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Doing the Time Warp:
Queer Temporalities and Musical Theater

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in Theater and Performance Studies

by

Sarah Taylor Ellis

2013

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Doing the Time Warp:
Queer Temporalities and Musical Theater

by

Sarah Taylor Ellis

Doctor of Philosophy in Theater and Performance Studies

University of California, Los Angeles, 2013

Professor Sue-Ellen Case, Co-chair

Professor Raymond Knapp, Co-chair

This dissertation explores queer processes of identification with the genre of musical theater. I examine how song and dance – sites of aesthetic difference within the musical – can warp time and enable marginalized and semi-marginalized fans to imagine different ways of being in the world. Musical numbers can complicate a linear, developmental plot by accelerating and decelerating time, foregrounding repetition and circularity, bringing the past to life and projecting into the future, and physicalizing dreams in a narratively open present. These excesses have the potential to contest naturalized constructions of historical, progressive time, as well as concordant constructions of gender, sexual, and racial identities. While the musical has historically been a rich source of identification for the stereotypical white gay male show queen, this project validates a broad and flexible range of non-normative readings. I employ the

aesthetic principles of musical theater to consider the genre's politics, which can cut against the grain of dominant ideology to establish identities and communities in difference. The musical, a bastion of mainstream theatrical culture, supports a fan culture of outsiders who dream themselves into being in the liminal timespaces of song and dance.

Chapter 1, "A Funny Thing Happened ... to the Integrated Musical: Poetics and Politics of Queer Temporality," lays the theoretical foundations for the dissertation by locating the "queerness" of musical theater in the temporally divergent ruptures of the genre's musical numbers. Chapter 2, "Let's Do the Time Warp Again: Performing Time, Genre, and Spectatorship," identifies an affective link across nonrealist, time-warping genres of science fiction / fantasy and musical theater, as well as their dedicated and overlapping fan cultures; by considering reality to be historical and contingent, these anti-quotidian genres explore the limits of what is objectively present, and physicalize a temporally divergent world in the here and now. Chapter 3, "Ragging Race: Spectral Temporality in the American Musical," explores a haunting in American popular culture: the under-acknowledged artistic contributions of African-Americans. Finally, Chapter 4, "'I Just Projected Myself Out of It': Rehearsing Identities in Youth Musical Theater," considers the impact of marginalizing the arts in contemporary US public education systems; teenagers who identify with and participate in the arts are imagined as a community of outsiders, defined by alternative sexualities, races, and geeky differences from the popular jock and cheerleader mold. Throughout these chapters, I explore how alienated subjects find moments of coherence and connection in musical theater's queer imaginaries of song and dance.

The dissertation of Sarah Taylor Ellis is approved.

Susan Foster

Gary Gardner

Sue-Ellen Case, Committee Co-chair

Raymond Knapp, Committee Co-chair

University of California, Los Angeles

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A Moment in the Woods: I Wish...

Best to take the moment present as a present for the moment.

Stephen Sondheim and James Lapine, *Into the Woods*¹

The tribe gathered at the gates of Central Park on a steamy summer morning just before the break of dawn.² The majority were New Yorkers; some had commuted an hour or two from New Jersey; others had made a pilgrimage several days earlier from Boston, Orlando, and Los Angeles. From college kids to PhD students, stage managers to social media gurus, everyone clutched a cup of coffee in hand, and an eager glimmer pierced through our tired eyes. We avid followers of the Fuck Yeah Stephen Sondheim fan tumblr were meeting for the first time to see the Public Theater's free outdoor production of *Into the Woods* together. David Levy, event organizer and curator of the vast virtual repository of Sondheim knowledge and trivialities, donned a "No One Is Alone" t-shirt and welcomed his fellow musical theater geeks into the fold. We would spend at least seven hours playing musical theater trivia games and singing show tunes while waiting for tickets; later that evening, we would reconvene for dinner and a show under the stars.

¹ Stephen Sondheim and James Lapine, *Into the Woods* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1989), 109.

² David Levy repurposes "the tribe" from the hippie ensemble of *Hair*; this label retains a countercultural – or at least a subcultural – charge, binding the geeky outsiders of the FYSS community. See also Raymond Knapp, *The American Musical and the Formation of National Identity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 156, in which Knapp chronicles the countercultural community of *Hair*: "While trying to preserve to some extent the eclectic chaos of youth culture, *Hair* also tried to enact a vision of that culture as a *community* – what might be described (expanding on the familiar marriage trope) as an extended 'group marriage' involving all the disparate disenfranchised elements represented in the show. And it was, after all, as easy to join this community as it was to join those of *Oklahoma's* frontier, *Guys and Dolls's* savvy yet oddly provincial Times Square, or *The Music Man's* all-American River City – all you had to do was learn the songs and join in."

To an outside eye, the tumblr meetup on July 29, 2012 was a typical gathering of social media users united by a common interest. Yet for the Sondheim aficionados in attendance, the day-long extravaganza resonated as a charged and heightened moment of connection: an expansive musical number punctuating our everyday lives and drawing us into a fabulous, if fleeting, community. While theater tumblists and tweeters are constantly connected online, we rejoiced in the opportunity to sync time together, “live” and in person.³ Particularly when mapped into the “woods” of Central Park, Stephen Sondheim and James Lapine’s musical provided an immersive landscape for our ensemble performance of fandom.⁴ “There’s something really special about finding your tribe and being able to share in that shorthand, that code, the secret handshakes and mottos that only you know,” David blogged the day after the event.

There have been a few times in my life when I’ve had this feeling of suddenly *belonging* after years of alienation. My first steps into the Jewish youth group world; my entrance into junior high show choir; moving into West Hollywood (which I described at the time as the gay man’s equivalent of a Jew’s first trip to Israel)... This weekend felt like one of those moments. And I’m not sure why at this point in my life having a theater tribe feels more important than it has for a

³ The “liveness” of the moment was mediated and paradoxically validated by the virtual: a constant stream of facebook status updates, Instagram photos, tweets, and tumblr posts. See Philip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (London: Routledge, 2008).

⁴ In this fractured fairy tale mash-up, the woods are a location of transformative potential organized by an alternative construction of time: the circular passage of midnights. Familiar storybook characters enter the woods in pursuit of a wish: Cinderella dreams of going to the king’s Festival, Jack wants his cow to give some milk, Little Red Riding Hood ventures to see her grandmother, and (in the only original fairy tale in the show) the Baker and his wife seek a child. As their stories are crossed, the expected narrative trajectory is tangled and rerouted; the characters stray from the path, and the path strays from them. Act I may end “happily ever after,” but Act II forces the characters to confront the challenges and disillusionment that follows getting one’s wish. The musical ultimately concludes in a world of moral ambiguity, with only a glimmer of hope found in a chosen family of survivors: Cinderella, the Baker and his son, Jack, and Little Red. The FYSS tribe is not unlike the chosen family that emerges from the fantastical woods at the end of Sondheim and Lapine’s musical: a chosen community of outsiders who have survived their own giants and witches. In the twitterverse, one of their most popular hashtags is *Into the Woods*-inspired: #nooneisalone.

long time, but it does. So now I'm embarking on a process to figure out how to hold on to it.⁵

This dissertation explores processes of identification with the genre of musical theater and the possibilities of clinging to those luminous moments in the woods. In particular, I examine how song and dance – sites of aesthetic difference within the musical – can warp time and enable marginalized and semi-marginalized fans to imagine different ways of being in the world. Musical numbers can complicate a linear, developmental plot by accelerating and decelerating time, foregrounding repetition and circularity, dipping into memory and projecting into the future, and physicalizing dreams in a narratively open present. These excesses have the potential to contest naturalized constructions of historical, progressive time, as well as concordant constructions of gender, sexual, and racial identities. While the musical has historically been a rich source of identification for the stereotypical white gay male show queen, my dissertation validates a broad and flexible range of queer, non-normative readings.⁶ I employ the aesthetic principles of musical theater to consider the genre's politics, which can cut against the grain of dominant ideology to establish identities and communities in difference. The musical, a bastion of mainstream theatrical culture, always and already contains a fan culture of outsiders who dream themselves into being in the liminal timespaces of song and dance.

