of trying to find the pre-constituted narrative that is best for her. The musical ends the same way that it began, with Cinderella singing "I Wish!" However, this time there's an indication that Cinderella actually knows what she wishes for. Because Cinderella's ultimate desire is to know who she is and what she wants, the final "I Wish," which resonates more happily and joyfully than in the Prologue, acts as an indication that she has now achieved her primary goal, which is to have a goal<sup>38</sup>.

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<sup>38</sup> The identification of the final "I Wish!" as a moment of joy and happiness from Cinderella (rather than a passing joke as I always saw it) also came from a conversation with a friend.

The issues that *Into the Woods* explores relate to the similar anti-Reagan queer politics that David Román examines in Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*. As he argues, Part I of the show, *Millennium Approaches* is characterized by a situation where “individualism breeds isolation [and] the structure of feelings of a dominating center prevails” (211). Even queer characters deny themselves and others through a desperate desire to appeal to a normative social system that oppresses them, as they “accept the terms of the regulatory regimes policing sexual desires and censor themselves accordingly” (211). Any of the relationships that do exist between characters are flawed due to their reliance on normative structures, and based upon “privileges of power,” “mutual isolation,” “domestic failures” and “misalliances” (212). Neither empowered individuals nor collectively-focused community members, the characters in Part I manage to be simultaneously isolated *and* beholden to heteronormative community structures at the same time. It is only through non-normative connections to each other that they can find both individual liberation and community connection, and these goals require a willingness to break from heteronormative models without embarking on wholly individualist journeys.

They accomplish this in Part II, *Perestroika*, where the show “sets out not only to restructure many of these social arrangements, but to offer hope in the new alliances – ones that challenge if not refute the heteronormativity of prevailing social practices” (211). For Román, this particular type of character development is an ideal refutation of the Reaganist politics that led to the deaths and neglect of People with AIDS in the 1980s, as it manages to avoid both conservative articulations of community values *and* hyper-individualistic liberalism.<sup>39</sup> It is not surprising, then, that *Into the Woods* – with the same underlying ideological negotiation of

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<sup>39</sup> *Angels in America* premiered in the early 1990s but is set in the mid-80s around the same time as *Into the Woods*.

individualism and collectivity – is often read as belonging to the same tradition of AIDS theatre in the age of Reagan and Bush.

After slaying The Giant, The Baker, Cinderella, Little Red, and Jack remain as the four major characters who haven't died, disappeared, or otherwise become irrelevant to the plot. The four of them then decide to form a sort of family unit, as they move in together (along with The Baker's infant son) and decide to go through life with each other. *Into the Woods* ends with a family unit formed by a group of people who have lost their families and been brought together due to mutual struggle: the connection between this narrative and queer audience is relatively intuitive. The idea of alternative family structures and the importance of "chosen families" for queer folks has become so widely acknowledged that phrases like RuPaul's oft-quoted "we, as gay people, get to choose our families" (a concept he invokes almost as frequently as his infamously overused "inner saboteur") abound in popular culture. Because queer life often involves forms of excommunication, abandonment, and estrangement from home communities and families, the basic plot structure of a group of people creating their own family in the absence of a conventional one already connects to queer experience.

At first, this new family may seem like a simple reproduction of a heteronormative family unit: a man, a woman, two youths (it's always unclear exactly how young Jack and Red are supposed to be, as their casting ranges from prepubescent to young adults) and a baby. As Kath Weston argues, queer kinship is often about more than simply re-producing heteronormative family structures with people who are not biologically related. Discussing adoption, she argues that "adoptive relations – unlike gay families – pose no fundamental challenge to either procreative interpretations of kinship or the culturally standardized image of a family assembled around a core of parent(s) plus children" (38). Rather, Weston asserts that "far

from viewing families we choose as imitations or derivatives of family ties created elsewhere in their society, many lesbians and gay men alluded to the difficulty and excitement of constructing kinship in the *absence* of what they called ‘models.’” (116). Weston does concede that some queer communities did attempt to portray found families “primarily as *replacements* for, rather than chronological successors to, the families in which individuals came to adulthood” (116), and she acknowledges the validity and value of these cases. However, a large portion of her discussion is interested in the types of queer family units that disrupt and complicate what a family looks like and how it functions.

The found family at the end of *Into the Woods* is clearly established as complicating, rather than reproducing, heteronormative family structures. Any desire to see Cinderella as a surrogate mother for The Baker’s baby is precluded by the ghost of The Baker’s Wife telling The Baker that he will now be “be father and mother” to the infant, insisting that he take on both roles. There is no romantic desire established between The Baker and Cinderella, as their connection in no way suggests that she will be playing the role of his wife in this new family. The Baker takes on a hybrid gender role as “father and mother” to the baby and Cinderella takes on an unspecified role in the unit without a conventional, nuclear family precedent. Attempts to read Cinderella and The Baker as surrogate parents for Jack and Red are also undermined: Red eagerly suggests that she will be Jack’s new mother (a line played for laughs because they are the same age), to which Jack replies “I don’t want another mother. I want a friend. And a pet.” Jack’s top-of-act desire to “be the perfect son” is exchanged for an ideal family unit that does not involve any parental figures, but rather a friend and a pet. Thus, four characters who could easily fall back on old patterns and construct a new, normatively-structured family unit, choose not to; instead, they create bonds that don’t easily map onto existing social structures, and go forward as

a new, unconventional linked by shared experience (the loss of loved ones and the successful slaying of a giant) instead of social expectations.

*Into the Woods* begins with a series of heteronormatively-structured relationships where characters constantly “look away” from each other by focusing on social expectations instead of the people right in front of them. The show ends with an unconventional family unit of people who are done fantasizing about easily-definable social roles, and have decided to face a complex and challenging reality. In the finale, the cast of deceased and no-longer-relevant characters then wanders onto stage, singing revised versions of the moral proverbs that they espouse during Act I. For example, Jack’s Mother, previously criticizing her son’s lack of intelligence by saying that “slotted spoons don’t hold much soup” now admits that a slotted spoon “can catch the potato”. These characters now express an interest in caring for figures that they initially rejected (“to mind the wolf, to heed the witch, to honor the giant”), suggesting a shift in the moral narratives that inform the world of the show<sup>40</sup>. While the direct allegorical reading of The Giant in *Into the Woods* as a metaphor for AIDS may not line up with Sondheim’s comments that there is no direct symbolism in the play, this reading alone proved valuable and meaningful to a community surrounded by loss and death. Moving past this direct allegory demonstrates the larger queer ways of thinking articulated in *Into The Woods*, particularly those that line up with queer politics of the 1980s. In an era when both conformity and hyper-individualism – seemingly contrasting perspectives – were leading to death, the need for a third way out from this double-bind of classic conservatism and neoliberal freedom was crucial, particularly for those most vulnerable. *Into the Woods* helps articulate the power and potential of the queer politics that emerged in response to this moment in time.

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<sup>40</sup> Of course, as previously mentioned, not all characters have grown; the 2 princes appear with their new paramours, and do not appear to have changed at all.

### **People Will Laugh at You: Reviving *Into the Woods* in 2002**

Children need protection

Just the way they need affection

- “Our Little World”

If the 1987 Broadway production of *Into the Woods* was emblematic of both queer cultural concerns and Broadway theatre in the late 80s, the 2002 revival adapts these concerns quite clearly to the new millennium. By 2002, the gentrification and “Disneyfication” of Times Square had dramatically reshaped the area. A neighbourhood that had formerly been “the kind of street that people told their kids to stay away from” (Cora Cahan, quoted in Chakraborty) was now a neighbourhood that had seen three Disney stage productions (*Beauty and the Beast*, *The Lion King*, and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*), a famously huge Toys R’ Us store, and theatrical productions explicitly for children at the New Victory Theatre. To make a profit, Broadway producers now had to be much more aware of families and children when choosing what to produce, and it is easy to see this trend expressed in the 2002 revival of *Into the Woods*.

Queer politics were facing similar trends. In 2002, the same year as the revival’s premiere, Lisa Duggan published her oft-quoted description of homonormativity; as I mention in my introduction, she describes it as a “politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption” (179). While critiques of homonormativity and assimilationist queer politics have now found their way to the forefront of queer political discussion, the early 2000s were a pivotal time when scholars and activists began to observe an increasing movement away from the radical and oppositional politics that characterized groups like ACT UP in the 1980s. Of

course, homonormativity is harmful for many reasons: it upholds structures that are harmful rather than contesting them, it excludes queer folks who can not (or choose not to) assimilate into these structures, and it abandons the more substantially resistant and transformative possibility of queer politics.

Broadway was facing similar issues. While tourists and family audiences have always been a part of Broadway's market base, the new Disneyfication of Times Square meant an increase in these types of audiences from the 1980s, as more people felt physically safe in a neighbourhood formerly associated with crime. With the opening of the New Victory Theatre, more shows in the neighbourhood were marketed specifically to children. David Savran identifies the financial success of the 1998-1999 Broadway season as "due in part to its exclusion of work that producers and critics regard as unsuitable for an increasingly corporatized commercial theatre and an increasingly gentrified city" (54). While Savran concedes that Broadway has always been middlebrow, he argues that the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century saw Broadway move toward an exceptionally commercial and gentrified space, both in terms of the neighbourhood surrounding the theatres and the shows staged in the theatres themselves. While shows that didn't follow this pattern still had an occasional home on Broadway (*Spring Awakening*, *Avenue Q*, and *Fun Home* were all extremely successful), a larger portion of the theatres on Broadway became home to shows that would fit into the increasingly commercialized space. As Hunter Bell and Jeff Bowen write about producing a new Broadway show in *[title of show]*, "if it was a jukebox musical, a revival, or a recognizable commodity, I'd say dream away... but original? On Broadway? Baby, that's risky!" While I obviously don't intend on proposing a cause and effect relationship between the gentrification of Broadway and the normalizing turn in queer politics (in either direction), the co-existence of both of the trends

and the importance of Broadway to many queer audiences (and vice versa) means that viewing the two together can help further understanding of both.

These shifts also reflect an erasure of publicly visible forms of non-normative sexuality such as sex work and porn theatres, further connecting the gentrification of Times Square to the concept of homonormativity. Duggan specifically associates homonormativity with a larger movement towards a hyper-privatization of gay life: “a rhetorical remapping of public/private boundaries designed to shrink gay public spheres and redefine gay equality against the ‘civil rights agenda’ and ‘liberationism,’ as access to institutions of domestic privacy, the ‘free’ market, and patriotism” (179). As Duggan argues, heteronormative forces of the 1980s were invested in defining “the private sphere as an isolated, domestic site completely out of range of any public venue” (181), and homonormative forces in the 21<sup>st</sup> century followed this model, advocating for “a dramatically shrunken public sphere and a narrow zone of ‘responsible’ domestic privacy, in terms arguably more broadly antidemocratic and antiegalitarian than the homophile movement at its more cautious and assimilationist” (182). A central tenet of the way that homonormative politics attempt to assimilate into dominant values is through their insistence on the relegation of sexuality and gender to private life, participating in neoliberalism’s drive towards isolated individualism. Homonormativity and the shrinking of publicly queer spaces is directly linked to neoliberalism: Duggan’s article is, after all, titled “The New Homonormativity: The Sexual Politics of Neoliberalism.” Thus, not only was Broadway attempting to appeal more to mainstream audiences, it was doing so through the diminishing of public sites of sexual deviance, aligning the politics of Times Squares’ gentrification with those of the neoliberal sexual politics that Duggan outlines. The exact type of privatized, neoliberal worldview that *Into*



*the Woods* critiques was becoming the worldview that defined the neighbourhood in which its revival was staged.

As he was directing the 2002 revival of *Into the Woods*, Lapine clearly felt the pressure to fit into this new Broadway culture<sup>41</sup>. Reception of the show focused consistently on its desperate desire to appeal to children. Ben Brantley, reviewing the show for *The New York Times*, argues that “its potential as family entertainment has been emphasized, though how many young children will sit through its nearly three hours of shifting moods is questionable” and Jubin describes it as having its “eyes on the lucrative family market” (59). The result was an *Into the Woods* with “softened,” watered down characters and politics, and goofy slapstick comedy: John McMartin’s warm and fatherly Narrator (described as “sweetly geriatric” in Clive Barnes’ *New York Post* review, a big change from Tom Alderedge’s sharply sarcastic narrator) awkwardly prances around the stage with Cinderella’s birds on the end of a long stick, rather than having them descend from the fly system as usual. There is a strange choreography choice that resembles the sort of “actions” that children perform during campfire songs that turns the lines “the cow as white as milk, the cape as red as blood, the hair as yellow as corn, the slipper as pure as gold” into a sort of “head, shoulders, knees and toes” number. The Three Little Pigs and an extra wolf are added to “Hello Little Girl” for no real reason except to dispel the sexuality of the song and replace it with slapstick comedy; and Milky White (normally a prop) is played by actor Chad Kimball in a comical cow costume, whose participation in the choreography and scenes provide hilarious – if not at times tonally inappropriate – moments of physical comedy.

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<sup>41</sup> Whether this pressure was due to Lapine’s own desire to fit into new Broadway expectations to sell tickets, the influence of financial demands from producers (which included both long-time production companies like Dodger Theatricals and new upstarts like TheatreDreams, inc.), or simply the implicit pressure of larger cultural shifts, is unclear.

Brantley's description of the narrator is an accurate depiction of the show as a whole and its relationship to the changing shape of Broadway in a post-Toys R' Us context:

The reliable Mr. McMartin plays the narrator a bit in the manner of the children's show host Mr. Rogers. In a sense this "Woods" is a gentrified version of "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood," a place for those who like their instructive porridge served with Champagne. The humor swings between dry Sondheimesque urbanity and a goofiness that recalls the "Fractured Fairy Tales" of the old "Rocky and Bullwinkle" shows.

Indeed, likely eager to replicate the financial successes of *Beauty and the Beast* and *The Lion King* (whether that eagerness was his own or that of producers is impossible to tell), Lapine makes choices that, as many have observed, make it sometimes seem like more of a parody of *Into the Woods* than a genuine production of the show. This tonal shift has a major impact on the show's politics, particularly the parts of the show that make it relevant to queer reception; this section will outline specifically how the representations of The Baker's Wife and The Witch in the 2002 revival mute the show's resistant politics in favour of a more palatable production that leaves normative social structures less challenged. Much like the rest of queer culture in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the sacrifice of resistance for assimilation is quite palpable.

As explored in the first section, the growth of The Baker's Wife – brilliantly performed by Joanna Gleason in the 1987 version – is one of the core driving forces of the show's structure. She spends the entirety of Act I defiantly asserting her independence against a controlling and conservative husband. Her choice to venture out into the forest alone and have sex with Cinderella's Prince – while problematic and unresolved – proves the inciting incident that every other character needs to begin rearranging their social connections into more honest and

reciprocal relationships. However, this moment – and The Baker’s Wife’s character in general – lose its emotional and dramatic force in the revival.

The revival’s Baker’s Wife – played by Kerry O’Malley – is oddly reimagined as a relatively soft-spoken, unconfident character. Rather than demand that her husband respect her independence, O’Malley’s Wife seems to wander sweetly through the woods while quietly suggesting that her husband maybe let her join in the journey. As Michael Kuchwara of *The Associated Press* asserts, “while vocally strong, [O’Malley] lacks the sardonic awareness Joanna Gleason brought to the original” (qtd. In “Reviving the Woods”). Matthew Murray of *Talkin’ Broadway* is more blunt, referring to both her and Stephen DeRosa as The Baker as being “personality free,” and Ben Brantley concludes that, while talented, O’Malley’s performance is “less fully defined.” Even positive reviews of her performance, such as Charles Isherwood’s for *Variety*, complement her and DeRosa for bringing “an appealingly light touch” to the characters, a phrase that does not seem appropriate for the characters they are portraying. This is not to criticize O’Malley’s acting skills: her recent performance as Lilah Folger on HBO’s *Snowpiercer*, for example, demonstrates her ability to play a sharp, strong-willed character very much in line with Gleason’s performance in the 1987 *Into the Woods*. However, despite being capable of bringing a powerful performance, O’Malley in the 2002 revival of *Into the Woods* brings sweetness and deference to a character who is supposed to be a driving force behind the show’s urge to break from restraining social structures.

While O’Malley’s Baker’s Wife is passive and deferential throughout the majority of the show, the most striking change to the character comes in an adjustment to the scene immediately preceding her encounter with Cinderella’s Prince. In this scene, The Bakers have a fight about whether or not to split up so it will be easier to find Jack: The Baker’s Wife wants to go off on

her own, while The Baker wants her to stay put. In the original version, The Baker's Wife is defiant and wins this argument; they mutually agree to split up, and she tells him they will count their paces so they won't get lost: the last thing she says to her husband is "100 paces. Go." In the revival, the argument goes much differently: The Baker snaps and screams "you stay here with the baby," while pointing his finger aggressively in her face. The Baker's Wife shyly backs down and sits on the ground to wait with Little Red and the baby while he storms off, sadly resigned to obeying his order. She then has a meek conversation with Little Red where she tries to forgive her husband for his disrespectful behaviour, saying "there's nothing wrong with having an argument." She stays put and doesn't venture into the woods alone until she hears Jack nearby calling Milky; she runs off to follow the sound of Jack's voice. She is reacting rather than acting: she leaves not because she has stood up to her husband and made her own choice, but because she has to follow Jack when he appears. This scene formalizes the decision that more subtle acting and blocking choices communicate throughout the rest of the show: Lapine shifts The Baker's Wife from a defiant woman who seeks what she wants and resists her disrespectful husband to a passive character who softly laments the fact that her husband won't respect or listen to her.

This scene also completely changes the meaning of the next scene: in the 1987 staging, Cinderella's Prince admires The Baker's Wife because of her brave decision to defy her husband and choose to go off on her own. If she no longer made this choice on her own, but rather followed Jack's cow call out of necessity after initially deferring to her husband, then this scene no longer makes sense as written: while The Baker's Wife's line is still "it was my choice," she is not able to deliver it as defiantly or confidently as she does in the original staging. The scene's pacing is much quicker than in the 1987 version (partially because Robert Westenberg, the 1987

prince, paces his lines very slowly, placing a beat between almost every word, while Gregg Edelman in the revival rushes through them), as the dramatic and thematic weight of the scene no longer holds much significance: O'Malley's soft-spoken character simply does not match the energy and conviction of the Prince the way that Gleason's does, and the scene passes briskly and lacks the same potential for connection and growth of the original staging. "Moments in the Woods" is well-performed by O'Malley; however, her passive approach to the character highlights the sadness of her ultimate choice to return to her husband over the salacious desire that characterizes the first half of the song. While Gleason's performance balances the temptation and excitement of the first half with the sad resignation of the second half, O'Malley's first half is more passively wistful, and it is quickly washed away (along with much of the queer potential figured by the song) by the sadness of the song's ending.

One of the few performances in the show (besides Laura Benanti's esteemed performance as Cinderella) that manages to avoid the general watering down of character and theme in the 2002 revival is Vanessa Williams' performance as The Witch. Williams, like Bernadette Peters before her, combines comedy and playfulness with fierceness and power in a way that creates a rounded character who dominates the stage and carries some of the show's most emotionally heavy songs. As I mention at the beginning of this chapter, The Witch is the most obvious queer figure in the musical: she openly rejects conventional beauty, acts as a gadfly and anti-normative figure throughout the show and ultimately chooses to reject the community, disappearing in a puff of smoke rather than stay with them. As with the divas discussed in Chapter One, The Witch is characterized by a powerful embodiment of assertive, non-normative femininity and an intensely emotional performance of the show's most vocally powerful songs. Williams, for the most part, maintains these characteristics of The Witch, managing to sustain one site of queer

resonance in a revival that loses or diminishes many of its other queer moments. However, even as Williams maintains Peters' roundedness and strength, the show's blocking and script changes constantly attempt to limit her performance and its potential.

Most notable are the changes in the song "The Last Midnight." The song is The Witch's most definitive diva number. Serving as her "Rose's Turn" or "Don't Rain on My Parade," it is an assertive, powerful, belt-filled moment of self-assertion where she gives up her conventional beauty, rejects the community, and finally disappears in a cloud of smoke. The song is typically staged as a statement of defiance where The Witch points out all of the characters' flaws – particularly their obsession with content, pleasant "niceness" – and ultimately chooses to abandon them, concluding "I'm the Witch: you're the world." In the original blocking, Peters gestures dramatically with her hands, pointing accusingly at characters and striking fear into them as she aggressively walks towards them. Her performance involves her entire body, as she seems to hit every mark on the diva checklist: she walks the stage like a runway, dismissively admires her nails, and repels characters with each step. If anyone is qualified to give a similar full-bodied performance where she owns a stage with each movement, it would be literal Miss America Vanessa Williams. However, Lapine's blocking grounds her and prevents her from using her arms by making her carry a prop baby through the majority of the song. All of Peters' gestures are literally impossible for Williams (with the exception of three brief moments where she points her finger at a character), as she has a baby cradled in her arms, and she spends the song sitting, rocking the baby, and gliding across the stage, prevented from engaging in the flashy and defiant body language of the 1987 staging. While Williams' vocals and performance are still compelling, the blocking and the baby prop leave the song, like much of the rest of the show, limited in its liberatory potential.

Lapine's choice to have The Witch carry The Baker's baby around stage during "The Last Midnight" relates to a general emphasis on The Witch's role as mother throughout the revival. While this role should already be obvious (The Witch sings about motherhood constantly, and her "Lament" – one of the most emotional songs in the show – is about mourning the loss of her daughter), the 2002 revival goes out of its way to hammer home the fact that motherhood is significant for The Witch. Despite an already notoriously-long runtime (especially for a show that was trying to bring in younger audiences), the revival chooses to add the narratively unnecessary song "Our Little World," a charm song about Rapunzel's life with The Witch that was not in the original but added to the London version of the show. The main purpose of the song is to give Rapunzel and The Witch more stage time together, making their loving connection clearer<sup>42</sup>. Furthermore, some of the lyrics to The Last Midnight are changed to further emphasize The Witch's connection to motherhood. Not only does she now sing it to The Baker's child while holding him, she also sings slightly different lyrics that emphasize this new blocking. In the original, she sings to the adults: "You're so nice. You're not good, you're not bad, you're just nice. I'm not good, I'm not nice, I'm just right. I'm The Witch. You're the world." In the revival, she sings to the baby: "You're so pure, but stay here and in time you'll mature, and grow up to be them. So let's fly, you and I, far away." In addition to removing some of The Witch's most iconic, oft-quoted lines, the lines also shift focus to the exact same themes The Witch explores earlier with Rapunzel: aware of the flaws with heteronormative society, The Witch longs to protect children from this corrupt world to keep them away from it. While this is not an inaccurate depiction of The Witch, it is the choice to focus on one aspect of her character (motherhood) that already receives substantial attention elsewhere at the cost of other aspects of

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<sup>42</sup> It also gives the actress playing Rapunzel something to do, considering that the character has some of the least stage time of anyone in the show.

her character (defiance, strength, rejection of normative society) that this song is designed to explore. Much like many of the other characters in the revival, the Witch is flattened, as the direction chooses to magnify on one area of her character – in this case, motherhood and the protection of “childlike purity” – that is most palatable to conservative family and tourist audiences while neglecting her more complex or controversial traits.

### **The Slotted Spoon: The Queer Potential of the 2002 Revival**

The slotted spoon *can* catch the potato!

- Jack's Mother

Considering the many attempts Lapine makes to cater to family and tourist audiences – particularly as these attempts involve the softening or flattening of the show's powerful women – it is tempting to settle on a conclusion that sees the revival as simply another articulation of the watering-down of both Broadway theatre and queer politics in a liberal, homonormative context. However, as with my discussion of *Wicked* in Chapter One, queer politics are not that easily diminished: while works may become less obviously resistant or queer in their more explicit features, queerness often resurfaces in the underlying structures and formal traits of the work. In this section, I consider the *Into the Woods* revival to be like the slotted spoon from Jack's Mother's proverb: while it lacks an obvious use (it doesn't hold much soup), further analysis shows how it has unexpected moments of productivity (it *can* catch the potato).

In a literal sense, the bulk of the show's script does not change. While directorial changes reframe the show along more normative lines, and minor changes to the script dramatically change the way that other scenes are framed, the majority of the original dialogue is intact, allowing some of the original meaning to come through. While one has to read against the grain of O'Malley's soft-spoken Baker's Wife to find her scene with Cinderella's Prince empowering,



the literal words that she speaks are the same as Gleason's. These lines no longer actually make sense because of changes to the preceding scene (as I previously mentioned, her line that going into the woods alone was "her choice" is no longer accurate, since the new script has her conceding to her husband's order), but she speaks them nonetheless. The non-normative chosen family also remains at the show's end, as does characters' re-negotiation of the concepts of self and community, so some of the avenues of queer identification from the original remain. Admittedly, much of the impact behind this re-negotiation of characters' relationship to community and self is lost. Gleason's Baker's Wife is one of the characters who is most clearly unhappy with her heteronormatively expected goal, and the loss of this character's anger and frustration at the limitations of her socially prescribed role dilutes the show's larger message about the harms of heteronormative frameworks. However, even with The Baker's Wife's fury missing, the characters do still re-negotiate their connection to self and community to form a family outside of normative structures. In this sense, the bare bones of the original's queer potential are still present in the literal lines and narrative structure, even if they are not quite as energized by performance and staging.

However, one of the strongest sites of queer potential in the revival comes from Williams' performance as The Witch, which reshapes some of the limitations of her blocking in order to ensure a fearsome diva emerges nonetheless. While the Witch is positioned more as "mother" and less as "outsider" than in the original (which balances both of these roles more evenly), Williams' performance complicates conventional notions of exactly what "motherhood" looks like, allowing for a queer critique of gendered social roles to emerge.

The revival focuses on The Witch's obsession with protecting children from a corrupt world, while downplaying the ways that this obsession has made The Witch herself into a social

outcast with a more aggressive hatred for the heteronormative world. Changing “The Last Midnight” from a song where The Witch aggressively confronts the protagonists into a song sung to an infant seems like a move that would diminish her role’s ferocity, as does saddling Vanessa Williams with a bulky baby prop during her showy diva number. Yet, despite her lack of movement during the song, Williams’ performance comes off as anything but meek: while barred from Peters’ showy diva moments, Williams instead uses the limitation of holding a baby to create a performance that becomes quietly fierce, channeling the Witch’s rage and abjection in a way that is less obvious but equally powerful. Sondheim himself describes his intent behind the new version of the song as one that is more “creepy and sinister” than the original, even as its new blocking and lyrics may prime audiences to see it as being sweeter: Williams notes that Sondheim told her that people would “expect [the song] to sound pretty” but that he clearly stated “I don’t want to hear it pretty” (Weinraub). The result is a scene that, on the surface, seems to shift The Witch’s rage into sentimentality, but that actually has the opposite effect, allowing the rage to seethe through in a way that is, in many ways, more intense than the original’s more obviously theatrical blocking.

Of course, to actually come across, this sort of work needs to be well-executed. Even if Sondheim and Williams intended to make a seemingly sweet scene subtly convey a quiet fury in a way that is even more unsettling than a more obvious, outright fury, a poorly-executed performance would risk losing this nuance and still come across as The Witch singing sadly to a baby about the inevitable loss of innocence. However, a quick survey of audience reception demonstrates that Williams’ performance communicated exactly what she intended. The YouTube channel MaskedLion uploaded a fan recording of Williams’ performance of “The Last Midnight” in 2008, which has 96,435 views, and comments on this video consistently reference

two features of Williams' portrayal of the song: that is more "human and relatable" than other versions, and it is simultaneously more intense ("Last Midnight – Revival). Comments include: "because here the witch is portrayed in a more human way – it makes it more sinister" (WickedMyster), "has a much darker feeling to it as many have said" (Arlo), "so human and real" (Max Solon), "soo creepy!" (omnigeek13), "verrrry creepy & sinister" (boynamedalex), and so on. While not all fans liked the performance – there are many references to the new lyrics being inferior – there is no suggestion of softness or sweetness as the reason behind this dislike, and almost every fan read Williams as being *more* emotionally intense than Peters'. The choice to have a character cradle a baby and sing about how she wants it to stay pure and protect it from the corrupt world does not, intuitively, seem like a more intense approach than having the character aggressively confront the protagonists; however, fan reception indicates that Williams successfully managed to make it so, as a set of blocking and lyric choices that seem to tame The Witch's fury actually manage to allow it to come across even more intensely than before. Sondheim's fears that the new lyrics may come across as "pretty" are reasonable; however, Williams ensures that the desired fury still translates.

WickedMyster's comment that Williams' performance is more sinister *because* it is more human also speaks to an interesting set of contradictions created by her role in the revival. Typically, the attempt to humanize a character, particularly a mother, would take the form of making her more sympathetic and sweet. However, in this case, it is Williams' humanity and relatability that makes her fury come through. Williams is both more furious *and* more relatable, while Peters is seen as more comical *and* less relatable or realistic. If a character's grounded humanity and relatability is directly connected to her rage at the palatable niceness and normativity of the others, the queer and feminist rage of The Witch is shown as something that is

more “normal” and relatable than the normative perspectives of the others, rather than simply a theatrical, performative “diva” moment that is removed from the everyday. As I mention in my discussions of “mainstreaming” queer affect, this moment allows a queer and feminist sensibility to become the normal, intuitive, relatable way to respond to liberal politics of “niceness,” while a more heteronormative framework actually takes on the position of “alternative.”

Furthermore, making *The Witch* simultaneously more motherly, more relatable *and* more intense resists normative notions of what motherhood looks like. The Witch as mother in this production of *Into the Woods* is not a passive or soft character type, but someone who has to fight fiercely to protect their child from the harms of a corrupt social order upheld by “nice” liberals like The Baker. The refiguring of “The Last Midnight” as a song about motherhood could, on the one hand, look like a flattening of The Witch, repeating the same thematic concerns from “Lament” instead of allowing her to explore new ideas. However, if one sees this version of “The Last Midnight” as characterized by a rebellious, resistant emotional drive, it is no longer simply a repetition of “Lament’s” themes but an expansion upon them, showing motherhood as a source of strength for The Witch, rather than just one of mourning and emotional struggle.

An intersectional framework also highlights how Vanessa Williams’ performance as The Witch opens her up to a particularly significant relationship with motherhood. To return briefly to Audre Lorde: Musser argues that Lorde’s writing on motherhood is intimately connected to her identity as a Black woman and her investment in Black kinship and family. The institution of slavery attacked Black peoples’ family and kinship structures; Black parents had their children taken from them and Black women were denied recognition as mothers (355). This legacy also continues today as a result of discriminatory and racist child protection services that disproportionately remove Black, Indigenous and other children of color from their parents

(“Under Suspicion: Concerns about Child Welfare”). Musser argues that assertions of motherhood are thus particularly powerful for Black women whose relationship to motherhood and family structures has been historically under attack by racist and patriarchal forces; she argues that Lorde’s claiming of Black motherhood is politicized “as a space of particular power” (356). Williams, as a Black performer who emphasizes the potential for strength and political resistance that comes from motherhood, is participating in a similar tradition to Lorde, claiming Black motherhood as a site of power. While Peters’ version of The Witch’s powerful “Last Midnight” does not involve motherhood at all (a topic which, for her Witch, becomes less relevant after “Lament”), Williams’ big diva number finds power in her relationship to motherhood, connecting her to a history of Black artists who claim motherhood as a site of strength.

Williams’ history as a public figure also adds an especially powerful implication to her performance of a song that rallies against the “niceness” of respectability politics and normativity. The first ever African-American Miss America, Williams’ title was taken away from her prematurely when she resigned after nude photos of her were published without her consent. Despite rightfully winning the Miss America pageant, Williams lost the title and faced harassment due to the respectability politics of a pageant that prioritized an image of sexual purity and innocence and punished a woman for daring to have a body. The racism and sexism that led to Williams’ mistreatment by the public and the press were coded using a rhetoric of purity and respectability (Armstrong). Despite this public response, Williams responded by becoming one of the most successful (if not the most successful) pageant winners of all time, going on to an illustrious career as a musician and an actress. Seeing Williams sing a song decrying the protagonists’ emphasis on maintaining their own sense of purity and innocence and

owning her outsider as The Witch who refuses to bend to these normative systems becomes particularly powerful when viewed in relation to Williams' history navigating similar dynamics.

Finally, I would be remiss to end this section without mentioning that – while Williams does spend the majority of “The Last Midnight” saddled with an awkward baby prop that changes the tone of the entire number – the song does end with her handing the baby off and finishing with a flourish. This moment allows for a very brief (less than a minute) moment at the end where Williams is able to perform with her full body. She spends a lot of this time throwing beans around the stage (and eating a few), and does not directly interact with the characters (who scatter to gather the beans), so there are no moments for her to aggressively confront them the way that Peters does: however, the last few seconds allow for Williams to have her own diva moment that is distinctly different from, yet equally powerful to, Peters'. While Peters' transformation back to her “ugly” self is not shown on stage (she is still “beautiful” when she disappears into a puff of smoke), Williams dramatizes the sacrifice of normative beauty for power on-stage: she tears part of her dress off to reveal a monstrous arm, and rips her wig off her head, throwing it across the stage before then disappearing in the puff of smoke<sup>43</sup>. Thus, while Peters gets much more time and a full song to express her conventional “diva moment,” Williams takes advantage of the few baby-free seconds allotted to her at the end of the song to go out with a literal bang, tearing her costume apart as the seething rage that is subtly communicated throughout the rest of the song finally gets a moment of explicit and grandiose expression.

Amidst the Mr. Rogers' Neighbourhood of the 2002 revival, with a sweetly geriatric narrator and a dancing cow, Williams manages to channel some of the rage and defiance of the

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<sup>43</sup> This same wig is earlier briefly turned into a Medusa-like, hissing collection of snakes at the start of the show, an eerie and sinister effect that foreshadows the later intensity of the new version of “The Last Midnight.”

original show's women<sup>44</sup>. She does so in a subtle way that incorporates itself into the family-friendly framing of the rest of the show but manages to do so in a way that does not compromise the character's integrity and ensures that the rage is still communicated. Broadway and queer culture in the 21<sup>st</sup> century both face similar critiques: in the process of becoming more accepted within mainstream culture, they similarly began to reshape themselves in a way that appeals to this culture, thus sacrificing some of the bite and explicit politics that they had when they were more defiantly positioned outside of the normative world. However, I assert that this bite and these politics did not vanish or diminish entirely, but are often re-shaped, much like the Witch's rage in the *Into the Woods* revival, into something more subtle and implicit that attempts to strategically infuse defiance into seemingly normative acts. Of course, this subtle defiance does not occlude the need for a more explicitly radical politics. While I celebrate the existence of implicitly queer structures and potential within the site of struggle over meaning that is popular culture (to borrow the language of Stuart Hall), I am not suggesting that these are sufficient on their own, and I of course recognize the need for more explicit acts of resistance. However, while encouraging explicit acts of resistance, I also resist the tendency for scholarship to fully dismiss less obviously radical moments, and instead advocate for the need to find the hope, power, and potential within those areas of queer expression that are too often overlooked and dismissed due to their association with popular entertainment. While the 2002 revival of *Into the Woods* mutes the queer potential of the original, aspects of its radical commentary on the harms of homonormativity manage to persist. Williams' performance demonstrates how an artist immersed

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<sup>44</sup> The optimist in me also hopes that O'Malley somehow does the same with *The Baker's Wife*: I have not been able to find any evidence of this in my analysis of the show, but it is my hope that either another scholar (or perhaps I) may find something in the future that I didn't before.

in a normative, watered-down production can nevertheless find ways to assert their presence and ensure that their strength shines through nonetheless.



## Chapter Three

### Finding a *Place for Us* in Disney Animated Musicals

#### Introduction – Queering Disney

Disney films have a rich history with queer audiences. They are popular sources of inspiration for drag artists and high-profile queer performers, including the popular Disney-inspired videos by Todrick Hall that I discuss in Chapter Five. Since 1991, queer Disney fans have regularly taken over Disney parks for their annual “gay days” gatherings. In 2000, Sean P. Griffin traced this history extensively, demonstrating the intimate connection between queer folk and Disney, claiming that “Disney was helping individuals to define their identity as part of the gay community [as] various Disney texts worked as a factor in the understanding of their sexuality” (xii). This relationship, of course, raises the question of why queer fans remain so fiercely dedicated to media produced by a company that does not have a history of openly representing them in their films. As Rowan Ellis argues: “queer fans, I think, often have this interesting relationship with Disney that is often built around metaphorical or subtextual readings of characters and feeling some kind of connection to them even when we know that we won’t necessarily see explicit representation of ourselves on screen.” While Griffin outlines a history of queerly-coded images and themes within Disney films, and demonstrates ways that queer audiences have responded to the queer potential of these codes, the company has yet to do much beyond vague tokenism in terms of explicit representation in their major animated film releases.

Granted, the corporation *as a company* has a more complex history; they had “the first lesbian/gay/bisexual employees group to form at any Hollywood studio” (Griffin 93), openly opposed the Defence of Marriage Act (Truesdell), and include same-sex marriages as a part of their “Fairy Tale Weddings” service. The inclusion of same-sex marriages is also not a subtle or

hidden feature; the website for the wedding service includes a picture of a queer couple on the front page, a risky move of explicit representation for a corporation that faces constant resistance from hate groups like the American Family Association every time they do anything remotely inclusive (“Disney’s Fairy Tale Weddings & Honeymoons”). Of course, Disney’s corporate history with queer issues is not entirely accepting: they were one of the “last holdouts” in Hollywood to offer domestic partner benefits for same-sex employees, before they eventually did so in 1995 (Woodyard and Lee). While the company’s relationship with queer employees is complicated and does involve many moments of support and solidarity (even amongst other moments of discrimination), this support rarely if ever extends to substantial representation in the actual films they produce. Still, many queer folk (including, admittedly, myself) somehow retain an intense love for the media produced by the company.

This situation echoes the historical relationship between queer audiences and musicals. As I have previously discussed, the surprisingly large fanbases of queer folks who love Broadway seems odd at first glance considering that the narratives portrayed onstage are often odes to heteronormativity. Scholars such as Stacy Wolf and D.A. Miller point out this discrepancy, and turn to formal and structural features including music, choreography, and performance as avenues for queerness in musicals. Central to their arguments is that these non-representational elements are more significant to the experience of a musical than the literal narratives of the shows. While the plots may be heteronormative, the structures of feeling that they produce through song and dance produce queer potential. I argue that a similar structure is at play with Disney, contrasting the narratives’ heteronormativity with formal and musical features that produce a much more liberatory affect.