The "American" musical is often considered to be pure entertainment: a commercialized genre offering escape and wish fulfillment for a generalized audience of white, middle class,

⁵ David Levy, "One of My Favorite Parts of This Weekend...", *It's... DLevy!*, July 30, 2012, accessed January 03, 2013, <http://itsdlevy.tumblr.com/post/28367974893/one-of-my-favorite-parts-of-this-weekend>.

⁶ Like Stacy Wolf, I follow Alexander Doty's definition of queer, which "privileges any nonstraight reading or interpretation" and marks "a flexible space for the expression of all aspects of non (anti-, contra-) straight cultural production and reception." See Stacy Ellen Wolf, *A Problem like Maria: Gender and Sexuality in the American Musical* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 23.

heteronormative spectators.⁷ To be sure, the plot lines of Golden Age musicals are often tidily resolved in marriage; the wedding of a man and woman is a synecdoche for the reconciliation of conflict in a broader community, and divergent parts are subsumed into a homogeneous whole – or violently excluded from this community – by the musical’s narrative end.⁸ Yet as both Richard Dyer and Raymond Knapp have pointed out, one of the musical’s fundamental contradictions is the marginalized others who have been central to the creation of this popular art form: Jewish immigrants, African Americans, gay men, and female divas.⁹ My work follows from recent scholarship on the interrelationship among content, form, and the unexpectedly diverse communities to whom the musical matters.

According to Andrea Most, for instance, musical comedies of the early and mid-twentieth century created a space for performative assimilation by Jewish musical theater actors and creators; the ruptures of musical numbers enabled the performance of difference and multiplicity by which immigrants wrote themselves into the narrative of mainstream America.¹⁰ African-Americans rarely featured as three-dimensional, narratively significant characters in early and midcentury musicals, but Sean Griffin explores how these actors could temporarily steal agency in their virtuosic performances of musical numbers – which are, after all, the *raison d'être* for the genre.¹¹ Even when these black bodies were absented from the stage, their aesthetic contributions

⁷ Richard Dyer, *Only Entertainment* (London: Routledge, 1992), 19-20.

⁸ See Knapp, *National Identity*, 9, for an elaborated definition of the marriage trope.

⁹ See Knapp, *National Identity*, 5, and Dyer, *Only Entertainment*, 20.

¹⁰ Andrea Most, *Making Americans: Jews and the Broadway Musical* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

¹¹ Sean Griffin, "The Gang's All Here: Generic versus Racial Integration in the 1940s Musical," *Cinema Journal* 42, no. 1 (2002).

– such as jazz music and tap dance – are fundamental to the musical form.¹² While the musical may have been carefully closeted in its Golden Age, John Clum and D.A. Miller explore the queer pleasures of the genre for the stereotypical gay male show queen, including coded dialogue and delightful releases from the narrative into song and dance.¹³ For women, as well, musicals offer prominent divas with powerful, belting voices and fierce athleticism; Stacy Wolf elaborates how female characters, though narratively reined in to marriage, can have a performative presence that exceeds the plot for spectators desirous to see and hear difference.¹⁴

My work thus hinges on a consideration of the political and aesthetic “integration” of the musical. Are the diverse components of a musical subsumed into a homogeneous whole, or can the elements stand apart and offer a vibrant theatrical vision of difference and multiplicity? The aesthetically integrated musical reigned from 1943 – 1965, or from *Oklahoma* to *Fiddler on the Roof*. Pioneered by Rodgers and Hammerstein and modeled after Wagner’s *Gesamtkunstwerk*, these musicals aimed to progress the plot seamlessly through song and dance, rendering all theatrical elements subservient to the narrative drive.¹⁵ The paradigm of integration has been

¹² See Arthur Knight, *Disintegrating the Musical: Black Performance and American Musical Film* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002) for an exploration of the connection between African Americans and musical performers, particularly in the segregated all-black-cast musicals of the early 21st century. See also Dyer, "The Colour of Entertainment," 36-45, and Todd R. Decker, *Music Makes Me: Fred Astaire and Jazz* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

¹³ See D. A. Miller, *Place for Us: Essay on the Broadway Musical* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998) and John M. Clum, *Something for the Boys: Musical Theater and Gay Culture* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999).

¹⁴ See Wolf, *A Problem Like Maria*, which considers Mary Martin, Ethel Merman, Julie Andrews, and Barbra Streisand as diverse images of women for mid-20th century audiences. By analyzing Martin’s "tomboy", Merman’s "butch Jewish mother," Andrews’ "femme," and Streisand’s "queer Jewess," Wolf elaborates how theater, film, and television tended to cast women as wives, mothers, ingénues, or temptresses, while musicals offered a different and more empowered view of womanhood – particularly in song and dance.

¹⁵ See Geoffrey Block, "The Broadway Canon from Show Boat to West Side Story and the European Operatic Ideal," *Journal of Musicology* 11, no. 4 (1993). Block likens pre-Rodgers and Hammerstein musicals to Baroque operas, in which composers and librettists "serve larger-than-life stars who arrest the action with their show-stopping arias." He identifies *Oklahoma* as the shifting point, after which musicals aspire to Joseph Kerman’s European

invoked as a standard for judging musical theater since midcentury, but whether musicals ever elide the differences across divergent theatrical elements is questionable.¹⁶ The poetics of the musical – a non-realist juxtaposition of multiple performance modes ranging from dialogue to song to dance – have the potential to open the genre to a wider range of identifications and interpretations, which can operate even independent of narrative and character. Following Stacy Wolf, my work engages in Judith Halberstam’s concept of “perverse presentism,” taking into account spectators’ identifications and desires as I re-view and recontextualize the musical with an eye towards difference.¹⁷

Musical numbers are often the location in which excess to the normative plot can be performed and even celebrated for the marginalized and semi-marginalized creators and fans of the genre. My dissertation particularly expands from Scott McMillin’s seminal aesthetic consideration of the genre, *The Musical as Drama*, in which he differentiates between the progressive time of the musical’s book and the repetitive time of musical numbers. For McMillin, song and dance inject a lyrical moment into the “the cause-and-effect progress of the plot,” suspending the linear book time in favor of a different order of time organized by repetition, circularity, and accumulation.¹⁸ After all, music does not unfold in “real time,” but

operatic ideal "of a musical drama in which the various parts – song, story, and movement – form an interdependent and homogeneous whole" and "and use music to define character, generate action, and establish atmosphere" (526).

¹⁶ Many scholars have previously questioned the paradigm. See, for instance, Wolf, *A Problem Like Maria*, 32: "In spite of the received history of musical theater, the form is hardly 'integrated' at all. Although composers, lyricists, and librettists are said to have successfully 'integrated' the book and the numbers, musicals are figured around what might be called Brechtian pauses, gaps, absences, interruptions, and 'Alienation-effects.'" In *Making Americans*, Andrea Most similarly notes a disjuncture between book and song, contrasting the "psychological realism" of the dialogue to the "celebratory energy" of the musical numbers (78-79).

¹⁷ Wolf, *A Problem Like Maria*, 8.