This chapter discusses the popularity of Disney's films with queer audiences by placing these films in dialogue with the history of musicals on stage and screen. I build on the important work done by Griffin, who traces the queer history of Disney films and the company itself; however, I specifically examine how Disney's relationship to musicals connects them with queer audiences. Disney's most popular movies are, after all, musicals. And yet, surprisingly little scholarship explicitly examines the structural relationship between Disney and the larger traditions of Hollywood and Broadway musicals. George Rodosthenous points out this lack in the introduction to the recently-published *Disney Musical on Stage and Screen*, which is one of the few extensive analyses of Disney films that views them specifically as musicals in dialogue with the tradition of musical theatre and Hollywood film musicals. Even Rodosthenous' substantial book contains only one chapter on queer readings, so the ways that the musical genre relates to queer Disney reception warrants further research<sup>45</sup>.

The implications of queer relationships to Disney's films are significant considering how that these films have largely come to stand in for American childhood and family in a substantial way. Disney's combination of marketing, merchandising and corporate acquisitions has ensured them a position where they have become almost synonymous with American childhood, and they have established their films as part of the core of an imagined American national identity. They are also the primary avenue through which contemporary North American audiences understand and access foundational cultural myths, legends, and fairy tales. Zipes argues that Disney has a "stranglehold" over the fairy tale, and that "if children or adults think of the great classical fairy tales today... they will think of Disney" (*Fairy Tale as Myth* 72-74). The ability for queer audiences to find space for themselves within these films thus means that they are not simply

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<sup>45</sup> Griffin himself has notably shifted towards musical scholarship, releasing a 2018 book on film musicals, but his influential book on Disney is surprisingly uninvested in looking at Disney films *as musicals*.

negotiating with mass culture: they are producing a dynamic relationship with a series of films that have inserted themselves into the core of a national cultural imaginary.

This chapter focuses on the films of the Disney Renaissance, which includes feature animated films released between 1989 and 1999 (Pallant 89). Besides simply fitting into my dissertation's larger temporal framework, this period is also significant because it marks a shift in the visibility of queer Disney audiences. While Griffin traces a gay Disney fanbase throughout the company's history, it was the 1990s when these fans first started to gain widespread public notoriety. While queer tourism to theme parks has a long history, the institution of "Gay Days" as a publicly visible, organized event marked by vibrant red t-shirts, media coverage, and a refusal to hide the nature of the event, is largely credited as beginning in 1991 (Cloud). The Lesbian and Gay United Employees group at Disney also formed shortly afterwards in 1992. While these occurrences could largely be attributed to a general shift in cultural attitudes toward and visibility of queer folk, the films themselves also changed during this period of increasingly visible queer audiences. I assert that fundamental changes to the ways that Disney films were structured after 1989 – particularly in their relationship to musical numbers and performance – are directly connected to the potential for queer reception and fan practices that emerged in the period. This chapter thus relates to my larger dissertation's interest in visibility, addressing a time when a previously subcultural contingent of Disney fans began to more publicly assert their presence and belonging within the filmic tradition that they had always loved.

The Disney Renaissance established a notable shift in the way that Disney structures the music of their films, and it is this shift in musical structures that I associate with much of the queer potential of the films. I assert that the transfer of certain Broadway structures and song types into Disney films, which was most substantially marked by the introduction of writing

team Alan Menken and Howard Ashman in 1989, led to increased possibilities for queer reception experienced by the newly visible viewership that formed around the films. Much of Disney's success in the renaissance comes from the "generous dose of musical theatre" (Kayvon) that Ashman and Menken infused into the films. Ashman's identity as a gay man is also often associated with Disney's popularity with contemporary gay viewers; it was, after all, a bold move for a family entertainment group to hire an openly gay, HIV+, Jewish man to oversee their major projects. However, I assert that the relationship goes beyond a simple cause-and-effect relationship where "Ashman was gay, and thus queer people wanted to watch his films:" rather, I argue that queer Disney fans' new visibility and vocality was, in many ways, enabled by the historically queer traditions and forms encoded in the Broadway structures he brought over to Disney. While a generalized sense of "the new Broadway sound" introduced to Disney by Ashman and Menken is relatively common knowledge, there is currently no extended structural analysis examining in detail exactly what changes Ashman and Menken made to the Disney musical.

I also argue that, in addition to incorporating historically queer structures from Broadway stage shows, Disney Renaissance films take advantage of one major convention from the classic Hollywood film musical: what Rick Altman calls the "dual focus narrative." Altman argues that classic Hollywood musicals, in contrast to other popular films, avoid a single-protagonist structure in favour of one that produces two, equally weighted protagonists. Most conventionally, these protagonists are from contrasting walks of life (urban and rural, rich and poor, old-fashioned and modern, etc.), and their romantic union in the musical represents the union of the two different concepts that they signify.<sup>46</sup> However, Altman also outlines films

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<sup>46</sup> While Altman's claim clearly does not account for all classic Hollywood musicals, and I would not position it as definitively as he does, it does outline a general tendency towards dual focus that preoccupies many of them.

where the dual focus is shared by two women (*Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*) or two men (the Gene Kelly/ Frank Sinatra musicals) who similarly share equal weighting as double protagonists.

While the first type of narrative – where two people from opposing worlds fall in love, and their union signifies the merger of the two larger worlds – is a core component of other genres (most notably the romantic comedy), what sets the Hollywood musical apart for Altman is the equal dramatic and formal weight that both members of the romantic union hold. Rather than the story of a protagonist falling in love with their love interest, they tell the story of two equally-foregrounded protagonists falling in love.

While Disney Renaissance films follow a more single protagonist-oriented narrative structure, I argue that their form produces a dual focus *musical* structure. As I outline in my introduction (and as Stacy Wolf argues), a musical often communicates two very different meanings – one through the literal narrative and one through the music and visuals – creating a distinction between what I call its “narrative plot” and its “musical plot.” While the narrative plot of Disney Renaissance films only has one protagonist, I assert that its musical plot typically produces a secondary character (either a sidekick or a villain) who shares equal formal weighting to the protagonist. I explore how characters like Ursula, Genie, Gaston, and the Muses from *Hercules* are positioned as primary foci of their film through their music and visuals, even as the narrative clearly establishes them as villains or supporting characters; while the protagonists of their films own the narrative plot, the musical plot is shared equally by both<sup>47</sup>.

Part of the benefit of this structure is that side characters and villains in mass culture are often able to occupy more antinormative or radical subject positions and mentalities than

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<sup>47</sup> Looking purely at the soundtracks to their films, it would sometimes be hard to even tell who the protagonist is: Sebastian and Ursula, for example, both sing more than Ariel, meaning that without the context of the plot and book scenes, she barely takes up space – an issue that I will explore more fully later in this chapter.

protagonists. It is easier to represent less normative ideas to a mainstream audience when they're expressed through a character who is easily ignored or dismissed as secondary, or rejected as a villain. The protagonist, however, has to fit more easily into normative models to be accepted by a mass audience. Even in ABC's *Modern Family* – probably the most assimilationist and politically anemic<sup>48</sup> gay representation on television – secondary characters (represented as friends of the normative gay couple Mitch and Cam) include politically active queers and people with non-normative lifestyles. These characters are permitted so long as they are supporting characters, safely distanced from the main couple, who are contained within homonormative frameworks<sup>49</sup>. I suggest that Disney follows this trend in their narratives, relegating their more significantly antinormative characters to the status of supporting cast or villains to safely “contain” their radical potential and keep it palatable to mass audiences. However, the musical structure of the Disney Renaissance films complicates this narrative distinction between primary and secondary characters by using the visual and musical planes to suggest a more equally-weighted dual focus on both, allowing more non-normative character types to gain prominence in the musical plot that they are denied in the narrative plots of mass culture<sup>50</sup>.

This is not to say, however, that the Disney Renaissance protagonists are politically useless, and that queer identification in the films comes purely from secondary characters and villains. This chapter also outlines how Menken and Ashman update the musical and lyrical

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<sup>48</sup> To borrow Muñoz's phrase.

<sup>49</sup> It's thus not a surprise that character actors like Judy Greer, who often play these types of supporting characters, are often beloved by queer audiences. John Fiske has outlined how viewers often watch seemingly normative television shows because they choose to relate to the villains instead of the protagonists. I outline in more detail how queer audiences of colour have developed specific reception strategies surrounding “identifying wrongly” with a text in relationship to Muñoz's *Disidentifications* in Chapter 5.

<sup>50</sup> Writing this in 2021, I'm also reminded of Kathryn Hahn's portrayal of Agatha Harkness on the Disney-produced *WandaVision*. Harkness is a supporting character; however, when the show gives her a musical number in seventh episode, the balance of focus in the show shifts strongly in her direction. Fan response to this song demonstrates the power that comes from giving secondary characters musical numbers. A similar situation happens with Kristin Chenoweth's performance as Olive in the TV show *Pushing Daisies*.

structure of protagonists' songs to construct a specific archetype of the Disney Renaissance protagonist as a strong-willed outsider who struggles against a too-rigid society that won't understand or accept them. Classic Disney protagonists like Snow White, Cinderella, and Sleeping Beauty are oppressed by a single authority figure (an evil queen, an evil stepmother, and an evil fairy), but are otherwise rather beloved by everyone else they meet. They don't want to escape from the larger social structure that they're in; in contrast, they want to escape the oppression of one single person so they can go on to join in their proper role in normative society. The heteronormative social order is the desirable end-goal from which the villains keep them. Disney Renaissance protagonists, in contrast, are consistently defined as outcasts who don't fit into the larger society that they're a part of; Ariel wants to leave the sea, Belle is unhappy in her small provincial town, Quasimodo is outcast because of his disability, Aladdin is a thief, and Pocahontas and Mulan both resist arranged marriages and challenge women's roles in their communities. I examine how the re-working of Disney protagonists into outsider-heroes who want to escape oppressive social norms, and the musical structures that accompany this framework, allow them to resonate with a strong, politically ambitious queer viewership.

However, despite the potential for queer identification that comes from this structure, the protagonists are still much more limited in their potential for substantial antinormative positioning: with the exception of Quasi, they're all thin and conventionally attractive, they all end up pursuing monogamous heterosexual relationships, and they generally stand in for more moderate, liberal, palatable forms of social change. By producing a dual-structure narrative, Disney Renaissance films allow for a dual form of queer identification. If the protagonists stand in for a more generally liberal, sometimes politically assimilationist, form of queer identification, and the side characters or villains produce more substantially resistant forms of queer potential,



then the dual focus musical plot allows for queer audiences to find paths of resistance in varying ways through both character types with equal weighting. This chapter thus connects to my dissertation's larger concerns about mainstreaming and assimilation, questioning how much the newfound public presence of queer Disney fans is contained or re-appropriated by dominant, homonormative structures.

Before beginning my analysis, I must also acknowledge the caution with which I approach this chapter. In *The Mouse that Roared*, Henry A. Giroux and Grace Pollock criticize approaches to Disney that are too celebratory, or that ignore the harmful aspects of Disney when they focus on the liberatory possibilities of their productions. They argue:

The potential for subversive readings, the complex interplay of agency and subordination, and the mixture of alienation and pleasure promoted by the culture industry, do not cancel out the power of a corporation like Disney to monopolize the media and saturate everyday life with its own ideologies. Although it is true that people mediate what they see, buy, wear, and consume, and bring different meanings... it is crucial that any attempt to deal with the relationship between culture and politics not stop with such a recognition but investigate both its limits and its strengths (10).

Taking Giroux and Pollock's warning to heart, my analysis – while focused on queer possibilities generated by Disney films – is done with an acknowledgement that these things do not cancel out the harm that is caused by Disney as a corporation. For example, while I highlight some of the involvement of LGBTQ+ employees and activism within Disney, I also acknowledge Disney's long history of labour disputes, and "use of sweatshops and other reprehensible labor practices" (14), and stress that the former in no way diminishes the significance of the latter. In 2018, Peter Dreier et al. surveyed Disneyland employees, finding

that 11% reported being homeless at some point in the previous two years, and that the majority of employees were either food insecure, or worried about being able to pay rent. Disney also repeatedly pops up in headlines related to dangerous or exploitative factory and production conditions. My research intends to work alongside – rather than oppose – the more critical work done by scholars like Giroux, Pollock, and Jack Zipes that investigates these issues. I focus on celebrating the ways that audiences have been able to enact progressive and radical responses to Disney’s products, and the important contributions of individual queer artists and writers (such as Howard Ashman) who have managed to produce beautiful and unexpectedly subversive and critical art within the corporation. However, this celebration is tempered by an acknowledgement of the many problems with the larger corporate entity that is Disney.

### **Before the Renaissance: A Brief History of Disney Musicals Before 1989**

Some day my prince will come. Some day I’ll find my love.

And how thrilling that moment will be.

- *Snow White*

While Disney’s animated movies before 1989 were obviously still musicals, and they pulled heavily from traditions of operetta and musical theatre, they are missing some of the trends that were popularized in many Broadway and Hollywood musicals of the time. Most notably, Disney animated musicals departed from Broadway’s focus on divas and powerful women. The Disney musical thus did not include many of the feminist and powerfully feminine moments that Stacy Wolf’s musical history *Changed for Good* identifies in Broadway shows released during the same decades, and instead chose to focus on different song types and conventions. I disagree, though, with Rick Altman’s claim in *The American Film Musical* that the Disney movie at this point was an “entirely different genre” from the musical (105). I

consider Disney movies of this era to be musicals; rather, I argue that they are missing specific conventions and song types from Broadway that are associated with feminism and queer reception. This section examines the specific song types and Broadway conventions missing from pre-Renaissance Disney films, which were later brought over during the Renaissance.

By 1950, Broadway had begun to develop a distinctive “range of song types” that included the popular “female duet” (Wolf *Changed for Good* 20) and empowering songs of female self-assertion such as the aptly-titled “I Have Confidence” from *The Sound of Music* or the celebration of singlehood “I’m Gonna Wash That Man Right Outa My Hair” from *South Pacific*. Wolf argues that, despite the prevalence of heteronormative stories in musicals, they often portrayed women in a slightly more independent way than the majority of 1950’s media did. In particular, these musicals frequently included “strong, dominating women” (30), often depicted female characters with jobs,<sup>51</sup> and featured prominent duets between women, which offered a chance for women to bond and connect through song in a way they often weren’t able to in dialogue. Most of the songs in 1950’s Disney films, in contrast, are either comic (the singing mice in *Cinderella*), passive and longing (“A Dream is a Wish Your Heart Makes”), or sweet and painfully sentimental (“All in the Golden Afternoon”). The purpose of this section is not to diminish the queer potential that *is* clearly available in these films<sup>52</sup>, but rather to explore how the specific types of Broadway-affiliated queer reception made available in the Disney Renaissance had not emerged in these earlier films. Furthermore, I suggest that early Disney’s song types attach themselves more easily to a secretive, interior type of queer reception – the passive and longing songs similar to the torch songs and songs of unrequited love that John Clum

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<sup>51</sup> The only woman in 1950’s Disney animated musicals with a job is Nana in *Peter Pan*, who is literally a dog.

<sup>52</sup> As Griffin discusses, these Disney films have undoubtedly provided points of reference and identification to queer viewers for decades.

associates with the closeted queer aesthetic of Lorenz Hart – than to a more declarative or public queerness made available by Broadway’s belting divas.

Disney Animation Studios released five musical films during the 1950s: *Cinderella*, *Alice in Wonderland*, *Peter Pan*, *Lady and the Tramp*, and *Sleeping Beauty*. In these films, women’s songs are consistently about parenting (Lady wondering what a baby is in *Lady and the Tramp* or Wendy singing about “Your Mother and Mine” in *Peter Pan*), passive longing (“A Dream is a Wish Your Heart Makes” from *Cinderella*), celebrating men (“He’s a Tramp”), or comic relief (“Bibbidi-Bobbidi-Boo”). The only female duet is “The Siamese Cat Song” from *Lady and the Tramp*, which only involves one female vocalist (Peggy Lee provides the voices for both cats) and is primarily comic in tone. There are many opportunities for possible female duets, but they never happen; the three fairies in *Sleeping Beauty*, for example, are given many moments that would typically lead to a song, including a scene where they prepare for Aurora’s birthday, which is set up like a precursor to a musical number. However, these never actually culminate in a song, as women’s voices aren’t given the chance to intermingle or coexist in a musical setting. Women’s songs of self-assertion, and empowering, queer coded female duets – which Wolf explicitly associates with lesbian readings – are notably missing.

The cultural treatment of the women who sang and acted for Disney was also far from the diva worship that scholars like Koestenbaum and Leonardi and Pope argue divas often receive elsewhere in mass culture. Rather than the praise, power, and fame that Broadway stars of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century like Mary Martin or Ethel Merman received, Adriana Caselotti’s reward from voicing Snow White was going uncredited in the film and being refused future jobs because producers were worried about her voice being associated with anything *but* Snow White (Hamilton). Rather than becoming a star herself, Caselotti was hidden from view so that her

personal image did not get in the way of public perception of the character she played; her breakthrough role resulted in her personal silencing. While her performance did still lead some fans to praise her as a diva, and she has now gone down in history as a “Disney Legend,” her fan culture grew in resistance to a larger media culture that tried to hold her in obscurity. Furthermore, female vocalists from *Cinderella*, *Sleeping Beauty*, and *Lady and the Tramp* had to sue Disney for ignoring their contract rights when their movies were released on video (Cagle). In sharp contrast to the political and creative power given to divas like Mary Martin and Ethel Merman, early Disney divas struggled to stake a claim for their place in the culture and politics of the industry. This trend continued over the next two decades, as the films of the 1960s and 1970s did not deviate from these musical structures, as they did not include any female duets<sup>53</sup> or self-assured diva numbers, and consistently relegated women’s interests to motherhood, family, and love<sup>54</sup>.

While these decades saw Disney’s animated films deviating from all of the tropes that made Broadway powerfully feminist and queer, their live-action musical ventures were somewhat more similar to Broadway conventions. However, even with live-action musicals like *Mary Poppins*, it is worth noting that – despite its obvious connection to Broadway with Julie Andrews as an assertive and dynamic singing female character – Disney was very careful to avoid fully committing to what was happening on Broadway. Discussing their demo for “Sticks,

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<sup>53</sup> With the exception of the light, comic mother/daughter charm song “Scales and Arpeggios” from *The Aristocats*.

<sup>54</sup> The 1960s only contained three animated Disney musicals, none of which involve female protagonists or prominent singing women. Again, women’s songs are reduced to comic tunes, or wistful longings for men or heteronormative fantasies. In *The Jungle Book*, the only woman to sing is Shanti, who sings a simple, sweet song about her desire to have “a handsome husband/ and a daughter of [her] own”. The 1970s saw only two animated musicals. *The Aristocats* involves mostly men singing, and the only female parts are the light charm song “Scales and Arpeggios” and Duchess’ few brief lines in “Ev’rybody wants to Be a Cat,” that include her telling the men how to “turn her on”. *Robin Hood* contains also mostly humorous songs or extradiegetic music. Again, as many Broadway shows began producing more powerful female roles, with Elaine Stritch storming into the beginning of the decade with “Ladies Who Lunch,” women in the Disney musical remained relatively docile and passive, and barely singing.

Paper, and Strings” (which would later become “Let’s Go Fly a Kite”), the Sherman Brothers claim that the song was originally “very different from the song we know today. It had an exciting and dynamic... driving rhythm – a very ‘show business’ kind of thing,” but that after playing it for Walt, “he said ‘that’s the kind of song that ends the second act of a Broadway show, but it does not end *my* movie” (*Walt’s Time* 46). The brothers changed it into a “very English three-quarter time” and “added a lilting sing-along chorus melody, and he bought it” (46). In brief, taking the Broadway out of the song got it into the film.

The 1980s brought Disney animated films closer to what was happening on Broadway, anticipating a move towards the major Broadway overhaul of their styling in 1989. The casting of Broadway legend Pearl Bailey as Big Mama the Owl in *The Fox and the Hound* was the closest Disney had come to a powerful female diva who sang. Of course, Mama is a mentor figure whose songs hardly speak to self-determination. One of her songs is pure exposition (“Best of Friends”) and her other two involve her giving advice to the protagonist (“Lack of Education” and “Appreciate the Lady”). However, her confidence, powerfully assertive voice, and the vocal and acting strengths of Bailey make her Mama Owl a diva-esque character in her own right, even if she is still in the role of singing about others rather than herself.

After this came *Oliver and Company* in 1988, the first Disney film involving Howard Ashman, one half of the songwriting team that would ignite the Disney Renaissance a year later. The song “Once Upon a Time in New York City,” written by Ashman in collaboration with Barry Mann, with lyrics like “dreaming is still how the strong survive,” is clearly a precursor to the adventurous, powerful “I Want” song that would come to characterise Ashman’s later work with Menken. Most importantly, *Oliver and Company* has Disney’s first powerful, self-asserting, singing female diva. Bette Midler, an already-established Broadway diva, plays vain, self-

obsessed, prize-winning poodle Georgette. Her song “Perfect Isn’t Easy” is – over half a decade after Broadway women began belting about their own strength, determination and confidence – finally an unapologetic anthem of self-confidence and self-determination sung by a brash, confident, vocally powerful diva. The first Disney film involving Howard Ashman, right at the beginning of the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, thus set the stage for the kind of Broadway-inspired, diva-centered, powerfully feminine films that Ashman and writing partner Menken would establish the next year.

### **The Disney Renaissance**

To our friend Howard, who gave a mermaid her voice and a beast his soul, we will be forever grateful. Howard Ashman 1950–1991.

- Dedication to Ashman from *Beauty and the Beast*

A year after *Oliver and Company*, the Disney Renaissance began. Ashman and Menken joined Disney’s ranks, bringing Broadway conventions to the company that dramatically reshaped the way their musicals sounded during the 1990s, and that continue to inspire Disney musicals afterwards. Furthermore, they brought Disney back to its *Snow White* days of telling stories inspired by fairy tales, folklore, and traditional tales, particularly those starring princesses. There had been no folk or fairy tale-inspired Disney animated film since 1973’s *Robin Hood*, and no princess-fronted film since *Sleeping Beauty* in 1959. *The Little Mermaid* thus revived one tradition that had been gone for 16 years, and another that had been gone for 30. There would be more Disney Princess films released in the next 10 years<sup>55</sup> than there had been in the 52 years preceding the Disney Renaissance. The association of the Disney Renaissance with princesses,

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<sup>55</sup> *The Little Mermaid*, *Beauty and the Beast*, and *Pocahontas*, along with the prominence of Princess Jasmine in *Aladdin*, and *Mulan*, whose titular character is included Disney’s official “Disney Princess” line of characters, despite her not being a princess in the film.

divas, Broadway song conventions, and fairy tales, makes it a particularly rich period for my discussion of queer possibility. Furthermore, the increasing queer visibility associated with Disney fans during the period marks it as a moment that is particularly significant. At the centre of this new face of Disney was Ashman – credited with giving “a mermaid her voice, and a beast his soul” – providing a prominent, openly queer figure behind the new Disney sound.

The two song types that are particularly significant to the Disney Renaissance are its reformulated style of “I Want” song and the show-stopping diva number. “I Want” songs – or early Act I songs where the protagonist articulates the major goal that will motivate their actions throughout the show (or at least the first act) – feature prominently in nearly every musical. Although pre-Renaissance Disney films contained popular and successful “I Want” songs, they are very different from the type of “I Want” songs that Ashman and Menken popularized in the Disney Renaissance. Disney Renaissance “I Want” songs are self-assertive and determined: they indicate a clear intention to take action and *get* what the protagonist wants. What starts out as longing and desire grows gradually into drive and motivation. The “I Want” songs from the pre-Renaissance films are instead marked by passive longing with no clear drive to action. Snow White’s “Someday My Prince Will Come” and “I’m Wishing” are about her longing for a man, and about waiting for her prince to come to her, with no goals for self-assertion beyond “wishing,” which she declares is “all you have to do”. Cinderella similarly sings “A Dream is a Wish Your Heart Makes,” which is about escape and longing, with again intention to act but rather a desire to “have faith in your dreams” and to “lose your heartaches” in escapism. Aurora’s songs, “Once Upon a Dream,” where she tells her animal friends about her longing for Phillip before he joins in and sings along with her, and “I Wonder,” where she muses that maybe



someone will find her if her “heart keeps singing” both speak to a passive longing with no articulation of agency.

In contrast, the “I Want” songs of the Disney Renaissance are never about men or romantic relationships, but rather about larger ambitions; this sets them apart from Snow White’s and Sleeping Beauty’s longing for romantic relationships (Cinderella at least has the somewhat more complex desire to go to a ball and escape the abuse heaped on her by her stepsisters). Moreover, they are often about the desire to leave behind a normative world in which the protagonist feels like an outsider so they can instead stake claim to their identity in a space away from their restrained lives. Ariel longs to learn about the “bright young women” of human culture; Hercules wants to find a community where he belongs; Mulan – quite the opposite of wanting a romantic relationship – wants to find a sense of self that transcends her family’s desire to make her the “perfect bride”; and Pocahontas similarly desires more than the arranged marriage her family wants for her. These are heroes whose longing is not for romantic partnership, but a more ambitious type of personal and social fulfillment (Ariel, Pocahontas, Belle, and Mulan all sing their “I Want” songs before they even meet their love interests).

The subjectivity articulated through the songs is also rarely passive but indicates a clear drive to fulfill the longing sung about; rather than waiting around or dreaming in their sleep, these protagonists intend to go out and achieve their goal. Ariel’s “Part of Your World” is determined and powerful, and expresses how she is “ready to stand.” Belle in *Beauty and the Beast* sings about how she wants “adventure in the great white somewhere.” Hercules proudly proclaims “I am on my way, I can go the distance.” The “I Want” song of Disney thus began to sound more like the many driven “I Want” songs that Wolf identifies (“Corner of the Sky” from *Pippin*, “Some People” from *Gypsy* or “Downtown” from the Ashman and Menken-penned *Little*

*Shop of Horrors*). In her 2011 essay on *Wicked*, Wolf describes the “I Want” song from the show as “build[ing] gradually verse by verse to become an ‘I will/I can’ song” (12), which better characterizes the trajectory of Renaissance-era Disney “I Want” songs.

These songs were clearly a major part of the Renaissance’s success with audiences. Ashman’s and Menken’s skills at writing “I Want” songs such as “Part of Your World” and “Belle,” led to the song type being one of the most popular amongst Disney fans, and the most frequent song type to be the protagonist’s featured song. In *The Little Mermaid* (“Part of Your World”), *Beauty and the Beast* (“Belle”), *Mulan* (“Reflection”), *Hercules* (“Go the Distance”), *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (“Out There” and the follow-up “Heaven’s Light,”), and *The Lion King* (“I Just Can’t Wait to be King”), the “I Want” song is literally the only solo song sung by the protagonist, as it takes precedence over all other song types for protagonists<sup>56</sup>.

Queer viewers have always found value in the “I Want” song, whether in its passive *Snow White* form or its assertive *Little Mermaid* form. Songs about longing, lack, and the desire for more have a history of appeal to queer viewers and speak to closeted experiences and unrequited love. “I Want” songs historically, including older ones like “Someday My Prince Will Come,” thus produce a fruitful space of identification and hope for queer viewers, and the older Disney classics are undoubtedly important to a certain tradition of queer identification. However, the transformation the song underwent with “Part of Your World” opens this identification up to a more assertive, vocal, and visible type of queer response, centered around a self-assured and determined goal instead of a passive longing; this type of music has been available on Broadway since at least the 1950s, but did not become available to Disney fans until 1989. Whereas pre-

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<sup>56</sup> This leaves Pocahontas and Aladdin as the only two of the eight singing Renaissance protagonists to sing solo songs that are not “I Want” songs. Aladdin’s song, “One Step Ahead” is also close to the “I Want” song genre and one could argue that it counts as one as well.

1989 Disney fans had to make do with passive longing – which reflects a relative lack of political and social agency – the Renaissance songs allow for a more forceful queer energy, which speaks to the political possibilities of that moment.

The thematic concerns of the songs also became more easily useful to queer identification, as they increasingly became about not belonging in the (hetero)normative world and longing for a space where they *will* belong (a desire that has a clear connection to queer experience). At the beginning of their films, Snow White and Aurora are both relatively content with their lifestyles and their place in society; their main conflicts are their longing for men, and their struggle against a single antagonist, with no issues with the larger society in which they live. Cinderella – while obviously discontented – is more out of place in her own household and family than with society at large; Cinderella’s desire is actually to fit into the dominant culture by going to a ball, rather than to find her own space outside of it. In contrast, Ariel, Hercules, Mulan, Pocahontas, and Belle all sing about how they don’t belong in the social order as it stands, and how they long for a way either to escape this society and find a place where they belong, or to break from the conventions thrust upon them by that society. The emergence of the “social outcast” as the standard Disney musical protagonist, and the introduction of the more assertive and ambitious (but still longing-filled) “I Want” songs they sing, speaks to the new possibilities for a bolder, more visible queer Disney audience.

Despite their confident tone, “I Want” songs are still based around a longing, a sense of lack, and a desire for more. More purely, powerfully assertive songs along the lines of what Wolf calls “belted act 1 finales of female self-assertion” (4) in the tradition of “Don’t Rain on My Parade” from *Funny Girl* and “And I Am Telling You” from *Dreamgirls*, are one of the moments in which the diva truly owns the stage, establishing it as a space for the powerfully

feminine. This powerful, non-normative feminine expression is at the heart of Miller's theory of gay musical identification<sup>57</sup>. However, with the arguable exception of Pocahontas' "Colors of the Wind," none of the Renaissance Disney protagonists have show-stopping, powerful songs of self-assertion, and many only sing solos during their "I Want" songs; this makes them an interesting type of diva who lacks the conventional number that establishes their presence and self-assertion, even as their "I Want" songs become more powerfully assertive. The conventional diva show-stopper instead goes to other characters. The "diva song" is given to the villain<sup>58</sup> in *The Little Mermaid*, and *The Lion King* (and arguably *Beauty and the Beast* and *Hunchback*), and to a sidekick or supporting character in *Aladdin* and *Hercules*. The trend of giving this song type to the villain continues even after the Renaissance, as with the villains of *Tangled* and *Princess and the Frog*, suggesting that the queer possibilities of the Disney Renaissance did not necessarily stop with the period's end in 1999.

The remainder of this chapter will analyze the boldly ambitious Disney Renaissance protagonists in relation to the sidekicks and villains that serve as the films' divas, looking to these divas as another source of inspiration for assertive and visible queer Disney fans. In analyzing Disney's Renaissance divas, I focus on the ways that music and visuals position them as central to the films even as the narrative may seem to construct them as marginal. Part of my argument is that Disney musicals *split* sites of queer identification between two separate character types: the protagonist and the diva.

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<sup>57</sup> I outline this more clearly in chapter one

<sup>58</sup> It is interesting to note that villains rarely sang before the Renaissance, with the exception of Mad Madam Mim (who sings a light comic relief song), Kaa, the Siamese Cats, and a few throwaway lines by Captain Hook, so the "villain song" is a song type largely introduced to Disney by Ashman and Menken. The duo were clearly interested in giving villains powerful performance numbers considering the prominence of Audrey II to their hit *Little Shop of Horrors*.

## **The Voice that Changed it All: *The Little Mermaid* and the beginning of the Disney Renaissance**

“Bright young women/ Sick of swimmin’/ Ready to stand!”

- Ariel, *The Little Mermaid*.

*The Little Mermaid*, the film that kicked off the Disney Renaissance, is, of course, easy to read as a conservative, patriarchal narrative. Ursula, the queer diva figure with a large body, is clearly positioned as the villain. King Triton’s power is represented by the phallic symbol of his trident, and Ursula’s ambition to steal this trident is framed as villainous and monstrous. She briefly succeeds, but ultimately fails, as she is impaled by a phallic ship-mast and dies, and her death is a victory for the film’s protagonists. It may be hard to see the room for a queer reading of this narrative. However, attention to the formal, musical, and visual aspects of the film tells another story. Other critics have argued that Ursula’s queer coding makes her an ideal source for queer identification, even as she is relegated to the role of antagonist. I expand on these critiques to argue that her musical and visual representation in the film not only opens her up to queer identification as a marginalized (and ultimately defeated) villain, but also makes room to view her performance and aesthetic as primary, celebrated, and victorious on the film’s affective and aesthetic planes. While she may be the villain of the *narrative*, the non-representational elements make her the hero (or at least the ruling diva) of the *musical*.

Ursula is quite clearly coded as a queer diva; Laura Sells mentions that Ursula was modeled on drag queen Divine, and was voiced by Pat Carroll, both known for performances that complicate gender norms. In addition to her physical and vocal dominance, Ursula also has a diva-like relation to notions of beauty. Gina Tonic claims Ursula as a figure of fat empowerment: she literally chooses her large size since, as a shape shifter, she has the power to appear any way

she wants (“9 Fat Positive Icons”). Koestenbaum explicitly associates divas with a complex relationship to notions of feminine beauty; divas neither reject beauty and aesthetics, nor become swept up in normative notions of feminine beauty. Instead, divas are often characterized as invested in femininity and beauty, but in an unconventional, queer way; they are not ashamed to be opulent, excessive, and decadent, and are often so in a way that offends – rather than reinforces – conventional sensibilities. Using the example of a Joan Sutherland album in which Sutherland’s lipstick on the cover was retouched, he explains: “the lipstick didn’t match the lips, but hung askew.... I knew Joan Sutherland and opera as errors in makeup: I enjoyed the spectacle of lipstick separate from the lips on which it was supposed to rest” (12). Ursula fits this description; while she is clearly not a conventional beauty the way that Triton’s daughters are, it is clear that she is invested in her appearance. The first time she meets Ariel, Ursula is shown primping in front of a vanity, as she applies makeup and hair product in a performative, theatrical way. Like the drag performer on whom she was modeled, Ursula’s aesthetic is a queer one, as she inhabits beauty and femininity in an unconventional, strange way.

What makes Ursula distinct from earlier diva-like Disney villains such as *Snow White*’s Evil Queen or *Sleeping Beauty*’s Maleficent is that she sings, while the others don’t. Ursula’s musical performance enables her to capture the film’s aesthetic and performative planes in a way that other characters don’t – allowing her to feature as dominant in the musical even as she is defeated in the narrative – while earlier Disney villains are relegated entirely to the narrative and don’t have this chance. Raymond Knapp points out how this even happens in the underscoring and background music: in the Tchaikovsky score from which *Sleeping Beauty* was adapted, Maleficent was given “distinctive and powerful” music, but the Disney film repurposes this music and gives it to the heroes (38). Maleficent, on the other hand, is given a musical

vocabulary taken from “novelty numbers” (38). Not only does Maleficent not sing, the music that accompanies her scenes in the score is adjusted to be less powerful.

Comparing the framing of Ariel’s musical performance to that of Ursula’s demonstrates the ways that the film allows Ursula to dominate it non-representationally, even as Ariel is its driving narrative force. While Ariel’s only song in the film represents the sort of confident, determined “I Want” song that came to characterize post-Renaissance Disney protagonists, it remains a song about desire and lack rather than substance or presence. There is confidence, but no braggadocio or diva-esque pride. Physically, the song refuses to allow Ariel the type of ownership of space that a diva demands. While “Part of Your World” includes several close-up shots, the vocal and visual high points of the song are all shots that diminish Ariel in the frame. Ariel’s most iconic shots in the scene are from high and overhead angles, meaning that the viewer is literally looking down on her. While she spirals and swims fluidly around the space, and she moves with grace and efficiency, she does not dominate the visual field or fill it with her body, and the camera refuses to let her take up the full frame during her vocal high points. The three vocal high points of the song are during the lines “stay all day in the sun,” “ready to stand” and “love to explore that shore above all,” all of which are ascending phrases leading to a sustained note at the top of her range. Yet, in the first, she visually shares the frame with another character, Flounder. In the second, she is filmed in a long shot, diminishing her presence and size. The third is then framed by a hole in the ceiling that takes up a large amount of the camera’s frame, preventing Ariel from filling the frame. Notably, all three are from an overhead angle, which explicitly positions Ariel as if she is being looked down on. The camera thus prevents Ariel from demanding attention the way that a diva conventionally does.

Ursula's solo, "Poor Unfortunate Souls," on the other hand, contrasts Ariel's from a visual and performative perspective. Ursula is almost exclusively filmed at eye level or from low angles, meaning the camera is always either pointed directly at her, or looking up at her, positioning her dominantly in the frame. Furthermore, the frame is often not large enough for her; she is filmed using several extreme closeups, including one in which her breasts take up almost the entire shot. Ursula owns the space in a way that Ariel can't, as her body and her voice together control the scene: Ursula sings with confidence, and dominates the visual field. The song also ends with an almost-parody of Ariel's iconic "upwards spiral" shots from "Part of your World," as Ursula similarly spins upwards into the air. However, unlike in "Part of Your World," the camera never goes above Ursula; she remains shot from a low angle, maintaining her power over the scene and re-framing Ariel's earlier shot in a way that foregrounds Ursula's position of authority.

Moreover, the song itself is one of pure self-assertion, with no hint of longing or dreaming. Ursula spends the majority of the song bragging about herself and her powerful sway over others ("they come crying to my cauldron yelling 'spells, Ursula, please!'", always with a powerful vocal presence. Vocally, Ursula and Ariel both spend parts of their songs breaking from their singing to speak; however, while Ariel does this to hesitate and ask questions ("what's that word again?"), Ursula yells, makes jokes and laughs. Her speech is often very quick, demonstrating her confidence and command over language, particularly when she quickly rattles off "if you want to cross a bridge my sweet, you've got to pay the toll, take a gulp and take a breath and go ahead and sign the scroll," seamlessly transitions to an aside to her companions, "Flotsam, Jetsam, now I've got her boys," and then returns to belting with the next line, "the boss is on a roll!" Ursula flaunts her vocal proficiency – her quick talking, her casual asides, her



belting, and her seamless transition between the three – and uses this proficiency to exert dominance over and manipulate Ariel, who ultimately falls for her seduction. Ursula here is the show's Ethel Merman or Barbra Streisand, the only character to demand the authority, respect, and control over scene, space, and song that belongs to the Broadway diva.

Furthermore, while Ursula fails to achieve the phallic power that she desires throughout the film in the form of Triton's trident, she does succeed in parodying the men who hold that power. Throughout "Poor Unfortunate Souls," Ursula's language mirrors that of the patriarchy against which she fights: the song is filled with lines such as "it's she who holds her tongue who gets her man." Ursula may not have Triton's trident, but she does make use of his language and actively turns it against him to manipulate his daughter. It *could* be argued that Ursula's language is simply an attempt to imitate the phallic power that she wants, and thus exists as another failed attempt at seizing a man's position of power. However, Ursula's use of patriarchal language is constantly parodic. The "she who holds her tongue" line is clearly ironic, as Ursula's plan is literally to *get* Ariel's man by *using* Ariel's stolen voice, meaning that she knows that it is exactly the *use* of the tongue that will, in this situation, get the man. In case the irony of this line is not clear, Ursula also makes a visual gag while singing this song: she grasps a severed tongue and throws it into her cauldron, as she literally holds someone else's tongue while singing the line. Ursula is thus not only using the language of the sea's patriarch in her attempt to overthrow him; she also deploys it parodically with a clear ironic distance.