¹⁸ Scott McMillin, *The Musical as Drama: A Study of the Principles and Conventions behind Musical Shows from Kern to Sondheim* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 9.

imposes a suspended animation on intensified, emotional moments.¹⁹ Musical numbers also have the potential to collapse time – memories of the past and dreams of the future – into a heightened here and now; the expansive present takes stock of time and makes multiple possibilities palpable, even proffering the potential of rerouting the narrative drive. It is in these exuberant, temporally divergent musical numbers that queer spectators can find giddy release from normative plots and imagine different ways of spending time in the world.

The predominance of a linear and developmental notion of progress through time often obscures alternative manners of organizing life patterns. Modern time consciousness – epitomized by the linear, horizontal timeline – exerts strict social, political, and economic control over work and leisure.²⁰ Yet different life trajectories can be constructed through attention to circularity, repetition, and luminous present moments, rather than smooth sailing along a straight and delineated path. Halberstam’s notions of queer time and space are particularly valuable in politicizing the alternative temporality of a musical’s song and dance numbers. Queer temporality emerges in opposition to normative institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction.²¹ Rather than take its definition from sexual identity alone, queerness encompasses multiple “willfully eccentric modes of being” and alternative ways of life that enable participants to imagine their lives “outside of those paradigmatic markers of life experience – namely, birth, marriage, reproduction, and death.”²² Queer subjects live in excess of the logics of labor,

¹⁹ Knapp, *National Identity*, 12.

²⁰ Bliss Cua Lim, *Translating Time: Cinema, the Fantastic, and Temporal Critique* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 11.

²¹ Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 1.

²² Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*, 1-2.

production, and capitalism while seeking creative approaches to organizing time and constructing identity.

After all, breaking into the repetitive time of song and dance not only alters the temporal landscape of the stage, but also fundamentally shifts characterizations. In an integrated musical, song and dance are often perceived to deepen character, yet McMillin suggests that a musical number actually *doubles* a character, effecting a striking transformation into a new “musical” self – and “the incongruity is theatrically arresting.”²³ Bertolt Brecht is an essential guidepost in my efforts to politicize the alienated theatrical elements of the musical, particularly the transformation that a character undergoes in song and dance.²⁴ The purpose of the Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt*, or alienation effect, is to defamiliarize what ideology makes seem normal and even natural; in other words, “People’s activity must simultaneously be so and be capable of being different.”²⁵ While the political goal of Brecht’s praxis is to denaturalize structures of capitalism, Elin Diamond suggests that techniques of alienation, historicization, and distanciation can be productively employed to denaturalize other cultural constructs, such as gender, sexuality, and race, as well.²⁶ As the disjunctive elements of song and dance double character, they can destabilize the notion of an essentialized identity by spectacularly showcasing the performativity of identity. Interrupting our normal sense of narrative and character, musical numbers can offer a

²³ McMillin, *The Musical as Drama*, 21.

²⁴ Brecht was astounded by the innovations of the musical theater stage in the 1940s, which he praised for a radical separation of theatrical elements. On a 1946 visit to NYC, Brecht saw several musicals – including *Oklahoma!* – and later wrote that the Broadway musical “has been evolved to the true expression of everything that is American. Stage designers and choreographers use V-effects [“alienating effects”] to a great degree.” See Carl Weber, “Brecht’s Concept of Gestus and the American Performance Tradition,” in *Brecht Sourcebook*, ed. Carol Martin and Henry Bial (London: Routledge, 2000), 45.

²⁵ Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre; the Development of an Aesthetic.*, trans. John Willett (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), 71.

²⁶ Elin Diamond, “Brechtian Theory/Feminist Theory: Toward a Gestic Feminist Criticism,” *TDR* 32, no. 1 (Spring 1988): 86, www.jstor.org/stable/1145871.

pleasurable disjuncture from the character delineated by the plot and a space of imagining potential difference within a “self.”

Rather than identify with a singular protagonist on a narrative journey as in an Aristotelian model, queer fans are often, I suggest, more attentive to transformations of time and identity across the musical; the “crackle of difference” between book and musical number enables these subjects to imagine new structures of self and specifically queer affiliations.²⁷ Employing Jill Dolan’s terminology, musical numbers might be considered utopian performatives: “small but profound moments in which performance calls the attention of the audience in a way that lifts everyone slightly above the present, into a hopeful feeling of what the world might be like if every moment of our lives were as emotionally voluminous, generous, aesthetically striking, and intersubjectively intense.”²⁸ Defining utopia less as a place than as a process of spending time, utopian performatives are indices to possibility: wormholes into the “what if.”²⁹ The very “present-tenseness” of performance can bring the utopian possibility of *communitas* into an evanescent here and now – and this sensation of understanding self and being understood by others is a rare feeling for queer subjects.³⁰

While entertainment does not present a model for a utopian world as in the classic literary models of Thomas More or William Morris, the musical provides a visceral sensation of how utopia might feel.³¹ Queer spectatorship of the musical is marked by a desire to locate, embrace, and actively participate in the performance of difference, which is always and already embedded

²⁷ McMillin, *The Musical as Drama*, 2.

²⁸ Jill Dolan, *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 5.

²⁹ Dolan, *Utopia in Performance*, 13.

³⁰ Dolan, *Utopia in Performance*, 17.

³¹ Dyer, *Only Entertainment*, 20.

in the genre's aesthetics. Stacy Wolf suggests that our identifications with the musical rely less on narrative and character and more on "bodies shaped through song and dance," the virtuosity and pleasures of performance itself.³² Moreover, musicals invite the audience to sing and dance along; the genre's participatory pleasures can offer a particularly important visceral experience of embodying alternatives to one's own life circumstances.³³ As fans perform and reperform musical moments and incorporate musical stories, songs, and characters into their lives, musical theater ruptures the division between performers and audience members, between creators and consumers. Although the musical's aesthetic is always determined by its commodity status, the uses and meanings produced by fan cultures can turn a commodity's exchange value to unpredictable identifications.

Avid fans of the musical – such as the FYSS tribe that gathered last summer in Central Park – delight in playing on the tenuous borders between fiction and reality. They locate agency in negotiating between scripted parts and their embodiment, or between performativity and performance; they strive actively to shape their worlds through the creation of new cultural fictions.³⁴ After all, dreams and fantasies – temporal excesses to a linear life progression – are never pure imagination, but forces that aspire to transform the "real" world.³⁵ For queer spectators, musical numbers can point to alternative structures of identity and community that have yet to be realized; as instances of anticipatory illumination, song and dance can show "the possibilities for rearranging social and political relations so that they engender *Heimat*," Ernst

³² Dolan, *Utopia in Performance*, 33.

³³ Knapp, *National Identity*, 283.

³⁴ See Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," in *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory*, ed. Katie Conboy, Nadia Medina, and Sarah Stanbury (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

³⁵ Raymond Knapp, *The American Musical and the Performance of Personal Identity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 167. See also Dolan, *Utopia in Performance*, 7.

Bloch's term for a home that we have sensed but have never before experienced.³⁶ These utopian performatives are always fragmentary and fleeting, performed in a fraught and conflicted present, yet they register the hopes, dreams, and – most importantly – the survival of marginalized, musical identities.

This dissertation elaborates on evanescent moments of negotiating identities in difference in and through the musical's time-warping aesthetics.

Chapter 1, "A Funny Thing Happened ... to the Integrated Musical: Poetics and Politics of Queer Temporality," lays the theoretical foundations for the dissertation by locating the "queerness" of musical theater in the temporally divergent ruptures of the genre's musical numbers. I examine *Rent* (1996), *A Little Night Music* (1973), and *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* (1962) in the context of pivotal events in the queer historiography of the United States to consider the ways in which the musical's aesthetics are valuable in imagining different ways of being for the stereotypical gay male show queen. Subsequent chapters expand the definition of queerness to validate a broader range of marginalized and semi-marginalized fans who identify with the musical's poetics and politics.