"Poor Unfortunate Souls" is filled with humour, and unlike the humour of "Part of Your World" (which comes from Ariel's inability to remember words), Ursula is the one making the jokes. Similarly to her parody of patriarchal language, the chant at the end of the song parodies the conventional use of Latin or heightened diction in fictional portrayals of spellcasting. Ursula

uses an absurd mix of common English words related to fish and voices (including “Beluga” and “Larynxes”) spoken to sound impressive, and faux-Italian and Latin phrases mixed with English such as “Et max laryngitis” and “La voce to me.” In contrast to Ariel’s uncertainty with language, Ursula is playful, quick, and masterful while she speaks, even when she is speaking complete nonsense.

Thus, while Ariel may be the protagonist of the narrative, Ursula demands control over the film’s visual and vocal realms; she is not simply a diva, but *the* diva who owns the non-representational world of a film that has denied her victory in its story. In this sense, the film creates two opportunities for queer connections: Ariel’s narrative function and “I want/ I will” song offers a site of attachment for queer experiences of longing and desire for change, while Ursula’s visual and musical ownership of the film offer a site of empowerment and self-confidence for the types of marginalized identities that villains often represent.

One feature of the dual focus structure that Altman observes is the use of dual protagonists to compare and contrast the different worlds they represent (19). As Altman argues, musical fans are thus trained to look for a dual focus shared between principal characters from contrasting worlds. In this case, these worlds are those of a privileged princess and a social outcast. Altman argues that the dual focus narrative particularly relies on scenes that mirror and reflect each other visually (19), which happens when Ariel and Ursula both perform the same “upwards spiral” movement filmed from different angles. Just as the film musical conventionally ends by “reconciling terms previously seen as mutually exclusive” (27), *The Little Mermaid’s* musical numbers demonstrate how both Ariel and Ursula struggle to fit into society in their own ways, and the film positions both of them in ways that allow for different types of queer attachment and imitation. While the narrative may place Ariel and Ursula in opposition,

Hollywood film history has trained audiences to view the positions they fill as ultimately reconcilable, as the musical structure of the film unites characters that the narrative pulls apart.

Ursula's narrative location is, however, a double-edged sword (or double-sided trident): punishing Ursula in the story gives viewers the tools to villainize and punish those whom she represents, and I do not want to deny the potential harm of this sort of interpretation. However, at the same time, her triumph in the musical side of the film gives a powerful space of identification for queer viewers. Considering the substantial nonrepresentational elements that celebrate Ursula's performance, the film sends the message that – while Ursula's literal actions are evil and unacceptable – her body, aesthetic, gender performance, and personality are spectacular and deserving of emulation and imitation.

The prominence of Disney villain merchandise, and the popularity of “Poor Unfortunate Souls” outside of queer communities (The Jonas Brothers produced a poor and unfortunate cover of it in 2008) also implies that Ursula is not always despised by mainstream viewers the way that the narrative structure would suggest. The musical structure leaks through not only to give a space of queer identification but, in a way, to queer the entirety of the text, and it is hard to believe that the film's primary signification of Ursula is that of an undesirable person. The other benefit to this kind of mix between a formally venerated figure and a narratively condemned character is that it allows the film to condemn a character's *actions* without condemning the larger social “types” that the character represents. Ursula's choices – regardless of her queer positioning – are, to manipulate a teenage girl into becoming her prisoner, to transform her debtors into seaweed and imprison them, and to eventually become a despotic ruler; these, of course, are terrible, evil actions. The film is able to punish these actions, thus creating the cautionary tale for children not to give up anything (especially their voice) for a romantic

relationship, or to trust strangers with deals that seem too good to be true, while still managing to use music to celebrate the kind of female empowerment and queerness that Ursula's performance represents. The narrative punishes her villainous actions as an individual, yet people sing and listen to "Poor Unfortunate Souls" to embrace the queer power that the character type aesthetically represents. This split between narratives that condemn evil actions, and music and nonrepresentational elements that support those villains' gender performance and outsider relationship to the dominant culture, is key to the diva-villain, and is something that I will explore in more detail with Regina from *Once Upon a Time* in Chapter Four.

Formally, it is clear why *The Little Mermaid* was the perfect film to kick off a new decade of visible, assertive queer Disney fans. Between Ariel's new (for Disney, if not for Broadway), assertive "I Want" song and Ursula's scene-stealing diva performance, the musical brought a new queer style to Disney, and one that would continue to influence their musicals for decades. The use of Ursula as a diva-villain and the denial of any songs to Ariel besides the "I Want" song is complicated; on one hand, being able to fiercely, femininely identify with the protagonist of a show in a queer way could carry much more weight than a similar identification with a secondary character or antagonist, and would come without the baggage of a potentially oppressive reading that leads heteronormative viewers to use Ursula's villainy to motivate discriminatory thinking.

However, the villain subject position also allows for Disney's divas to be much more explicitly queer, as Ursula's Divine-inspired aesthetic of the queerly beautiful diva drag queen is able to push the boundaries of beauty further than a classic Broadway protagonist, who still has to maintain some level of appeal to normative values in order to secure her status as the protagonist. While Fanny Brice and Elphaba are not normative, the extent to which they can

push borders of normativity is limited by the need to make them the hero; by making Ursula a villain, the film can make her queerness more extreme, at the cost of losing the power that comes from being the narrative protagonist.

Thus, while Disney divas are less central to the narrative, I argue that they have the ability to be more queer than conventional Broadway divas, while maintaining their appeal to identification through their musical and visual – if not narrative – dominance. Characters such as Ursula thus provide viewers with an entry point that allows them a space and place in Disney, as the Disney Renaissance and the Broadway shift it caused in Disney opened up room for queer identifications in what are arguably the most influential children's films and versions of classic fairy tales currently present in North American culture. In this sense, Ursula's character dramatizes the pros and cons of "mainstreaming" in queer musicals: while presence in mainstream media often results in assimilation into a homonormative positioning, it is often protagonists who are expected to participate in the greatest degree of assimilation into normative structures. Antagonists and supporting characters, on the other hand, have more room to defy expectations, even as they sacrifice some level of narrative centrality.

### **Diva As Narrator: *Hercules* and the muses**

"And that's the world's first dish"

- Terpsichore

Hercules follows the same structure as *The Little Mermaid* but is more extreme in the way that it visually diminishes its protagonist; if Ariel is looked down upon by the camera during her big song, Hercules is practically irrelevant to it. During "I Can Go the Distance," Hercules' only song in the film, the cinematography consists primarily of long shots that focus on the beautiful landscapes surrounding Hercules, making Hercules tiny in the frame (if he is even in

the frame at all). The camera is more interested in the horizons and landscapes than in Hercules himself; on two separate occasions, Hercules sings belted, sustained notes while the camera looks only at scenery. This of course sets up a similar structure to *The Little Mermaid* where the protagonist's song of longing provides a space of queer identification, but they are denied the diva role, diminished by both the camera and the types of songs they sing. Unlike *The Little Mermaid*, however, there is no singing villain-diva in *Hercules*; while Hades' literally flaming characterization is clearly diva-like, which presents him as an easy source of queer identification, Hades never sings<sup>59</sup>. Megara and Phil also each only sing one song: Meg's song is about falling in love with Hercules, and Phil's is about a series of disappointments with his life. The vocal and visual divas of *Hercules* are, rather, the muses who serve as its narrators.

The muses are clearly defined by confidence and self-assertion; the film opens with them interrupting another narrator to point out that they can do a better job than him. They playfully correct each others' pronunciation of words, banter and fight with each other during songs, burst into Megara's only solo song to challenge her, and exert individual confidence and dominance<sup>60</sup>. Their gospel-inspired songs allow for vocal riffs and runs, and they are by far the most vocally extravagant and powerful songs in the show, displaying the vocal talents of a quintet of actresses including Tony award winners LaChanze and Lillias White who get to show off their vocal prowess in a way that the other characters do not. Musically, the muses are the centre of the film.

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<sup>59</sup> Interestingly, the only male divas who get to sing are characterized by performed masculinity (Genie and Gaston), while feminized men like Jafar and Hades don't get singing voices (Jafar very briefly sings, but it is a short refrain of an earlier Genie song, with the other characters speaking throughout the song). The one exception is, of course, Scar, whose issues I outline later in this chapter.

<sup>60</sup> The moment when Clio corrects Thalia's pronunciation of "vase" in a way that makes both pronunciations fit the rhyme scheme in different ways (rhyming with both "face" and "aahs") mirrors a similar moment in *Guys and Dolls*' "Marry the Man Today," where Sarah corrects Adelaide's grammar in a way that makes both lines fit into the rhyme scheme efficiently ("I" rhyming with "apply" and "me" rhyming with "guarantee"), a significant moment considering the importance Wolf ascribes "Marry the Man Today" in the history of feminist and lesbian readings made available through songs where women sing together.

The Muses are visually distinctive; in a genre where characters conventionally wear the exact same outfits for the entire film, the muses have several costume changes during the song *Zero to Hero* alone. They are constantly filmed wearing distinctive and colourful outfits and framed in vibrant shots with flashing lights that resemble a disco or club, which contrasts with the landscapes and ancient Greek architecture that make up the rest of the film's visual plane. Visually, vocally, and performatively, the muses steal the show: Hercules only sings an "I Want" song, Phil sings a comic relief song (accompanied by Danny DeVito's character acting which is hilarious but definitely not vocally showy), and Hades doesn't sing at all. Megara only sings one song, and the Muses burst in halfway through it to join in: the song is a back-and-forth where Megara tries to repress her feelings while the Muses point out that they can tell that she is in denial. They sing lines like "honey we can see right through you," as they take on a position of confidence and epistemological superiority, knowingly and self-confidently pushing Megara out of her state of denial. In contrast, the Muses have three featured songs, all of which are vocally and visually extravagant.

Unlike Ursula, however, the muses are completely separate from the film's plot, serving as narrators who do not fully exist in the diegesis or story of the film. This distancing substantially reduces their ability to demand attention and ownership over the film's structure the way that Ursula does; while they are visually and vocally powerful, they also have no plots or backstories themselves, and are literally removed from the action of the story. They do not get to sing about themselves; while they exert their presence and pride, this assertion is always framed by songs that functionally serve to narrate the story and sing about others. In this sense, while Ursula is a figure of a social outcast, the muses are not able to figure *any* role within the social order, as they exist on an entirely different plane from it. Many viewers don't even realize the

muses have names<sup>61</sup>, as they represent diva figures who, despite their strong personalities and performances, lack the plots, backstories, or dramatic agency to leave the substantial narrative impacts of characters like Ursula.

Notably, the muses, removed from the plot and dramatic action of *Hercules*, are the only Black characters in Disney Renaissance films. Even *Tarzan* somehow manages to present an entire film set in the Congo without representing any Black characters. While Disney's villains are often subtly inflected by racial markers – Scar's fur is darker than the other lions in *The Lion King*, and Ursula has purple skin – the muses are explicitly depicted as Black women singing gospel music. Their dramatic function – both as narrators and as the voices of reason who give advice to other characters despite lacking motivations and desires of their own – mirrors similar mentor/support roles that Disney had previously given to characters voiced by prominent Black performers, including Tony Award winner Pearl Bailey in *The Fox and the Hound* and Tony nominee Samuel E. Wright in *The Little Mermaid*. Even in *The Lion King*, set in Africa, the lead is voiced by a white man: James Earl Jones, the most prominent Black actor in the film, plays a mentor figure who dies early in the film and gives the hero inspiration from beyond the grave. While the Disney Renaissance was often comfortable placing powerful divas with impactful performances in the roles of social outsiders, their only divas explicitly depicted as Black are not permitted a place within the story world at all.

The muses of *Hercules*, in this sense, serve as an example of the dynamic that Toni Morrison theorizes in *Playing in the Dark*. Morrison discusses how American texts by white authors tend to deny or distort the importance of African and African-American history to American history more generally. As she argues, there is a strange assumption that the presence

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<sup>61</sup> Prompting an imgur album literally titled “Not many people know this but the muses in Hercules have names; Calliope, Clio, Melpomene, Terpsichore, and Thalia” available at <https://imgur.com/gallery/38I4L>



of “first, Africans and then African-Americans in the United States” which “shaped the body politic, the Constitution, and the entire history of the culture... has had no significant place or consequence in the origin and development of that culture’s literature” (5). Morrison describes “the process of organizing American coherence through a distancing Africanism” (8), as white authors attempt to deny the fact that any understanding of their own cultural history is inherently dependent on the presence and history of African Americans.

*Hercules* fits this structure; choosing the genre of gospel music for the film’s primary sound, Disney includes a quintet of Black singers to provide the aesthetics and sounds of the genre. However, while benefitting from a musical genre established and developed by African Americans, the film avoids addressing African American characters or history in any substantial way beyond aesthetics, as the Black characters are not given a space in the plot or story. The film thus attempts to benefit from an African American genre while simultaneously refusing to explore the historical weight of that genre or its relationship to Black Americans. Disney was also no stranger to this sort of structure; Sam Baltimore has pointed out that Howard Ashman’s original treatment for *Aladdin* intended to frame Genie as a Black character with music inspired by the Harlem Renaissance, despite being in a film that has nothing to do with the Harlem Renaissance, creating what Baltimore calls a “confusion of musical and ethnic signifiers” (213).

In addressing *Aladdin*’s stage adaptation, Baltimore shows how Black characters are positioned in a way that “forms part of a larger pattern that serves to both foreclose ‘normal’ roles to black performers and open up marginal ones, both in terms of subject position and in terms of stage time” (219). This structure also relates to what Dan Dinero refers to as the phenomenon where a “big Black lady stops the show,” as “a Black woman, heretofore uninvolved in the storyline, sings a rousing number... the excess of the number is heightened by

the song's existence outside (in excess) of the main narrative" (30). Patina Miller, in Kooman & Dimond's "Random Black Girl," sings about experiences playing this sort of role: while she declares "I'll open my mouth unbelievably wide. And at the end of the song, when it's time to let go, I'll give 'em a dose of my crazy vibrato," she laments that "when it comes to the plot, I've no significant role." Broadway has a repeated tendency to take advantage of Black performers' singing voices and musical performance while denying them narrative representation or providing any platform for their stories and experiences.

During the 1990s, Disney was, in general, perfectly comfortable depicting characters of colour as singing protagonists (*Aladdin*, *Mulan*, and *Pocahontas*). Why, then, is it specifically the Black characters in *Hercules* who are removed from its narrative, despite being central to its musical structure? Part of this, I suggest, relates to the fact that *Aladdin*, *Mulan*, and *Pocahontas* are all othered, presented as if they are completely removed from a conventional Western European context. *Aladdin* and *Mulan* are both set in an exoticized East, clearly distinguished from (and often contrasted to) Western styles and history. While set in North America, *Pocahontas* is established specifically as a story about colonialism, rather than one about American history more broadly, with a clear distinction set up between the Western European colonizers and the (inaccurate, romanticized, settler-colonial depiction of) Indigenous cultures<sup>62</sup>.

*Hercules*, on the other hand, intervenes in Greek mythology, a narrative tradition often positioned at the origins of Western European culture and literature. Ancient Greek and Roman culture and literature is often considered to be the foundation on which most English and other Western European traditions are built; allowing the muses space in the narrative would thus be admitting to the importance of non-white voices to narratives that are considered cornerstones of

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<sup>62</sup> The film's representation of Native American culture has little connection to any actual Native American cultures or nations (including the invention of terms such as the "blue corn moon" by Disney).

Western culture in a way that the more distanced and “othered” narratives of *Pocahontas*, *Aladdin* and *Mulan* do not risk. Of course, Africa obviously *was* connected to and had influences on the Greek and Roman empires. Considering the frequent depictions of Cleopatra and Egypt’s involvement with the Roman empire in popular culture, the involvement of Africa and Africans in Greek and Roman history should be common knowledge<sup>63</sup>. Just as Morrison argues that “the contemplation of this black presence” in North American literature “is central to any understanding of our national literature and should not be permitted to hover at the margins of the literary imagination” (5), the presence of Africans is clearly central to any understanding of Classical literary traditions, despite the insistent representation of ancient Greek and Roman culture as completely white. Hilary Lehman argues: “it is generally true that if my students have heard of Classics at all, it’s been indelibly linked in their minds with whiteness, whether because of images of austere temples and statues or because our society assumes everything old (even imaginarily old) is white,” and further points out that many of her colleagues “go on and on about the ‘foundations of Western tradition’... performing an act of active erasure, of intentional whitewashing... [rewriting] the history of Classics to exclude Asia and Africa, [and continuing] to propagate the narrative of a Western tradition rooted in the Greco-Roman past.” Disney refuses to admit that the Western narrative they are representing is not the white one that people like to pretend it is. However, they still insist on profiting from African American styles and music while they simultaneously whitewash history.

Despite the film’s refusal to allow the divas of *Hercules* any narrative space, they do, like Ursula, produce room for aesthetic identification. As Cindy Patton observes of Madonna’s

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<sup>63</sup> Although the number of North Americans who think that Africa is a country and don’t realize that Egypt is a part of it may suggest that many people are actually unaware that Africa had a substantial relationship with the Greek and Roman empires.

“Vogue,” sometimes even the most seemingly watered-down versions of subcultural practices can carry messages from the originals that bleed through in aesthetics and bodily movements, allowing viewers to “learn without remembering” (qtd. in Shershow 42) the ideology encoded in a performance style. Thus, the gospel music style, vocals, and aesthetics of the muses themselves may encode aspects of the specific Black histories from which they are drawn, even in their watered-down Disney version. Furthermore, powerful and political diva performances do not always depend on literal narrative to have impact. Malik Gaines, for example, discusses Sylvester’s diva persona as one created through his “dress, voice, attitude, and body”, as he “shape[s] his identity with costume” (149), and that he gains particular power by his constant use of “historically black signs” (136). Obviously, Disney lacks the intention and political goals of Sylvester; however, this example demonstrates how politics can be encoded in the signifiers of historically Black modes of performance, even if they are not tied into the larger narrative itself.

Thus, viewers who identify with the diva, or more specifically the Black divas figured in *Hercules*, can reproduce and imitate the muses’ coded language, musical stylings, and movement associated with historically Black art forms. This is not, of course, to excuse Disney’s issues with representation in this case, where they capitalize on an African American genre while failing to provide effective African American representation. Rather than excuse Disney’s shortcomings, I instead hope to demonstrate the radical potential of Disney’s Black queer *audiences*, who can find forms of attachment within these films, even as these films create barriers to such identification.

Like the queer fans of Disney who began to demand visibility, the muses are not entirely complacent with their relegation to the margins, but find ways to pierce through the veil placed between them and the film’s diegesis. The muses complicate the distinction between the diegetic

story world and their extra-diegetic location in two instances. In the song “I Won’t Say I’m in Love,” the muses begin to occupy an ambiguous place in the diegesis; visually, the song suggests that, like the rest of the film, characters are not aware of the muses, who only exist in a space of direct address to the audience. While Meg sings a song about her growing feelings for Hercules, the muses appear near her in the forms of statues and carvings, commenting on her statements in song. Meg shows no signs of noticing or acknowledging them, and the visuals of the song emphasize that they are not interacting with Meg as literal characters, but rather only exist on an extradiegetic, musical plane.

Yet, while Meg’s body language and movement clearly indicates that she does not acknowledge the muses as “really” being there, her lyrics oddly contradict the visuals of the scene, as there are several moments where she directly responds to their statements, accusing them of being “way off base” and telling them “get off my case” when they insist that she is trying to hide her true feelings. This is the only time that in the film that a character acknowledges the muses’ existence (besides a brief moment at the end when Hermes yells “hit it, ladies!”), as the structure of the song allows for them to briefly step into the diegetic world. The songs of a musical, already complicating the question of what is and is not diegetic, allow for moments of slippage, or what Josie Torres Barth would call “diegetic bleed,” where characters who only exist in the film’s extradiegetic sphere can briefly break into the world of the narrative and blur the boundaries between the two levels of the film. The muses then visually appear on the same level as the characters in the concluding song, “A Star is Born.” Again not fully recognized as diegetic characters, the muses nonetheless take advantage of the diegetic slippage caused by the musical number to shift visually into the world of the narrative and interact with the characters there, asserting their relevance to a plot that tries to obscure it.

Thus, much like Ursula in *The Little Mermaid*, queer identification in *Hercules* is split between an outsider-protagonist and a supporting diva character. Like Ariel, Hercules represents a sort of limited queer figure: he is a social outsider who literally leaves behind two heteronormative family structures (his adoptive parents, and his birth parents on Olympus) to find an alternative space where he can feel like he belongs. However, he is also an extremely palatable, “safe” type of outsider: he is white, muscular, conventionally handsome, and ends up in a (presumably) monogamous heterosexual relationship by the end of the film. Like Ursula, the muses embody a type of aesthetic, performance, and style that is often subjugated in mass entertainment – in this case, a style specifically associated with Black women – but do so at the cost of a substantial position in the narrative. While they stylistically and musically dominate the show as its divas, the narrative works to sideline and exclude them to maintain an appeal to white-centered fantasies about what Western history looks like. Thus, the show’s musical plot offers two very different rich sites for queer identification, even as its narrative plot diminishes the less normative of the two. Both Hercules and The Muses navigate, in different ways, the tense relationship between the resistance and containment that mass culture offers marginalized audiences.

### **Queer Masculinity: Male Divas in *Beauty and the Beast* and *Aladdin***

I use antlers in all of my decorating.

- Gaston (*Beauty and the Beast*)

This chapter has, up to this point, focused on the diva as a powerfully performing woman. However, as Gaines discusses in reference to Sylvester, men can also occupy the diva position in a queer, radical way. This section discusses what happens in Disney films when a man takes on the diva role, as exemplified by Gaston in *Beauty and the Beast* and Genie in *Aladdin*. Both

Gaston's and Genie's music is flamboyant, confident, and self-assertive. Like Ursula and the Muses, neither occupies the narrative position of protagonist, yet both sing the only confident, self-assertive numbers of braggadocio and self-love in their films. Gaston and Genie both serve not just as divas, but as queer divas, in two slightly different ways: Gaston with his foregrounded performance of masculinity, and Genie with his constant play with gender and homoeroticism.

The epitome of patriarchal masculinity, Gaston takes pride in his masculinity, his popularity with women, and his dominant position within the social order of the town. Such a normative figure would not conventionally be one that would appeal to queer viewers; however, what makes Gaston a valuable figure of queer potential in the film is the fact that his masculinity is never essentialized or presented as biologically-grounded. Rather, Gaston is constantly self-aware about how his masculinity is socially constructed. This self-awareness leads to moments where Gaston plays with gender, exposing its performative nature and playing with its contingency. These moments also allow for the film to develop moments of homoeroticism and homosociality between Gaston and other characters.

The homoerotics of the song "Gaston" are fairly apparent, as it is essentially a song about a bar full of men (and three token women who look identical save for their dress colour) singing about how much they love and admire Gaston's muscles and masculine prowess. However, the queerness of the song goes past this surface-level homoeroticism. Throughout the song, the celebration of Gaston's masculinity slowly turns into a dissection of the constitutive parts of that masculinity, foregrounding the various ways in which it stems from a combination of his actions, his feelings, and his individual ways of expressing and experiencing identity. The song discusses the diet required to make his body the way it is, the athletic skills (spitting, fighting, and hunting) he uses to shore up his masculinity, the clothing involved in performing his gender, and even the

home décor he uses to prove that he is a man<sup>64</sup>. The song also does so in comically exaggerated terms: he eats five dozen eggs every morning so he can be “roughly the size of a barge,” every last inch of him is covered in hair, and he uses “antlers in all of [his] decorating.” The hyperbole of the song presents Gaston less as a paragon of masculinity, and more as an exaggerated parody of it. As Gaston performs his masculinity in a self-aware way, the scene starts to feel more like a drag show that deconstructs and plays with gender, rather than an uncritical celebration of manhood. I argue that Gaston’s performance is similar to that of a drag king’s, making a spectacle out of masculinity.

If masculinity is a performance to Gaston, heterosexual desire is a part of this performance. During “Gaston,” he is swarmed by a trio of adoring women; rather than paying much attention to these women themselves, Gaston takes the opportunity to strike a pose, using them as props for his masculine image. Gaston’s gaze is directed away from any of them; they take up three corners of the frame, and he looks towards the only corner not occupied by a woman. In this example, Gaston does not desire the women themselves, but rather the way that the women make him look as they are draped around his chair, as he prioritizes his own pose and image over any desire to look at or interact with them. As Jack Halberstam argues of James Bond, Gaston’s masculinity depends “absolutely” on props, including “an endless supply of [beautiful babes]” (*Female Masculinity* 419-422). Gaston’s heterosexual relationships produce a homoerotic structure; his attachment to women is based less on his desire for them, and more on the way they support his masculine construction. Since the audience for this construction is made

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<sup>64</sup> Self-conscious performances of gender permeate *Beauty and the Beast* throughout, from a small moment where a woman’s hair is revealed to be a wig during the song “Belle,” and the fact that the servants in Beast’s castle are able to maintain their gender identity and performance despite being transformed into household objects. The servants preserve their gender expression through performative indicators including voices, bodily movements, and cosmetics such as Mrs. Potts’ eyeshadow or the feather duster’s lipstick.



up of men, the primary focus of his erotic energy is on men, rather than women; his erotic attraction the latter is used to impress the former.

This mediated eroticism – where Gaston’s erotic performance directed at other men is mediated through women – is similar to the triangulated relationships Eve Sedgwick examines in *Between Men*. In dialogue with René Girard, Sedgwick discusses love triangles, observing that “the bond that links the two rivals is as intense and potent as the bond that links either of the rivals to the beloved” (21). Sedgwick also notes Gayle Rubin’s and Claude Levi-Strauss’ arguments surrounding “the use of women as... property for the primary purpose of cementing the bonds of men with men” (25-26). In the context of Sedgwick’s book, the erotic triangles created when two men compete over a woman become just as much about the relationship between these two men as they are about the relationship between either man and the woman; often, the woman often exists solely as a tool to facilitate a relationship between men. While the scene during “Gaston” is a bit different – the other men are not in competition for Gaston over the women’s affections – the structure is still at play, where a triangle is formed between Gaston, the women, and the male bar patrons whom Gaston is trying to impress. In this case, while the women are the mediating figure – the apparent object of Gaston’s affection – the primary relationship is between Gaston and the men he hopes to impress.

This small moment in the bar during “Gaston” is reflected on a larger scale in Gaston’s relationship with Belle. Ostensibly, Gaston’s primary motivation during the film is his plan “to woo and marry Belle.” However, his interest in Belle is rooted not in any desire for her, but for the social status she can bring him. Gaston is introduced during the song “Belle.” He sings about Belle’s beauty, but does so while he stares at his reflection in the back of a pot, observing that “here in town there’s only she who is beautiful as me.” He is so wrapped up in his own reflection

that he doesn't even notice Belle, the supposed recipient of his affection, as she walks right by him. Later on, Gaston creates an elaborate wedding celebration before he even asks Belle to marry him, joking: "I'd like to thank you all for coming to my wedding. But first, I better go in there and propose to the girl!" For Gaston, the union between husband and wife is secondary to the actual function of the wedding: a event centered around himself where he can perform for the community and demonstrate his masculinity. Heterosexual union is thus, for Gaston, not about erotic desire or a connection to a love interest, but another part of the performance by which he constructs his gender and his position within the community. Gaston's heterosexual acts are, in reality, all about impressing other men.

As self-aware as it is, Gaston's construction of masculinity is still obviously harmful and dangerous. His treatment of women as mere props for his performance of masculinity is, of course, misogynist and ignores the humanity of these women. Furthermore, his determination to get what he wants and maintain the dominance and cultural position that his successful performance of masculinity has given him leads him to acts of violence. Gaston himself is hardly an icon of queerness, and I do not suggest that queer viewers are called to identify with his subject position in the way they are Ursula's or the Muses'. His disregard for the humanity of women, and his obsession with constructing the perfect image of masculinity, are not queer traits, but rather normative and harmful ones. However, the film constantly foregrounds the ways that Gaston's embodiment of masculinity is not natural or normal, but rather a constructed performance constituted by a series of props and gestures. Thus, the queerness of Gaston comes not from venerating and imitating his actions (as if he were a real person), but in imitating the way that his character (as a fictional figure played by an actor) parodies masculinity. Unlike "Poor Unfortunate Souls," which inspires a sort of sincere reproduction of its vocal and visual

power, “Gaston” compels a more playful response, as the song plays out a parodic, self-conscious performance of gender that constantly has its tongue in its cheek. As the mechanics behind his masculinity are revealed, and the homosocial structures behind these mechanics become apparent, Gaston’s performance is about giving the lie to normative aspects of masculinity, rather than celebrating that normative masculinity itself. It is important in this sense to separate “Gaston as performer” from “Gaston as fictionalized person.” While the latter entity creates an extreme version of a dangerous, normative masculinity, the former allows for audience imitations of Gaston *as a performer* to enjoy a critical approach to masculinity as spectacle.

Unlike Gaston, Genie is not characterized by hyper-masculinity, but rather expresses queerness through his femininity and androgyny. Robin Williams’ performance of Genie as flamboyant and boisterous makes him a much more conventional queer diva, as he embodies a type of feminized male performance that is conventionally associated with gay men. As Joseph Boone points out, Genie “embodies the polymorphously perverse gone wild,” introducing “a note of gay campiness” to the film (415). Outside the film itself, the choice of Robin Williams to perform Genie further codes this performance as queer; while not gay himself, Williams is known for his involvement in queer-related films. After *Aladdin*, Williams would appear in a cross-dressing role in *Mrs. Doubtfire*, star in *The Birdcage*, and make a cameo in *To Wong Foo* – the last two of which were amongst of the most popular drag films of the 1990s.

Genie’s depiction in *Aladdin* also demonstrates another substantial way that the diva can serve a queer role that I have not yet explored: the diva’s relationship to time. A side effect of the diva’s favourite pastime – signing about how great they are – is that their songs often halt the forward progression of the narrative, as the stories must stop while the divas boast about

themselves. Granted, this structure is not always the case: Ursula's song, for example, develops the plot as it dramatizes her seduction of Ariel, and the Muses' primary role is to move the plot forwards. Genie, however, fits the queer diva role of halting narrative development. Sam Baltimore has argued that the Genie's two songs are "numbers written to celebrate the Genie and his fantasy version of Aladdin, to pause any ensuing romance in favour of delighting in fantasy, razzle-dazzle and physical prowess" (214). Citing Jack Halberstam's discussion of queer time, Baltimore suggests that Genie halts the progression of "straight time" – or the teleological development of plots (and lives) through a conventional, heteronormative pattern that results in heterosexual romance, marriage and reproduction – to explore moments of joy and pleasure that stand outside of these prescribed timelines. While Baltimore makes this claim specifically about Genie in the film, I would extend this claim to apply to divas in musicals more generally, as spending an entire song to break from the plot and sing about yourself inherently disrupts conventional storytelling structures.

Genie, a shapeshifter, also plays with gender in the various forms he chooses to take on. He transforms into several female characters, and some of the male characters he changes into play with gay stereotypes, such as the fashion designer who plans Aladdin's prince outfit. However, beyond "tak[ing] several turns in drag" (Boone 416), Genie is also notably inconsistent in how he presents himself as a woman, exploring varying ways in which gender can be performed and be performative. In some cases, such as when he takes on the form of a flight attendant modelled on Carol Channing, he maintains his face shape and distinctive blue skin colour, giving the impression that he is simply his "default" self wearing a costume. However, in other transformations, such as when he takes on the form of a TV reporter, he changes his skin

colour, face shape, and appearance enough that it becomes less like his regular body in a costume and more of a complete transformation into another body.

This variance in his level of transformation is also not limited to his female roles, but to any time Genie transforms. His transformations range from his “default Genie aesthetic” in a costume to a complete transformation into someone else. Genie’s transformations thus complicate the opposition between performance as disguise or pretending to be someone else, and performance as fully *becoming* someone else in a more substantial way, as he explores the continuum between impersonation and embodiment. Genie’s transformations thus present a range of different ways of experiencing gender. Genie’s form, like his gender, is malleable: it becomes impossible to determine the line between when Genie is doing an impression – performing in drag while still identifying as a man underneath the “costume” – and when he more substantially transforms into someone else (or when, as is usually the case, he is doing something that fits somewhere in between). Genie thus neither simply takes “turns in drag” *or* fully transforms into women; rather, he refuses to choose one or the other, opting for a more consistently fluid understanding of gender identity.

Genie also uses moments of gender ambiguity to complicate characters’ sexuality. During “Friend Like Me,” Genie transforms into a beautiful woman; not knowing that the woman is Genie, Aladdin leans in to kiss her. Right before their lips touch, Genie transforms back into his default appearance, taking Aladdin by surprise. Genie then creates a group of camels who dance erotically while dressed in provocative outfits that resemble the outfit that the woman Aladdin had almost kissed was wearing. Gender in this scene is constantly mapped onto actions and expression rather than to biologically-bound bodies: a genie and a camel can both achieve the same degree of femininity as a cisgender woman, as gender is not bound to essentialized bodies.

Gender in *Aladdin* becomes divorced from the biological and placed onto the personal, symbolic and cultural, as Genie demonstrates the many ways that gender is expressed through performative codes. Genie's constructions in *Aladdin* function similarly to the inanimate household objects of *Beauty and the Beast*, who manage to convey gendered identities through their coded expressions and actions, despite having no connection to human biology because they do not have human bodies.

As I mention earlier in this chapter, one of the benefits of the "sidekick" character type is that they are allowed to be more antinormative than protagonists because their actions are easily dismissed due to their comic, supporting nature. A film that follows the adventures of a shapeshifting genie who makes audiences radically question their assumptions about gender would be a hard sell for a mass-market film. However, because Genie is safely contained within Aladdin's much more heteronormative narrative, he is permitted to do all of these things since his actions are easily dismissed as simply being comic relief from a secondary character. Audiences are supposed to follow, relate to, and focus on Aladdin and Jasmine, and so the leads are required to fit the values of a mass market. Gaston and Genie both represent the queer possibilities created by decentering protagonists – who often have to fit most easily into heteronormative models – and focusing on villains and supporting characters as sites of queer identification. While this is true of nearly all mass media – again, John Fiske emphasizes the importance of villain-identification to marginalized audiences – Disney Renaissance films in particular privilege this type of identification by producing a dual focus structure through their music. By stylistically and musically elevating secondary characters and villains to the same plane as protagonists, Disney Renaissance musicals allow for frequently-sidelined character types to take centre stage.

**Roadblocks to Identification in *The Lion King*, *the Hunchback of Notre Dame*, and  
*Pocahontas***

“I thought we all were children of God”

- Esmerelda, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*

*The Lion King*, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, and *Pocahontas* all, in their own ways, provide figures similar to the divas of the other Disney Renaissance films. However, they provide aesthetic and structural problems that I argue disrupt the easier identifications discussed elsewhere in this chapter. While Ursula and Gaston do terrible things in their films’ narratives, their songs provide a space to experience the performances and aesthetics associated with their characters while skirting the problems they present in the narrative. However, the villains in these three shows – Scar, Frollo, and Ratcliffe – complicate this dynamic, since their narrative problematic identities bleed into the performative aspects of the songs themselves. This section explores the ways that these characters’ songs disrupt imitation and participation, and examines why these specific characters seem to resist identification. I suggest that it is the characters’ positions of systemic, oppressive power that prevent them from providing comfortable sites of identification, even in the nonrepresentational aspects of their songs. While Disney protagonists in the Renaissance are almost always in some way outcasts or black sheep who don’t belong in their settings<sup>65</sup>, I suggest that it is only when the diva sidekicks and villains are *also* in some way socially marginalized that they create particularly powerful moments for identification in their musical performances. When the divas of the text represent institutional authority, Disney

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<sup>65</sup> Except for Simba, who is the only renaissance protagonist whose “I Want” song is not about longing or lack, but rather about ambition, and who fits quite comfortably into the social order.

Renaissance films tend to produce aesthetic barriers towards participating in or emulating their musical numbers, stripping them of the appeal of characters like Ursula<sup>66</sup>.

Scar from *The Lion King* is the character in this section who comes closest to potential queer identification, and he is a less straightforward example of this phenomenon than the other two. He is a popular character amongst fans, his song “Be Prepared” is a beloved diva song, and he is a character whose representation *has* led to queer reception and imitation<sup>67</sup>. His effeminate voice and movements position him similarly to Hercules’ Hades, and it is not hard to read him as a gay-coded diva. However, any attempt to imitate his subject position and performance during “Be Prepared” is constantly made difficult due to the visuals of the song; the visuals of the “Be Prepared” sequence are based on Nazi propaganda. To imitate the choreography and aesthetic of “Be Prepared” would be to imitate a sea of hyenas doing the goose step while Scar stands over them, positioned in a way that is filmed similarly to *Triumph of the Will*. While Scar’s effeminacy, sharp wit, and biting sarcasm may create moments of queer identification, the kind of embodied imitation that comes from the musical aspects of Disney films is disrupted by the fact that his musical number is not something that can be blithely imitated. While a fan can easily perform “Poor Unfortunate Souls” almost identically to how it is done in the film (minus the literal swimming), a performance of Be Prepared requires certain modifications to avoid reproducing the Nazi imagery. Unlike the glamorous divas of Ursula and the Muses, Scar’s

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<sup>66</sup> Gaston may be the patriarchal authority of his town; however, he is still a working-class man, whereas the protagonist marries a prince and becomes a princess; in the grander scheme of things, Gaston has little power, and is actually Beast’s subject. Belle’s character in general, who characterizes the working-class members of the town as “little people” is not without her problems related to class mentality and hierarchy, and a class-based reading of the film demonstrates how Gaston has little structural power outside of the specific community of the “poor, provincial town” in which he lives.

<sup>67</sup> Popular examples include celebrity drag queen Nina Bonina Brown’s look based on him, and the fact that he is amongst the villains Todrick Hall chooses to include in his “Spell Block Tango” video.



connection to this imagery upsets the impulse to identify with the type of diva position he would otherwise occupy.