Chapter 2, "Let's Do the Time Warp Again: Performing Time, Genre, and Spectatorship," identifies an affective link across nonrealist, time-warping genres of science fiction / fantasy and musical theater, as well as their dedicated and overlapping fan cultures. Defining genre as a performative structure rather than a defined set of aesthetic qualities, I consider how fans pleurably cross fantasy and reality in participatory cult films such as *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* and *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog*. By considering reality to be

³⁶ Ernst Bloch, *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature: Selected Essays*, trans. Jack Zipes and Frank Mecklenburg (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988), xxxiii.

historical and contingent, these anti-quotidian genres explore the limits of what is objectively present, and physicalize a temporally divergent world in the here and now.

Chapter 3, “Ragging Race: Spectral Temporality in the American Musical,” explores a haunting in American popular culture: the under-acknowledged contributions of African-Americans. Defining history as an always imaginative construction, I bridge from E.L. Doctorow's 1975 novel *Ragtime* and the 1998 musical adaptation – which posit ragtime music as a contradictorily violent and utopic crossing of African-American, Jewish, and Anglo-American cultures – to historical performances of ragtime music at the turn of the century. Analyzing late 19th- and early 20th-century pianola advertisements, I reimagine the parlor player piano as a spectral space of encounter between black artists and white consumers and attempt to uncover the fraught negotiations of race ragged across these 88 black and white keys.

Chapter 4, “‘I Just Projected Myself Out of It’: The Excess and Economics of Youth Musical Theater,” considers the impact of marginalizing the arts in contemporary US public education systems. Artistic disciplines are often allotted less class time than required subjects such as math and the sciences, and they frequently receive less funding and public recognition than competitive sports and other mainstream extracurricular activities. Teenagers who identify with and participate in the arts are thus imagined as a community of outsiders, defined by alternative sexualities, races, and geeky differences from the popular jock and cheerleader mold, and these youth are often marginalized along with their artistic disciplines. This chapter explores the fictionalizations of youth musical theater communities in the hit television show *Glee* and the cult movie *Camp* to trace the shifting reception of the musical across time and geography.

Throughout these chapters, marginalized subjects find brief moments of coherence and connection in musical theater's imaginaries of song and dance. A musical number can offer a

luminous, liminal timespace of negotiating queer constructs of identity and community. If only for a moment, the sensation of understanding self and being understood by others can grip the performers and the audience, who collectively cling to the expansive present – breathless, longing, and desirous of difference. In the heart of Central Park during the steamy summer of 2012, a (regrettably mediocre) production of *Into the Woods* provided an enchanting organizing landscape for an ensemble of musical theater geeks – tweeters and tumblists, repetitive theatergoers and obscure cast album collectors – to experience one such singular sensation together. Significantly, this fantastical Sondheim show both begins and ends with a rising two-note gesture: “I wish...”³⁷ The open and unfinished quality of this fleeting phrase captures the overarching gesture of this dissertation. At the end of a musical, the curtain may close and the fullness of the utopian moment may fade – but a melody can haunt, reprising the promise of *communitas* and performatively reaching for difference and transformation beyond the proscenium arch.

³⁷ Sondheim and Lapine, *Into the Woods*, 3 and 138.

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**A Funny Thing Happened ... to the Integrated Musical:
Poetics and Politics of Queer Temporality**

EVAN

*Peter, you're reading a paper with a front page announcing the deadliest month
in nine years for the soldiers in Afghanistan, and you're upset about theater?
Don't you think that's a little ... narrow?*

PETER

*It's all of a piece, darling. See, that's what the computer savvy greasers and socs
of your generation don't seem to understand. You flock to the interwebs for your
fingerling snippets of news, and you call that — being informed. But, you whiz
right past all the other awful shit that exists in the day's news. Now, me? I see all
the awful. I hold it in my goddamn lap. Little awful smudges of it come off on my
fingers. This paper is not a news bite, it is a news sandwich, an awful news
sandwich made on awful bread with awful meat, awful lettuce, and sale-at-
Pennies dijonaise. No page of this awful paper could have been possible without
the inclusion of every other awful page, and it is nothing but farce to believe
otherwise.*

*So you see, dear, it isn't that I'm narrow, it's that I am concerned about
everything via a very specific entry point.*

Philip Dawkins, *The Homosexuals*¹

In *The Homosexuals*, 48-year-old regional theater director Peter represents a familiar stereotype and reality: the fabulously gay show queen.² “Overtly and unapologetically flamboyant. If you cut him, he would bleed glitter,” playwright Philip Dawkins describes him.³ Peter thrives on Broadway gossip and obsesses over the Tony Awards; his everyday rhetoric is rife with theatrical references, playfully poetic imagery, and double entendre. Peter’s boyfriend, an art history professor, loves how Peter’s showy attire is a controversial work of performance

¹ Philip Dawkins, "The Homosexuals," 2011, MS, Unpublished Manuscript, 5. Performed June 11 – July 24, 2011 by About Face Theatre at the Victory Gardens Biograph Theater in Chicago. My thanks to Philip Dawkins for sharing his unpublished play with me.

² John M. Clum, *Something for the Boys: Musical Theater and Gay Culture* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 4.

³ Dawkins, "The Homosexuals," 2.

art; Peter immediately unsettles fashion standards upon entering a room and boldly signifies his difference from the norm. For a show queen, style is substance.

Like Peter, I am interested in reading style as substance, engaging the poetics of musical theater as a “very specific entry point” into processes of identification. In this dissertation, I explore how the musical can serve as an identificatory site for marginalized subjects. I interrogate how song and dance – sites of aesthetic difference within the musical – lend themselves to processes of identification that can potentially cut against the grain of dominant ideology. The musical often narratively closets an alternate ideology that is always and already implicit in the form, and identifications with elements in this form – particularly the warped temporalities of song and dance – can create a politicized imaginary of identities in difference, new forms of affiliation, and specifically queer relationships.

As Stacy Wolf writes, “It is precisely the musical’s *musicality*, the element that marks the form’s popular appeal, that also opens it up to queer appropriations.”⁴ Indeed, music and gay identities have long aligned in the popular imaginary; according to Philip Brett, the “deviant status” of music performers is built upon a long tradition of understanding music to be “different, irrational, unaccountable.”⁵ For D.A. Miller, the specific queerness of the musical is located precisely in the discontinuity between book and musical numbers: “As often as it had numbers, every Broadway musical brought [the queer spectator] ecstatic release from all those well-made plots,” he explains.⁶ Broadway’s persistent binary between musicals and “straight” plays further

⁴ Stacy Ellen Wolf, *A Problem Like Maria: Gender and Sexuality in the American Musical* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 31.

⁵ Philip Brett, “Musicality, Essentialism, and the Closet,” in *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology*, ed. Philip Brett, Elizabeth Wood, and Gary C. Thomas (New York: Routledge, 1994), 11.

⁶ D. A. Miller, *Place for Us: Essay on the Broadway Musical* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 3.

confers queerness on a genre that “unnaturally” bursts into song and dance, rupturing the aesthetics of realism and its representations of normative identities.

Following Miller and Wolf, I locate the “queerness” of the American musical in the ruptures of the musical numbers – and particularly in their temporal deviation from a linear narrative. Much like Miller, *The Homosexuals*⁷ show queen Peter exults in heightened moments of release from the normative linear plot. Peter’s fashion sensibilities, his playfully self-aware rhetoric, and his passion for musical theater all sync with his idiosyncratic approach to time. “The future is ambiguous. Like Capri pants,” he explains. “I’d much rather concentrate on the here and now, on all of the many this-very-moments that make up a life.”⁷ Just as he signifies his difference from the norm with bold clothing, then, Peter bends time to a “queer temporality” of his own creative self-fashioning. He rejects a normative, progress-driven construction of time and progressive futurity in favor of a full and sensuous series of present moments.