That said, Scar does have something of a queer fanbase: Frollo and Ratcliffe, on the other hand, are much rarer appearances in drag shows or queer performances<sup>68</sup>, and lack the large-scale, visible queer fanbases of other renaissance villains, making them more straightforward examples of the “problematic divas” this section explores. To start with Frollo: *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* is structurally odd in that it is filled with songs of longing and sadness. Unlike the conventional Renaissance Disney musical, which has an “I Want” song near the beginning, and then moves on to focus on other song types throughout, *Hunchback* has four songs that are related to the “I Want” tradition. Quasimodo has two songs, “Out There,” and “Heaven’s Light” that both serve the same function: to explore his position as a social outcast and to express his longing to fit in. Quasimodo and Pocahontas are the only two Renaissance protagonists who sing more than one notable solo song<sup>69</sup>, and Quasimodo is the only character whose songs are both “I Want” songs. Esmerelda also prays for help for the marginalized in “God Help the Outcasts,” and Frollo sings a disturbing version of the “I Want” song about his sexual longing for Esmerelda and the shame it causes him. The only songs in *Hunchback* that aren’t about longing are exposition songs or comic relief, making it hard to find a diva in a film full of songs about lack.

Frollo, however, is visually and aurally distinct from the other characters in a way that aligns him with the figure of the diva. His song, “Hellfire,” is clearly designed to be the

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<sup>68</sup> I have seen one drag performer dress up as Frollo once, and it was at a “Disney villains” themed show where every performer dressed up as a different villain, suggesting that Frollo may have not been their first choice.

<sup>69</sup> Aladdin has two songs, but one is a duet. Belle, similarly, has one solo song (with a brief reprise) and a relatively minor duet with Beast. Ariel, Hercules, and Mulan all only sing once (although Mulan briefly sings in the ensemble opening number), and Tarzan does not sing.

showstopper of the film; despite also being about longing the way the others are, it is vocally and visually more intense and powerful. Most of *Hunchback's* musical numbers are either comic and bright, exposition-based, or relatively soft, making frequent use of blue-tinted shadows, natural light, and cool colours. "Hellfire," with its literal pillars of fire, intense Latin chanting, and huge choir of faceless forms that eventually dissolve into fire and engulf Frollo, is more visually intense than the rest of the film's songs<sup>70</sup>. The song stands out as unusually dark in comparison to not only the rest of the music in *Hunchback*, but also other Disney songs. The main musical theme of Hellfire is also present throughout the rest of the film; it is the very first melody heard in the film's score before the beginning of "Belles of Notre Dame," and recurs throughout the film prominently in the score, positioning Frollo's song as the musical high point of the film.

Character-wise, Frollo is also self-absorbed like the conventional diva. While he is invested in piety and purity rather than extravagance and glamour, his commitment to the latter is connected to pride and self-righteousness, as he finds himself "so much purer than" others. Referring to everyone else as "the common, vulgar, weak, licentious crowd," Frollo's elevation of himself above others contains a diva-like grandeur, even as he sings about his desperate lust and longing for Esmerelda. Furthermore, for a self-proclaimed pious man who hates festivals and dancing, Frollo's appearance is far from humble, with his lavish, purple robes, large velvet hat, and hands decked with bejeweled rings. One could easily make a case for Frollo as a diva who gives space for queer performance in the film; however, his constant association with repression prevents him from ever fully exploring a diva-like bravado, as his character becomes wrapped up in shame and piety and his song never moves fully past longing into self-celebration.

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<sup>70</sup> It is notable that, while the film's visuals *do* get more intense once Frollo starts burning down the city, there are no more songs at this point; the score begins to sound more like "Hellfire" and the film begins to look more like the song, but nobody else sings.

Furthermore, Frollo's positioning against the film's portrayals of otherness and celebration (the Romani people, festivals, parties) mean that, even if he does function as a diva, it would be hard to find a queerness to his diva performance. Rather than rejoice in what makes him different, Frollo celebrates his remarkable ability to conform, and even in doing so sings about the sexual urges that disrupt this ability, as the most musically intense and showy song in *Hunchback* is also one that is characterized by repression.

*Pocahontas* has a similarly challenging diva figure in Governor Ratcliffe. Like Frollo, Ratcliffe has an elaborate purple outfit with a matching hat, and he is dressed much more lavishly than anyone else in the film. With his indulgent, aristocratic posturing, his pampered, white pug (whom he spoils with bubble baths and cherries), and his effeminate servant who is clearly in love with him (much like LeFou to Gaston in *Beauty and the Beast*), Ratcliffe seems like an ideal source for queer identification and diva-like male femininity. However, any pull for viewers to imitate Ratcliffe is almost prevented before the film even begins due to one trait that distinguishes him from all other Disney villains: he is based on a real-life person. While other Disney Renaissance films are purely in the realm of legend, myth, and fiction, *Pocahontas* is based on actual history, and thus making the villain a literal colonizer. While it may be fun to imagine oneself as an evil sea-witch or a genie, pretending to be a real-life person who was complicit in mass murder and colonialism does not offer the same attraction.

Identification with Ratcliffe is also disrupted within the structure of the film itself. Ratcliffe has a similar issue as Frollo in that his big diva number never reaches the same level of self-confidence and showmanship standard to the song type, but rather ultimately produces itself as a variation on the "I Want" song. While he imagines himself decked out in gold and becoming knighted, and is clearly obsessed with himself (the song is, after all, called "Mine, Mine, Mine"),

all of his lyrics in the song are focused around his desire to accumulate and gain wealth. There is no actual celebration of who Ratcliffe *is*, and Ratcliffe never seems to identify anything about himself that he particularly likes or is proud of; while it may sound like a prideful song, it is actually one of lack, desire and greed, as Ratcliffe sings about what he wants rather than who he is. The film thus inhibits the same type of identification that comes with other Disney divas, since there is no opportunity in the song to celebrate the self; rather, it simply expresses a selfishness that is devoid of confidence or pride. The song is thus used to condemn Ratcliffe's greed and ends up positioning him as a particularly terrifying villain since his entire sense of self is built on a lack and a desperate desire to fill that lack by consuming and taking from others.

Scar's Nazi imagery, Frolo's deep shame, and Ratcliffe's unbridled greed all work to inhibit the kind of identification that is invited by the unbridled celebrations of self-love and confidence performed by Ursula, the Muses, Genie, and Gaston. I would argue that these barriers to identification are related to the fact that these divas occupy privileged normative social positions as a member of the royal family, a judge, and a colonizing governor. Disney seems unwilling to provide these divas with the kinds of songs of self-love that accompany divas who represent more marginal subject positions, such as a socially outcast witch or a prisoner magically imprisoned in a lamp. In this sense, Disney's villains are particularly desirable and imitable when they represent the marginalized, whereas their depictions of villains who abuse structural authority are much more strictly criticized and despicable.

Supporting my claim that *Pocahontas* and *Hunchback* struggle the most with making their diva-villains musically and visually appealing, these two films are also the only Disney Renaissance films where the protagonist sings multiple solos. Thus, some of the performative energy typically carried by the divas in other films is instead shifted to feature the protagonist

more frequently than usual. In this sense, I suggest that *Pocahontas* may be the only Disney Renaissance film to position its protagonist as a musical theatre diva. *Pocahontas* is the only Renaissance film where the protagonist sings a solo song that is not an “I Want” song<sup>71</sup>, and she is the only protagonist other than Quasimodo to sing more than one solo at all. Her song “Colors of the Wind,” while primarily didactic in purpose, is filled with self-determination and confidence. Pocahontas sings about the fact that she understands the world better than John does; while the song is primarily about appreciating the natural world and critiquing the idea of privatized land ownership, Pocahontas surprisingly speaks a lot about herself, singing “*I* know every rock and tree and creature has a life,” “the rainstorm and the river are *my* brothers,” and “the heron and the otter are *my* friends” (emphasis mine). As much it is a song about respecting the Earth, the song is also a way for Pocahontas to sing about how great she is at properly understanding and appreciating the Earth, contrasting herself to the ignorant John. Pocahontas’ first depiction on screen shows her jumping off a waterfall as her friend Nakoma calls her a “show off”<sup>72</sup>. Pocahontas’ distinctive characterization as a “show off,” along with the fact that she sings more solos than other Disney Renaissance protagonists (with the exception of Quasi, who sings two “I Want” songs), almost seems to fill the gap left by Ratcliffe, allowing for the protagonist to step into the film’s diva position. While other Disney protagonists produce avenues of queer identification through their determination and willingness to strike out, turning their “I Want” songs into “I Will” songs, these moments never turn into full-fledged songs about self-love and celebration. Pocahontas, however, embodies both the new, self-determined Disney

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<sup>71</sup> Quasimodo’s songs are both I Want songs.

<sup>72</sup> Pocahontas’ friendship with Nakoma, with Nakoma’s distinctively short hair, and a scene where the two play around splashing in the water while Nakoma asks “don’t you think we’re getting a little old for these games?” also produces the material for a lesbian reading of their relationship.

protagonist of the 90s *and* the Disney diva character type often expressed by villains and sidekicks, in one character.

Disney's celebration of socially disenfranchised divas, as well as their comparative disinterest in those who abuse positions of institutional power, is interesting considering the common perception of Disney films as ultimately reinforcing the status quo, particularly with respect to capitalism and consumerism. Musically, Disney Renaissance films actually seem unable to fully celebrate villains who represent the status quo in the same way they can celebrate their divas who are socially marginalized. Particularly notable is the fact that *Pocahontas* explicitly condemns excessive consumerism and financial greed, as the position of evil authority in the film is the greedy capitalist, while the diva-protagonist is opposed to private ownership and chastises John for thinking that "the Earth is just a dead thing you can claim." The film's anticapitalist bent is not necessary to tell its story; primarily framed as an exploration of colonialism and racism, *Pocahontas* could have easily stopped at a liberal, tolerance-based narrative where colonisers are criticized and learn to respect Indigenous nations (as many similar films do). However, surprisingly for a mass-market children's film, *Pocahontas* adds to this story a condemnation of excessive consumerism and environmental destruction. Since the film's primary colonizer is also associated with greed, the film links its critiques of racism and colonialism to those of capitalism.

Of course, the film's criticism of capitalism is ironic considering the vast amount of resources that went into marketing and profiting from *Pocahontas*. Giroux and Pollock outline:

One of Disney's biggest promotion campaigns began in the summer of 1995 with the release of *Pocahontas*. A record lineup of tie-in merchandise included stuffed animals, sheets, pillowcases, toothbrushes, games, moccasins, and over '40 different picture and

activity books.’ A consortium of corporations spent an estimated \$125 million on cross-marketing Pocahontas (100).

In this context, I return to the dilemma raised at the beginning of this chapter, where Disney’s films often seem to be sending very different messages than their corporate practices do. Indeed, it’s as if some of the employees at corporate Disney could benefit from watching more Disney movies (at least post-Renaissance Disney movies). Thus, while Disney has a lot of work to do in terms of improving their corporate policies and practices to make them more ethical, these corporate issues are not necessarily directly related to the messages contained within the films that they produce, and are in fact often opposed to them. Indeed, the sharp divide between what Disney’s films preach and what their corporate elements often practice acts as a consistent source of frustration for anyone who both cares about Disney films and desires a more ethical, equitable and caring world<sup>73</sup>.

I do not want my exploration of the content of Disney films to distract from criticism of their business practices; while the two are inevitably linked *in some ways*, they are also, in many ways, distinct. Thus, my readings of queerness within Disney productions (as well as my criticisms of *Hercules*’ and *Aladdin*’s relationships to race) are primarily focused around the company’s *films* with a recognition that this is a separate issue from its *business*. This project is primarily interested in the artistic and ideological aspects of Disney texts when they are removed from the context of its corporate practices, although obviously with the hope that other important work will be done to advocate for the improvement of the business practices of the Disney corporation.

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<sup>73</sup> Although Stacy Wolf’s analysis of Disney’s school theatre programs in “Not Only on Broadway” also demonstrates how even some of their corporate practices in creating theatre programs are not purely conservative in function, as Wolf advocates for a more nuanced understanding of these programs.

### **Beyond the Renaissance: Frog Princes, Frying Pans, and *Frozen***

All at once, everything looks different

- “I See the Light” (*Tangled*).

*Tarzan* marked the end of the Disney Renaissance in 1999. After *Tarzan*, Disney turned away from fairy tale musicals, opting instead to focus on large-scale non-musical films such as *Atlantis: The Lost Empire*, *Treasure Planet*, and *The Emperor’s New Groove*. The increased popularity of Pixar studios and CGI animation also led Disney to shift their focus from the Walt Disney Animation Studios productions to focus on Pixar films such as *Monsters, Inc.*, *Finding Nemo*, and *The Incredibles*. For the most part, the Disney Renaissance was over, with Disney going in a very different direction that largely abandoned the musical format and the fairy tale and princess franchise of the 1990s. However, since 2009, 10 years after the release of *Tarzan*, Disney has begun to shift their focus again back to films like those from the Renaissance. *The Princess and the Frog*, *Tangled*, *Frozen* and *Moana*. This “neo-Renaissance” started a new tradition of films that sounded a lot like Disney Renaissance films, but with some key differences; this section suggests that these new developments offer further potential for queer identification and attachment.

In this new trend, the determined “I Want” song is still as popular as ever, with Tiana, Rapunzel, Anna, and Moana all singing songs that sound like they’re right of Ashman and Menken’s score for *The Little Mermaid*. However, the musical trends of these new films are also developing new traditions that were not part of the Renaissance. Most of the protagonists sing more than one solo: in *Tangled*, *Frozen*, and *Moana*, the protagonists’ “I Want” songs are all reprised later in the film in order to demonstrate that protagonist has accomplished the goal that was set the first time they sang it. Rapunzel goes from wondering “when will my life begin?” to



declaring “now’s when my life begins.” Anna starts by looking forward to the first time in forever that she won’t be alone and later announces that she “finally understands” and encourages her sister to work together with her. Moana proudly declares (in a mouthful of a line) that “all the time wondering where I need to be is behind me.” Moana reprises her “I Want” song for a second time during the song “I am Moana,” which has the same melody as “How Far I’ll Go,” but ends with her declaring “I know the way: I am Moana!” The determined “I Want/I Can” song popularized during the Renaissance is expanded by these reprises, as they finally allow Disney princesses to sing about not only their desires and plans, but also their accomplishments and achievements. By having their protagonists sing multiple times, character growth is traced more effectively in the music of these films, and the protagonists become more abundant sources of musical imitation and identification, since they can figure both determined dreamers and self-confident divas (although singing villain-divas still exist in the forms of Dr. Facilier, Tamatoa, and the fabulous Mother Gothel). Because the depiction of the Disney protagonist as an outcast who does not belong within their community remains, they offer the same call to queer identification that they had in the Renaissance; however, imitation of these characters no longer simply produces a determination to get what one wants, but also a celebration of one’s accomplishments and strengths.

*Frozen* is often recognized for its dramatic shift of Disney narrative structures, as the primary relationship in the text is between two sisters, rather than between a protagonist and their love interest. The film complicates the classic Disney concept of “true love’s power” by locating it between these sisters. However, the musical structure of the film is also significant to this change. *Frozen* contains the first true female duets in the history of Disney Animation Studios –

with “For the First Time in Forever” and “For the First Time in Forever (Reprise)”<sup>74</sup> – which ensure that the focus on sisterly love is reflected in the score as well as the plot. Given the importance of the female duet to lesbian identification (Wolf), the absence of this song type for over half a century of Disney musicals is telling about the historical absence of queer-aligned Broadway song types from Disney musicals. In *Frozen*, we finally get a chance to hear “two women’s voices, in close proximity as they hit notes within the same octave, [which] create a particularly intimate aural relationship on which the female duet capitalizes” (Wolf *Changed for Good* 33). The lack of any love interest whatsoever for Elsa, Hans’ claim that he gave up trying to seduce her because “no one was getting anywhere with her” and the ease with which viewers have claimed “Let it Go” as a coming out anthem invite (or, rather, demand) lesbian readings of Elsa, and it is thus fitting that *Frozen* is the first Disney film to contain a song type so historically associated with lesbian identification<sup>75</sup>.

The dual-protagonist structure, in which Anna and Elsa share narrative focus, also extends to the music, allowing them to share the musical plane of the film. Like Renaissance-era Disney films, there is a split between one character whose songs are primarily about longing and determination (Anna) and one with a song about self-assertion and confidence (Elsa in “Let it Go,”), as the characters create a similar split to the Renaissance films. However, unlike the divas of the Renaissance, Elsa is neither a villain nor a sidekick, but a protagonist in her own right. While Elsa was originally supposed to be evil (Hibberd), the production team’s choice to make

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<sup>74</sup> With the exception of the hardly-notable “Siamese Cat Song,” where both voices are sung by the same woman, and the novelty mother/daughter “Scales and Arpeggios.”

<sup>75</sup> It is also worth noting the complete absence of any substantial song for the male love interest Kristoff, despite him being voiced by musical theatre star Jonathan Groff, further cementing the importance of women’s voices singing together in the film.

her a dual protagonist along with Anna allows for the film's diva to finally step into the narrative, as well as musical, spotlight.

While the Disney Renaissance ended in 1999, its structures did not disappear afterwards, and Disney films continue to be influenced by the musical changes introduced by Ashman and Menken in 1989. The queerness of these structures – including the determination of a socially outcast protagonist to find a new world where they belong, and the prominence of self-loving divas with complicated relationships to gender and the social order – has not diminished, but instead seems to be actually expanding. While queer Disney fans have always develop strategies to find themselves in Disney films and use the films' content to navigate their relationships to gender and sexuality, the musical changes brought over from Broadway by Menken and Ashman in 1989 altered the structure of Disney films in a way that allowed for a bold, assertive response to the films. Because the musical as a genre encourages imitation and embodiment of characters, the increased confidence and assertion of queer-coded characters, especially in their musical numbers, makes the Disney films in the Renaissance tradition particularly empowering for queer viewers. In a period when queer communities were becoming increasingly visible in mainstream and popular culture, Disney films of the time provided (and continue to provide) sources of inspiration, motivation, and identification for proud, visible, and assertive queer viewers. It is thus not surprising that, despite Disney's importance to queer audiences for decades, the 1990s saw the institution of events like Gay Days, where huge groups of red shirt-wearing queer folks visibly took over the park to assert their presence, "ready to stand."

## Chapter Four

### “The Song in Your Heart:” *Once Upon a Time* and the Musical TV Episode

A rhythm stirs deep within my soul

I’m saying things in ways I can’t control

- *Once Upon a Time*

While musical episodes of television shows have been around for as long as TV itself, the 21<sup>st</sup> century has seen a huge rise in their prominence and popularity. The announcement that a show is going to have a musical episode has become so commonplace that it is often an expectation rather than an exception, and it’s sometimes surprising when a long-running popular show *doesn’t* have one. Serious dramas like *Grey’s Anatomy* that don’t seem like they would have musical episodes feature them, and shows like *Riverdale* have made the musical episode an annual event that is anticipated every season. This chapter looks at the ways that television shows harness musical theatre conventions and explores the possibility for queer expression and intimacy that comes from this use. A central premise of this chapter is that, due to the formal conventions of the musical, musical episodes produce unique opportunities for character development and thematic exploration that their non-musical counterparts do not.

On the one hand, the structure of the musical episode allows a series to use music and choreography to *heighten* and advance already-existing character traits, tensions, and thematic concerns. However, putting a non-musical story into a musical format can also dramatically *change* and reshape the way these elements function altogether. Due to the musical’s historical relationship to queer style – particularly its non-normative performances of gender and self-expression – I argue that it is through both these moments of escalation and transformation that the queer potential of a show is often realized. This chapter primarily looks at ABC’s *Once Upon*

*a Time (OUAT)*, as a case study, examining the ways that the series' musical episode "The Song in Your Heart" functions in relation to the queer potential of its non-musical episodes.

This chapter will begin by outlining the ways that the musical format changes the way a television show can tell its stories. I will then explore the queer potential of *OUAT*, focusing specifically on the way that the series navigates the topics of redemption and authority. The show's unconventional understanding of these topics produces a scenario in which queerness and opposition – particularly opposition to heteropatriarchal structures – become a valuable aspect of what it means to belong to a community. This approach disrupts thinking that conflates the concepts of belonging and assimilation by demonstrating how the former can be achieved without the latter. *OUAT* creates a perspective where the disruption of the social order becomes *part of* what it means to be an active member of a community, as you can belong to a community without assimilating to it. This mindset is particularly embodied by the character Regina (the evil queen from *Snow White*), whose character development sees her moving from villain to hero; rather than an assimilationist move, I argue that Regina enacts this more complex, mediated relationship to the community of heroes which she joins. Moreover, *OUAT* constantly foregrounds its unwillingness to express control over its own stories; this volatile approach to authority in storytelling is then developed through the way Regina as a figure of power and authority (she is always either a queen or a mayor, and sometimes both) relates to the community. Both redemption and authority in the series are gendered, as it is precisely Regina's relationship to heteronormative family structures, gender roles, and sexuality that fuel her challenges to what it means to be redeemed by a community, and what it means to be an authority figure in that community.

The chapter will conclude by exploring how the musical structure of “The Song in Your Heart” responds to, transforms, and amplifies the queer potential embodied by the other episodes. Without the musical episode, I argue, the queer possibilities of *OUAT* are not fully realized; it is only through the use of the musical form (strategically placed in the penultimate episode of the series’ major plot arc) that the show is able to most acutely articulate its queerness. The disruptive antinormativity embodied by Regina has a foil in the character of Rumpelstiltskin (also known as Rumple). Much like Regina, Rumple is a fan favourite, villain-turned-hero, whose plotline follows his movement from an outsider to a community member. However, unlike Regina, Rumple’s motivation is almost entirely wrapped up in his desperate desire to obtain a heteronormative social position. Rumple goes to great lengths to secure a stable identity as a patriarchal father and husband, and his relationships with others often serve primarily as instrumental devices to help him achieve this identity<sup>76</sup>. Because both are fan favourite characters played by extremely charismatic actors, Regina and Rumple are given similar weighting in the show: every movement towards queerness that Regina opens up is given a heteronormative counter-narrative by Rumple. However, the musical episode demands a renegotiation of which characters get to hold dramatic and narrative weight. Rumple’s patriarchal motivations and normative drives are not traits that the musical has historically given a strong dramatic or musical positioning, and the musical episode formally re-negotiates *OUAT*’s power dynamics accordingly. “The Song in Your Heart” allows Regina’s queer community role and leadership to shine while Rumple’s shrinks away when presented with a genre which historically relegates his goals and values to a secondary, less dominant role.

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<sup>76</sup> As I explore in Chapter Two, this instrumentalization of relationships is a core function of the heteronormative structures that *Into the Woods* critiques.

As I mention in my introduction, both musicals and queer culture have had a complicated relationship with mainstream popular culture since the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. From the 1930s to the 1950s, musical theatre was synonymous with mainstream popular culture; however, since the 1960s it became increasingly separated from the mainstream as its audience became more and more niche. This was particularly notable by the 1980s, when Times Square was perceived as literally a dangerous place to go due to crime rates. The turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century has seen an increased return of the musical into popular sensibility: its increased presence in popular, mainstream television shows is part of this re-integration of the musical into everyday North American popular culture and life. *Riverdale* may be many peoples' first exposure to musicals like *Carrie*, *Heathers* and *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, introducing new fans to these musicals, and to the genre as a whole. As queer culture and musicals increasingly find themselves at the centre of pop culture – and as the queer histories and queer cultural significance of musicals is increasingly acknowledged and foregrounded – it becomes important to examine how, exactly, this relationship develops. Because the tense dance between inclusion and assimilation is at the forefront any time a cultural tradition moves from the sidelines into the centre of popular consciousness, this chapter is particularly interested in the ways that musicals in popular culture navigate the relationship between visibility, popular acknowledgement, belonging, and assimilation. *Once Upon a Time* is a show deeply invested in issues of conversion, redemption, and community belonging thus making it an ideal case study for this chapter.

### **Musical Episodes**

“Oh God, do I have to sing an inspirational musical theatre song right now?”

- Heather in *Crazy Ex Girlfriend*

Musicals rely on the externalization of feelings, motivations, and ideas. It is difficult to have characters in a musical who do not speak their mind or express themselves, either to the audience or to other characters, since it is challenging to keep feelings hidden or bottled up in a genre that revolves around singing about them. This often results in nihilistic or emotionally secretive characters being excluded from the music in a musical episode (this happens with Rumpelstiltskin in *Once Upon a Time*) or, more frequently, being forced to sing against their will in a way that comically leads them to begrudgingly communicate feelings they would otherwise keep secret (which happens to Spike in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* or – as represented in the epigraph at the beginning of this section – Heather in *Crazy Ex Girlfriend*). In the latter case, it is the musical genre itself, rather than a narrative plot device, that can serve as the turning point where a formerly repressed character begins to reflect on and address their own emotions. The musical episode thus allows for a series to produce emotional expression or insight from characters who would otherwise be unwilling to reflect in this way: Spike and Heather both constantly hide their feelings, and their forced musical theatre numbers lead to them processing and better understanding these feelings, and making major life decisions as a result.

Furthermore, the musical structure tends to privilege characters with more intense, theatrical, or emotionally charged characterizations. Musical episodes thus often shift who is represented as being central to the narrative. A character who would normally play a supporting role due to their extreme or exaggerated personality is suddenly at the centre, as they find themselves more at home in a musical than the others. *Riverdale*, for example, features Cheryl Blossom – typically a supporting character who is a significant fan favourite, but not nearly as central to the narrative focus as the “core four” of Jughead, Betty, Archie and Veronica – as the lead character in two of its three musical episodes. The world of musical theatre fits Cheryl’s



over-the-top, extroverted diva personality better than it does the other characters who are more at home in the melodramatic neo-noir world of *Riverdale*. Meanwhile, Jughead – typically the show’s narrator and voice of authority – is barely present in the musical episodes as his softboi brooding does not quite fit the tone demanded of a conventional Broadway show<sup>77</sup>. The performance styles that *do* translate most easily to the conventional structure of a musical (big personalities, character actors as opposed to classic leads, divas, “artsy” characters, and energetic characters) are ones more likely to be coded as – or explicitly written as – queer. Thus, it’s not a surprise that Cheryl (a lesbian), her girlfriend Toni Topaz (who is bisexual), and Kevin (who is gay) are key players in the musical episodes, when they typically play second fiddle to the four core straight characters in other episodes.

Furthermore, as I have explored in previous chapters, musicals evoke a certain sense of intersubjectivity and participation. It is difficult for audiences to remain detached spectators when watching a musical, since the musical structure evokes a physical imitation of performers that blurs the line between character and spectator, making audience members imagine themselves becoming the characters on the stage or screen. As outlined in Chapter Two, it is hard to produce villains in musicals who don’t in some way appeal to audience identification since their performance of musical numbers appeals to participation and imitation: if someone sings a song, there’s a good chance the audience is going to want to sing along<sup>78</sup>. This phenomenon can also re-shape the way that a television show’s characters are perceived and framed, since having a conventionally antagonistic character sing can frame them in a more sympathetic way, or in a

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<sup>77</sup> While there are angsty musicals – *American Idiot*, *Spring Awakening*, etc. – these still involve a very extroverted, angry, emotionally-raw performance that is not quite the same as the subdued, moody, introverted angst of Jughead. While a Joy Division jukebox musical may one day happen, the most well-known and successful articulations of the musical genre tend to shy away from subdued, muted introspection.

<sup>78</sup> An easy solution to this is, of course to have villains who either don’t sing, or who sing light comic relief songs.

way that evokes a sense of audience identification or understanding that was previously absent. No matter how much you hate a character, if they sing a catchy song, you may find yourself imitating the performance as you sing along to the cast album later. In the case of *OUAT*, I argue that it is both through the musical episode's treatment of reserved or secretive characters (particularly Rumple), and the opportunity it provides for characters to indulge in theatrical performance that allow it to intervene in and expand on the series' queerness.

### **Redemption**

Villains don't get happy endings

- Common refrain from *Once Upon a Time*

Villain origin or redemption stories have become increasingly popular in contemporary fairy tale adaptations. From Disney's *Maleficent*, to Gregory Maguire's *Wicked*, to Bill Willingham's *Fables*, fairy tale fans at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century like their villains to be sympathetic and contextualized. These stories trouble moral dichotomies of good and evil by producing narratives that reposition the villains of classic fairy tales, either transforming them into heroes through redemption narratives, or providing sympathy for them as villains by providing context and backstories. Of course, the "villain POV" story isn't anything new (*Paradise Lost*, for example, begins with Satan's perspective), but this storytelling approach is particularly prominent in the early 21<sup>st</sup>-century, to the point where it's rare to find a recent fantasy or fairy tale narrative with a conventional, purely evil villain. This is in sharp contrast to the mainstream fairy tales of the mid to late 20<sup>th</sup> century, which often prioritized villains who are quite straightforwardly evil. As Nathaniel and Rebecca sing in *Crazy Ex Girlfriend*: "It's hard to paint people with evil or glory when you know that everyone's got a tragic backstory."

*Once Upon a Time* is entirely built on the concept of reimagining or recontextualizing fairy tale characters to position them in a new light: Snow White becomes a survivalist hunter based on her time as an outlaw in the woods, the miller's daughter falls in love with Rumpelstiltskin, Little Red Riding Hood is a werewolf, and Peter Pan is a dangerous villain obsessed with youth and power. Because of its investment in reimagining characters, *OUAT* leans heavily on villain redemption narratives; villains are given tragic backstories that contextualize why they are evil and evoke sympathy for them, but their actions are still condemned as evil and the "wrong way" to react to their situation. However, through the intervention of heroes, they learn to turn from their evil ways and either end up joining the side of good, or can die with a clean conscience<sup>79</sup>. This is the trajectory of the character Regina – *OUAT*'s version of Snow White's Evil Queen – who is portrayed sympathetically when it is revealed that her evil stems from tragedy she faced in her youth, but she is still condemned until she decides she wants to join the side of good and become a hero.

Villains in fairy tales are typically figures of social otherness, and Regina's otherness is specifically coded as queerness through her gender performance and deviant sexuality. Because of this positioning, the development of context and sympathy for her creates a narrative of understanding and acceptance for social deviance and a challenge to social structures that would position outsiders as evil. However, this sort of narrative also risks an assimilationist ideology. The idea that these villains can be saved and converted could easily be read as a narrative that only accepts difference through its assimilation into social norms, rather than one that is open to understanding that difference on its own terms.

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<sup>79</sup> The show even makes fun of itself for falling into this pattern by hinting at – and then subverting – it with Cruella de Ville, who is set up as if she is going to have a tragic backstory like every other villain on the show, until it is revealed that she is the only character in the series who is just inherently sadistic and murderous for no particular reason.

For example: Regina begins the series as an antinormative character who resists heteronormative assumptions about what a “happy ending” should look like. Regina’s position during the first season of the show is clearly coded as queer, as her *raison d’être* is to destroy the heteronormative “happy endings” of the fairy tale stories in her life. Her primary goal is to keep Snow White and Prince Charming from being together; she casts a curse that separates characters from their significant others and places them with very different lives in a town called Storybrooke. The characters have no memories of their previous lives, and are frozen in time, unable to age or reproduce. On first glance, these new lives seem empty and miserable, but many of them are also simply less normative than their fairy tale endings. Rather than being with Prince Charming, Snow White has a successful and stable job as a schoolteacher, which she appears to find fulfilling. She also has casual sex<sup>80</sup>, finding sexual and personal fulfillment outside the context of a monogamous relationship. Regina then reigns as “Madam Mayor,” who shuns romance and begins a purely sexual relationship with The Huntsman, whose heart she has ripped out so that he could “never feel again.”<sup>81</sup> She also raises an adopted son as a single mother. In Regina’s world, characters are unable to complete their teleological journeys towards marriage and normative stability, while Regina revels in an existence of pure *jouissance* outside of normative expectations of reproduction or futurity. Regina is therefore constantly positioned in the first season of the show against heteronormativity and normative notions of love, sexuality, and reproduction, and a queer reading of her is far from difficult to generate.

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<sup>80</sup> A brief fling with Dr. Whale is mentioned often later in the series.

<sup>81</sup> This is a major issue, since The Huntsman is coerced into his relationship with Regina. He is her prisoner and she literally has possession of his heart (which, in this universe, allows you to control someone’s actions), clearly positioning any sexual contact as being non-consensual. While the rest of Regina’s actions during the curse can be celebrated in a sort of anti-normative *jouissance*, this particular action constitutes sexual assault, and is obviously therefore in a different category that I condemn outright. Princess Weekes has a comprehensive article outlining *OUAT*’s problems with consent and its frequent representation of women raping men, which is referenced in my bibliography.

Once Regina is “converted” and joins the heroes’ side, though, she begins to desire a normative relationship and family structure. She abandons her intentional singlehood and sexual adventurousness to pursue a conventional “true love” relationship with Robin Hood. Because villains in the universe of *OUAT* are not allowed to have “happy endings,” Regina sets out to find a way to officially change her status from “villain” to “hero.” Her desire to “change sides” is thus directly related to her desire for a conventional love story. It would therefore be easy to see Regina’s conversion to good as also the abandonment of her oppositional, queer positioning: the narrative here comes very close to one of assimilation. However, while assimilation is undoubtedly the trajectory of many villain conversion narratives (and many of the narratives within the show itself), something different is happening in *OUAT*, particularly with Regina. While she loses her oppositional positioning outside of the community, I argue that her new position of belonging within the community is anything but assimilated. Regina’s redemption narrative provides an example of how an outsider can seek acceptance within a community without being forced to assimilate to that community’s standards, retaining their socially disruptive positioning while also developing a sense of belonging. Regina’s story is told in a way that emphasizes how communal belonging does not always come at the cost of difference, and that redemption or conversion narratives do not always have to feed into liberal assimilationist frameworks; while Regina toys with the option of pursuing a more classic assimilation into the social order (almost literally “killing” her “dark half”), she ultimately pursues a more complicated social position.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> This place of belonging as disruption (where part of Regina’s value as a member of the community is precisely her ability to disrupt and challenge its norms), and the way that it challenges the conflation of “belonging” and “assimilation” (leading to a “belonging without assimilation”) is not uniquely mine; I outline the scholarly precedents that inform the approach here in more detail in my introduction.

Despite her appeal to heroism and belonging, it is consistently made clear that Regina, while now a beloved member of the community, has not given up her oppositional ideology. She constantly disrupts the heteronormative assumptions and drives of the other characters and maintains her socially disruptive position. The characters begin to rely on Regina to point out when they're becoming too naïve or begin to romanticize things, a role which Regina takes on with the same fierceness and radical thinking that characterized her as a villain. In a fan favourite line, Regina questions one of Snow White's plans to release a mermaid who has attacked their ship by questioning "And what? You'll win her over with your rainbow kisses and unicorn stickers? You're such a naïve princess!" While Regina does begin a monogamous heterosexual relationship with Robin Hood in later seasons, she is quick to remind everyone that he is not her "happy ending" and that, while her relationship with him makes her happy, it is not the primary purpose for her happiness or her belonging in the world. This assertion becomes even more meaningful when Robin dies and Regina continues her "happy ending" without him. Even her relationship with Robin itself is complicated; during the relationship, she co-parents her son, Henry, with Emma, as the two women raise a child together<sup>83</sup>. Regina's sister Zelena is also pregnant with Robin's child<sup>84</sup>, whom she and Robin plan to raise. The kinship structures created as part of Regina's happy ending, even before Robin dies, are unconventional, as she raises one child with another woman, and plans on raising a child conceived as the result of her sister sexually assaulting her partner. Once Robin dies, Regina refuses to see this as a loss of her happiness, but rather something that she (obviously) mourns, but moves past to celebrate the lifestyle that she has created independent of heterosexual couplings. Regina makes it consistently

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<sup>83</sup> For context: Emma gave birth to Henry, then gave him up for adoption. Regina adopts him, but he later reconnects with Emma, and the two agree to co-parent.

<sup>84</sup> Another problematic sexual assault narrative that the show does not handle well, as Zelena gets pregnant by manipulating Robin into having sex with her by disguising herself as his dead wife.

clear that, while she has become a member of the heroes' community and a force for good, she has not assimilated into their heteronormative system. Her values differ from their naïve view of romantic relationships as the ultimate end goal of their lives.

Regina's communal relationship with the other characters often allows her to transform them and change them in ways that her oppositionality and antagonism could not; rather than assimilating into their normativity, she instead allies with the characters and actually pulls them from heteropatriarchal frameworks. In Season 5, Snow White (now going by Mary Margaret, her "modern world" name) begins to realize that her position as wife and mother has gradually led to her losing the drive that had previously defined her as heroic. She has gone from an outlaw folk hero living in the woods, adventuring and fighting an oppressive monarch, to someone who often sits on the sidelines and cheers the others on. Regina addresses this with her, and encourages her to change her name back to Snow White, take up arms again, and reassert her active presence within the group. In other words, when Snow begins to become docile and depoliticized by her heteronormative lifestyle, Regina as a queer force is able to push her back into action.

This same pattern repeats in Season 6 when Emma gets trapped in a dream world where she gets to live out her wish of being a conventional fairy tale princess, free of responsibility but also of independence or will. Regina realizes that the only way for Emma to break from the dream is for Regina to play up the role of the evil queen, using her magic to tear apart the seams of Emma's fantasy world and expose its inviability and falseness. It is only through Regina's queering of Emma's normative fantasy that she is able to rescue Emma from the dream world and bring her back to reality. Once again, Regina's most important role in the community she has joined is in disrupting it and exposing its flaws and shortcomings. Considering that Regina here saves Emma from an empty, heteronormative princess fantasy and returns her to a more complex

and honest life, it is also not hard to see why fans are so drawn to a queer reading of the two as a couple<sup>85</sup>.

In one of Regina's most important moments as a character, and a moment in which the show solidifies its commitment to maintaining the oppositional aspects of Regina's character even as she joins the community, is when she attempts to "remove" the evil from herself. Regina uses magic to split her dark, "Evil Queen" persona from her new, heroic "Regina" persona, and attempts to kill the Evil Queen. This plot move, on its own, demonstrates how an assimilationist reading would play out; Regina would defeat the dark version of herself and move forward with her new, heroic but normative identity. However, the narrative plays out instead as a Jungian narrative of merging with the shadow self. When Regina confronts the Evil Queen, she chooses to love her and accept her, restoring the darkness in her heart that she had previously taken out to split her personality. In this moment, the show makes it clear that Regina does not abandon her "Evil Queen" past or sacrifice her otherness to join the community; rather, she learns how to channel her disruptive positioning as a force of good, maintaining her oppositionality and difference while gaining acceptance and belonging.

I argue that *Once Upon a Time's* unique approach to the "villain redemption" plotline currently popular in fairy tale adaptations allows it to avoid the more problematic and assimilationist drives enacted in similar adaptations. Regina complicates the simple trajectories of these plotlines by producing an understanding of redemption that allows her to maintain the critical positioning she embodies as a villain, while still finding a sense of belonging that does not necessarily indicate assimilation.

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<sup>85</sup> Besides, of course, the fact that their intimate friendship and co-parenting of a child is arguably the primary driving force behind the entire series.