Queer temporality describes an array of alternative life narratives and relationships to time, embracing “the here, the present, the now” rather than a heteronormative, developmental progression of birth, marriage, reproduction, and death. Judith Halberstam suggests that queer time “flashes into view in the heart of a crisis, [and] exploits the potential of what Charles-Pierre Baudelaire called in relation to modernism ‘the transient, the fleeting, the contingent’.”⁸ Within the genre of musical theater, the musical number’s showstopping qualities frequently queer time; a song lyrically, musically, and choreographically expands upon an evanescent instant, temporarily displacing the narrative drive. Or, an extended number joins many such instants, however separated by time and distance. Animated by song and dance, bodies in musical

⁷ Dawkins, “The Homosexuals,” 100.

⁸ Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 2.

performance can accelerate and decelerate time, foreground repetition and circularity, dip into memory and project into the future, and physicalize dreams in a narratively-open present.

As I will elaborate in Chapter 2, I hesitate to essentialize the musical as an exclusively “gay” genre.⁹ Many contemporary homosexuals, including characters in Dawkins’ play, dis-identify with the show queen stereotype; and while the musical has been a seminal point of identification for gay men, I wish to validate a broader range of queer readings of the genre, to keep the poetics and politics of the musical fluid and open. The postmodern urban world increasingly gives rise to skewings of heteronormative time for multiple subjects. For Stacy Wolf, the term “queer” can be broadly applicable to any nonstraight reading or interpretation: following Alexander Doty, she considers it “a flexible space for the expression of all aspects of non- (anti-, contra-) straight cultural production and reception.”¹⁰ For Bliss Cua Lim as well, “queer” extends to a wide range of minoritarian, unincorporated excess: anyone who feels “other than.”¹¹ While this chapter will focus specifically on identification by the gay male show queen, later chapters broaden the queer reception of the musical and consider affective connections across other marginalized groups.

The historical narrative of the formally “integrated” musical insists that all elements, including musical numbers, linearly progress the plot. Reevaluating the principles of integration through a lens of queer temporality, however, illuminates the musical elements’ potential divergence from the narrative. As Elizabeth Freeman suggests, we can only identify what is queer and what is not in retrospect; queer cultural debris accumulates “in idiosyncratic piles ‘not

⁹ D. A. Miller notably makes this claim in *Place for Us*, 16.

¹⁰ Wolf, *A Problem Like Maria*, 23.

¹¹ Lim used this particular terminology in her talk on Queer Temporalities, presented as part of the UCLA Department of English’s Mellon Sawyer Series on May 20, 2010. See also Bliss Cua Lim, *Translating Time: Cinema, the Fantastic, and Temporal Critique* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).

necessarily like any preexisting whole,' though composed of what preexists.”¹² Rather than read the musical as a homogeneously integrated Gesamtkunstwerk, I locate a shifting affective relationship among book, music, lyrics, dance, design, and other elements of the musical.¹³ The aesthetically-charged and temporally distinct musical numbers emphasize performative self-invention that show queens find ripe for reimagining identity and for valorizing queer subjectivity. My affective history embraces idiosyncratic moments of queer temporality in the musical, which we can retrospectively understand as “structures of belonging and duration that may be invisible to the historicist eye.”¹⁴

In what follows, I explore queer temporality and identification in *Rent* (1996) and *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* (1962), with a brief musical interlude from *A Little Night Music* (1973). In the context of pivotal events in the queer historiography of the United States, I argue that the ways in which music and dance warp time are particularly valuable in imagining different ways of being for the show queen. The commercially queer *Rent* opened towards the end of the HIV/AIDS epidemic (1980s and early 1990s), while the narratively closeted – but stylistically queer – musical comedy of *Forum* opened on Broadway early in the decade that would culminate in the Stonewall Riots (1969). *A Little Night Music's*

¹² Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), xi.

¹³ See Richard Wagner, *Opera and Drama* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995) for the operatic forerunner of the integrated musical, championed by Rodgers and Hammerstein in the 1940s and 1950s. In his autobiography, Richard Rodgers explains, "I have long held a theory about musicals. When a show works perfectly, it's because all the individual parts complement each other and fit together. No single element overshadows any other. In a great musical, the orchestrations sound the way the costumes look. That's what made *Oklahoma!* work. All the components dovetailed. There was nothing extraneous or foreign, nothing that pushed itself into the spotlight yelling 'look at me!' It was a work created by many that gave the impression of having been created by one." See Richard Rodgers, *Musical Stages: An Autobiography* (New York: Random House, 1975), 249.

¹⁴ Freeman, *Time Binds*, xi.

“The Miller’s Son” thus occupies a particularly fabulous and fleeting moment of rapturous promiscuity and excess in the 1970s and early 1980s.

No Day But Today: *Rent* (1996)

American theater of the early 1990s addressed a rising epidemic that seemed to hit hardest within the Broadway community itself: AIDS. As a generation of theatrical writers, composers, choreographers and performers succumbed to the disease, dramas such as Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America* (1993) and Terrence McNally’s *Love! Valor! Compassion!* (1995) played side-by-side with musicals such as James Lapine and William Finn’s *Falsettos* (1992) and Jonathan Larson’s long-running hit *Rent* (1996).

Although Larson is the only one of these writers not identifying as gay, this young, struggling artist was certainly part of the queer East Village community of the late 1980s and early 1990s. Larson insisted that AIDS affects everyone in the community – “not just homosexuals and drug abusers.”¹⁵ Queer temporality extends to those living in the shadow of the HIV/AIDS epidemic: those who “live outside of reproductive and familial time as well as on the edges of logics of labor and production.”¹⁶ Larson never saw the acclaim and commercial profit that his rock musical ultimately won. Rather, this bohemian composer witnessed his gay friends struggle with HIV/AIDS and himself died from an aortic aneurysm shortly before the New York Theatre Workshop previews of *Rent*.

Much scholarship criticizes this popular musical for normalizing or banalizing HIV/AIDS as just another aspect of *la vie bohème*. In an article surveying the field of theater and

¹⁵ Judith Sebesta, "Of Fire, Death, and Desire: Transgression and Carnival in Jonathan Larson's *Rent*," *Contemporary Theater Review* 16, no. 4 (2006): 428.

¹⁶ Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*, 10.

performance studies, for instance, David Savran encourages scholars to better specify a relation between performance and its *habitus*. He proffers a long, scathing critique of *Rent*'s economic, cultural, social, and symbolic contexts as an example:

the gentrification of the East Village; the commodification of queer and queer wanna-be culture; the mainstreaming of hip-hop; the prolonged economic boom that has particularly benefited the Broadway theater-going classes; the transubstantiation of high into low, *La Bohème* into rock opera, as the occasion for slumming by members of these affluent classes; the romance of miscegenated cultural forms; the romance of miscegenation; the tragic mulatta updated as Latino drag queen in the wake of *Paris Is Burning*; [and] the Disneyfication of Times Square, in relation to which the Nederlander Theater, gussied up to look dilapidated, becomes a theme park of abjection.¹⁷

John Clum echoes these sentiments in *Something for the Boys*,¹⁸ as does Helen Lewis in a dissertation on the commodification of queerness in *Rent*.¹⁹ For Lewis, *Rent*'s identity as a queer, fringe musical dissolves with its Broadway opening. This once-subversive event becomes a piece of cultural capital on the Great White Way, and it further degenerates into a piece of nostalgia, devoid of its radical queerness, in the 2005 film adaptation.

While these critiques are certainly warranted, Lewis's personal reaction to her first Broadway viewing of *Rent* complicates her thesis. "To many of us coming out in mid-1990s America, who also doubled as musical theater queens, Jonathan Larson's rock opera *Rent* was a

¹⁷ David Savran, "Choices Made and Unmade," *Theater* 31, no. 2 (2001): 93-94.

¹⁸ Clum, *Something for the Boys*, 272-274.

¹⁹ Helen Lewis, *Renting a Queer Space: The Commodification of Queerness in Jonathan Larson's 'Rent'*, diss., Tufts University, 2007, accessed March 21, 2010, ProQuest Dissertations and Theses.

declaration of rebellion, a call to a new generation,” she writes.²⁰ Although highly commercialized, *Rent* provided a point of identification for young queer spectators like Lewis, as well as a venue for both gay and straight audience members to consider the gravity of the AIDS epidemic. As David Román reminds us, “Popular culture is not just a means of co-optation and mass manipulation. Popular culture may inspire meanings that exceed or contradict the process of commodification.”²¹ He reads the strength of ensemble performance in *Rent* as a vital embodiment of community in the face of crisis.

Popular media began heralding the end of AIDS with the proven success of protease inhibitors in 1996, and as AIDS became a manageable rather than a fatal disease, the subject slowly slipped from discourse in the United States.²² Yet *Rent* was one of the few popular entertainments to repeatedly raise the issue of HIV/AIDS on Broadway, winning four Tony Awards and a Pulitzer Prize for Drama, and then continuing its run at the Nederlander for twelve years. Even the Broadway closing in September 2008 feels open-ended, as this rock opera lives on in national tours, local productions (including often controversial high school productions of *Rent: School Edition*²³), multiple cast albums, a 2005 film adaptation that reunited much of the original Broadway cast, and a live recording of the final Broadway performance. Most recently, a reimagined off-Broadway production premiered at New World Stages in July 2011, closing in September 2012 after a healthy run of 450 performances.

²⁰ Lewis, *Renting a Queer Space*, 2.

²¹ David Román, *Acts of Intervention: Performance, Gay Culture, and AIDS* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 282.

²² David Román, *Performance in America: Contemporary U.S. Culture and the Performing Arts* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

²³ See Kenneth Jones, "The Show Won't Go On: *Rent* Canceled at Texas High School," *Playbill.com*, December 11, 2008, accessed October 11, 2012, <http://www.playbill.com/news/article/124211-The-Show-Wont-Go-On-Rent-Canceled-at-Texas-High-School> for the most publicized controversy over the *Rent: School Edition*. The debacle has inspired a musical of its own: *Speargrove Presents* by Sammy Buck and Brandon James Gwinn.

In its various incarnations over the years, *Rent* has garnered a dedicated young fan base of “Rentheads.” During its original Broadway run, *Rent* became the first show to offer a limited number of \$20 tickets on the day of the performance; Rentheads would camp out overnight to secure these seats in the first two rows of the orchestra. This rush and lottery policy, particularly popular with students and young adults, has since extended to most Broadway musicals and plays. The marketing strategy not only develops young audiences who will hopefully continue theatergoing later in life, but it also queers the Broadway theatergoing crowd in the present by enabling younger and lower class audience members to attend at an affordable price. Michael Riedel observes that seating these raucous, obsessive fans in the front rows “seems to perplex the people behind them, some of whom paid scalpers \$500 for their seats.” Rentheads attend the theater in a queered form of repetitive cultural consumption; in March 1997, less than a year after *Rent*’s Broadway premiere, Riedel interviewed fans who had seen the show as many as 57 times. More actively engaged than one-time audience members, Rentheads “notice the slightest variations in performances, nudging each other when, say, Wilson Jermaine Heredia, who plays a transvestite, tries out a new shade of lipstick.” The very act of “camping” out in front of the *Nederlander* creates a tight-knit community of enthusiasts who embrace the musical’s affective – and even therapeutic – powers of presentism: the philosophical belief summed up in the repeated lyric, “No day but today.” “When I saw 'Rent' for the first time, I was going through a difficult period in my life," one self-proclaimed Renthead explains. "I'd just broken up with someone and I'd lost four friends to AIDS. 'Rent' gave me hope.”²⁴

²⁴ Michael Riedel, "Every Day A 'Rent' Party: Hardcore Fans Of The Hit Musical Form A Squatters Camp At The Box Office," *New York Daily News*, March 3, 1997, accessed September 27, 2012, http://articles.nydailynews.com/1997-03-03/entertainment/18034670_1_rent-heads-show-mccarthy.

By Halberstam's definition, queer temporality "emerges most spectacularly, at the end of the twentieth century, from within those gay communities whose horizons of possibilities have been severely diminished by the AIDS epidemic."²⁵ Queer time embraces each fleeting and evanescent moment. Paradigmatic of the shifting temporalities accessible in the genre of musical theater, *Rent* is simultaneously concerned with the swift passage of time and the possibility of time's arrest; the show advocates a powerful "no day but today" mentality as a response to crisis. This musical's queering of the linear timeline offers an alternative lifeline of identification that is particularly resonant for socially marginalized subjects and communities. *Rent*'s show-stopping anthems extend a fleeting and fragmentary sense of *communitas* that blurs the boundaries among characters, performers and spectators.²⁶

Temporality of the HIV/AIDS crisis

Jonathan Larson's friend Victoria Leacock Hoffman calls HIV/AIDS an "apocalyptic disease." The diagnoses of several friends had a profound impact on the composer's temporal perception of life in the late 1980s and early 1990s. "It would accelerate everything, because, I believe, it started an invisible stopwatch. Time could run out," she writes.²⁷ Time is accordingly of central importance as *Rent* opens – established before the characters are introduced by name or the setting is elaborated. "We begin on Christmas Eve, with me, Mark, and my roommate, Roger," Mark starts. "We live in an industrial loft on the corner of 11th Street and Avenue B, the

²⁵ Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*, 2.

²⁶ See Jill Dolan, *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 11. Dolan follows anthropologist Victor Turner in her theatrical definition of *communitas*: "the moments in a theater event or a ritual in which audiences or participants feel themselves become part of the whole in an organic, nearly spiritual way; spectators' individuality becomes finely attuned to those around them, and a cohesive if fleeting feeling of belonging to the group bathes the audience."

²⁷ Jonathan Larson, *Rent: The Complete Book and Lyrics of the Broadway Musical* (New York: Applause Theater and Cinema Books, 2008), x.

top floor of what was once a music publishing factory.”²⁸ *Rent* structurally plays out the apocalyptic acceleration of time in the bohemian East Village. Act I covers a succinct span of Christmas Eve through Christmas Day, but sets in motion a dynamic series of intertwined storylines. The fiery relationship between performance artist Maureen and her new girlfriend Joanne begins to crack; HIV-positive Roger meets and eventually admits his feelings for fellow diagnosee Mimi; Collins falls for Latino drag queen Angel, both of whom have AIDS; and Mark stands by to document every moment on film – including the pivotal performance “Over the Moon” and the subsequent protest at the Life Cafe.

From this concentrated sequence of events, Act II then covers a sprawling span of time: New Year’s Eve through Christmas Eve of the following year. Relationships flounder, but ultimately revive as the community learns to embrace the present moment against this quickened pace of life. Inspired by Susan Sontag’s *AIDS and Its Metaphors*, Jonathan Larson explicitly aimed “to quash the already clichéd ‘AIDS victim’ stereotypes and point out that [...] people with AIDS can live full lives” – as can the surrounding community affected by the loss.²⁹ For Larson, living a full life means embracing the musical’s mantra of community and presentism: “No day but today.”