One might ask, though: if this queer reading is already so apparent that the series' non-musical episodes provide the tools for it, this raises the question: what does the musical episode add? I will argue that, on the one hand, the musical episode enhances what is already there, taking the queerness of Regina's new social positioning and her constant disruption of gender and sexual norms and giving them voice (literally) in a more explicit and heightened way through song. In this sense, the musical episode could be seen as fulfilling the first function I outlined at the beginning of this chapter: a chance to take queer themes that already exist and placing them at the centre when they're normally on the margins.

However, the second function I outline – shifting the storytelling structure to articulate queerness in a way that isn't available in the other episodes – is also at play in *OUAT*. This structure is most evident when considering Regina's relationship to the series' other primary "redeemed villain," Rumpelstiltskin. Both Regina and Rumple start the series as villains and later become reformed. Both are breakout characters with huge fanbases surrounding their respective actors (Lana Parilla and Robert Carlyle), and both compete (along with Captain Hook and arguably Belle and Zelena) for the status of fan favourite. Unlike Regina, however, Rumple's function as leader is a largely conservative one: for every bit of queerness that Regina produces in the series, Rumple embodies its heteronormative, toxically patriarchal foil. As both vie for the status of the series' primary charismatic antihero, *OUAT* presents tools for both queer and conservative readings; I argue that the musical episode shifts the balance of this relationship, privileging queer readings based in Regina's character and disrupting Rumple's claim to narrative and dramatic authority. The next section explores Rumple and Regina as foils, following their characters' trajectories – particularly in relationship to issues of authority – as they develop very different ideological articulations of what it means to be a strong leader. The

last section then develops into a reading of how “The Song in Your Heart” uses the musical to both expand on the queerness of Regina’s redemption arc and re-frame the series’ approach to authority to align more clearly with Regina’s queer characterization and against Rumple’s more conservative leadership model.

### **Queering Authority**

I was always the queen. It was you who added “evil” to my name.

- Regina, *OUAT*

*Once Upon a Time* is a series that, both textually and culturally, embraces its own volatility – a term I take from Jack Zipes’ *Breaking the Magic Spell*. Volatility refers to the fact that a fairy tale has no official, original, or definitive “version,” but is rather constantly changing and shifting as it is re-told and re-interpreted by audiences. Sandra Strauch discusses *OUAT*’s volatility as she looks to its “narrative weaknesses,” describing how fans are drawn to the areas that the series leaves open-ended and undiscussed because they allow those fans a place to add to and reshape the narrative. In doing so, the show’s creators are denying their own authority over the narrative, challenging the hierarchy of author/reader by giving both equal command over the story’s meaning and trajectory. This idea of storytellers needing to “let go” of their own stories instead of clinging to a sense of absolute ownership is a crucial driving concept throughout the series, and it also informs the way that other forms of authority are articulated and developed in the narrative. For *Once Upon a Time*, characters understand the world through storytelling, so their views on the world are often expressed through their views on storytelling. In this case, the queerness of Regina and the conservativeness of Rumple both find their best expression in how the two relate to narrative structures and storytelling ideals. To fully articulate the way that

*OUAT* understands and presents authority, though, I first must briefly outline how it understands and presents the related concept of authorship.

The series' basic plot structure of reimagining classic fairy tales obviously points to the volatility of those classic tales and the lack of any definitive "versions" of the stories; however, the show also emphasizes the instability of not only classic fairy tales, but also of its own universe and its own versions of those stories. This is most apparent in the major conflict of the fourth season, in which Regina tries to track down the author of the book in which her story was written to ask him to change her ending. When the characters meet the author (named Isaac), he is revealed to be a villain whose major crime is trying to control people's lives by using an enchanted pen to write their stories the way that he thinks they should happen, based on conventional narrative structures. The characters have to fight Isaac, preventing him from forcing people into specific narrative structures against their will. While the obvious metaphorical function of this narrative is to embrace a "you control your own destiny" ethos (which is extremely common in Disney productions), the fact that it is literalized as an author trying to control stories emphasizes *OUAT*'s criticism of authorial figures whose sense of authority is linked to controlled and conventional narratives.

While *OUAT* vilifies authors who try to control or own stories, that doesn't mean that it rejects the idea of authors altogether. After Isaac loses his powers because of his crimes, they are transferred to Henry, Regina's son. Initially believing the role of the author to be inherently evil, Henry destroys the enchanted pen containing his powers; however, he later resurrects the pen and begins to learn how to use it more effectively. Henry finds that recording and telling stories has substantial power – he is able to bring people peace, guide them through their conflicts, and help them better understand themselves – and that the role of author is valuable, so long as the

author works in *service of* stories, rather than with *power over* them. The stories are never Henry's, and he doesn't use his power to control them; rather, he tells stories in ways that help others, while allowing them to live and grow independently of his voice (he often finds pieces of paper with stories on them that slip out of his book, or finds the pen writes things on its own without him controlling it). Henry uses storytelling as a starting point for inspiration or learning – in the musical episode, for example, he retrieves a lost story so he can learn from it and teach Emma how to defeat the villain – but never as a closed-ended or finalizing project.

Outside of the text itself, the creators of *OUAT* have demonstrated their appreciation for volatility in their fan interactions. *OUAT* has a large base of fans who write fan fiction and reimagine the show's stories, often in queer ways. One of its most popular "ships" (a romantic relationship between two characters that fans celebrate and write about in fanfiction, whether it exists explicitly in the series itself or not) is SwanQueen, or the pairing of Emma with Regina. While almost any series with a fanbase has similar "shippers", who write fanfiction about such pairings, what sets *OUAT* apart is its celebration of queer pairings of its characters. For example, when Michael Coleman (the actor who plays Happy on the show) attempted to criticize fans who ship SwanQueen as being "rude and aggressive," the actresses who play both characters (Lana Parrilla and Jennifer Morrison) and show co-creator Adam Horowitz stepped up to defend the fans and demonstrate their love for the ship (Romano). Parrilla and Morrison have also tweeted pictures of themselves wearing SwanQueen-themed sweaters (@LanaParilla "Birds of a Sweater"), and Parrilla retweeted a fan-written song about the pairing (@LanaParilla "This is for all the #SwanQueen Shippers").

It is not unusual for show creators to play with subtext or to acknowledge and support fan readings in subtle ways: Joss Whedon famously espoused a "bring your own subtext" policy.

Furthermore, the idea of television shows keeping plot and developments open-ended and avoiding definitive notions of closure is also not new. Tania Modleski points out openness and a lack of resolution is a core feature of soap operas, as viewers tune in “not to find out the answers, but to see what further complications will defer the resolutions and introduce new questions. Thus the narrative, by placing ever more complex obstacles between desire and fulfillment, makes anticipation of an end an end in itself” (88). However, what *is* rare is to see show creators using the language of fans themselves and explicitly endorsing fan narratives and readings. Rather than simply keeping the plot of *OUAT* open-ended so they can keep writing more episodes, the producers publicly celebrate moments where fans create their own developments on the narrative, giving those developments equal weighting to the “canonical” plot choices that they make in official episodes. By celebrating specific fan ships – using the fan-created names for these ships like SwanQueen – in ways that go beyond subtext or innuendo, the cast and creative team behind *OUAT* has helped to cultivate a particularly strong fanbase and demonstrated a willingness of the authors to concede control over their own narrative. For Whedon, fans bring their own *subtext*; for *OUAT*, fans bring their own text.

Comparing the authority figures of Isaac, Regina and Rumple I will demonstrate how *OUAT* understands and queers notions of leadership in a way that is very similar to its volatile approach to storytelling. Regina, as previously discussed, uses her authority to disrupt the social order rather than to shore it up; whether acting as the oppressive evil queen or the Madam Mayor of Storybrooke, Regina’s attempts to enforce authority involve disrupting heteronormative and patriarchal structures. When she casts her curse that creates the town of Storybrooke, it largely works to prevent characters from following the scripts of normative life trajectories, mostly

based around gender, reproduction, and sexuality<sup>86</sup>. While the curse is still obviously evil, considering that none of the townspeople consented to these lives and are living them against their wills, the underlying principles behind the world are informed by an antinormative drive that is suspicious of conventional gender roles, kinship structures, and narratives.

When Regina becomes a hero later in the series, she maintains these same underlying principles, but begins to enact them in a way that uses authority in a consensual and respectful way instead of a coercive way. It is only when she encourages, rather than forces, people to destabilize their normative lives that the others accept her leadership, consenting to have her remain their mayor instead of fighting against her. This makes sense: despite Regina's initial frustration with normative social structure, her coerced rebellion still ultimately becomes a normative gesture itself, as she is forcing others to follow the social system that *she* thinks is best. Regina does not become a leader that the series treats with respect and honor until she is able to maintain her disdain for the status quo, while exploring it in ways that don't force other people to follow her specific vision for breaking this status quo. This is the role she takes up by the third season: she challenges normativity and encourages others to do the same, but she also allows people their own voice and agency in negotiating her challenges. Much like a good author, the job of a good leader in *OUAT* is not to enforce a social structure, maintain the status quo, or preserve normativity in a conventional patriarchal sense; the series instead represents good leadership as a willingness to push against the norms and imagine new possibilities for the

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<sup>86</sup> For a few examples: Snow White is a single, spinster-esque school teacher with a Julie Andrews inspired haircut, a teenage Cinderella is encouraged to give her baby up for adoption to focus on her own life goals recognizing that she is too young to take care of a child, Regina is a single mom with a political career and an adopted son, Little Red Riding Hood's grandmother runs a successful diner, and all of the fairy tale characters with conventional family roles and "happy endings" instead play out very different life narratives. Many women who have no jobs in their fairy tale stories now have thriving careers.

community, guiding people without coercion. Regina's role as mayor is thus not that different from her son Henry's role as the author.

In contrast, Isaac and Rumple both pursue power because of their desperate desire for heteronormative structures and expectations, expressed through their investment in conventional narratives and storytelling structures. Isaac's first major crime – the one that marks him as a villain – happens when he uses his powers for the second time. He uses his authorial powers to persuade Snow White and Prince Charming to rid their unborn child (who would later grow up to be Emma) of any potential for darkness. Because Emma is fated to become extremely powerful, the Charmings are worried about the possibility that she may one day use that power for evil, and the Author takes advantage of this fear to convince them to remove all potential for evil from her and place it inside of another child, so Emma will become purely good and the other child will become pure evil. In other words, the Author's second use of his powers, and his first major revision of a story, is to remove moral ambiguity from it; rather than deal with a powerful child who has the potential for both good and evil, Isaac chooses to re-write the story so that there are two children, one of absolute good and one of absolute evil. Using his authority over the world to produce dichotomous, easily-understood articulations of good and evil and robbing characters of their moral complexity, Isaac's villainous use of authority is associated with his desire for a clean-cut, easy storytelling structure of "good vs. evil." It is his affinity for unambiguous, closure-oriented stories that makes him a bad authority figure.

Isaac's decision also relates to one of the major issues that Jacqueline Rose notes in her influential study of children's literature: adults often want children to represent easy, essentialized, or uncomplicated identities so they can be imagined as a place of respite from the contradictions of the adult world. This, of course, denies children complexity and punishes them

for being morally ambiguous, as children's fiction emerges as a place where children are forced to stand in for essentialized and binarized concepts so adults can imagine that these concepts exist in their purest forms in childhood, and thus must have some sort of natural or essential basis. Rose thus argues that children's literature contains "a refusal to acknowledge difficulties and contradictions in relation to childhood" as well as a use of "the image of the child to deny those same difficulties in relation to ourselves" (8). This is an issue to which *OUAT* consistently returns; in the third season, Peter Pan's obsession with childhood is reimagined as destructive and dangerous, as his drive for eternal youth leads him to imprison and murder people. Similarly, flashbacks show how Snow White's youthful purity and naivete when she is a child are less endearing and more dangerous, as she accidentally causes the death of Regina's lover. *OUAT* in general is suspicious of narratives of purely innocent (or corrupt) childhood, preferring more ambiguous understandings of children that refute binaries; it thus makes sense that this suspicion translates to a condemnation of Isaac when he attempts to use his authority to enforce these normative notions of what "childhood" looks like.

Even Isaac's first use of his authorial powers – which is less explicitly evil than his second – is treated with hesitance and suspicion. Cruella de Ville in the series is depicted as a sociopathic murderer, whose main delight in life is killing people. Isaac uses his author powers to make it so Cruella is physically incapable of killing anyone; she still lives her life as usual, but is unable to do the one thing that brings her pleasure. This choice is, of course, less clearly harmful than his decision with Emma: he does it in self-defense, since Cruella intends on killing him, and it is, of course, probably good that he prevents a murderer from killing people. However, the series still casts suspicion on his motivations, since he uses magic to control someone's actions, and he relegates Cruella to a hollow, empty life of misery and longing. This



decision raises similar questions to texts like *A Clockwork Orange* about the treatment of criminals, as Isaac chooses to abandon Cruella to a life of confusion and misery, longing to kill people but being physically unable to, rather than trying to respond to her in a more compassionate way such as trying to better understand her compulsion to murder and finding her some form of support or rehabilitation. Again, it is Isaac's inability to deal with human complexity, and his desire to fit people into easily-understandable (and thus easily-controllable) categories that is at the root of his desire for authority and his role as an author.

Isaac's final villainous act is to produce a world very similar to that of Regina's curse. Isaac plans on trapping all of the characters in a new book, called "Heroes and Villains," where they lose their memories and live new lives. He also creates a happy ending for himself as a successful, famous author. However, while Regina's curse was focused around disrupting heteronormative notions of happy endings and breaking up romantic couples, Isaac's is simply formed around swapping who gets happy endings, as he essentially writes characters into each others' roles (Snow White becomes an evil queen while Regina becomes an outlaw hero, for example). Characters are still binaristic manifestations of good and evil (as the title of the book suggests): the only real difference is that these binaries are even more extreme, as in the example of "The Light One," the new Rumpelstiltskin who is an entirely virtuous force of good. Even when restructuring an entire world, Isaac is unable to think outside of binaries, and uses his power and authority to enforce conservative, Manichean understandings of good and evil, a use of power which the series condemns considering that Isaac is ultimately defeated.

Rumple's desire for power functions in a similar way to Isaac's, as it always emerges in response to his desire for a life steeped in patriarchal and heteronormative myths. An enigmatic, morally ambiguous character who often helps heroes and villains alike in exchange for a price,

Rumple does not seem like a primary candidate for normativity. With his mercenary attitude, his giggling and coy personality, and his solitary life on the margins as “the dark one,”

Rumpelstiltskin seems more like a possible figure for queerness or marginality; however, closer analysis of his character reveals someone who is primarily motivated by normative expectations and drives. All of his seemingly-ambiguous villainy, at its core, stems from an unhealthy obsession with fitting conventional narratives, particularly in his attempt to position himself within a heteronormative family unit. Rather than an antinormative character, Rumple serves as an extreme example of the dangers of subscribing to hegemonic masculine norms regarding family roles and structure.

Rumple’s path to becoming The Dark One, and his evil actions afterwards, develop primarily from his drive for a conventional family unit and lifestyle. Before gaining his powers, Rumple lives a conventional life spinning and selling wool with his pregnant wife Milah. After injuring himself to escape war (fearing a prophecy that his actions in the war will leave his son fatherless), Rumple is branded a coward and publicly shamed. This initial action leads to a series of choices where Rumple prioritizes his ability to preserve a normative life in the village above all else, to the point that it begins to harm the people around him.

Rumple is so uncomfortable with the idea of deviating from the norm that he is unwilling to leave his hometown, even when he becomes a pariah there. He alienates Milah, who becomes unhappy with their marriage. In a last-ditch effort to save her marriage, she insists that she and Rumple must leave the town, where they’ve become a joke due to Rumple’s cowardice, and explore the world, pleading: “this isn’t a life... we could start again, go somewhere no one knows us, see the whole world beyond this village” (“The Crocodile”). Rumple ignores her concerns, choosing to live in a village where everyone scorns them, because he is scared to leave

the familiar. While unhappy as “the village coward,” he at least has a status and identity within a social structure with which he is familiar; he would rather have an undesirable script to follow than no script at all. As with his decision to injure himself in the war, he justifies his fear of breaking from his safe, normative life by appealing to his son Baelfire, suggesting that somehow staying put in a harmful space would be better for the child than living a migratory life.

In this case, Rumple uses an unfounded appeal to the child to justify his unwillingness to break from traditional structures. Despite no actual evidence that Baelfire would be happier in a village where his father is a pariah than living on the road, Rumple uses him to justify his refusal to live a migratory lifestyle. He never actually asks Baelfire what he wants, but instead simply assumes that the child would want a normative life, because that’s what children are supposed to want. This introduces one of the primary patterns that emerges around Rumple, where he assumes that he knows what his family wants based on conventional understandings of their social positions (“wife,” “child,” “son”) rather than actually talking to them and listening to what they, as complex people, desire. Because Baelfire is a child, Rumple assumes that Baelfire would want stability and a conventional home, since this is “what children are supposed to want.” Milah then leaves Rumple, choosing to embark on her world-exploring journey without him rather than stay in town as a pariah; it is Rumple’s own desire to maintain a normative family structure that ends up actually driving his family away from him.

Rumple then turns to evil, becoming The Dark One, a path that again stems from his obsession with normativity. When his 14-year-old son is conscripted for military service, Rumple learns that he can control the powers of The Dark One (who is, at this point, a different person) with a dagger, and does so in order to save Baelfire from the draft<sup>87</sup>. The Dark One then

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<sup>87</sup> Further supporting my claim that Rumple is more interested in his understandings of what people should want, rather than listening to what they actually want, is the fact that Baelfire says he actually *wants* to join the military.

tempts Rumple into stabbing him: again, this decision is motivated by Rumple's obsession with family units, as The Dark One's tempts him by implying that Baelfire is not his biological child, and mocking Rumple's inability to fit into norms of masculinity and fatherhood. Spurred on by these accusations, Rumple stabs The Dark One: it is then revealed that whoever kills a Dark One becomes the next Dark One, and Rumple is transformed.

From this point forward, Rumple's actions and intentions are continuously warped and influenced by the darkness of his new power; however, the primary motivating factor behind his evil actions is still his desire for a conventional family unit. More specifically, Rumple becomes obsessed with controlling his family members in order to force them into normative roles, rather than allowing them to develop their own desires and personalities, much as he did when he tried to force Milah and Baelfire into a normative life in a village where none of them were happy. Despite now having god-like powers, including teleportation, Rumple continues to live in the same village with his son, even though the townspeople are now terrified of him. He also forces Baelfire into a conventional childhood narrative: much like when Isaac has all of the potential for evil transferred out of Emma into another child, Rumple gives Baelfire a memory potion to erase his bad memories in an attempt to keep him "pure." After Baelfire expresses a moment of moral ambiguity in which he tells his father to kill a man who threatens their life and suggests that violence may be necessary in self-defence, Rumple erases Baelfire's memory of the experience rather than deal with the complicated moment. He then becomes so obsessed with Baelfire's safety that he does not allow the child to leave the house or have any independence, associating this extreme control with parental protection<sup>88</sup>. Rumple is more concerned with maintaining a

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However, this is one case in which I would suggest that Rumple actually is in the right, as a 14-year-old joining the military is the sort of decision that it makes sense for an adult to overrule.

<sup>88</sup> Regina's mother Cora, who is also revealed to have had a romantic relationship with Rumple, has a similar plotline where she is more focused on what she wants Regina to be than on what Regina wants. Regina briefly starts

“pure” son (what Rose would call an “impossible child”) than with actually listening to Baelfire’s needs; even as he becomes an outlaw and a mercenary, he still manages to remain an oppressively normative figure in his understandings of family structure.

Even as Rumple becomes completely controlled by darkness, his actions consistently stem from his obsession with normative family models. He tries to track down Milah to reunite with her, only to kill her when he finds out that she wants to stay with her new lover, Captain Hook. He then ends up losing Baelfire when the child goes through a portal into a world without magic in attempt to escape his father’s powers. Rumple has the chance to join him in the world without magic, but impulsively chooses to stay behind out of fear of losing his powers. Even though this is an instance of Rumple quite literally choosing his powers instead of his son, he still justifies his choice by appealing to his role as father: when his son first expresses a desire for his father to give up his dark powers, Rumple says “I need more power so I can protect you.” When he chooses not to go through the portal out of fear, he explains his reasons by yelling “It’s a trick! It will tear us apart!” Paradoxically, Rumple justifies his abandonment of his son and his obsession with power by suggesting that his primary reason for needing this power is to protect the very son he abandons; again, he neglects his actual relationship with his son for his *idea* of what a father is supposed to be (masculine, powerful, controlling) and loses his actual son in the process.

The moment he loses Baelfire, Rumple regrets his actions and wants to find a way to enter the land without magic. From this point forward, he embarks on years of dark deeds and evil, but the structuring principle behind all of his actions is his attempt to cast a curse that will bring him (along with the rest of his world) to the same land without magic that his son went to.

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to treat Henry this way, but stops when she realizes that it is against her principles, and also too similar to the way her mother treated her.

His evil acts continue to stem from his desire to be a father to his son, and his quest for power still comes from his desire to fulfill a normative position within the social order. Interestingly, he continues to associate being a father with having power and control: even losing his son as a result of his quest for power does not help him understand that fatherhood is not inherently attached to power. When trying to figure out how to reunite with his son, Rumple asks the Blue Fairy if there is a curse that can reunite them, to which she responds “of course you would think of a curse instead of a blessing.” Rather than responding to the fairy’s suggestion that there may be a blessing that could help, Rumple devotes himself to enacting a curse to find Baelfire. He takes measures to ensure that, under the curse, he will still be the most powerful person in the land without magic, and he ultimately schemes to find a way to bring magic, and his power, into the world without magic, thus reuniting him with his son without giving up his power.

Rumple’s actions indirectly end up leading to Baelfire’s death, a narrative development that clearly condemns his particular approach to power when it is enacted tyrannically. This condemnation is also demonstrated in his romantic relationship with Belle; much like with Baelfire, Rumple constantly ignores Belle’s actual desires and instead assumes her wants and needs based on her conventional position as his romantic partner and eventual wife. He lies to her, manipulates her, and even at one point physically imprisons her on a ship, and he justifies all of these actions by claiming to protect her, as a husband in a patriarchal narrative “should.” Rumple emerges as a dark manifestation of heteronormative expectations of husbands and fathers, showing how his desire to control his family and fit them into normative models under the pretense of protecting them is dangerous and harmful: Baelfire dies and Belle almost dies because of these attempts at “protection.” In later seasons it’s revealed that, even as a child, Rumple’s desperate desire for a normative family relationship with his father blinded him to his

father's many faults, leading him to inadvertently creating the dangerous villain Peter Pan. Despite his appearance as a chaotic, amoral outlaw or mercenary figure, the primary motivating principle behind Rumple's quest for power is constantly his warped desire to fit people into normative expectations, and to fit himself into a heteronormative model of the family patriarch.

The show thus demonstrates two possible approaches to leadership: Regina stands in for a boundary-pushing and queer leadership, while Rumple stands in for a conservative leadership that produces and maintains a rigidly-defined, patriarchal social order. The fact that Regina and Rumple both have huge fanbases suggests that it is possible for fans to take either side, and the show thus leaves it more ambiguous whether it endorses Rumpelstiltskin's view of traditional family-oriented leadership or Regina's more radical approach.

Narratively, the show does seem to value Regina as a leader in ways that it doesn't value Rumple. While characters constantly push Rumple to give up his magic powers, and he is repeatedly criticized by others (including Belle) when he chooses to keep them, Regina is never given the same pressure once she is reformed. Regina keeps her magic powers, and uses them frequently to help the community, and nobody tries to stop her. Regina also keeps her position as mayor of Storybrooke long after the curse that gave it to her is broken, indicating that the town is comfortable with her authority over them despite her formerly evil ways; in the Season 6 finale, several characters design a new door for Regina's mayor's office that says "Regina Mills: Queen". Rumple spends six seasons being pressured by everyone to give up his magic, while Regina keeps throwing fireballs everywhere with little to no criticism, and retains her political power. In this sense, the show indicates that Regina's queer leadership is more desirable than Rumple's conservative leadership. However, despite Rumple's constant chastisement for his choice to keep his powers, Robert Carlyle's charismatic performance makes it hard to dislike

him. Despite the extreme toxicity of his relationship with Belle, “Rumbelle” shippers are numerous (Rumbelle rivals SwanQueen for the most popular ship), suggesting that many fans don’t quite recognize (or choose to ignore) how harmful it is, and how disrespectful Rumpel is of Belle’s autonomy and agency. Thus, while *OUAT* implies that Regina is a more desirable leader than Rumpel, the non-musical episodes of the show allow for a reading that sides with Rumpel.

While Rumpel is constantly criticized for his obsession with power, and regularly pressured by the others to give up his magic, he does ultimately manage to find his happy ending. In the finale of the show’s main plotline, Rumpel finally chooses to sacrifice power and control. The Black Fairy gives Rumpel the option to control Belle’s mind and bring Baelfire back from the dead, assuring that he could have the perfect family unit that he always wanted, bound by his unquestioned leadership. Rumpel turns down her offer and kills her, saving the day: after this, Belle returns to him, and he raises a baby with her. On the surface, this seems like a resolution that rejects Rumpel’s approach to power: Rumpelstiltskin is only able to find happiness once he rejects power and chooses to humble himself and let go of control. However, while he may not have fireballs and a mayor’s office like Regina, Rumpel has still found the patriarchal place of power he always sought out. Belle chooses to stay with him despite his immense history of toxic and harmful behaviour (including repeatedly lying to her, endangering her life, and physically controlling her). Belle’s dream is also to travel the world; however, she ends up giving up this dream to live a domestic life in a small town with Rumpel, as he gets his fantasy of domestic bliss at the cost of his wife’s freedom<sup>89</sup>. While he may not be in a position of

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<sup>89</sup> The series had a seventh season, but it was a “reboot” plot that stated an entirely new story; the core story of the series was wrapped up in the sixth. This chapter is focused around the series’ “main” plotline.

In Season 7, Rumpel does finally allow her to see the world; however, this is only on his terms, after she spends years grounded in one location. Making Belle wait patiently for years before finally giving her permission to travel hardly seems like the most flexible mentality, and this moment also happens in the “epilogue” season of Season 7: the main plotline of the series ends on them living in Storybrooke raising a baby.



political or magical power, he occupies a role of familial power as the normative patriarch he has always wanted to be: he has a wife and a child, and they live an idyllic, conventional life, that largely serves his needs at the cost of others'. He may have rejected The Black Fairy's offer to brainwash Belle, yet he managed to find a life that fits the script that he has always wanted, and the series presents this as his "happy ending." The ultimate suggestion here is that there was nothing wrong with Rumple's desire to fit everything around him into easily digestible fulfillments of heteronormative categories; rather, he simply had to learn to do it without magic and evil<sup>90</sup>.

Both Regina and Rumple are thus punished when they achieve power through tyrannical or violent means, yet find themselves rewarded when they achieve similar authority through good deeds. While I suggest that the show leans more towards Regina's approach to authority – she does, after all, become accepted by the community several seasons earlier than Rumple, keep her powers without struggle, and remain mayor/queen – fan reception and narrative development suggest that Rumple's twisted romanticization of strictly-scripted heteropatriarchal family structures is ultimately rendered desirable to some extent. The musical episode, however – as musical episodes often do – disrupts and shifts this balance, further queering a show that already has a lot of queerness to offer.

### **The Musical Episode**

I'm Gonna Rip the Song Right From Their Hearts

- Regina from *Once Upon a Time*

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<sup>90</sup> Again, Season 7 complicates this. However, Season 7 is treated so much like a "coda" that is detached from the narrative arc in Season 6 (and it excludes the majority of the former principal cast members), meaning that Season 6 occupies the same sense of narrative closure and finality that a series finale would.

The queer politics of *Once Upon a Time* culminate in its musical episode, “The Song in Your Heart.” The musical episode is also the penultimate episode of Season Six, the last season of the series’ main plotline, and it is fitting that a fairy tale series with deep ties to Disney chose to kick off the finale of its main story with a musical. Considering that the penultimate episode is the moment when Emma has to develop the most substantial revelations about herself and her character development in order to equip herself to fight the final battle of her time on the series (in Joseph Campbell’s terms, her apotheosis), it is significant that the series chose to place the musical episode in this pivotal moment. This choice alone supports my claim that the function of musical episodes is not merely novelty or commercial gimmickry; instead, a musical episode can serve a foundational, core function in how a series develops and resolves its stories.

The musical episode structurally allows the series to push Emma’s character development further than it had before. While an outspoken leader, Emma is consistently characterized as hesitant to talk about her internality or emotions and is distant and guarded on a personal level even as she is confident in her political leadership role as the sheriff and “saviour” of Storybrooke. The opening scene shows a young Emma preparing to enter a singing contest, only to crumple up the poster advertising it after a fellow orphan makes fun of her. Her fear of expressing herself or showing vulnerability is literalized in her fear of singing. As an adult, Emma learns that her parents activated a spell that gave her singing voice magic powers, and that the only way for her to defeat the antagonist is by singing. Thus, much like reserved characters in other musical episodes, Emma is forced to sing. Singing is then used as a plot device to push Emma into a space of emotional honesty, confidence, and reconciliation that she had otherwise been unable to achieve.

While Emma is technically the narrative focus of the episode, she is far from the dramatic or musical focus. As I previously mentioned in relation to characters like Cheryl Blossom in *Riverdale*, a musical episode often necessitates a re-organization of who is front and centre, as supporting characters demand more focus while leads often take a step back. A quick glance at listening statistics to the songs from the episode supports this claim: on YouTube, Regina's song and Captain Hook's song both have over 4 million views, while Snow White and Charming's is barely above 3 million (as of February 20, 2021), suggesting that viewers are far more interested in villain songs than those of the heroes. The other songs from the episode weren't even officially uploaded to YouTube by ABC, suggesting that they did not foresee a market for the videos of those specific songs, and the most popular unofficial uploads of them have under a million plays each (except for the ensemble number "Happy Beginning" which has a little over 1 million). The same trend appears on Spotify listening statistics, where Zelena (The Wicked Witch of the West) joins Regina and Hook with the most popular songs. Amusingly, Regina's song "Love Doesn't Stand a Chance" is listed as Ginnifer Goodwin's (the actress who plays Snow White) most popular song on Spotify. Clearly *OUAT* fans found the villains' songs the highlight of the episode, even as Emma's song figures the narrative climax.

Furthermore, while all of the villains who sing in the episode experience some sort of "redemption" arc during the show, it is not their modern-day redeemed selves who get to sing. Emma is the only character who sings a solo song in the present, whereas all of the other characters' solos take place in flashbacks, meaning that the villains sing in their "full villain" states, rather than as "reformed villains." The popularity (and sheer number) of the villains' songs says explicitly what the rest of the series suggests implicitly: while the heroes are the ostensible focus of the series, fans watch it for the villains. The episode confirms Stacy Wolf's

claim that musicals often seem conservative from a narrative perspective but work in radical ways on the more affective level of the musical structure. While Renaissance-era Disney films emblemize this by giving their villains more assertive songs than their protagonists (see Chapter Three), *OUAT* heightens this dynamic by having villains' songs actually *outnumber* heroes': there are three villain solo songs in the episode (four if you count "The Queen Sings," even though it is mostly a prelude to "Love Doesn't Stand a Chance"), while there is only one hero solo, one hero duet, one "fight" song between Regina and the Charmings, and one ensemble song at the end. Not only are the villains' songs more powerful and more popular, they are actually more frequent as well, as the villains' song time actually outnumbers the protagonists'.

The choice to have villains sing as their past selves, as opposed to their present selves, also exemplifies the show's nuanced approach to redemption that I outlined earlier. The series suggests that including a former outsider in a community does not necessitate that persons' assimilation to the community's values, but that their disruption of those values is, in itself, a valuable part of community belonging. While this is communicated subtly through Regina's frequent challenge to characters' normative drives, and more clearly when she accepts the Evil Queen as an essential part of herself, the musical episode explicitly dramatizes this message not only for her, but also for two of the series' other most prominent reformed villains, who don't get similar narratives. While Regina, Hook, and Zelena have all joined in the Storybrooke community and progressed through redemption narratives, the episode relies on their evil personas for its most popular musical numbers. The characters' most compelling performances and expressions of emotion and personality come when they are still outsiders. While modern-day Regina is a beloved character, the show relies on her past self to produce a song powerful enough to draw in audiences, emphasizing that this outsider part of herself is an essential part of

what makes her compelling. This reliance on the characters' pasts demonstrates how this past can (and should) never fully go away, but remains an essential part of what makes these characters themselves; it is their past outside of the community that makes them meaningful enough to warrant the most frequent, and the most popular, songs in the episode. While some compromise is required, and certain aspects of their villainous pasts are obviously incompatible with their inclusion in the community (literally killing and torturing people, mind control, attempting to acquire fascist-like control over the community), the general anti-normative values that underlie these pasts are still celebrated through performance and song.

This choice emphasizes one of the most important aspects of the musical form: it is hard to have a conventional, normative character steal the show in a musical. From songs like "A Problem Like Maria" in *The Sound of Music*, to the focus on the diva's unconventional beauty in shows like *Funny Girl*, or the outsider or countercultural protagonists in shows like *Cabaret* or *Chicago*,<sup>91</sup> popular musical numbers often hinge on what makes the singer (or the person sung about) different from the norm. As Wolf emphasizes, the plots of the shows often work towards containing these characters in normative narrative conclusions, but the conclusions are rarely marked by interesting or memorable songs. The moments for which the musical exists, and for which the audience attends a musical, are the moments of instability and outsidership that come before this normative ending.

Regina's song, "Love Doesn't Stand a Chance," also exemplifies exactly what it is about her character's past that is meaningful besides a vague sense of "anti-normativity." Emphasizing that you "don't need blind faith to cope," Regina's song serves as a counterpoint to Snow White and Charming's somewhat naïve trust in the power of romantic love, "the most powerful magic

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<sup>91</sup> Wolf's *Changed for Good* points out how women in 1950s musicals were more likely to have jobs than in non-musical film and TV, and how the daring and unconventional "single girl" dominated the musicals of the 1960s.

of all.” Regina acknowledges the appeal of love, which “at times can entrance,” and admits her own previous desires for romantic love, but she asserts that this type of love on its own “doesn’t stand a chance” against her. The Charmings’ simplistic, heteronormative worldview leads them to believe (wrongly) that their love for each other can singlehandedly defeat the Evil Queen; Regina points out that “love’s magic spell” may be nice, but it “cannot match the power” of her curse. The Charmings later learn that Regina is right; the spell that was cast to make everyone sing was about channeling the power of an entire community and the mutual bonds and love that extended far past a single romantic coupling. The relationship between two individuals, as Regina suggests, is not nearly as powerful as the Charmings think it is.

The song is also a chance for Regina to celebrate her sexuality, glamour, and power in a manner similar to Ursula from *The Little Mermaid*. Regina is dressed luxuriously, and regularly dances provocatively, touching herself, moving seductively against a mirror, and engaging in choreography that combines the sexuality of *Sweet Charity* and a Whitesnake music video. Considering that there is no diegetic audience to these scenes (there are briefly guards behind her, but she murders them all), Regina is performing this way for herself, embracing her own body and sensuality. She also calls Snow White a “bitch,” emphasizing the uncharacteristically adult nature of this song compared to the usual family-friendly tone of an ABC fairy tale TV show with ties to Disney. Zelena’s “Wicked Always Wins” similarly includes lines such as “what they call green with envy/ I just call looking good,” as she celebrates the unconventional beauty of her green skin. In both instances, the characters sing songs that unapologetically celebrate themselves, channelling the history of the Broadway diva to give women who live outside the center of the social order the chance to declare their beauty and power.

The villain, in an unconventional turn of events, is also proven right on a narrative level. The musical is split between two time periods: half of it consists of flashbacks to a time when Regina was still the Evil Queen, and the other half consists of a modern-day plot that takes place long after she has been reformed, where everyone fights The Black Fairy. In the flashback scenes, where the majority of the musical numbers take place, the Evil Queen Regina actually *wins*. A spell is cast that makes everyone in the kingdom sing, and Snow White and Charming think that this music will give them the power to defeat Regina; however, it is later revealed that this spell was never intended to help them with this battle. Instead, the spell channels all of the magical energy produced by the music into Emma so that she can defeat The Black Fairy years later. The Charmings are left powerless in their fight against Regina, and she wins, since their magic was intended for a fight against a completely different foe that would happen far in the future, rather than for this battle. While the good guys ultimately prevail, they do not prevail against The Evil Queen: the result is that, in the “flashback narrative,” the villain actually wins with impunity.

This plot demonstrates that Regina’s song has a valid point. Snow White and Charming literally believe that they will be able to defeat a powerful sorceress that they have never been able to beat before because a spell is making everyone sing, and “love expressed through song is a power like the queen has never seen.” They believe that singing their romantic duet at Regina will somehow allow them to overpower her, as their somewhat-narcissistic view that their romantic relationship is somehow more powerful than anyone else’s (and legitimately powerful enough to singlehandedly save the entire kingdom) clouds their judgement as to the true purpose of the musical spell. As Regina estimates, the Charmings’ romantic love is not as all-powerful as it may seem, and the two lose their fight with her. Simply “love expressed through song” in a

typical romantic duet is *not* as powerful as the Charmings seem to think it is. Rather, it is the collective love of an entire community and the ability of Emma's song to connect her to her family and friends that produces the "most powerful magic of all."

The musical episode's plot is thus structured unconventionally in that it allows Regina a sort of "double victory" in the primary conflict of the episode, since she is a villain in the "flashback narrative" when villains win, but a hero in the "modern day" narrative when the heroes win. One of the struggles with representing a powerful villain is the narrative need to make them lose, despite the affective drive towards their celebration and appreciation. While a musical typically handles this by celebrating them in the music while punishing them in the libretto, *OUAT*'s musical episode uses its nonlinear storytelling structure to allow Regina victory in both the narrative *and* the music. While these flashbacks take place in a distant past from the present-day scenes, the episode maintains a singular, coherent narrative throughout the larger timespan. Evil wins in the past (Regina defeating the Charmings), but then good ultimately wins years later in the future when Emma defeats the Black Fairy; therefore, the episode is able to satisfy the conventional need for heroes to be victorious, since evil is ultimately defeated at the end of the episode. However, Regina "switches sides" between the flashback sequences and the present-day scenes, meaning that she is evil in the time period when evil wins, but good in the time period when good wins; thus, in the narrative of the musical, Regina never actually loses. The show's use of flashback and nonlinear storytelling thus allows it to tell a story where the diva-villain wins, and is never actually defeated, while still satiating the normative desire for happy endings where the villain is defeated.