The title *Rent* is often read as a play on two definitions: the noun describing Mark and Roger’s looming financial deadline, as well as the verb “to tear apart with force or violence, an apt metaphor for the turmoil in the community.”³⁰ Yet we can also read the word “rent” as a tear in the fabric of linear time: an attempt to intervene in time’s progression by embracing the present moment. Individuals and communities impacted by the AIDS epidemic sought to counter

²⁸ Larson, *Rent*, 2.

²⁹ Sebesta, "Of Fire, Death, and Desire," 428.

³⁰ Larson, *Rent*, xi.

the heightened speed of life by celebrating “the here, the present, the now,” seemingly bringing time to a standstill.³¹ In this sung-through musical, recitative marks the quickened linear passage of time, while anthems, reprises and other repetitive frameworks take stock of time and attempt to capture a luminous *communitas*.

Setting this contrast between recitative and anthem is “Another Day,” in which the isolated Roger continually recoils from Mimi’s attempts to engage him in the present moment. Roger’s dynamic dialogue-like verses tactically seek to drive Mimi away: “Who do you think you are?/Barging in on me and my guitar/Little girl – Hey/The door is that way/You better go, you know the fire’s out anyway.” Occurring in linear time at a quickened progressive pace, Roger defers any potential romance to “another time – another place.”³² In contrast, Mimi bridges into an anthemic chorus in a heightened rhetoric, rife with simple lyrical and musical repetition:

There’s only us/There’s only this
Forget regret/Or life is yours to miss
No other road/No other way
No day but today.³³

Against Roger’s harried quaver rhythms (continued in the accompaniment), Mimi’s mantra slows time to strong, stilled half notes. Melodically circling within the small range of a fifth, she echoes the presentist credo that has been prefigured in an earlier Life Support meeting.

After alternating between these competing temporalities, “Another Day” collapses the two in a combination-song conclusion: against Roger’s continued attempts to drive her away, Mimi pleads that Roger embrace the here and now. Her mantra is backed by the Life Support

³¹ Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*, 2.

³² Larson, *Rent*, 43.

³³ Larson, *Rent*, 44.

group, a supportive community for those diagnosed with HIV/AIDS. Roger's anxious deferral to "Another time, another place,/Another rhyme, a warm embrace/Another dance, another way/Another chance, another day" is continually met – and eventually trumped – by the resounding collective assertion, "No day but today."³⁴

By the end of Act I, Roger begins to embrace the present despite his rapidly deteriorating health. The start of Roger's relationship with Mimi in "I Should Tell You" coincides with his own bridge from progressive recitative into a shared, poetic anthem: "Trusting desire – starting to learn/Walking through fire without a burn/Clinging – a shoulder, a leap begins/Stinging and older, asleep on pins."³⁵ This chorus clings to the moment of their embrace and steps outside a linear conception of time, taking place as a respite in the middle of the riotous list song "La Vie Bohème." Rather than directly progressing the narrative, the poetics of this song are specific enough to connect to character and scenario – yet broad enough to be echoed by different characters in different contexts.

Embracing the circular "Seasons of Love"

This contrast in temporalities plays out vividly in the show-stopping Act II anthem "Seasons of Love." The actors meander to the front of the stage, slowly forming a stalwart line of bodies – each standing awash in a spotlight, a visually vibrating standstill. The spotlight often accompanies show-stopping moments in the genre of musical theater; the scenic background fades into darkness and characters uninvolved in the number may freeze in place or exit the

³⁴ Larson, *Rent*, 45.

³⁵ Larson, *Rent*, 82.

stage.³⁶ Similarly, the surrounding narrative context may fade as the focus shifts to the performer(s) in the expansive present moment. Coupled with breaking the fourth wall, a show-stopping number creates a heightened, Brechtian tension between the performer and the character being portrayed. As Raymond Knapp points out, “[music] imposes, through its obvious and conventional artificiality, a kind of mask that both conceals and calls attention to the performer behind the persona.”³⁷ Anthony Rapp even recalls that director Michael Grief encouraged the actors “to strip yourselves of your characters a bit, and let yourselves be exposed” in this “presentational” song, which lies outside the bounds of straightforward storytelling.³⁸ The doubleness in this staging of “Seasons of Love” consciously extends the song’s applicability beyond the theatrical narrative.

Musical structures in “Seasons of Love” work by circularity and repetition, rather than a progressive linear temporality. A simple piano vamp – the immediately recognizable undercurrent of the song’s verse – begins the tune. This two-measure chord progression creates a quasi-inversion around the tonic triad (F major). Chords are notably ambiguous, open and widely spaced in their initial iterations, filled in and full-bodied with vocal and instrumental elaborations only later in the song. The opening two chords (labeled in the score as an open B-flat major suspension with an added second and an A minor seventh) are particularly incomplete, with multiple directional implications.

³⁶ One of the first shows that keyed me into this use of the spotlight was *In the Heights* (2008), in which Andy Blankenbuehler’s choreography occasionally brings a past time and place to life around the spotlighted singer. In “Paciencia y Fe,” for instance, Abuela’s childhood in Havana whirls about her in the show-stopping present.

³⁷ Raymond Knapp, *The American Musical and the Formation of National Identity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 12.

³⁸ Anthony Rapp, *Without You: A Memoir of Love, Loss, and the Musical Rent* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006), 21.

The image displays a musical score for the chorus of the song "Seasons of Love". It consists of two systems of music, each with four staves. The top two staves of each system are for the vocal line, and the bottom two are for the piano accompaniment. The key signature is B-flat major (two flats) and the time signature is 4/4. The lyrics are: "Sea - sons of lo - ve. Sea - sons of Sea - sons of lo - ve. — Sea - sons of lo - ve. — lo - ve. —". The score shows a repetitive, arpeggiated piano accompaniment and a vocal line with significant rests, creating a circular feel.

Chorus of “Seasons of Love”

Significantly, this song’s lyrics and repetitive, modular melody also focus on circularity rather than progress: on the repeated rituals that bring meaning to the 525,600 minutes in a year, rather than the linear timeline of life. Echoing the sparse opening chords, the vocal line is riven with gaps. Much of the melody is arpeggiated, and quaver rests break up the verses:

In | daylights **[rest]**, in sunsets **[rest]**, in | midnights, in cups of coffee,

| **[rest]** In inches, **[rest]** in miles, in | laughter, in strife.

In | **[rest]** five hundred twenty-five thousand | six hundred minutes **[rest]**

How | **[rest]** do you measure a | year in the life.³⁹

These audible gaps echo the absence of loved ones in a community wracked by AIDS. In fact, Angel's death is visually translated as a gap in the line of actors during a "Seasons of Love" reprise; an empty beam of light marks her former position. Even as rests break up the phrasing of the verse, though, rests also provide space for collective breaths – another of the repetitions by which one can measure a life. Chests rise together on the downbeat of the chorus, a full crotchet breath: "How about [breath] love?" A breath is an affirmation of continued life in the community, even as it marks a melodic absence. Singular events in the life of an individual – birth and death – are sites of repetitions in the ongoing, collective life of the ensemble.

An organ joins the accompaniment towards the end of the song, introducing a gospel quality to the final iterations of the chorus. Using musical tropes of religious transcendence, "Seasons of Love" seeks to transcend life's linear progression through an embrace of the repetitions of life – and to transcend the life of any one individual by pointing to the ongoing life of the community. Two African American soloists, a female followed by a male, improvise on the melody of the second verse while backed by choral harmonies. The company rejoins the soloists in the second chorus and erupts into offbeat clapping, filling some of the previous rests with a powerful, embodied ensemble presence:

It's | time now **[clap]** to sing out **[clap]**,

Tho' the | story ne**[clap]**ver ends **[clap]**.⁴⁰

The audience often joins this celebration of life by clapping in solidarity with the characters/performers, both the dramatic and the real-life communities affected by the

³⁹ Larson, *Rent*, 87.