As I argued earlier, Regina and Rumple represent very different approaches to the "redeemed villain" plotline, with Regina representing a queer approach to authority and Rumple



hetero-patriarchal authority. The musical episode, however, tips the balance between these two characters. While “The Song in Your Heart,” with its three diva villain songs, is essentially a showcase of the major villains of the *OUAT* universe, Rumple never sings in it. Despite the fact that Rumple is a fan favourite with a strongly performative and distinctive personality, and a Rumpelstiltskin song would have likely sold well to fans, he is not given the chance to sing in the episode. Furthermore, considering that he is a more central character than Hook or Zelena (not to mention a longer-running one, as the latter two only join in later seasons) it seems strange from a narrative perspective that both of them get to sing when he doesn’t. However, when considering the types of characters that get to sing in musicals, this decision makes sense.

Rumple’s characterization excludes him from the more popular Broadway song types; he definitely would not have been able to sing a diva song like the other villains. Rumple lacks the fury of Regina, the indulgence of Zelena, or the daring adventurousness of Captain Hook; due to his general disdain for emotional expression, it would be hard to adapt Rumple’s character to a conventional, showstopping musical theatre number. That being said, his wry, playful personality would make sense for either a novelty song or an “unwilling singer” song (like Spike from *Buffy*, who is forced to sing against his will). Moreover, Robert Carlyle’s performance as the character would lend itself well to a comic relief number along the lines of *The Sword and the Stone*’s “Mad Madam Mim.” However, the musical theatre form limits the types of dramatically significant or meaningful songs that a character like Rumple can sing, and the episode chooses not to give him any songs at all. And, as Wolf argues, “because the musical values song as the most sincere and honest form of expression, it privileges characters who sing, and nonsinging ones are usually evil, dull, or dispensable” (*A Problem Like Maria* 30). In this sense, the musical episode – by not allowing Rumple to sing – significantly downplays the tonal

and dramatic significance of his role in non-musical episodes, allowing the show's other reformed villains to take centre stage<sup>92</sup>.

As Lehman Engel argues: "one of the chief differences between most plays and most musicals... is that characters in plays are often not what they seem; in musicals, they invariably must be" (16). For Rumple, who relies on never being what he seems, the genre poses a challenge for his incorporation. While a character can sing about their duplicitousness (as in "Master of the House" from *Les Mis*, or "A Little Priest" from *Sweeney Todd*), they're still being honest in their songs, even if they're being honest about the fact that they're dishonest. Unlike Mrs. Lovett from *Sweeney* or Monsieur Thénardier from *Les Mis*, who are proud of their duplicitousness and openly celebrate being evil, Rumple's biggest secret is that, underneath the evil surface, he is desperately enamoured with conservative social structures and values. Characters who are motivated by a desire to fit into the norm, even if they take controversial or evil steps to do so (like Boq in *Wicked*) often don't sing, and usually don't sing the most memorable or popular songs in a musical.

As I suggested earlier, the series subtly implies its disapproval of Rumple's approach to authority and power by constantly pressuring him to give up his magic powers despite not doing the same to Regina. However, this episode makes the series' general discomfort with the type of power and motivation that Rumple represents much more explicit, denying him a voice in an episode that's all about the power of voices. Emma's defeat of The Black Fairy is empowered by the songs of everyone in Storybrooke – hero or villain – and thus the only character who is not

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<sup>92</sup> There are, of course, some reasons on the level of production that could have prevented Rumple from singing: Robert Carlyle may have been unwilling to sing for this episode, producers may have felt that a playful Rumple song wouldn't fit the episode's more dramatic tone, or there may have not been enough time to include an additional song. However, regardless of the reasoning, the end decision was to have Rumple be the only major villain in the show (not to mention a villain who had been around from the very first episode) not to sing. Rumple comments on this, saying "do you think the dark one sings? I'd rather gouge my eyes out with a rusty fork."

invited into this power-sharing community is Rumpelstiltskin, who ends up being the only one who didn't have a song in his heart to sing. Queer diva Regina, on the other hand, is clearly front-and-centre, as the musical genre gives the show the tools to explicitly state what they imply elsewhere: as much as Emma may drive the show's narrative, it is divas like Regina that are its emotional and thematic core.

### **Conclusion: A Happy Beginning**

Happily ever after, is the way these stories go

Used to think that's what I wanted, but now I finally know...

A happy beginning now is ours.

- "A Happy Beginning," *OUAT*

As the finale song of "The Song in Your Heart" emphasizes, *OUAT* is not a series that invests in conventional notions of closure, authority, or stability. Rather than celebrate happy endings, the series is about happy beginnings; more specifically, the characters never wait for bad times to end and make way to a stable life of eternal goodness, but rather accept the inevitability of bad times and instability and instead focus on the moments of joy that can be found during this instability. The episode's contrast of *mise en scene* with music and lyrics emphasizes this; despite the characters happily singing after Hook and Emma get married, surrounded by a beautiful rooftop wedding set and dressed in bright, cheerful clothing, the chorus sings more ominous lyrics: "when we face the endless night/ take my hand and join the fight." The conventional marriage that ends a fairy tale plot and the jovial wedding imagery is contrasted with lyrics about combat, acknowledging that this wedding takes place before a major fight and a period of struggle and darkness. The episode then ends with a dark curse pouring out of a clock tower and descending upon the wedding guests in the form of a twisting black cloud,

as the scene's aesthetics begin to match the song and peaceful joy is presented as happening alongside – rather than instead of – instability and chaos.

This moment at the end of the musical episode aptly sums up the series' thematic understandings of closure and stability. When approaching authority, the series prioritizes types of authority that are flexible and destabilize the status quo. When dealing with redemption, the series prioritizes a sense of redemption that does not become assimilation, but rather encourages characters to maintain aspects of their former outsider status and continue disrupting the community that they become a part of. When dealing with authorship, the series is invested in its assertion that no one person can claim ownership over a story, and that no story has one single, definite meaning. All of these themes develop most explicitly around Regina's character – as well as the way this character is contrasted with Rumple's – and achieve their most explicit dramatization in the musical episode. I suggest that part of this reasoning is because so many of *OUAT*'s themes – celebration of outsiders, divas, and the antinormative, an emphasis on the middles of stories rather than the ends<sup>93</sup>, and a rejection of narrative authority or mastery<sup>94</sup> – are historically structures that underly musicals. These traits of the musical also happen to be historically important to its queer spectatorship, which is drawn to the way that the genre centers the types of narratives and characters that are often on the periphery of other mass-produced narratives. Even before its musical episode, *OUAT* had the heart of a musical, and it is not surprising that it chose the musical form for the penultimate episode of its core plotline, and that so many of its politics find their most explicit articulation in this episode.

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<sup>93</sup> The finale is rarely the most memorable song in a musical.

<sup>94</sup> Notably, Wolf argues that the biggest criticisms of Andrew Lloyd Webber-style megamusicals in the 1980s were based around their emphasis on reproducing a standardized, "definitive" show (people would refer to jobs on Webber shows as "McTheatre jobs"), since this contrasted so heavily with everything the musical had otherwise come to stand for.

Out of all of my chapters, this chapter comes the closest to allowing a generalized sense of antinormativity to stand in for queerness: as my introduction states, avoiding this issue is one of my core goals. I often discuss how more abstract concepts such as authority and narrative closure are “queered” in the series, something that risks the abstraction of “queer” away from gender and sexuality. However, Regina’s rebellion is almost always coded in terms of her unapologetic sexuality, her expression of femininity, and her resistance to specifically heteronormative myths surrounding relationships and family structures. It is the Charmings’ obsession with the idea that their monogamous heterosexual coupling is the ultimate sign of a “happy ending” that leads Regina to freeze time and end all of the “happy endings” of the other characters. It is the way in which Snow White’s conventional role as wife and mother has slowly led to her depoliticization that Regina criticizes when she encourages her to take up arms again. It is Regina’s choice to adopt a child as a single mother, then later raise that child with another woman, that emphasizes her unconventional understanding of family and kinship. And it is her assertion that a romantic relationship with Robin Hood is not her happy ending that drives her to define happiness on her own terms, outside the structures of a normative romantic coupling. Furthermore, Rumple’s conservatism is consistently of the hetero-patriarchal type, connected to repressive notions of what women and children need to be in relation to their fathers. It is his desire to fit the conventionally masculine categories of “husband” and “father,” and his related desire to force his wives into conventional social categories of “wife” that lead to his most despicable acts. Therefore, the series’ resistance of Rumple’s approach to authority and its celebration of Regina’s goes beyond a generalized interest in antinormativity towards a celebration of non-normative genders and sexualities and a warning about the dangers of heteronormativity more specifically.

Still, as with many of the other texts I analyze in this dissertation, *OUAT* is lacking in explicit queer representation. *OUAT* offers five women who are romantically attracted to other women; however, two (Red Riding Hood and Dorothy) only have a very brief romance in a single episode that is barely developed, one (Mulan) only ever experiences unrequited love, and the other two are a part of the seventh “reboot” season that happens after everything I have discussed in this chapter. However, I want to emphasize that this is a project largely about how queer communities and cultures connect to popular culture, rather than queer representation in popular texts themselves. I am primarily interested in what fans and audiences can do *with* these texts, and what resources the texts provide for queer response. Even if the on-screen lesbian representation in *OUAT* is lacking, the off-screen lesbian reception practices that emerged surrounding SwanQueen (fan art, fan fiction, even homemade clothing and jewellery) are a vast and amazing part of queer culture that deserves documentation and celebration. *OUAT*’s politics on their own are interesting, but what makes them *particularly* valuable is the way in which queer viewers have been able to use them as a starting point to develop a culture of reception and response. What then makes this show particularly valuable is the way that these fan creations have been acknowledged and celebrated by the show’s production staff in a particularly visible way. The following chapter will further explore these reception communities, turning my gaze from musicals themselves towards queer fan-creators and their creations.

## Chapter Five

### Queer Broadway Youtubers

Let me be your star.

- *Smash*

Up to this point, this dissertation has primarily focused on close analyses of musicals, examining their potential for queer reception, intervention, and reimagination. This chapter looks directly at queer responses themselves, exploring how actual transformative works made by queer fans on YouTube enact the types of response and reception that the other chapters argue musicals make possible. These transformative works give voice to the queer impulses I have traced in the first four chapters, bringing them out of the hypothetical and into the actual. The first section develops most directly from Chapter Three, discussing queer artist Todrick Hall and examining how his YouTube Disney mashups respond to, develop, and interact with the queerness made possible by Disney musicals. The next section will discuss Superfruit, a duo consisting of two members of the a cappella group Pentatonix, examining their queer reimaginings of musicals. The third section then brings Hall and Superfruit together, discussing how their videos exemplify the relationship between 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century reception practices, and inquiring into how the era of Web 2.0 and user-generated content have impacted the shape of queer musical theatre reception practices.

Part of my argument – as indicated by the *Smash* quote that opens this chapter – is related to contemporary culture's focus on public performance of the self. In an era when people are constantly encouraged to construct public personas and perform their identities in an open, visible way similar to that of celebrities, historic queer practices centered around secrecy and anonymity often clash with these cultural trends. While I briefly explore serious issues and

threats to queer lives caused by this predilection for public performance, this chapter (along with the following coda) also outlines ways that contemporary cultural practices related to social media and participatory Internet culture are being used in productive and fruitful ways. I aim to complicate the reductionist “generation me” accounts that see millennials and zoomers as spotlight-obsessed narcissists, looking to ways that public performance and spaces like YouTube manage to facilitate nuanced connections and communities. This chapter also develops my larger argument that accounts of contemporary queer practices too often associate secrecy with shame and publicity with pride, which leads to the accusation that the loss of secrecy and anonymity in queer spaces results in “pride culture’s” inability to confront and navigate the more challenging and complicated aspects of queer life. Conversely, I explore ways that queer communities are participating in processes of “public shame,” where they use public declaration as a way to process and work through difficult experiences and trauma in community-minded and healing ways.

**“She Really is a Basic Queen, this Belle:” The Queer Disney Aesthetic of Todrick Hall**

In dreams, you will lose your heartache

But I nearly left the real me on the shelf

- Todrick Hall, “Cinderfella”

Todrick Hall is one of the many contemporary celebrities who launched their career through YouTube. While he is now primarily well known for his performances on Broadway, his appearances on *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, his music albums and national tours, his work with Taylor Swift, and most recently his huge hit single “Nails, Hair, Hips, Heels,” his YouTube work is still a primary reference point for many of his fans. This kind of YouTube-originated stardom is a recurring feature with many modern celebrities – including Brian Jordan Alvarez, Tyler Oakley,



Pentatonix, and of course most famously Justin Bieber and Troye Sivan – making it sometimes hard to differentiate between what counts as a “fan work” and what counts as product of the established entertainment industry. For the sake of this chapter, both Hall and Superfruit, despite producing work through major studio outlets, will be treated as creating “fan response” on their YouTube channels, largely because their YouTube content consists of independently produced works that are not officially associated with the producers of the works to which they respond; for example, Hall’s videos are not made *for* Disney, but rather as a fan response *to* Disney, even though he has since gone on to work with Disney as a composer. Regardless of their creators’ celebrity status, the works discussed in this chapter are still queer fan responses to other works, and thus demonstrate through performance the ways that queer audiences make meaning of and respond to musicals.

Part of my reason behind choosing performances by celebrity/fan hybrids is that these performers fill, in many ways, the role of “Big Name Fans” (referred to in fan communities as BNFs). BNFs destabilize the binary between celebrity and fan, as they are fans that either become well-known and respected leaders amongst fan communities, or in some cases become celebrities themselves (many Doctor Who writers, for example, are BNFs, having participated extensively in fan activity before being hired by the show). I have chosen to focus on BNFs because of the way that they can influence and structure the ways that other fans act. Paul Booth gives the example of Adam Malin, BNF and co-founder of Creation Entertainment, an organization that puts on fan conventions. Booth discusses how Malin uses his BNF status and convention structure to produce “authorized ways to behave,” arguing that Creation Entertainment “seems to reward fans for following the same type of celebratory fandom [as Malin]” (*Crossing Fandoms* 42). While fan culture is complex, multifaceted, and constantly

shifting, looking to the type of reception practice and response modeled by BNFs can give some indication of larger trends that are being modeled for other fans. As Kristina Busse and Karen Hellekson argue, no fan experience happens in isolation: fans exist in a network of ideas, and any reception practice – whether it follows, resists, or negotiates with these ideas – is informed by the larger fan network and context in which it is made: in their words, “the community of fans creates a communal (albeit contentious and contradictory) interpretation” of texts (7). While not all fans model their reception practice on those of BNFs (many actually reject them), BNFs do still, in many ways, inform the general discourse and structures surrounding fan behavior. Even to reject a mode of fan performance modeled by a BNF is still to acknowledge and interact with the discourse they have produced. Therefore, focusing on their reception practices can give a better understanding of the context in which other audience communities react to media.

Todrick Hall is a huge fan of Disney, and some of his most popular productions have been his Disney fan videos. While Hall has many varieties of these videos (including a series called “Once Upon a Crime” that puts Disney characters, often played by drag queens, “on trial”), this chapter will primarily focus on his mashup music videos. In these videos, Hall re-tells the stories behind classic Disney movies using a combination of pop songs, mashups between Disney songs and pop songs, and Disney songs with re-written lyrics. For example, “Cinderfella” mashes up Disney songs with pop songs to recast the story of Cinderella as a romance between two men, “Cinderoncé” tells the story of Cinderella using entirely Beyoncé songs, and “Beauty and the Beat Boots” re-imagines the song “Belle” from *Beauty and the Beast* as taking place in a gay village. This chapter focuses primarily on “Cinderfella” and “Beauty and the Beat Boots,” with some discussion of Hall’s other works.

It is tempting to call Hall's videos parodies. Indeed, some lean heavily towards the parodic or the satirical, particularly the "Once Upon a Crime" series. However, the videos are not consistently parodic: they are not mocking or entirely humorous in nature, and are also not marked by an overarching tone of irony, comedy, or a feeling of "writing against" the traditions with which Hall engages. Rather, Todrick Hall's fairy tale videos look less like parody or re-writing, and more like pastiche or homage. Pastiche, as Richard Dyer argues, "does something beyond replication, but not taken to the point that it becomes parody, ridicule or burlesque" (*Pastiche* 54). Rather than critiquing, lampooning, or mocking Disney, Hall is primarily invested in appreciating and imitating their style while introducing queer narratives and cultural references into it. While he does use humour, and his videos are often quite funny, this humour is not the primary structuring affect of many of the videos, and it is also not usually parodic in tone. Rather, Hall attempts to genuinely imitate the affect and tone of Disney films, albeit with queer plotlines and sensibilities. In imitating Disney's style while indulging in queer culture, Hall's videos carry the insistence that queer narratives belong within the world and aesthetics of Disney's films. Hall thus demands the inclusion of queer perspectives within dominant narratives by demonstrating how these voices and perspectives already fit quite naturally within said narratives. As I discuss in my introduction, this project is interested in moments that decenter heteronormative frameworks by treating queer readings as if they are the logically intuitive, "mainstream" ones, thus positioning straight readings as "alternative" or strange. For Hall, his queer takes on Disney are presented as common-sense – possibly even more intuitive than heteronormative approaches to the films – thus going beyond a "queer version" of Disney towards a *queering* of Disney on a more fundamental level. Hall is therefore not re-working queerness to fit into the mainstream, as homonormative approaches often do, but rather re-

working the mainstream to imagine what it would be like if queer frameworks were treated as the standard, and heteronormativity as the deviation.

Hall's celebration of a mainstream company like Disney, and his demand for inclusion within their narratives, raises similar concerns to those I identified with Regina's characterization in Chapter Four. It would be easy to dismiss Hall's videos as falling into the homonormative or the assimilationist mode. Sean P. Griffin, for example, has argued that "Disney's growing acceptance of a 'lesbian' or 'gay' audience... has the ironic potential of decreasing an individual's ability to use the company's products through a wider 'queer' sensibility" (xxi) as audiences become more attached to fitting into Disney's narratives than working against their ideology. Furthermore, the fan videos' status as homage, rather than parody, puts them at odds with queer theorists such as Lee Edelman, who have described irony as "that queerest of rhetorical devices" due to its "corrosive force" (395). Despite some moments of humour, Hall's lack of interest in criticizing Disney makes him an easy target for Fredric Jameson's famous critique of pastiche as a "neutral practice... without any of parody's ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse" (65). However, I argue that these critical frameworks are not sufficient for grasping the radical potential of Hall's videos. Resisting Jameson's critique of pastiche as empty, I turn to scholars that explore the value of transformative media practices that, despite not being parodic or satiric in tone, are still capable of substantial critical intervention. Unlike, Jameson, Dyer sees pastiche's function as "uncertain, but suggestive and productive " (54), a description that I will unpack later in this chapter. As in my analysis of Regina in Chapter Four, which rests on the axiom that you can simultaneously insist on a space of belonging within a community while still disrupting the norms of said community, this chapter is motivated by the claim that

you can develop critical interventions into a text without explicitly framing your work as a critique of it.

In fact, there are several frameworks that help explain what Hall's videos are doing. The desire to take something from mass culture and repurpose it to mean other than its "intended" meaning, of course, is theorized in Dick Hebdige's account of subcultural resignification, where "opposing definitions" of the same objects are worked out, and objects "made to mean and mean again as 'style'" (3). Hall could thus be seen as participating in the long-standing practice of taking existing aspects of the dominant culture and imbuing them with new, queer meaning for his purposes. However, I suggest that Hall's videos are not necessarily giving these stories *new* meanings so much as revealing the queer energies that have been behind them all along; thus, Hebdige's analysis of suits and paperclips being endowed with new meanings does not entirely fit. Similarly, Hall's videos could be seen to fit Juan Antonio Suárez's description of queer *avant garde* cinema, which he calls a "mixture of parody of *and homage to* popular icons and myths" (xvii). However, I would be hesitant to call Hall's videos *avant garde*, considering their representational, narrative structures and lack of association with experimentation or abstraction.

My argument is, instead, most directly guided by José Esteban Muñoz's *Disidentifications*. Muñoz describes how queer people of color develop strategies to "read oneself and one's own life narrative in a moment, object, or subject that is not culturally coded to 'connect' with the disidentifying subject" (12) since "ideological restrictions implicit in an identificatory site prevent 'proper' identification" (8). Faced with a dominant culture in which the normatively-sanctioned sites of identification for a Black queer man are limited, Hall instead finds moments that are not overtly designed to connect with his experience, and he asserts his presence within those very sites. As Muñoz argues, *Disidentification* "neither opts to assimilate

within such a structure nor strictly opposes it; rather, disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology... like a melancholic subject holding on to a lost object, a disidentifying subject works to hold on to this object and invest it with new life” (11-12).

Discussing how a lesbian could identify with Fanon despite his flawed understanding of gender, he argues: “disidentification offers a Fanon, for that queer and lesbian reader, who would not be sanitized; instead, his homophobia and misogyny would be interrogated while his anticolonial discourse was engaged as a *still* valuable yet mediated identification” (9, emphasis in original).

This formulation may seem to be in some tension with my claim that Hall’s videos assert the queer presence that “already” exists in Disney musicals, rather than fundamentally changing the musicals themselves. However, one of Muñoz’s key examples clarifies how these two ideas work together. He begins *Disidentifications* with a story from Marga Gomez’s *Marga Gomez is Pretty, Witty, and Gay*, where Gomez recounts watching an exploitative talk show episode where David Susskind interviews a group of “lady homosexuals.” While the show is meant to paint these lesbians as stereotypical and undesirable, Gomez finds them alluring and appealing: “Gomez luxuriates in the seemingly homophobic image... she performs her disidentificatory desire for this once toxic representation. The phobic object, through a campy over-the-top performance, is reconfigured as sexy and glamorous, and not as the pathetic and abject spectacle that it appears to be in the dominant eyes of heteronormative culture” (3). What is intriguing about this account is that Gomez sees the women as alluring for exactly the same reason that they are supposed to be disgusting. She neither accepts nor rejects the image, but reconfigures it into something that works for her, choosing to indulge in what she perceives as the sexiness of the exact traits that are supposed to signify the image’s ugliness. I argue that this is what Hall’s queer approaches to Disney do; they serve more as a re-negotiation and refiguring that reveals

the films' queer potential by "looking at them queerly," identifying with them and decoding them in ways that go against dominant readings.

Disney's representation of Black characters is, as I previously discussed in Chapter Three, extremely limited, and its problems with Black representation clearly intersect with gender. For example, *The Princess and the Frog* was criticized for constructing an intentionally ethnically and racially ambiguous love interest for Tiana, their first Black princess; Brandon Fibbs describes Tiana's love interest, Prince Naveen, as "neither white nor black, but some sort of mysterious combination of both by virtue of his fabricated, vaguely European origins" (qtd. In Lester 300). Neal A. Lester argues that "critics are not so concerned that Tiana dates and eventually marries interracially, but rather why Disney does not allow its first African-American princess to romance and wed an African-American male" (300). He criticizes the lack of Black men in *The Princess and the Frog*, concluding that the early death of Tiana's father, and the limited and problematic roles for Black men in the film, "raise serious questions about Disney's construction of African-American maleness" (301). Disney's first film about a Black woman not only separates her from other Black characters (her father dies, her best friend is white, her love interest is not Black, and her mother, Eudora, doesn't get much screen time) but also produces a notable lack of Black men. This problem, as I noted in Chapter Three, also arises in the treatment of the muses in *Hercules*, which in turn relates to the general mistreatment of Black women in musical theatre.

Todrick Hall's videos thus intervene in a cinematic universe that resists his presence on multiple accounts: not only is Disney lacking in both Black characters *and* queer characters, but its racist structures also engage in specifically gendered forms of racism that harm Black men and women in differing ways. Intervening in this universe is thus a particularly complex political

move: Disney's messages are not only encoded as straight and white, but also encoded in a way that polices Black representation along binaristic, normative, gendered lines. Hall then works to decode these stories as gay and Black, negotiating and resisting the asserted white-straightness of their encoding; to invoke Dyer's framework, he is not parodying or reshaping the text, but instead foregrounding a specific decoding of the text. Furthermore, when a pastiche imitates something, "it selects. It does not reproduce every detail of the referent, but selects a number of traits and makes them the basis of the pastiche" (56). This approach allows for Hall to take the pieces of Disney that work for him and decode others – as Gomez does with the scandalous Lesbians on TV – through a perspective that reveals their latent queerness, and reject the rest. While this act still involves a love for and connection to the disidentified/ decoded object without explicit critique (thus distancing it from irony or satire), it is still a radical act for Hall to assert his presence and belonging in these narratives.

To explain exactly how Hall does all of this complex work – negotiating its problems without engaging in explicitly critical or ironic modes – I turn to Paul J. Booth's 2012 study of mashups. Viewing Hall's videos as mashups of Disney films and popular culture, I argue that this form allows them to produce a type of transformative storytelling that engages in the non-parodic mimicry of pastiche, while still making relevant and important political commentary. Central to Booth's discussion of mashups is his argument that meaning is made in the conversation between the two different texts, rather than the use of one text to parody or critique the other. He gives the example of a Madonna/The Who mashup video: because of the dramatically different audiences for both of these artists, it would be easy to see the video as aimed at either a rock fan audience interested in parodying pop, or a pop fan audience parodying The Who. However, he points out that the video does not make value judgements on either artist,



but rather celebrates both and uses sounds from each to create a new work of art. However, Booth argues that, despite its lack of a “critical” framing, the video still ends up creating critical commentary about both Madonna and The Who by drawing comparisons between the sexuality of Madonna and the violence of The Who. The critique thus exists in the dialogue between the two artists rather than individual criticism of either artist. In this case, an artist can enhance an audience’s critical understanding of the source texts, even if they’re not explicitly *criticizing* those texts: the mashup is primarily a mode of celebration, but deeper critical understanding can develop as part of this celebration through the process of making the unlikely connections and distinctions that come from the “mashing up” of two different texts. I argue that a similar dynamic is at play in Hall’s videos.

I also argue that Hall’s videos follow Dyer’s argument that there is no solid, eternally consistent “original” that pastiche imitates. Rather, Dyer claims, pastiche “imitates its idea of that which it imitates (its idea being anything from an individual memory through a group’s shared and constructed remembering to a perception current at a given cultural historical moment)” (55). In other words: any act of imitation is, first, an act of decoding: to imitate something, that thing must first be filtered through someone’s subjective lens – informed by their cultural context – and it is this subjective understanding of the “original,” rather than the original itself, that is imitated. There is, as Stuart Hall notably points out, no way to interact with a cultural text that is not in some way mediated by the cultural context and subjectivity of the decoder (“Encoding/Decoding”). Dyer argues that it is a shift in context that characterizes pastiche, rather than a change to the original text itself: “the pastiched text does not itself change: leaving aside the vagaries of manuscripts and editions, the words are what they are, but the perception of their significance and affect changes... different periods and cultures see and hear

different things in texts and this must be registered in any imitation " (55). What would it mean to look at Hall's depictions of Belle walking through the village, or Cinderella as a young Black gay man, as a shift in the perspective from which he looks at Disney films, rather than a change to the actual films themselves? This relates to my idea of Hall as "looking queerly" at Disney films; by mobilizing pastiche, Hall is able to suggest that he is not actually changing anything substantial about Disney; rather, he's outlining what Disney can look like when the cultural perspective through which it is "seen and heard" (Dyer 55) is a queer one.

"Cinderfella" is most emblematic of Hall's typical structure, where he takes several popular songs, mashes them up with Disney songs, and uses these mashups to tell a story based on a Disney film. While the video does have moments of comedy, its primary goal is not to elicit laughter, but rather to produce an emotionally earnest retelling of the Cinderella story centered around a gay couple. Mashups of Disney songs with pop songs are used to incite the same senses of wistful dreaming and celebration of love that are present in the Disney film, with the insertion of drag queens, queer cultural references, queer characters and queer love stories. While some songs *are* parodied, even these parodies are eventually incorporated back into the sincere tone of the overall video. For example, a rewriting of Katy Perry's "Firework" begins as a full-on comic parody, playing with the line "do you ever feel/ like a plastic bag?" by pushing it to more and more ridiculous similes of unpleasant things one could feel like. Performer GloZell Green (performing as the Fairy Godmother) sings comic lines such as "do you ever feel like a toilet bowl?" escalating towards the comic conclusion "if you answered yes, then you nasty," complete with a classic comic record scratch noise. In this moment, the video begins to take on a Weird Al Yankovic-style parodic tone; however, the parody ends on a sincere note, as the song climbs to its emotional climax and the jokes easily melt away as GloZell's voice adopts a much more

sincere and hopeful tone. As the music ascends upwards, GloZell begins singing “you’ve just gotta release your dreams, and make believe, with faith and trust, and a little bit of pixie dust”. The parody is subordinated to sincerity, and the song ends with a wistful message of hope and dreaming. Yet while the parodic tone constantly gives way to one of sincere homage, I would argue that the video maintains a critique throughout, as the critique comes not from parodying Disney films or pop songs, but rather by putting the two in dialogue. While primarily celebratory, the video still manages to produce effective criticism of the gender structures of both Disney films and pop songs through this dialogue.

The video opens with the classic song from *Cinderella*, “A Dream is a Wish Your Heart Makes,” mashed up with Jessie J’s “Who You Are.” The mashup takes the values of the 1950 song about the powers of dreaming and wishing for more and updates the sound by putting it in dialogue with a 2011 song that explores similar themes. Beginning with the opening chords of the Jesse J song, the sound is immediately that of contemporary pop, while the opening lyrics are those from the *Cinderella* song, blending old and new and emphasizing their musical and ideological consistency. The songs are both about holding onto dreams and letting them carry you through challenging situations. The *Cinderella* song urges listeners to keep on believing “no matter how your heart is grieving;” similarly, Jesse J’s message is to hold on to yourself even when “it’s hard to follow your heart.” Jesse J’s song is anchored by the phrase “seeing is deceiving, dreaming is believing,” which sounds like it comes straight out of a Disney film. It is not hard to see the similarities between the two songs, and Hall clearly uses the mashup to demonstrate the continuity of *Cinderella*’s story with contemporary pop sensibilities (and, by extension, the queer story of two men falling in love that he is telling in his video).

Furthermore, “A Dream is a Wish Your Heart Makes” is a classic example of one of Disney’s most popular (and arguably most queer) song types: the “I Want” song. As I discuss in Chapter Two, the aptly-titled “I Want” songs of classic Disney films are focused on longing, dreaming, and yearning for a better, often less restricted or contained, life. These types of songs speak to common queer experiences, as they are often focused on longing for a lover from whom the protagonist is separated, their messages of longing line up with the experiences of closeted desire and unrequited love. Cinderella’s stepfamily insists that he can’t end up with the prince because of his gender; thus, the video emphasizes why Disney’s famous “I Want” songs are particularly relevant to queer viewers. Hall highlights a queer sensibility behind one of Disney’s signature song types and dramatizes a queer use of Disney songs that has existed for over half a century.

While the mashup of “A Dream is a Wish Your Heart Makes” with “Who You Are” is primarily a way of demonstrating continuity between *Cinderella*’s ideals and contemporary aesthetics and gay sensibilities, there is a subtle difference between the two songs that challenges some of the ideology behind *Cinderella*. As I outlined in Chapter Three, one of the most important distinctions between classic Disney protagonists of the 1950s and those after the release of *The Little Mermaid* in 1989 is a change in the way that they sing about their goals and dreams. While the “I Want” songs of earlier films are about passive longing, the “I Want” songs from later films see Disney protagonists who are assertive in pursuing their goals. While still about longing, the songs are also about a drive to action, functioning similarly to Stacy Wolf’s description of “The Wizard and I” from *Wicked* as “build[ing] gradually verse by verse to become an ‘I will/I can’ song” (12).

“A Dream is a Wish Your Heart Makes” does not have the drive that later Disney “I Want” songs do; however, by mashing it up with “Who You Are,” Hall is able to imbue this early Disney song with the affective drive of a post-1989 one. While both songs are about not letting bad situations pull you away from your dreams, “Who You Are” has an additional message about also not letting normative drives prevent you from being true to yourself. There is a resistance embedded in Jesse J’s insistence to not “lose who you are” in this dreaming that is absent from Cinderella’s passive longing. Hall’s mashup thus combines Cinderella’s dreams about things getting better with Jessie J’s insistence that these dreams do not distract from a confident assertion of a sense of self. “Who You Are” also sounds very different from a classic Disney song, as its more driving and vocally powerful modern pop style allows for a vocal style that fits its confident lyrics. While celebrating Cinderella’s desire to “keep wishing on stars,” Hall interrogates the passive way that Cinderella does so. After expressing a passive longing for his life to get better, Hall immediately questions (borrowing lyrics from Jessie J’s song) “why am I doing this to myself?” He mentions “I nearly left the real me on the shelf,” and emphasizes the message: “don’t lose who you are.” As this song frames a scene in which Cinderella is taunted by his step-family, the lyrics highlight how, while dreaming is important, it needs to be accompanied by a stronger sense of self and a more assertive drive, lest Cinderella lose himself to the passive deference he has shown his family while he “leaves the real him on the shelf.” Despite not clearly criticizing *Cinderella*, Hall’s incorporation of Jesse J’s song still functions critically by rejecting the passivity and acquiescence expressed in the older song.

I could conclude on reading the video as using contemporary pop songs to criticize some aspects of classic Disney stories. However, what is particularly interesting about Hall’s videos is that this critique goes both ways, as he also uses Disney’s universe to “fix” issues in pop songs.

Once Cinderella arrives at the ball, a chorus of women sing a mashup of “I Kissed a Girl” by Katy Perry with “Kiss the Girl” from *The Little Mermaid*. Katy Perry’s song is known for being a particularly abysmal attempt at a queer anthem that both exoticizes and trivializes queer women. Lyrics such as “you’re my experimental game” and “it’s not what good girls do” treat romantic and sexual activity between women as an exciting taboo for the self-identified straight singer to experiment with, with no concern for the feelings of the people she uses as games and experiments. Her lyrics reinforce harmful cultural stereotypes about lesbian experiences as a “phase,” something done for attention, or exotic and scandalous. Of course, topics such as using someone for sexual experimentation do not fit into the romance-driven Disney aesthetic, so Perry’s more problematic lyrics don’t have a home in Hall’s video, as they do not fit his attempt to imitate a Disney-inspired story. Rather, these lyrics are modified and replaced by lyrics from Disney songs that change Perry’s message of taboo experimentation into those of love and celebration. Most notably, Perry’s line “I hope my boyfriend don’t mind it” is replaced with “take me away on a magic carpet,” and the line “don’t mean I’m in love tonight” is replaced with “can you feel that love tonight.” An easy first reaction to these changes is to assume that the removal of lyrics associated with infidelity and one-night stands is an inherently conservative move of censorship and policing of sexuality. However, in this case, Disney’s privileging of a less explicitly sexual romance is anything but depoliticizing or conservative: rather, Disney ideals of a desexualized romantic love are made politically resistant in this moment, as Hall uses Disney imagery (the magic carpet) and lyrics (can you feel the love tonight) to challenge Katy Perry’s biphobic and homophobic lyrics. Perry’s dismissive and exploitative approach to queer sexuality has no place in a Disney-aestheticized world, and it becomes repurposed into a much

more empowering song about same-sex desire as a source of magic and love, using Disney's aesthetics to empower queer experiences that Perry's more sexual lyrics trivialize.

"Beauty and the Beat Boots" is a very different video from "Cinderfella." While "Cinderfella" is an earnest love story, "Beauty and the Beat Boots" is primarily a comedy, as it follows Belle from *Beauty and the Beast* wandering through a West Hollywood-style neighborhood and singing a modified version of the song "Belle" about queer life. Despite its comic tone, however, it is still more mashup than parody, since most of the comedy in the video is not at the expense of Disney's *Beauty and the Beast*, but rather comes more from the collision between Belle's character and the gay village through which she wanders: we're not mocking Belle or laughing *at* her, but rather laughing at the humour that comes from her unexpected interactions with the space. The video celebrates both the village and the Disney film, much as the Who/Madonna video that Booth analyzes celebrates both musicians: the comedy comes from clashes between two valued texts, rather than the contrast between one privileged text and one criticized text. Despite its simultaneous celebration of both queer culture and *Beauty and the Beast*, this comparison of the two raises critical points about both. While the villagers in the video make fun of Belle, calling her "bargain, busted [and] basic," their commentary is not much different from the villagers of the Disney film, who also criticize Belle as she wanders through the French village in the film. The majority of the jokes in the video consist of not of criticisms of Disney, but as in-jokes for queer viewers about U-Hauls and drag queens' problems with wigs, with Belle serving largely as a focalizing point for the audience to follow through the village rather than a target of the video's criticism.

The video's comedy often comes when Belle's sweet, sincere Disney Princess aesthetic is put in dialogue with the sexual content relevant to the village, as she sings lines about go-go boys

and their “thirsty clientele,” and reads a copy of *Adelante* with a scantily-clad man on the cover while she exclaims “it’s my favourite!” However, Belle is never shocked by moments of explicit sexuality, but rather integrates the sexual content and language rather smoothly and sincerely into her song, suggesting (as Hall’s videos often do) that queer content and Disney mesh quite naturally. Much of the humour comes from the nonchalant and casual way that Belle navigates and interacts with the queer villagers. The underlying joke of the video is that it presents images which seem like they shouldn’t go together (a Disney princess and go-go dancers) and shows them fitting together rather seamlessly, defying the expectation that these two worlds would clash. The result *is* humour, but not at the expense of Belle, but rather at the surprise that Belle is quite comfortable in a sexualized context. It would have been easy to create a video in which Belle was uncomfortable or overwhelmed by the village, which would have had the parodic effect of explicitly criticizing and mocking Disney’s characters for their incompatibility with the real world. Indeed, this is the implication at the beginning of the video, as Belle is played by Colleen Ballinger, who is primarily associated with her character Miranda Sings, who is notably uncomfortable with anything sexual. However, Ballinger’s Belle is, surprisingly, nothing like her iconic Sings character, and is instead extremely comfortable with displays of sexuality.

Unlike “Cinderfella,” moments of critique in “Beauty and the Beat Boots” end up coming from the similarities, rather than the differences, between the Disney film and the contemporary setting with which it is mashed up. The video foregrounds Belle’s naïve, daydreaming mentality, as characters comment on how she is “stuck in Arendelle.” However, the villagers with whom she engages are also characterized as having a similar naivety; the characters are completely absorbed in aesthetics, fun, and sex (store owners Adam and Steve literally cannot produce words because they can only say “yas”), leading Belle to exclaim “there must be more than yas



girl get your life.” Rather than one of the two mashed-up texts (Disney and the village) commenting on the other, their comparison draws out a similarity between both of them, as they are both characterized by a sort of carefree joviality that can potentially lead to obliviousness.

While primarily celebrated and explored in a fun, comic way, the absentminded dreaminess of both Belle and the village are also subtly criticized by the video’s visuals. The naivety of Belle and the seemingly romanticized village through which she wanders is contrasted with constant reminders of threats to the safety of the village. Belle’s idyllic fairy-tale home seems straight out of a Disney movie; however, there is an “anti-crime technology” sign in front that serves as a reminder of crime issues and safety concerns in gay villages like the ones she wanders through exist, as well as the sort of creeping gentrification and increased policing that home security systems imply. Later, while she sings the line “it’s so grand to be LGBT. Here, everyone’s embracing,” Belle is positioned in front of hateful protestors carrying “gays go to hell” signs. The complete absence of political discussion or depth in the characters’ conversations is, on its own, presented as primarily fun and jovial. However, its contrast with the visuals draws attention to the problems with this absentmindedly celebratory worldview, as the video does not allow the viewer to ignore the problems that the characters in the video are ignoring. The elephant in the room becomes visually emphasized, and the characters by contrast are criticized for their blissful unawareness; without engaging in direct satire, Hall’s juxtaposition of two images allows the critique to still emerge without compromising the largely celebratory tone of the video.

The problems with this absentminded blissfulness also briefly creep into the text, as one of the characters makes a transphobic comment, “I heard she used to be a male,” without any of the characters criticizing the comment or pointing out its problems. On the one hand, it’s

possible that this line reflects the underlying transphobic microaggressions that can come from a song written by a cisgender gay man. The characters may not address the problem with the comment because the writer may *also* have not seen an issue with the comment: in light of recent issues surrounding Hall's statements about *RuPaul's Drag Race* and transgender issues, there is a chance that this may be the case<sup>95</sup>. However, regardless of the author's intent, those who *are* aware of the problems with the comment are still positioned in this moment to criticize the blithe unawareness of the characters in the scene, even if the author shares this blithe unawareness in this moment. The characters' daydreaming and celebration of the community is, in some cases, depoliticizing and distracts from the real threats and discrimination surrounding them, including their own moments of transphobia; in this sense, the video sends the subtle critique that, while unbridled celebration of the more fun aspects of queer culture can be enjoyable and empowering, it needs to be tempered with an awareness of political issues lest it lead to a depoliticizing situation in which threats and hatred are literally just ignored in favour of a romanization of LGBTQ+ life.

This critique, while not the primary focus of the video, functions as an effective criticism of both Disney and contemporary queer culture, allowing for an unironic, seemingly uncritical video to still communicate critical messages. Disney is infamous for their "sugarcoating" of history. Discussing Disney's tendency to sanitize the historical content they represent, Tison Pugh argues that "by reinventing and reinterpreting reality, including unpleasant aspects of reality, Disney can re-signify virtually any countercultural element into its utopian vision" (10).

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<sup>95</sup> In response to drag performer Aquaria's criticism of *RuPaul's Drag Race* largely excluding drag kings, transgender contestants, and other performers who are not cisgender men, an account alleged to be Hall's personal Facebook account commented calling these criticisms "annoying," saying "if she wants this she should create her own show" (quoted in Kelly). This chapter was begun before this incident, complicating my initial perspective about Hall's politics in light of his recent decision to align himself with the ongoing cisnormativity and misogyny characterizing in *Drag Race*. I want to state my support of trans and nonbinary performers and my clear opposition to the way that Hall's comment contributes to their ongoing oppression within queer media.

Discussing the specific example of Disney's representation of pirates, Pugh points out that "if pillaging and plundering can be construed as appropriate pastimes within a utopia of play and innocence, the limits of Disney's ability to resymbolize a countercultural ethos appear virtually endless" (11). D. Soyini Madison has made similar commentary about the way that Disney misrepresents sex workers in *Pretty Woman* in order to resignify their experiences into a "Disneyfied" framework that is unable to appropriately address their lives<sup>96</sup>. No matter how complex a figure Disney chooses to represent, they will find a way to ignore all of the complicated, sexual, violent, and other "mature" issues surrounding that figure in order to turn them into a sanitized, easily-consumable Disney product. It should not be a surprise to anyone reading this at this point that queer culture has faced similar issues recently. From assimilationist politics to the corporatization of "pride" that attempts to reduce queer activism to purchasing a pair of rainbow Converse, queer culture has come up against its own issues of sanitization, where less desirable or palatable topics are either "softened" to make them easier to digest, or ignored altogether.

Even in the world of scholarship and criticism, Heather Love notes, queer writers tend to focus on a "mode of affirmation" whereby "we construct a genealogy that steps from stone to stone, looking for high points of pride, gender flexibility, and resistance" that overlooks harder-to-manage experiences of shame and struggle (515). Love argues that "we need a genealogy of queer affect that embraces the negative, shameful, and difficult feelings central to queer existence" (515). While it might be a stretch to argue that "Beauty and the Beat Boots" is engaged in a genealogy of negative queer affect, it does critique queer culture that is hyper-invested in the positive to the point of overlooking problems. While Hall does not primarily

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<sup>96</sup> *Pretty Woman* was produced under Disney's "Touchstone Pictures" label. Touchstone was specifically created as a part of Disney's branding strategy to expand their productions into PG-rated and more mature content.

criticize, parody or lampoon this culture in his video – it is often lovingly rendered – he also does not entirely let them off the hook, highlighting issues with transphobia amongst queer communities, safety and gentrification issues in urban queer life, and the ongoing threat of hate groups. The mashup aesthetics of Hall's videos allow him to create an homage to a film and a culture he clearly loves that avoids the scathing irony or ridiculous parody often expected of queer critique, while also ensuring that neither is able to escape a critical lens.

“Beauty and the Beat Boots” also gains nuance when seen in the context of its precedent, Hall's earlier video, “Beauty and the Beat.” While Belle is played by a different actress, and the setting is different, GloZell makes a cameo at the end as the same character she played in “Beauty and the Beat,” explicitly tying the two videos together. This comparison is significant because “Beauty and the Beat” takes on a similar structure, but with race rather than gender and sexuality as its central topic (although both are, obviously, intertwined). A white woman playing Belle wanders through a Black neighborhood singing a re-writing of *Beauty and the Beast*'s “Belle.” However, in this case, the characters in the Black neighbourhood do not engage in the same blissful obliviousness that the characters in “Beauty and the Beat Boots” do. The threats to queer life in “Beat Boots” are implicit and never explicitly acknowledged by the characters. Meanwhile, threats to Black lives in “Beat” are explicit and acknowledged by characters; one scene, for example, is bluntly interrupted by a gunshot, from which characters run. This is not to say that the video presents a patronizingly bleak, tragic depiction of Black communities: the neighbourhood is very much celebrated and full of life, and it is clear that Hall is painting a loving depiction of Black community and life very much in line with his celebration of queer community in “Beat Boots.” However, the characters lack the absent-minded neglect that the characters in “Beat Boots” do; they instead have a more mindful mentality that blends rich and

celebratory lives with an open awareness and acknowledgement of the threats to these lives that come from the racist structures underlying American society, including the overpolicing and police violence against Black people and Black neighborhoods, redlining and economic oppression, and other forms of institutionalized violence and discrimination that lead to a situation where Black communities like the ones in the video find their everyday lives disrupted by violence and gunshots.

Both of Hall's *Beauty and the Beast* videos balance a celebration of a community with an acute awareness of the threats that community faces. What makes the primary difference between these two is that the characters in the village are unwilling to acknowledge these threats in a way that is dangerous and depoliticizing, allowing transphobic comments to go uncriticized and hate groups to go ignored. In contrast, the characters in Hall's working-class Black neighborhood share the celebration and life of those in the village but are also more nuanced in their awareness and negotiation of threats. This also functions as critique of another larger issue facing the space of "the village" in contemporary queer culture: its increasing gentrification. The village is fast becoming (or, as some may argue, has already become) less a place for "queer life" and more a place for "wealthy, middle-class, cisgender, white, gay life." Thus, the space of the village is becoming more and more inhabited by people whose class and racial privilege allows them to overlook major political issues threatening more vulnerable queer people, who are being forced to leave the space due to increasing rent prices and the replacement of affordable housing with luxury condos. As is often the case, white, cisgender, and middle-class queer people tend to focus on preserving aspects of their class, race, and gender privilege in ways that alienate other queer people from their forms of sexual politics. While the cast of Hall's video is racially diverse, the characters' more blasé behavior reflects that of a gentrifying village whose wealth

keeps them incubated from (and thus allows them to ignore) many major threats to queer life, particularly those types of queer life that don't have the same protections. The neighborhood in "Beauty and the Beat," on the other hand, is populated by people who don't have the same class privilege that inoculates them from the most harmful parts of this discrimination, and thus don't have the luxury of pretending that problems aren't there.

While more obvious forms of gentrification (huge luxury condo developments popping up, old apartments being renovated with the rent being exponentially increased, luxury boutiques and stores opening) are often perceived as a relatively recent issue, the pervasive whiteness of the village and its structural problems with racism are in no way new. Charles I. Nero, for example, points out how "white hostility toward African Americans" (229) and other forms of racial discrimination have historically led to overwhelmingly white populations in queer villages. Nero draws attention to the case of the Faubourg Marigny of New Orleans, which developed as primarily white through a combination of the nearby, white-staffed University of New Orleans (whose status as a segregated workplace led to segregated neighborhoods surrounding it) and the way that the proliferation of gay homeowners in the area was related to an exclusive group. He outlines how, in an attempt to increase gay home ownership, new homeowners were actively recruited from both "informal networks of middle-class gay men" (234) and working-class service workers in the area, both of which consisted almost entirely of white men. The result was that this small, informal network had priority in purchasing new homes, thus establishing the neighborhood as a primarily white one. This was, of course, compounded by existing mortgage discrimination that still results in people of colour being less likely to be approved for mortgages than white people with the exact same (and, often, even less) income. Nero discusses how poor white applicants are actually more likely to be approved for mortgage loans than comparatively

wealthy Black applicants: one Federal Reserve study of 6.4 million applications he cites demonstrates how literally the poorest white applicants were more likely to receive loans than Black applicants in the highest income bracket.

Rochella Thorpe examines both the racism exhibited in white queer spaces, and the aggressive refusal by white queers to acknowledge or believe accounts of this racism in an attempt to preserve a visualization of queer spaces as a “haven” and deny their potential for racist actions. She argues that these structures led Black queer communities (in her study, specifically Black lesbians) to create their own spaces apart from the white-dominated queer sites most commonly associated with queer life in the dominant imagination:

It seems important to note that the lack of awareness about racial problems in white lesbian bars in Detroit existed precisely because race was never adequately dealt with as an issue in these bars. African-American lesbians who had been discriminated against might have felt it would be inappropriate to discuss these experiences with white women or that they would not be believed, since white lesbians thought of their bars as a haven. Indeed, bar culture was both dear to the white lesbians who participated in it and under fire from heterosexual society. Nonetheless, to declare the bars a safe place for all would be to ignore the very real experiences of African-American lesbians (50).

In many ways, the structural racism – as well as the structural disavowal of this racism – that Thorpe outlines is very much at play in the village of *Beauty and the Beat Boots*. Desperate to see their site as a haven, the queer community members become wrapped up in this celebration to the point where they ignore or disavow threats both internal and external, particularly when those threats primarily pose a danger to the more marginalized amongst them, so they can preserve their utopic vision of the village.

This context also adds subversive power to Hall's disidentificatory practice in the video. As a Black gay man, Hall occupies a subject position that is often viewed by dominant culture as being antithetical to images of the white-coded gay village. However, as writer, choreographer, and producer of this video, he disidentifies with the image of the village to produce a utopic hope for the possibilities what the village *could* be; like his image of Disney, the space is given new life and new hope for transformation. While he is critical of the village's issues, he also asserts his belonging within the space, along with the belonging of other queer characters of colour who appear in the video. This assertion also goes past simply the "belonging and inclusion" of queer characters of colour in a place that is still primarily coded as white, but to moments of more significant restructuring that center the experience of queer people of colour: for example, Belle's "favourite book" is an issue of *Adelante*, a magazine for Latine audiences written in both Spanish and English. Hall could have easily chosen a more well-known English publication like *Out* or *The Advocate*, but chose to have Belle read *Adelante* (and implying her fluency in Spanish), thus centering non-Anglophone and Hispanic perspectives as the centre of queer culture in his utopic construction of a queer village. Intervening in a context where queer people of colour are erased or devalued (or even perceived as imposters: Nero outlines how Black gay men in popular media are most commonly depicted as either imposters or frauds), Hall centers their experiences as being the lifeblood of these very spaces. Muñoz argues that queer people of colour find ways to "identify with ethnos or queerness despite the phobic charges in both fields" (11). In positioning himself as a Black queer man in both a Black neighbourhood in "Beauty and the Beat" and a queer village in "Beauty and the Beat Boots," Hall is doing exactly this type of work, where he finds a way to identify with and celebrate both locations, without ignoring their



problems, imagining the utopic possibility of spaces while still criticizing their flaws as they currently exist.

All of this is not to say that Hall presents queer cultures in general as currently being flippant, naïve, or ignorant of discrimination and problems; this is simply the criticism launched in “Beauty and the Beat Boots,” targeting a specific problem that is emerging in the specific space of the village, and wealthy, white queer spaces in general. Hall’s other projects present fiercely political queer folx who are anything but blasé. His song “Fag,” for example, is a pointed and assertive response to homophobic discrimination, and many of his queer-themed songs are poignant and polemical. Hall is openly political about both race and queerness (and their intersections), and his identity as a Black, gay man is central to the politics communicated through his work. I thus want to emphasize that the blasé, naïve queers of “Beauty and the Beat Boots” are not intended to be a criticism of queer culture as a whole, but rather a targeted criticism of specific issues facing some people within aspects of queer culture, particularly those invested in the scene of the increasingly-gentrifying village.

While Hall has engaged in a variety of different modes of criticism and transformative work throughout his career, many of his mashups follow a similar structure. Through earnest sincerity in “Cinderfella” and comedy in “Beauty and the Beat Boots,” Hall’s underlying message is consistently that queer people and experiences – in particular the experience of a Black gay man – are not alien to the world and values of Disney. Through mashup aesthetics, Hall emphasizes how the classic *Cinderella* film and its music applies quite naturally to a gay romance story, and how Belle seems quite at home comfortably hanging out with go-go dancers in the village. Furthermore, while I argue that this message of belonging is, in itself, empowering, I also emphasize that Hall does not let it exist without a critical function, as he uses

mashup aesthetics to criticize the gender politics of *Cinderella*, the sexual politics of Katy Perry, and issues surrounding the depoliticization that emerges from romanticized understandings of queer life. Hall thus insists on a place of belonging within dominant cultures; however, this place is one that does not require assimilation, but allows for queer perspectives to maintain their critical function and distinctive identity and place even as they find belonging and acceptance within the larger community.

### **Superfruit's "Hi-Fi DIY" Aesthetic**

You can tell these three were theater nerds in high school

- Comment by YouTube user Dutch 2061 on Superfruit's "Frozen Medley"

Superfruit is a performance duo made up of Mitch Grassi and Scott Hoying, two of the members of popular a cappella group Pentatonix. Their output includes original music, song covers, and YouTube videos where they answer fan questions and engage in discussions about culture, politics, and their personal lives. Some of their most frequent (and popular) video types are Broadway-themed, including covers and medleys of songs from musicals (including *La La Land*, *Wicked*, and *Frozen*) and the reworking of popular music in the style of classic Broadway numbers ("Hip-Hop Goes Broadway" and "Pop Goes Broadway," the latter of which features Broadway legend Shoshanna Bean). This section navigates one of the major paradoxes in which Superfruit's videos exist: despite being professional singers with major record deals, the cover videos that Superfruit releases typically feature them performing in ways that downplay their talents and celebrity status in an attempt to make their performances seem more relatable, like DIY fan videos that anyone can make. As in my analysis of *Wicked*, I argue that Superfruit demonstrates a contemporary extension on D.A. Miller's discussion of queer musical theatre reception as a participatory practice that opens up performance – particularly gendered

performance – as a site where audience members can occupy gendered subject positions that are otherwise made culturally unavailable to them.

Superfruit’s “*La La Land* Medley” opens on a dramatic long shot of Scott Hoying as he plays the intro to “Mia & Sebastian’s Theme” from the hit film *La La Land* on a baby grand piano while the camera slowly zooms in on him. As the camera moves closer, however, it gradually becomes apparent that Hoying is not actually playing the piano, but rather dramatically moving his hands across the keys in an imitation of piano playing. Hoying’s performance thus transforms from one type of imitation – a trained pianist playing a cover of a song – to a very different type of imitation that draws on traditions of mime and theatricality. This moment emblemizes the general aesthetic of Superfruit’s mashups, which emphasizes an image of spontaneity, impulsivity, and a DIY ethos. Props and costumes (when performers even wear costumes: they mostly wear casual clothing) are improvised using cheap materials, sloppy makeup, and household objects like paper plates. In their “*Frozen* Medley,” Kirstin Maldonado drapes her hair over others’ heads to use it as a wig, as performers’ bodies are used in lieu of costume pieces. Everything is also filmed in one shot, as both the *mise en scene* and the editing (or lack thereof) are designed to downplay technical proficiency and planning, and to highlight impulsivity. In other words, everything is carefully planned to make it look like the performers were neither careful nor possessed of a plan.

The democratizing message that this aesthetic sends is clear: you don’t need to have classical training, or high production budgets to participate in a Broadway performance, and this performance can exist without the normative values of “polish,” “refinement” and careful engineering often associated with professional theatre. What matters more to this type of cover is an understanding of the emotional impulses and theatricality of the songs, and the kinds of mime

skills and imitative performance commonly demonstrated by drag performers and others who engage in lip syncs and air band performance. This isn't to say that the type of performance modeled doesn't require skill – theatrical and camp performance styles, emotional intuition, mimicry and mime are, of course, complex and challenging. However, development of this skill breaks from classical training institutions that exclude many people both directly (costs of lessons, discrimination embedded in schools and conservatories) and indirectly (classical traditions that model principles often based on upholding highly-regulated styles of performance associated with white, middle-class values), emerging instead from a more accessible form of training and practice. Superfruit's videos send the message that you don't need the tools and training of a conventional Broadway actor to perform a Broadway song. They imply that anyone watching their videos has the resources to create similar videos, thus modeling a sort of fan and audience engagement that calls audiences and fans to become performers themselves by participating in their own medleys, covers, and fan videos.

Considering the emphasis on the “call to participate” that D.A. Miller associates with queer musical theatre fandom, it is not hard to connect the style of performance modeled by Superfruit with historic queer reception practices. Musical theatre fan practices have historically allowed queer Broadway fans to enact the performance of subject positions that were otherwise culturally unavailable to them: in the example of piano bars that Miller gives, gay men are permitted to perform a feminine subjectivity while performing along to musical theatre songs, despite being told elsewhere they are not allowed to occupy this subject position. While Miller does not reference it directly, the practices he outlines are also related to the practice of drag communities, such as the Black and Latine drag ball tradition, which are largely structured around inhabiting and queering (or, to use Muñoz's terms, disidentifying with) subject positions

from which participants are systemically excluded. Superfruit's videos send a similar message: despite the high production values of musicals like *La La Land*, a fan without access to the budget required to make this musical can still access the subject positions and experiences of Emma Stone and Ryan Gosling (or the characters they play) by performing the songs in response videos, using their own resources and experiences to imitate, embody, and queer them. Much like historic queer spectators, these fans are claiming a subjectivity that they are elsewhere told is "not for them."

This embodiment of culturally-prohibited subject positions is also specifically associated with gender and sexuality. Hoying and Grassi are both queer (Hoying is a cisgender gay man, and Grassi is genderqueer), and their work as Superfruit (as the name suggests) openly celebrates queerness, homoeroticism, and non-normative approaches to gender. The duo performs medleys of songs from extremely heteronormative shows such as *La La Land* (largely a love letter to a sort of bland, white, hetero-utopian view of Golden Age Hollywood Musicals) while emphasizing queer aesthetics and foregrounding queer relationships. The "*La La Land* Medley" opens with a suggestion that Kristin Maldonado is going to be playing the role of Hoying's love interest, as she approaches him to compliment his piano playing. However, this narrative is quickly brushed aside as Grassi jumps into Hoying's arms and they begin making out while romantic music plays in the background. The heteronormative frame of the musical is thus quickly replaced by a queer couple at its center, with Maldonado playing a supporting role. The two are – like Todrick Hall – able to disidentify with popular musicals by asserting queer presence within them. The actors also smoothly alternate between characters of different genders, indicating the change with as little as a bad wig or literally nothing besides the choice to begin acting as that character. Grassi and Hoying indulge in the queer pleasures of using fan

participation to act out relationships and gendered subject positions from which they are otherwise excluded.

These videos embody a contradiction that has been inherent to musicals for decades: despite appearing DIY, informal, and impulsive, they are actually heavily choreographed and planned. In fact, it is exactly this planning that allows the videos to appear natural: “*La La Land* Medley” and “*Frozen* Medley” are both entirely filmed in one shot (or at least edited to appear that way: there’s an obvious “cheat” moment in the former that could be used to sneak in a cut). This choice emphasizes spontaneity and suggests a lack of engineering, since there are no edits or other obvious signs of cinematic post-production or polish: we see everything that the camera captures, with no interference or modification after the fact. However, this suggestion is, of course, deceptive: to film something in one shot (especially with a constantly moving camera like the one in these videos), the video has to be extensively blocked beforehand: the camera operator and actors need to know exactly where to go, and when to go there, so the scene can proceed smoothly with everyone consistently framed appropriately. Because the videos are medleys, there are constant transitions from song to song and scene to scene: creators would have to rehearse and prepare to remember when one song bleeds into another, when scenes transition, where their entrances and exits are between songs and scenes, where the camera needs to be during all of this, and also where props need to be laid out. Behind the spontaneous surface is a rigorously engineered production process.

This careful engineering does not – of course – diminish the idea that “anyone could do it” with these videos: one does not need high budgets or technical training to put in the labour required to block and rehearse a production. While not everyone can sing the way that the members of Pentatonix can, for the most part videos like Superfruits are achievable without the

training, technology, or budgets that are often associated with Broadway productions. However, it is important to consider the tension between the casual, spontaneous image of Superfruit's videos and the engineering that goes into creating them. This is not new to musicals; Jane Feuer outlines in details the tension between engineering and spontaneity in golden age film musicals, arguing that "engineering is a prerequisite for the creation of effects of utter spontaneity" (65) and that this is used so that musical films "may appeal as 'folk' art while taking full advantages of the possibilities technology gives mass art" (7). Hollywood musicals, Feuer argues, attempt to negotiate their use of a medium associated with distance, polish, and the culture industry, with their desire to imitate live performance and achieve its appeals to audience connection and participation. Part of this process, according to Feuer, is this engineering of a sense of spontaneity, which is a tradition that I argue Superfruit continues. Superfruit benefits from the dissemination and technology of YouTube – which allows them to reach fans across the world in a way that live performance and participatory spaces like piano bars can't – and uses engineering techniques to minimize the aesthetics of distance and artifice created by a digitally distributed mediums. Thus, I don't see the choreography of Superfruit's videos as being opposed to a sense of sincerity, but rather an attempt to negotiate some of the downsides to digital dissemination, modeling a type of practice historically associated with liveness and geographically bound locations, but making it available to a wider range of people.

One limitation to Superfruit's performance is their lack of awareness of how their whiteness structures and limits their ability to queer texts. Grassi and Hoying are both white, and the three DIY covers I explore here (*Frozen*, *La La Land*, and *Wicked*), as well as many of their other cover videos, focus on songs from predominantly white texts. Thus, their intervention is, in many ways, adding white queer voices to white heteronormative musicals, leaving the whiteness

of the original musicals unchallenged and uncomplicated. This process, while subversive from the perspective of gender and sexuality, is also limited from the perspective of race. This also disrupts the videos' potential connections to queer fans of color, some of whom may not entirely relate to the performative spectatorship of two white queer people and may connect more with different forms of audience practice. Of course, as Rebecca Wanzo asserts, "there is not a single kind of black or African American fandom," and there are likely *also* many queer fans of color who relate to Superfruit's videos in a more straightforward way, as much as there are likely fans who do not connect with Superfruit at all. As with the rest of this project, it is my hope that the practices modeled can open up the possibility for intersections and coalitions, and that as many queer musical theatre audiences as possible may find some site of identification with the practices outlined; however, it is also important not to generalize spectatorship practices and thus foreground the ways that Superfruit's whiteness shapes their forms of queer reception, and how their form of queer spectatorship may also not resonate – or resonate in a limited or different way – with different queer fans.

In fact, Hoying and Grassi's white privilege limits their videos in the way it leaves the (often problematic) racial ideologies of the musicals to which they respond unchecked. The intervention of these videos, while empowering for white queer viewers, may be less relatable for queer viewers of color, who may not resonate with the queering of shows with racist structures, so long as these racist structures are neither critiqued nor acknowledged by the performers. Two of these videos do feature Kirstin Maldonado, a Latina performer, expanding their response to musicals as an assertion of white queer and Latina voices in the texts, rather than only white voices, although Maldonado's presence as a "featured guest" in the videos



instead of a core member of Superfruit, and her absence from many of their queer Broadway covers, limits this potential.

The inclusion of *La La Land* in Superfruit's repertoire of covers highlights the ways that white privilege structures some of Superfruit's artistic choices. *La La Land* is particularly notorious for the racist implications of a plot where a white protagonist tries to "save jazz" from the "sell-outs" (portrayed by predominantly Black men, including John Legend) of jazz fusion by "bringing it back to its roots." The idea that what jazz needs is for a white guy to save it from Black musicians who are bringing it in the "wrong direction" is rather obviously problematic: Ira Madison III and Seve Chambers delve into this misrepresentation of jazz in much more detail. However, Superfruit's cover indulges in the music of *La La Land* while remaining – like the queers of Todrick Hall's village in "Beauty and the Beat Boots" – blissfully unaware of the major issues with the film in which they are indulging. While Maldonado is in this video, there are no Black artists featured in any substantial way, and the two white performers (as the core members of Superfruit and the video's romantic couple) are foregrounded. At the very end of the video, a chorus emerges, which contains Black performers, but none are given solos or substantial screen time, as Black performers in this video – much like the movie on which it is based – are relegated to the background in a story about jazz.

It is true that *La La Land* is an aggressively heteronormative film that reflects on the "good old days" of Golden-Age Hollywood cinema, reinscribing all of the hetero-patriarchal tropes that go along with it. Therefore, a medley of songs from it starring trio of two queer people (who make out with each other) and a Latina woman *does* disrupt its heteronormativity and queer its narrative, making Superfruit's video a fruitful site for queer reception. However, *La La Land* is also a film that whitewashes jazz and seems to suggest that the best thing that can

happen to the genre is for a white man to lead it. The Golden Age nostalgia of the film is as white as it is heteronormative – I’m reminded of Roxanne Gay’s criticism of *The Help* as creating a “gleeful nostalgia in the air as if all the elderly white folks around me couldn’t help but think, ‘those were the days.’” – and to criticize its heteronormativity while ignoring its racism is to be complicit in the latter. *La La Land* is thus rendered in Superfruit’s video as a space that is opened for white queer pleasure, while still remaining uncritical of the aspects of the film that continue to make it a complicated and harmful site for audiences of color, particularly Black ones.

In cases where Superfruit covers artists of color (as in the majority of the artists in their “Hip Hop Goes Broadway”), their politics are also fraught, as they queer the gendered connotations of music of artists like Jay-Z, Jamie Foxx, and Nicki Minaj, only to simultaneously whitewash the songs in the process. “Hip Hop Goes Broadway” takes hip hop songs and re-arranges them entirely to sound like conventional musical theatre numbers: the lyrics stay the same, but the music is transformed entirely to fit into a “Broadway” mold. In doing so, the video suggests that “Broadway” and “hip hop” are opposed genres: the music has to be completely reworked for the songs to “go Broadway.” The songs are modified away from a genre associated primarily with African American and Latine performers, as their hip-hop styles and structures are erased: they are then sung by two white people. Granted, conventional musical theatre styles like the ones in which Hoying and Grassi sing *do* have a strong African American influence, as they were “produced primarily by Jewish artists who were influenced by the music of African Americans” (Wolf, *A Problem Like Maria* 17). In this sense, the style that Hoying and Grassi “convert” the hip hop songs into is, like the hip hop songs themselves, one rooted in African American traditions. There is thus potential for a critique that sees the videos as highlighting the

ways that seemingly white-coded Broadway styles are actually heavily influenced by historic African American music. A resistant reading could look at the video as a mashup of two styles – rather than a “conversion” of one style into another – thus highlighting the mutual importance of Black traditions to both. However, there is no evidence to suggest that Superfruit’s video is foregrounding this kind of historically aware approach, and their insistence on creating a clear binaristic divide between “hip hop” and “Broadway” (Hip Hop and Broadway are not being compared: rather, Hip Hop is being transformed, “going” Broadway) demonstrates a lack of recognition of the ways that these two genres have more in common than their distinction suggests.

This shift in the style of the songs carries the suggestion that hip hop music cannot be “Broadway” music the way that other song styles can: this reinforces a conventional, restricting notion of what “Broadway music” is allowed to sound like (and one that artists like Lin-Manuel Miranda have actively fought) that continues to exclude composers and writers of color from musical theatre. As with their *La La Land* cover, the performers do complicate the gender and sexual norms encoded in the songs they cover; however, they do so at the cost of reinforcing racialized norms of what “show tunes” are allowed to sound like and associating Broadway (and queer Broadway fan practices) with structures and aesthetics that – despite their origins in African American styles – have become heavily associated with white artists. Of course, all of this is not to say that Superfruit’s videos are useless; rather it is to temper my celebration of them and acknowledge the limitations and some of the problems with their racial positioning.

Overall, Superfruit’s queering of popular musical songs is complemented by a DIY aesthetic. Unlike other queer Broadway covers (like Hall’s, as well as popular videos by Michael Korte, and professionally-produced performances such as Miscast and Broadway Backwards),

Superfruit makes aesthetic choices that emphasize spontaneity, amateurism and low budget, all of which send the message that these are the types of videos that any fan can make. These choices clearly connect to the participatory history of queer Broadway fans: as D.A. Miller argues, queer connections to Broadway often originate in basements and bedrooms, where children dance and sing along to cast albums, performing gendered roles that go against the ones they're told to perform. Superfruit models a type of performance that very much mirrors these personal, participatory encounters with queer Broadway, showing audiences how the queer pleasures of sexual and gender transgressions through Broadway participation are open to anyone with the desire to perform.

### **Streaming Marie's Crisis: Connecting Contemporary Participation to Historical Structures**

I'm so over James Dean

- Superfruit, "Heartthrob"

This section examines how the types of performance in the videos I have analyzed earlier demonstrate larger shifts (along with some continuities) in relationship to their 20<sup>th</sup> century precedents. Central to this section is a discussion of the relationships between private and public, personal and communal, and shame and secrecy. In *Place for Us*, Miller emphasizes the inextricability of "solitude, shame, secretiveness" from Broadway pleasures; that, while much of post-Stonewall gay life is presented as a "declarable, dignified thing," musical theatre lingers as a "*living relic*" whose existence is "a shady one, tucked away in the closet, where cast albums and playbills occupy the space vacated by the recent removal of the erotic accessories to beside the bed" (26). Heather Love expands on this analysis to argue that Broadway functions in Miller's analysis as a sign that "pre-Stonewall" feelings of shame have not faded, but that "an important connection exists between queer experience and the feelings of shame and secrecy that

have long been associated with it” (495). As I have previously mentioned, Clum similarly describes the closet as the “breeding ground for show queens” (5). By comparing Miller’s previous accounts of piano bars with the performance practices highlighted by Hall and Superfruit – and with contemporary depictions of piano bars in popular culture – I argue that the connection between musicals and the closet has shifted. This is not to say that the shame of the past has somehow been exorcized from the Broadway musical (Love’s essay cautions against exactly this type of statement); rather, I argue that queer audiences process their shame differently in a contemporary context, navigating it in a more public way that breaks down the association of shame with secrecy. This is not a “solution” to the shame of the past, nor is it a purely celebratory “affirmative reclamation” of the type that Love cautions against (493): it is, however, a different way of processing and navigating shame. These performers are neither disavowing it nor denying it; rather, they are negotiating and navigating it in a sincere, open way.

For Miller, participation in piano bars is a contradictory experience of singing in a public venue while preserving private emotions and histories. Miller communicates a moment where he tried to give a man with whom he is enamored a tape of *South Pacific* as a gift: he argues that the gift did not lead to the romantic/ sexual connection he desired because it was an attempt “to impart to him that *homosexuality of one*” that represented “the archaic condition where one dreamed all alone” (23, emphasis in original). In the bar itself, he gives an example of a friend (named M in the book) who accidentally sings the wrong words to a song during a singalong. The friend is embarrassed, not because of his inaccuracy, but because he has betrayed something of his individual, private history with the song:

The reason had less to do with its inaccuracy or apparent absurdity than with its sense.

Too plainly did it betray his provincial juvenile desire, even more impatient than that of

Rose herself... to dwell in some fanciful New York where people were always running off to *the theatre*... how frightened we were of our own originality, of the consequences of thinking, as each of us couldn't help often having occasion to do, *some people ain't me* (54-55, emphasis in original).

In both of these cases, the pre-Stonewall shame of Broadway is realized as an individualized, personal thing. While these individual experiences still created communities and connections (the regulars at the piano bar still know each other and bond through a shared experience), the actual act of singing the songs is depicted as, itself, a largely internal, personal phenomenon – these men relate to each other because they share similar private histories, not because they desire to create a communal, publicly open forum where these individual histories can be expressed or shared openly. Similarly, Jack Halberstam describes queer shame and failure as something with creative and productive power, but also something that expresses that power quietly and secretively: “it quietly loses, and in losing it imagines other goals for life, for love, for art, and for being” (88). In a conventional “lost in the crowd” experience, being in a community of people allows the individual members to “hide together” and avoid sharing individual experiences or moments. It is a form of community connection that can be empowering and generative, but one based on the secrecy and privacy of each individual member, even as they sing together and bond over their mutual hiding.

The framing of this experience (communal connections and individual anonymity) is, of course, common to pre-Stonewall queer communities and organizations, so it makes sense that Miller would characterize Broadway in this way, since he sees show queens as a sort of “residual Stonewall culture.” The Mattachine Society, for example, constantly navigated the relationship between wanting a public *communal* identity, under which members could politically resist and

socially connect, while maintaining a private set of *individual* identities to maintain each member's secrecy. Their name was connected to a historical group whose very public, performative, communal activism was enabled by the anonymity of their individual members. As Jonathan Ned Katz explains:

One [historical] masque group was known as the "Société Mattachine." These societies, lifelong secret fraternities of unmarried townsmen who never performed in public unmasked, were dedicated to going out into the countryside and conducting dances and rituals during the Feast of Fools, at the Vernal Equinox. Sometimes these dance rituals, or masques, were peasant protests against oppression—with the maskers, in the people's name, receiving the brunt of a given lord's vicious retaliation. So we took the name Mattachine because we felt that we 1950s Gays were also a masked people, unknown and anonymous, who might become engaged in morale building and helping ourselves and others, through struggle, to move toward total redress and change (413).

In this description, it is exactly the masks that facilitate communal connection and activism; in a seemingly paradoxical relationship, the hiding of individual identities allows for the group to become more visible and outspoken, since they can now speak up with relative freedom. Miller's representation of piano bars is very similar: the suppression of individual histories and experiences allows for a visible and meaningful community to form, without the risk of those individual secrets' exposure. In the exception that proves the rule, M's moment of personal exposure is treated with derision and discomfort, showing how individual secrecy actually allows for a strong connection to community.

Superfruit and Hall, on the other hand, perform their queer connections to Broadway publicly, uploading them to YouTube channels with millions of subscribers. They model a public

performance of Broadway reception that is very much at odds with the “anonymity in numbers” model of Miller. In Miller’s model, a Broadway audience is encouraged to participate by imaging themselves performing as the divas onstage: however, this performance is done in secret as a private process: even as community members bond over their mutual private experiences, those experiences themselves and their details remain private. Contemporary audiences are, in contrast, broadcasting their participation for the world to see. While one can watch a YouTube video from the privacy of their own home, the primary message of Superfruit’s videos is that fans can – and should – also make their own videos, turning all audience members into public performers. Even if someone doesn’t want to film their own fan video, YouTube’s emphasis on posting in the comments section (which, due to the merging of Google accounts with YouTube accounts, means that many users’ posts will have their real names and profiles publicly displayed along with them), encouraging a form of visible public forum instead of private experiences of reception. I argue that this change represents a larger shift in queer Broadway reception, and queer community formation more generally, away from secrecy towards publicity and visibility. This is not to say, however, that queer shame has disappeared (shame and secrecy are not, after all, the same thing): I argue instead that audiences are, instead, processing complicated emotional experiences in a more public, visible way, which contains both its own possibilities for empowerment and its own dangers.

This is possibly most exemplified by the changing representation of piano bars in popular media. Marie’s Crisis – a historic piano bar in Hell’s Kitchen – has appeared recently on television; however, the experience of the bar seen on TV is very different from the actual experience of frequenting the bar in reality. In Ryan Murphy’s *The Politician*, for example, Ben Platt’s character is shown singing a solo at Marie’s Crisis (although the interior filming location



is actually *not* Marie's Crisis, it is diegetically established as Marie's, since they use the bar's exterior and the streets outside of it to establish the location). Before performing, he gives a speech to the bar's patrons, who listen to him attentively as he introduces his song; he then sits at a piano (backed by a full band) and performs the song, while the patrons stand in front of the stage, watching his performance attentively. The scene plays like either an open mic/coffeehouse event, or a bar with live entertainment featuring Platt's character as a performer. Of course, to anyone who has actually been to Marie's Crisis, this scene would make no sense: Marie's Crisis doesn't have a full band with electric guitars, and despite the occasional solo now and then (performed by special guests, regulars, and bar staff – not random first-year NYU students like Platt's character), the majority of the Marie's Crisis experience is in its singalongs. A location that is frequently characterized by a large group of people crowding together around a piano and singing together comes across as a space where a clearly-defined "audience" sits back and watches a single person perform, backed by a band. Thus, a site historically associated with the anonymity of the individual within the collective becomes reimagined as a site where an individual's subjectivity is put in the spotlight.

While actual piano bars do not function the same way that the fantasy version of Marie's Crisis does in *The Politician*, this popular representation is having a concrete impact on the bars themselves. Ashley Lee of the *Los Angeles Times* interviewed Marie's pianist Adam Tilford, who discussed the increase in patrons at Marie's who attend because they saw the bar on TV. He observes that they demand a different type of music than has historically been played at piano bars (more Disney and Idina Menzel, less Sondheim or Kander and Ebb) and largely push for a structure that is more focused on solos and individual interests than on the larger group experience of the room. Tilford mostly frames this in a negative way (demanding, entitled

patrons ruining others' experiences by throwing crumpled-up bills at the pianists, demanding solos, and recording people on their phones without consent), and it is definitely an indication of some of the dangers that come with increased visibility. However, it also speaks to ways that the larger visibility of queer culture in popular culture can re-shape queer culture itself, as people begin to expect real-life sites of reception such as bars to more closely resemble what they see on TV (as a personal anecdote, I remember going to a gay bar with a friend who was extremely disappointed because it didn't match their expectations from what they saw on *Queer as Folk*). A common experience across all of these channels is an increased focus on the ability for community spaces to function as a site for the showcase and sharing of individual experiences, rather than a space for individuals to connect with a group while maintaining a more privatized sense of individuality: again, this is not necessarily a good or bad development but it is a noteworthy shift in the way that the spaces function nonetheless.

This is, again, not to say that this new openness occludes shame: publicly visible performances are not always prideful and celebratory ones. Platt's performance in *The Politician*, for example, is far from a celebration: his character is experiencing what production designer Jamie Walker McCall refers to as "his dark period" where "everything is a bit more sad" (qtd. in Lee). His public performance is more a navigation of struggle and mourning than the type of unbridled celebration that Love argues post-Stonewall queer culture often aggressively insists is the only "proper" affect for queer expression. We can also see this negotiation of shame in the YouTube examples in this chapter. In Hall, the connection is a bit more obvious: as I have argued, his "Beauty and the Beat Boots" criticizes exactly the sort of cultural insistence on pride as a form of uncritical joy that Love identifies, and the video negotiates the need to temper some of the celebratory rhetoric to navigate the less desirable, more dangerous threats that

contemporary queer life faces. Thus, Hall's video is as much a public negotiation of complex issues and struggles that face a community of which he is a part as it is a public celebration of its beauty. The performance's publicness does not negate its ability to deal with complex issues that go beyond the sort of celebration that Love argues "can be toxic when it is sealed off from the shame that has nurtured it" (515): instead, it is a form of celebration that examines and processes exactly the problems that surround it. The primary difference is not a lack of shame, criticism, or "bad feeling," but rather the relationship to privacy and publicness that frames the way these affects are navigated.

For Superfruit, the performance of shame comes from the very DIY aesthetic that makes their videos so successful: part of the appeal of Superfruit's aesthetic is its imperfection, even as it is a carefully-orchestrated type of imperfection. The top comment (as of 10/20/2020) on their "Frozen Medley" for example, is "how drunk were they lmao," which has 5,500 likes and 33 replies, and the second-ranked one is "you can tell these three were theater nerds in high school" (with a heart emoji at the end). Top comments on their *Defying Gravity* video (as of 10/20/2020) make fun of Grassi's height ("Mitch is 100% standing on a chair") and their sloppy makeup ("Scott, honey, you turned Mitch into an avocado"). Part of what makes Superfruit so appealing, then, is the ability for audience members to relate to their expressions of conventionally "shameful" experiences. However, rather than hold these experiences as secrets, they put their shame on display in performance.

Of course, there is a lot of pride in Grassi and Hoying's performance; unlike Hall's critique in "Beauty and the Beat Boots" or Ben Platt's mournful performance in *The Politician*, there is no desire to process hard emotions, but rather a desire to reclaim shameful feelings by reshaping them into empowering ones. This strategy, then, is closer to what Love calls

affirmative reclamation, or the desire to (in the words of Eve Sedgwick) turn queer shame into a productive, creative, and transformational force that can be celebrated (494). Love criticizes too heavy a reliance on this sort of reclamation, because it can prevent “critics from engaging fully with the intransigent difficulties of the past” as well as stop them from acknowledging the ways that “the affective lives of queer subjects continue to be structured much as they were before gay liberation” (494). Therefore, Love’s model fits Hall’s work (which deals with struggles of contemporary queer life, albeit in an upbeat, fun and humorous way that is not devoid of celebration) and Platt’s performance (which shares and processes shame with an audience without attempting to reclaim it) moreso than Superfruit’s more reclamative videos. However, Love does not fully reject affirmative reclamation as a mode of processing shame: rather, she criticizes the over-reliance of queer scholarship and creation on this mode at the cost of other modes that grapple with hard experiences without transforming them into positive ones. This model thus does not discredit the affirmative reclamation of ostensibly shameful experiences modeled by Superfruit, but rather insists on the need for them to exist alongside more direct navigations of negative queer affect as expressed elsewhere.

Overall, my mobilization of Heather Love’s work on shame in this instance is to avoid the naïve claim that the public expression of queer Broadway fandom means that we have somehow exorcized all of Broadway’s shameful ghosts, and now experience it in a purely optimistic and wonderful way. Rather, I argue that the range of emotions processed through Broadway reception includes, as it does in Miller’s 20<sup>th</sup> century study, both empowering experiences and difficult, painful queer struggles such as longing, desperation, and shame. The primary difference, I argue, is not its relationship to shame but its relationship to secrecy and individualism: that the communities surrounding musicals become more about the highlighting

and visibility of individual experiences within the community, rather than the use of community as a sort of mask to preserve the anonymity of individual members; as it often does in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the private becomes public. This also comes with the open acknowledgement of queer Broadway reception practices amongst mainstream and dominant venues and contexts. While the underlying affects may be similar in many ways, queer audiences are processing them differently, primarily in a more public way, both in terms of their visibility to each other as individuals, and their visibility to the mainstream. This is not to create a dichotomy between an “individually secretive 20<sup>th</sup> century” and an “individually performative 21<sup>st</sup> century:” obviously, sites where individual displays and performances of queerness (such as drag balls and pageants) existed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and sites where individuals maintain anonymity within a group exist in the 21<sup>st</sup>. My interest here is in general trends and shifts in community spaces, not to establish firm rules, boundaries, and absolutes.

Of course, visibility has as many dangers as it does benefits. As my evocation of the Mattachine Society demonstrates, individual anonymity can lead to collective publicity and activism in a way that individual exposure can actually prevent. If individuals within a collective are anonymous, they are potentially more willing to take more daring action as a part of the collective due to the reduced chances for individual consequences. Similarly, anonymity has the potential to produce bonds and community connections with others that a hyper-awareness of individual histories and subjective experiences can prevent: sometimes, the desire to “disappear in a crowd” can be as empowering as the ability to perform individualism in front of the same crowd. Communities bound by mutual secrecy can breed their own forms of empowerment and intimacy, and while they still exist in spaces like bathhouses, the gradual emphasis on individual visibility and spotlighting in queer spaces runs the risk of reducing the potential of these

collectives. In terms of visibility to mainstream culture, Mia Fischer has extensively outlined the ways that this visibility often results in the stereotyping and fetishizing of trans people, as I discuss in my introduction. The impacts of mainstream visibility on the ability for queer culture to function radically have been well-documented at this point: the more that something becomes visible to mainstream culture, the more likely that culture is to attempt to monitor, regulate, and assimilate it, and this visibility can thus create dangers and problems.

However, visibility also carries radical potential. As someone who grew up in a small city with a very small queer community without many cultural outlets, I can attest to the power of mainstream visibility to speak to queer people who do not have direct access to the networks that allow initiation into less visible communities. The only reason why I knew that most of queer culture existed outside the context of the wealthy lawyers of *Will and Grace*<sup>97</sup> and isolated small-town teens of *Dawson's Creek* and *Degrassi* was because of media representations in *Queer as Folk*, *Broken Hearts Club*, and *But I'm a Cheerleader*, and the only reason why I knew any of *these* things even existed was because of my ability to Google “gay movies” or read Kerr Smith’s Wikipedia page after watching *Dawson's Creek*. Without the easily visible access provided by the Internet, I would have remained unaware that thriving cultures of others like me even *existed*. Even then, I was not aware that queer piano bars existed until I read about them in D.A. Miller’s book in graduate school: I can therefore only imagine the number of small-town queers who were first introduced to Marie’s Crisis in *The Politician*, or to other queer Broadway fans more generally through Superfruit and Todrick Hall.

While communities built on secrecy work for those who live in areas with large scenes, the wide dissemination brought on by mainstream visibility can connect queer audiences who

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<sup>97</sup> A show that contributed to a brief suspicion that I needed a 6-figure salary if I wanted to be “gay enough” to live a meaningful homosexual life.

live in areas that would have historically cut them off from access to, and even knowledge of, these communities. Mary L. Gray, for example, discusses “places where media representations of LGBT people outpace the tangible presence of locally organized constituencies” (3), and that youth in these spaces “use new media to enhance their sense of inclusion to broader, imagined queer communities beyond their hometowns” (15). Thus, responding to calls by Gray and Scott Herring to decenter the urban in queer work, I want to identify the ways that a hyper-emphasis on the types of insider groups that often form in urban areas can alienate those who don’t have access to these communities. David Halperin in *How to Be Gay*, for example, discusses how understanding certain queer cultural expressions requires you to “have undergone a gay initiation yourself” (20), and points out that this type of initiation relies on context, as there is “a big difference between living in a gay ghetto in a metropolitan center, such as Sydney, and growing up in a small town in the north of Michigan” (25). Issues surrounding “informal networks” also relate back to Nero’s discussion of how these sorts of networks are often racially-constituted, as informal networks of white queer people can structure the shape of queer community and structurally exclude queer people of colour, who are not made part of the initiation process or given access to parts of the “hidden queer underworld” that are overseen by white gatekeepers.

While I am as cautious about mainstream visibility and skeptical of Rainbow Capitalism as any self-respecting queer academic, I also know from experience that seeing a queer character on television, or even seeing Monét X Change in a Pepsi commercial, may be the closest that some queer youth outside of major city centers have to seeing a sign that they are not alone in the world, and thus can be profoundly reaffirming. Thus, as much as mainstream visibility can introduce new dangers, and new possibilities for a watered-down, homonormative politics, it can

also introduce new queer audiences to the sort of queer “initiation” that was previously primarily available only in more select circles and geographic locations.

Outside of the commonly-discussed visibility of queer culture in the mainstream, there is another type of visibility that I have outlined here: the increased visibility of individual queer people’s lives to each other within our own spaces, and the breakdown of norms related to personal privacy. This, also, is not clearly a good or bad thing: as queer people are expected to broadcast our personal histories to each other and connect through the sharing and spotlighting of individual experiences (whether that’s through posting experiences and perspectives on social media and YouTube, or other situations such as providing additional personal information to sexual partners or on dating apps, or blending less easily into a crowd at queer events that provide more possibilities for personal visibility), there are both beneficial and harmful possibilities.

I want to end this chapter with a popular meme, shared by Debby Querido to the Facebook group *Sounds Gay I’m In* on September 1, 2020:

Straight ppl be like: meet - become friends - start dating.

Queer ppl be like: meet – share trauma stories – confess their undying love for eachother  
- become friends – get married – move in together – start dating. (Arrows in original post replaced by M-dashes here)

Part of my difficulty in relating to Miller’s book – in which everyone’s biggest fear is the exposure of personal emotions and shame – comes from the fact that the areas of contemporary queer culture I have encountered are quite the opposite: openly discussing your shame and trauma has become the norm. It is not uncommon to discuss someone’s deepest experiences of trauma and immense details about their past shames and deepest fears (along with their entire



astrological birth chart) within an hour of meeting them. The ability to openly discuss trauma and shame in an open and ongoing basis, often in public and semi-public spaces such as social media, can be therapeutic, stigma-reducing, and helpful.

However, as I discussed in my introduction, pressure for queer folks to disclose personal information about themselves can also be harmful; Sam Feder's aptly-titled documentary *Disclosure* explores the way that pressure to disclose personal information is a particularly dangerous and fraught issue for transgender people, whose confidentiality and privacy can be extremely important to their well-being. Issues with disclosure surrounding HIV status are also particularly fraught, as HIV+ people similarly face social (and legal) pressure to disclose their status, despite wishing to avoid doing so because of the stigma attached to being HIV+. There is, as usual, no easy answer to the question of whether a queer culture that prioritizes open expressions of individual experiences is harmful or beneficial. However, understanding this increased emphasis on visibility in 21<sup>st</sup>-century queer cultures (not only to mainstream culture, but also to each other) can help scholars and artists better navigate its possibilities and its dangers. The YouTube fan practices explored in this chapter speak to the promises and dangers of a cultural context where queer audiences are encouraged to put their fan practices in the spotlight. In an age when everyone is encouraged to film or stream themselves engaging with their favorite media, turning their private fan reception into a public practice, it is important to be open to a more complex understanding of how this new focus on public expression functions.

## Coda

### Now Gives Way to Then

To Friends. To Lovers. And fuck all the others!

- House of Gahd's signature toast<sup>98</sup>.

Many popular histories of queer Broadway include laments for an era that they claim has long since passed. Miller's story ends with his beloved piano bar J.J.'s closing down. When he discovers the old J.J.'s pianist playing at a new venue, he goes in but realizes that "nothing was the same" (63). Miller's disappointment ranges from the electric piano "homogenizing what could no longer be appreciated as the great smoothness of his playing style," to the new crowd, "so drunk, so beyond caring," who did not know any of the words to the songs, to Miller's own personal development into an "implacable person" who clings to the past and is disappointed because the present will "never be quite exact" (63-64). A recurring theme in Clum's study is the "dwindling" of the show queen (213), and his dissatisfaction with queer cultures after 1990 is so persistent that Steve Swayne concludes that Clum "doesn't like the idea that there's more than one way to be gay today" (104). Swayne suggests that Clum sees developments that deviate from his own historically-situated community as being "deficient" (101). As I discussed in Chapter Five, Adam Tilford of Marie's Crisis has expressed frustration at newer customers, who can be disrespectful to pianists and other patrons. While I acknowledge the longing, nostalgia, and loss expressed by these accounts – and I recognize that it stems from legitimate critiques of harmful contemporary cultural trends – it is my hope that this dissertation pulls away from the mix of disappointment and nostalgia that permeates many accounts of queer Broadway audiences post-1990. One of my primary goals in this analysis has been to balance an

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<sup>98</sup> Half-taken from a similar toast on an episode of *Queer Eye*, a fact that they mention nearly every time they start the toast.

account of how queer Broadway audiences have changed with an account of the ways that many experiences have nonetheless managed to persist. Furthermore, in looking at both changes and continuities, I have also aimed to express moments of criticism and as well as those of hope, joy, and celebration for the possibilities of queer cultures both now and then.

Part of my hope for a new generation of queer cultures, of course, comes from the fact that I myself am a part of many of these cultures. I have been lucky enough to have been immersed in communities that constantly empower, encourage, and challenge me, and I hope that this project has been able to do these groups justice. Part of my connection to queer community is digital; because the first 24 years of my life were spent in small cities with limited access to queer life, the online spaces that I outline in Chapter Five were my primary access to a sense of a larger queer world for a long time. In discussing the reception practices modeled by Superfruit and Todrick Hall, this project has highlighted aspects of a cultural network that has been crucial to a younger generation of queer audiences who use the Internet to expand their sense of community past physical borders. While Miller and Clum may lament the changing shape of physical queer spaces, I also celebrate the possibilities that the Internet has created for people who have never had access to these spaces due to geographic limitations, financial restrictions, intersectional oppression within queer spaces, and the spaces' lack of accessibility and consideration of disabled queer patrons<sup>99</sup>. In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, these online spaces have been crucial to an even larger contingent of queer folks who have found themselves disconnected and alienated while many of the physical spaces that served as hubs for their communities have been unavailable.

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<sup>99</sup> Due to an overwhelming lack of appropriate legislation, many queer spaces such as bars and clubs continue to avoid doing even the bare minimum when it comes to accessibility.

Another source of constant inspiration has been the queer communities based in Montreal, the city where this dissertation was written. Not all queer musical fans have moved solely online, and physical reception communities continue to flourish. Recognizing the community that surrounded me during the process of completing this project, this coda aims to briefly highlight two events in Montreal that embody the spirit of what the five chapters of this dissertation have outlined: the Segal Centre for the Performing Arts' Broadway Café, and House of Gahd's event Coven. I intend to give a sense of an urban space where the shifts that I have identified in queer cultures since the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century are being embodied. Avoiding a focus purely on change, I also – as always – pay attention to moments of continuity, exploring examples that may counter Miller's fear that “nothing [is] the same.” Some things, after all, never change.

Broadway Café<sup>100</sup> is a regular event run at the Segal Centre for Performing Arts in Montreal. It has two different versions: the standard Broadway Café is more or less “Broadway karaoke,” where anyone can sing a musical theatre song for the crowd, accompanied by a pianist. The other version, the “Big Broadway Sing-Along” functions, as its name would suggest, very similarly to the piano bars that Miller explores in his study. Coven is a monthly<sup>101</sup> drag show run by Montreal's House of Gahd (formerly known as the House of Laureen) that brings together a group of queer performers whose styles frequently tend towards horror, the supernatural, or the grotesque. While the event is not specifically about musicals, their programming often overlaps with musical theatre<sup>102</sup>, and Coven embodies many of the larger developments in queer audience

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<sup>100</sup> Currently on hiatus due to COVID-19 but likely to resume in the future considering the immense popularity of the event with performers and audiences.

<sup>101</sup> Also on hiatus due to COVID-19 but also likely to resume in the future.

<sup>102</sup> Including appearances by performers such as Abby Long, who have deep ties to Montreal's musical theatre community.

communities that I outline throughout this dissertation. I have chosen to highlight one Coven event – Twisted Disney – to give an idea of how some of the Disney films explored in this dissertation are approached by the performers in the event.

Both events speak to the two major topics traced in this dissertation: public declaration, and mainstreaming. My discussion of Broadway Café engages with my accounts of Marie’s Crisis from Chapter Five to explore how the event grapples with issues of mainstreaming, belonging, and audiences’ increasing interest in individual visibility and performance. I take note of a similar negotiation taking place in Coven’s regular “runway” segment. In examining Twisted Disney, I draw from my broader discussions of holistic queerness, exploring the performers’ complex negotiations of Disney material.

One of the major concerns about contemporary piano bars that critics have expressed is the newer audiences’ focus on individualistic performance over community connection. As I discussed in Chapter Five, Adam Tilford has identified a trend where patrons want to perform solos and demand attention – likely motivated by scenes on TV of characters performing solos at piano bars – rather than join in with the larger group at the bar. The piano bars of Miller’s memory were focused on the appeal of blending in and disappearing into a crowd whose collective performance allows them to indulge in a sense of community as a place for anonymous secrecy. Contemporary piano bars, in contrast, encounter patrons whose primary desire is visible public expression. As newer queer audiences engage in cultural and political practices focused on visibility – from conventional pride-based declarations to public negotiations of shame and struggle – the ability to “disappear in a crowd” becomes harder to

maintain, even as the underlying feelings and affective drives from which this practice stems may still persist<sup>103</sup>.

Broadway Café, on a basic structural level, works to circumvent this issue by splitting itself into two events, designating some nights for solos and others for sing-alongs. This divide means that patrons are not likely to show up to a sing-along event expecting solo time, since the two events are clearly distinguished. However, the event goes beyond simply creating a binary between “individualistic performance nights” and “group sing-alongs” to emphasize a sense of community in both. For example, the solo nights intersperse solo numbers with community showcases, where local musical theatre groups are given the chance to promote their upcoming shows with performances by the casts. Someone’s solo performance of “Waving Through a Window” may thus be followed by a chorus of 10 people from an indie theatre group performing a number from their upcoming production of *Heathers* and briefly talking about their collective’s mandate and goals. These showcases ensure that the event remains contextualized within a broader musical theatre community: even as it provides an outlet for individuals to engage in public performance, these performers are constantly reminded of the larger network of which they are a part. In this sense, audience practices rooted in visibility and performance are still grounded by a structural emphasis on connectivity and community that prevents them from descending into the isolated, self-serving individualism that Tilford laments. It is impossible to decontextualize Broadway Café from the larger musical theatre scene that surrounds it, as the hosts regularly pay tribute to and highlight how embedded that larger scene is in their event.

One of the most distinctive features of Broadway Café’s sing-along events, and one likely to be the most polarizing to stalwart traditionalists, is the presence of a large projector screen

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<sup>103</sup> In Chapter 5, I outline how the feelings of shame, sadness, and trauma that Miller’s communities explored through piano bars do not go away with public performance, but are often navigated and expressed publicly.

containing the lyrics to every song. In one way, this addresses Miller's fear that younger piano bar patrons don't participate in the sing-alongs because they don't know any of the words. It also responds to Tilford's observation that audiences are demanding more Disney and less Kander & Ebb. With the lyrics displayed on the screen, even audiences who don't know the songs can follow along and join in when they feel comfortable, allowing the pianist to move from mainstream Disney hits to less well-known numbers without alienating new audiences. What this projector screen indicates is a desire to welcome the uninitiated into an existing Broadway audience practice, circumventing the informal networks and processes of community initiation that are often required to access these sorts of activities.

Broadway Café participates in the structures of mainstreaming that are a major focus of this dissertation; while aimed at a general audience and not marketed as a queer event, Broadway Café explicitly connects itself to historical queer practices, and patrons regularly reference the importance of musical theatre to queer communities and expressions. Their sing-along events are advertised as being "in the spirit of New York's famous piano bars,<sup>104</sup>" and hosts and performers explicitly discuss and pay tribute to Broadway's queer history, most notably during their annual Miscast night<sup>105</sup>. Popular Montreal drag performer Abby Long makes regular appearances at Broadway Café, and has publicly expressed their appreciation for the event as a space for queer expression and community. Thus, the movement towards opening Broadway Café to a broad audience signifies the desire to invite the uninitiated into an audience practice that has its roots in queer cultural history.

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<sup>104</sup> This quotation is taken from the official Facebook event for the June 22, 2019 Broadway sing-along, accessible at <https://www.facebook.com/events/2708465716047581> (as of April 4, 2014). It is also a recurring statement in their media and press for Broadway Café.

<sup>105</sup> The idea behind "Miscast" is that you sing songs for roles that you would typically not be cast in. The majority of these performances involve people singing songs typically sung by someone of a different gender.

Any initiative aimed at wider public outreach is bound to have its critics. Opening up practices that previously relied on secrecy and covert processes of what David Halperin would call “gay initiation” (20) risks inviting unsafe or disrespectful patrons into important queer spaces. The harmful audience behavior that Tilford outlines at Marie’s Crisis is a serious issue that is further exacerbated the more that piano bars further enter the mainstream popular consciousness. A broader audience also runs the risk of the event becoming more heteronormative (or at least homonormative) as its queerness can be watered down to make new patrons feel more comfortable.

However, as I discussed in Chapter Five, covertly transmitted queer cultures do not only exclude the non-queer world: their practices of secrecy often exclude queer folks who do not have the same types of access or privilege as those at the center of these informal networks of initiation. As Halperin points out, “your degree of gay acculturation depends a lot on your social network” (25): these types of informal social networks often result in the exclusion of queer people of colour (Nero), rural queer communities (Gray) and other queer communities that exist outside of the circle of middle-class, white, cisgender gay men who often position themselves as the arbiters and administrators of queer initiation, acculturation, and taste. Thus, something like the Segal Centre’s large projection screen is not simply a way to open up the event to non-queer audiences; it’s also a way to invite queer audiences who, for various reasons, have not experienced the same type of cultural initiation as the audiences in Miller’s and Clum’s studies. Unlike the communities in these nostalgic accounts, not all queer audiences who are interested in musicals managed to exit the womb having already memorized the entire Comden and Green songbook.



The Segal Centre's Broadway Café also does not show signs of being pushed towards homonormativity or producing an unsafe space for queer patrons. Three particular memories from Broadway Café stand out to me as exemplifying the spirit of queer Broadway history. One of these is a rambunctious crowd singing along to "Dance: Ten; Looks: Three" from *A Chorus Line*. Hearing a mixed-gender audience singing about the joys of getting breast implants carries an undeniable queer joy; as even the cisgender, straight men in the audience join in to flirtatiously proclaim "you're all looking at my tits now, aren't you?" the audience is invited into an experience that encourages performance and identification across gender identities. In Miller's account of the joys of diva performances that invite men to embody femininity, he describes the experience as the diva "implanting breasts" (89) in the spectator; this moment resonated with that description quite literally. An event overly concerned with appealing to heteronormative values would likely not include numbers that encourage cisgender men to imagine themselves wanting breast implants. The second is the experience of Miscast night, seeing a large group of queer performers explicitly celebrate the possibilities of the event for gender and sexual subversion, including a Norma Desmond-inspired drag performance by host Richard Jutras and a powerful performance of "I'm Here" from *The Color Purple* by Montreal performer Anton May. The third, which I have already mentioned, is Abby Long giving a speech to the audience about their appreciation for the supportive and caring community created by Broadway Café, which provided a safe space for their performance. In my experience, then, Broadway Café has managed to avoid many of the downsides that come from opening up historical queer practices to larger audiences, and their events have showcased much of the joy and community that can come from them<sup>106</sup>.

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<sup>106</sup> As with any event, there are some downsides to this one (being located inside a theatre venue – even one with a fully stocked bar and a casual seating arrangement – inherently shifts the tone of the event to feel less casual and

House of Gahd's Coven, in contrast, will likely never have to worry about accusations of homonormativity. Explicitly political and boundary-pushing, Coven has featured performances including a number based on Nadia Ali's discussion of the porn industry's treatment of Muslim sex workers<sup>107</sup>, and a performer tearing a bible apart in anger after playing audio clips from a homophobic Eric Porterfield interview<sup>108</sup>. They also feature intense, explicit content, ranging from a baptism-turned-mock-infanticide<sup>109</sup> to a Cruella de Vil who makes coats out of men in puppy play bondage outfits instead of dalmatians<sup>110</sup>. Host Selma Gahd makes the event's uncompromising dedication to radical politics explicit at the beginning of every show, and the night always starts with the audience swearing a solemn oath to "use their powers to fuck the patriarchy." Coven's combination of unbridled sexuality, grotesqueness, visceral imagery, and political engagement ensures that it resists the assimilationist and politically anemic tendencies of much of contemporary queer culture.

However, as intense as Coven events may get, they simultaneously manage to be one of the most welcoming queer spaces for newcomers in the city. As long as the audience is willing to accept that things will get gross, intense, and political, Selma's hosting style creates a welcoming and accessible environment for everyone. Gahd constantly checks in with new audience members to make sure that they feel supported and welcomed, and always makes sure to produce an atmosphere of care. Coven thus troubles the binary between popular appeal and radical politics, as it manages to open up drag performance to new audiences in a welcoming space

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welcoming to many working-class patrons and other groups who may feel less comfortable in a theatre than in a bar; the theatre itself is located in a residential area relatively far away from the downtown core; patrons are seated, which creates a sense of distance between patrons that the standing areas of bars avoid; etc.). I would never suggest that Broadway Café is a replacement for piano bars; however, with all of its limitations, Broadway Café has proven to be one of the highlights of Montreal life, both as a queer person and as a musical theatre fan.

<sup>107</sup> Performed by Phoenix Inana.

<sup>108</sup> Performed by Selma Gahd.

<sup>109</sup> Performed by Uma Gahd.

<sup>110</sup> Performed by Pythia.

without compromising its commitment to radical queerness. The event is produced by the House of Gahd, which is also the home of Uma Gahd, who hosts one of the most popular screenings of *RuPaul's Drag Race* in the city. Thus, newcomers to this politically-charged event often find out about it from Uma while attending a *Drag Race* screening. In a way, something as homonormative as a *Drag Race* screening<sup>111</sup> serves as an entry point into a larger network of radically queer performance in Montreal, rather than its antithesis.

Coven's importance as an inclusive space also extends beyond the audience to the performers themselves. *Drag Race* has created an extremely narrow, normative vision of what a drag performer is, leading to a situation where venues and audiences are frequently discriminatory against performers who don't fit this model. Coven explicitly foregrounds performers who face discrimination in many other drag venues in the city: the event celebrates drag kings, genderqueer performers, and others who do not fit easily into the cisnormative and homonormative expectations cultivated by increasingly mainstream audiences. Ticket sales from events (always available at a "pay what you can" basis to keep the event financially accessible<sup>112</sup>) are used to compensate performers directly, and the hosts have candid discussions with audiences about Montreal's relationship to tipping and the way that Coven prioritizes paying their artists. Knowing that performers are fairly treated and compensated, and that the producers are willing to openly discuss their commitment to ethical business practices in a public setting, ensures that Coven is a setting grounded in ethics and care.

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<sup>111</sup> Although Uma's screenings are unique in that they are constantly critical of the show, willing to discuss its political issues and engage with the audience about some of the more challenging topics that come up in relation to it.

<sup>112</sup> Although less physically accessible than they should be, as many of the independent performance venues in Montreal involve huge staircases with no elevators and other major accessibility problems. A primary criticism I have of performance in Montreal is that artists in the city need to demand higher standards for accessibility in the venues available to them.

One of the major features of a Coven event – and one that relates most to my discussion of public and private expressions of queerness – is their “runway” segment. About halfway through the show, the host creates a runway section in the venue, and invites all audience members to walk down it, having their moment to perform in the spotlight. There are no rules for who is and isn’t allowed to walk the runway; people in elaborate outfits and costumes share the runway with people in the everyday outfits. Nonetheless, whatever someone is wearing, and however they choose to walk, everyone is met with cheers and applause<sup>113</sup>. An event that focuses on individuals taking to a stage (or runway) to perform in front of a crowd risks association with the kind of hyper-individualism that leads to disrespectful Marie’s Crisis patrons who are more interested in attention than community. However, as with Broadway Café’s use of community showcases, Coven’s runway segment manages to cultivate community *through* individual performances. Much like the queer community building I discuss in Chapter Two, Coven’s events empower the individual through their connection to others, rather than creating a binary between the two concepts. Coven thus harnesses contemporary queer patrons’ affinity for the spotlight, performance, and public declaration, and uses it as a source of community building rather than isolated individualism.

The Coven event most relevant to this dissertation specifically is their Twisted Disney show, which took place on September 27, 2019. The event featured several artists performing numbers that combined Disney films with queer horror and the grotesque. While it may seem like the humor and commentary from an event like this would primarily come from the clash between queer and horror aesthetics and wholesome Disney films, many of the numbers chose

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<sup>113</sup> The significance of this event had never quite occurred to me until a student of mine wrote in a performance journal about how much the runway portion had added to their experience of feeling like they were in a supportive and caring community.

instead to highlight continuities between the two. Thus, much like the mashups I examined in Chapter Five, a queer critique of Disney and other mainstream media does not always have to come from a juxtaposition of queerness with popular cinema; in contrast, a similarly critical and subversive critique can come from highlighting the underlying structural queerness within popular media itself. Rather than positioning themselves as alternative “queer” approaches to Disney, this sort of performance views queerness as something holistically embedded throughout these popular films, suggesting that they were queer all along.

Pythia’s performance of Cruella De Vil as a dominatrix who makes skin suits out of her puppy play partners, for example, does not require much deviation from De Vil’s characterization in the film. With the exception of swapping out dalmatians with men in kink gear, Pythia’s mannerisms, behaviours, and personification are fully in line with the Disney character. Much as Belle in Todrick Hall’s “Beauty and the Beat Boots” meshes quite naturally with go-go dancers and gay Latino magazines, De Vil in Pythia’s performance fits in quite easily with kinky and fetish imagery. The humor does not come from the contrast between the two worlds, but rather from how surprisingly the two go together. Uma Gahd mashes up *The Little Mermaid*’s “Part of Your World” with audio clips from *Hoarders*, reimagining Ariel as a hoarder with a grotesque, dirty cavern full of garbage (and even some human remains). This interpretation flows logically from the plot and characterization of the original film: part of Ariel’s plotline is that she gathers random human junk (forks, corkscrews, discarded glasses, etc.) in a cave. While the cave is drawn in a visually-appealing way for the film, in reality someone who grabs every random piece of trash that gets thrown in the ocean and hoards it in a cave would likely create a space more similar to Gahd’s monstrous mess of garbage. Thus, like Pythia’s Cruella, Uma Gahd’s monstrous Ariel is a logical continuation of the character’s

representation in the film, rather than positioned in opposition to it. Similar acts included Fawn Darling as Yzma from *The Emperor's New Groove*, queering normative beauty rituals through a grotesque spa treatment performance inspired by Yzma's spa scenes in the film, and HercuSleaze re-imagining Captain Hook's obsessive relationship with his crocodile as a sexual connection. The politics at play here are very much in line with what I discuss in Chapter Five. The performances do not position themselves as fully oppositional to the Disney films; however, they also do not fully celebrate or accept these films uncritically. Like many queer interactions with popular culture, they instead take the negotiated stance theorized in Muñoz's strategy of disidentification, working with and against popular texts at the same time.

This constant negotiation and mediation with the popular does not make the event less politically significant, and Twisted Disney still maintained a space for substantially critical reflections on Disney's politics. One of the most memorable numbers of the night was Phoenix Inana's performance as Jasmine from *Aladdin*. Inana's number intercut dialogue from *Aladdin* with music and audio clips from an interview with Muslim pornographic actress Nadia Ali. In the audio clips, Ali says of the scenes that she was asked to shoot:

A lot of porn companies and adult companies would not shoot me, and I would not get a lot of work if I did not wear hijabs and scarves. The only thing that stands out - and I got millions of views - is because of my outfit. I'm not okay with that. But, then again, it was good for the viewers, and I got what I wanted out of it. I did get the publicity.

Ali expresses a desire to participate in sex work and embrace her Islamic background, while navigating a racist industry and audiences who fetishize her. By directly placing this interview in her *Aladdin* number before she begins dancing, Inana demonstrates the connection between Jasmine's depiction in the film and larger issues with the fetishization of Muslim women in

Western culture. Inana generates a dialogue between *Aladdin* and Ali's interview to construct an empowering performance dedicated, as she says, to "subverting the racist fetishization and appropriative orientalist depictions of Muslim and Middle Eastern women and reclaiming the depiction and narrative of Arab and Muslim gender and sexuality<sup>114</sup>." At the heart of Coven is a dedication to political critiques that unpack problems with popular culture texts, even as many of the performances simultaneously find space for empowerment and joy within those very texts.

### Conclusion

Who can say if I've been changed for the better?

But, because I knew you, I have been changed for good.

- Wicked

In highlighting these two communities at the end of my dissertation, I hope to exemplify the queer audience cultures that continue to live and thrive after the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The queer potential of the musicals that I unpack in Chapters 1-4 is being realized not only by the online communities that I explore in Chapter Five, but by more conventional in-person communities grounded in physical spaces. While many of the principles and affective drives of queer cultures have changed from the time of Miller's beloved piano bars, the communities are not fading or disappearing: they're simply changing. Assimilation, corporatization, commercialization, pink capitalism, homonormativity, gentrification, and neoliberal individualism have emerged as major threats facing both contemporary queer life and the queer significance of musicals as a genre. Broadway and its queer audiences have seen major movements towards publicity and public declaration, accessibility, openness to wider audiences, and re-negotiated relationships with popular culture. There is danger in all of these changes, but

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<sup>114</sup> This quotation is taken from the description for a video recording of the performance that Inana uploaded to YouTube, listed in my Works Cited as "Baddie Jasmine."

alongside this danger comes so much potential for empowering and meaningful community practices.

As I discuss in Chapter One, contemporary Broadway shows have used their connections to queer Broadway history to produce new, promising developments on historically queer structures. *Wicked* gives a new strength and voice to the feminine men of Broadway history, and *The Color Purple* builds upon histories of Broadway divas and female duets to articulate new potentials for intimacy between women on stage. Within this context, where the fundamental embeddedness of queer history in Broadway's structures is being more openly acknowledged, *Head Over Heels* features two lesbians boldly declaring that they will "make it [their] world." While Chapter Two is primarily concerned with the assimilationist risks that come from this new cultural context, it similarly looks to Vanessa Williams' performance in the *Into the Woods* revival as a space of hope. Furthermore, while contemporary movements towards individualism and self-fashioned identities become an increasingly more dangerous and alienating component of neoliberalism, Sondheim's show complicates the concept of the individual to imagine an alternative. *Into the Woods* shows how individual freedom and community responsibility can be mutually informative and beneficial, attempting to reconcile the desire for individual identity formation and community connections. This paradigm is embodied by the performance communities that I outline in this coda, demonstrating how contemporary emphasis on self-discovery and identity fashioning can be mobilized towards community building, rather than solely existing as its opposite.

Chapters 3-5 all work with the issues of mainstreaming and assimilation, demonstrating how increased engagement with popular culture and claims to belonging are not always the same thing as homonormativity and cultural assimilation. A critique of Disney's horrendous corporate



practices and the many problems with their films does not occlude a celebration of the way that queer artists like Howard Ashman worked within the corporation to produce films that have inspired and empowered queer audiences. As my analysis of Regina and the musical episode in *Once Upon a Time* demonstrates, to belong is not always the same thing as to assimilate; in fact, disrupting and challenging a community's values can be a valuable part of exactly what it means to belong to that community. And finally, my analysis of Todrick Hall and Superfruit in Chapter Five looks at queer reception in practice, exploring how engagement with mainstream popular culture does not always have to be wholly oppositional to be politically radical. The audience practices explored in that final chapter manage to celebrate the queer pleasures and joys they find in popular texts without allowing this to distract them from an effective political movement that resists the problems with these texts. Furthermore, Chapter Five engages with Heather Love's concern that contemporary queer culture's obsession with public declarations of pride have prevented communities from grappling effectively with shame. I demonstrate how public declarations of shame, trauma and struggle are just as important to these politics of publicity as pride-based discourses.

Looking at trends focused around individuality, publicity, and mainstreaming, it is easy to see why critics are concerned. While I share these concerns, and a substantial part of this dissertation engages in critique based around them, I am also excited about the possibilities for today's queer communities to take these trends and do with them what they do best: queer them. Queer cultures have historically thrived on breaking apart binaries, finding commonalities between seemingly opposed concepts, and (conversely) demonstrating how seemingly similar things can actually be extremely different. Queer artists and audiences of contemporary musicals have found ways to break down binaries between individuality and community, and between

wider popular appeal and radically oppositional politics. They have similarly broken apart concepts that were previously conflated, finding ways to demonstrate how it is possible to have belonging without assimilation and how shame and secrecy do not always operate hand and hand.

As musicals and the queer practices that are at the basis of the genre continue to develop and change, I have confidence that they will continue to respond to new challenges and limitations with the same queer energy that they always have. Queer communities will continue finding ways to disrupt attempts to crystalize, depoliticize, or assimilate queerness. While Miller and Clum fear the disappearance of the show queens of the past, I look forward to seeing the ways that musicals of the future will be able to provide a space for queer explorations of gender and sexuality. I similarly have faith in the empowerment, community building, identity formation, and cultural development that queer communities have made, currently make, and will continue to make as they celebrate the musicals that they love.

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