⁴⁰ Larson, *Rent*, 88.

HIV/AIDS epidemic. These communities overlapped significantly, as the disease affected a wide range of theatrical talents in the 1980s and 1990s.

Repeating with a difference, accumulating meaning

When “Seasons of Love” is reprised later in Act II, this site of repetition draws the audience back to earlier iterations – and, thus, outside of the strictly linear plotline of events. Reprises can be understood through Gilles Deleuze’s concept of clothed repetition: “a mode that mirrors mechanical repetition but challenges its pretence to some essential reality by adding variation, slight shifts, that deny sameness and proclaim the principle of difference.” In the genre of musical theater, repetition can potentially contain and transform the past; rather than being “emptied out” as a mechanical refrain, the chorus can expand into “a ‘semiotic machine’ of accumulating, even clashing, connotations.”⁴¹ Through leitmotif, reprise and other repetitions, the musical becomes a particularly complicated and dense art form; repetition draws the musical into the realm of sedimented history, complexly layered rather than strictly linear.

After Angel passes away, for instance, friends hold a memorial service where they recount stories of her life, culminating in a reprise of “I’ll Cover You” – a song that resonates in the memory of the characters as well as audience members. This song originates as an Act I duet in which Angel and Collins vow to protect one another as they musically and choreographically envision their life together. This musical act of projection, realized in a faithful though brief relationship, now exists only as a memory. Yet Angel is a “new lease” on life for Collins; Collins comes to understand that love is not a stable or concrete entity, but a relationship that is

⁴¹ Quoted in Jeanette R. Malkin, *Memory-theater and Postmodern Drama* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 157.

continually renewed and reinvoked through repetition – even in the physical absence of the loved one.

Like “Seasons of Love,” the reprise of “I’ll Cover You” opens to sparse piano accompaniment beneath Collins’ embellished, soulful remembrance of the song he shared with his lover. As instrumentation builds and Collins’ voice gains strength, the company supports Collins with choral backup vocals, as with the gospel quality in the second verse of “Seasons of Love.” Joanne and another soloist soon begin filling in Angel’s missing vocals in a soaring, harmonized elaboration of her line, “So with a thousand sweet kisses, I’ll cover you.”⁴² This substitution can be considered an act of surrogation, Joseph Roach’s concept of collective social memory by which one body stands in for another’s absence – always failing to fully fill that gap, but vitally memorializing the dead in the act.⁴³

The company finally erupts into a full reprise of “Seasons of Love,” overlaid with Collins’s continuing reprise of “I’ll Cover You.” Temporally collapsing these once-separate strands of the musical, this combination song again points towards transcendence of a linear timeline. The elevated gospel vocals at the end of this reprise invoke religious transcendence as well as the transcendence of an individual life through the ongoing life of the community. Prompting each individual to a reconsideration of life, Angel can be read as a Benjaminian “angel” of history herself:

Where we perceive a chain of events, [the angel] sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been

⁴² Larson, *Rent*, 116.

⁴³ See Joseph R. Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.⁴⁴

Even as the narrative trajectory of *Rent* hurls Angel towards her death, she is one of the few characters to live fully in a queer temporality throughout the musical: perceiving history as a layered, sedimented construct and embracing every here, present, and now. Her committed relationship with Collins – however brief – inspires her friends to wholly embrace the gift of the present. Although her body is absented from the stage, Angel’s presence lingers to “awaken the dead” – by awakening Mimi to hear Roger’s song – and to “make whole” this community in crisis by continually prompting them to live in the present moment.

Temporality of performance repertoire

In *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, Peggy Phelan considers performance and subjectivity as uniquely occurring in the present. For Phelan, performance is characterized by its ephemerality. “The disappearance of the object is fundamental to performance,” she writes. “It rehearses and repeats the disappearance of the subject who longs always to be remembered.”⁴⁵ Roommates Roger and Mark seek to capture time by creating enduring works of art in *Rent*: Roger seeks his “One Song Glory” before the virus takes hold of his body, while Mark attempts to “document real life” in his East Village community, which seems to be “getting more like

⁴⁴ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 257-258.

⁴⁵ Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993), 147.

fiction each day.”⁴⁶ In light of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, these characters desire to leave a legacy, a fragmentary trace of self and others. In Phelan’s conception, an art object such as Roger’s song or Mark’s film is a documentary supplement to the originary performance; it is a “spur to memory, an encouragement of memory to become present.”⁴⁷ As Philip Auslander reminds us, Phelan’s neat division of an “authentic,” originary performance and its supplement is complicated by layers of mediation.⁴⁸ *Rent* walks a fine line between a (highly mediated) performance and a (fictional) documentary of the bohemian East Village community affected by the AIDS epidemic. From Broadway to community theater productions, film versions to cast recordings, *Rent* invokes a highly mediated and layered set of memories in its multitudinous, fragmented forms. With Jonathan Larson’s untimely death before the show’s transfer to Broadway, the musical itself is often read not only as a memorialization of the HIV/AIDS victims, but also as a vital memorialization of the composer himself.

One stage direction in the musical is particularly striking: a note that “the names of the HIV support group members should change every night and should honor actual friends of the company who have died of AIDS.”⁴⁹ Despite differences in gender, ethnicity, sexuality and other aspects of lived experience, characters at the Life Support meeting interweave the same open, unanswerable questions about their diagnoses in the canon “Will I”: “Will I lose my dignity/Will someone care/Will I wake tomorrow/From this nightmare?”⁵⁰ Like “Seasons of Love” breaking the fourth wall, this act of surrogation merges the cast members’ fiction and reality – and even if

⁴⁶ Larson, *Rent*, 8.

⁴⁷ Phelan, *Unmarked*, 146.

⁴⁸ See Philip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (London: Routledge, 2008).

⁴⁹ Larson, *Rent*, 38.

⁵⁰ Larson, *Rent*, 46.

the names are “fixed” in a cast recording or film version, viewers or listeners can read their own friends, family and perhaps even themselves into the never-ending round. In fact, the Rentheads interviewed in Michael Riedel’s 1997 article identify the anthems “Seasons of Love” and “Will I?” as the most emotional moments in the show because of their layered reach from characters to performers to audience members.⁵¹ In this fleeting and fragmentary moment of connection, or what Jill Dolan might call a utopian performative, *Rent* is both performance and archive: a vitally present invocation to memory.⁵²

Throughout *Rent*, repetition and surrogation seek to awaken and enliven memory. Just as “Seasons of Love” collapses into “I’ll Cover You” at Angel’s memorial service, *Rent*’s finale constitutes another remarkable musical agglomeration: “Another Day” bridges into a temporal collapse of “Will I?” and “Without You” (Mimi’s ode to Roger). The song culminates in a resilient ensemble assertion of the musical’s mantra, “No day but today” – a takeaway message for the audience. Cracking open the linear timeline, these dense and sedimented moments of collective memory resound with the characters, performers and audience members alike. Indeed, it is not the recitative or the quickened linear passage of time that lingers in the audience’s collective memory, but the soaring anthems such as “Seasons of Love” that bring time to a standstill. Extracted into our own repertoire to be reprised, reappropriated and recontextualized, such songs extend a message of a communal hope in the wake of crisis.

Richard Dyer has most fully explored the utopianism of musical theater in *Only Entertainment* (1992). Defined as a culturally and historically specific performance produced for profit, entertainment offers “escape,” “wish fulfillment,” and a release into “something better.”

⁵¹ Riedel, "Every Day A 'Rent' Party."

⁵² See Dolan, *Utopia in Performance*.

“Alternatives, hopes, wishes – these are the stuff of utopia, the sense that things could be better, that something other than what is can be imagined and maybe realized,” he writes.⁵³ For Dyer, narrative contradictions are seamlessly resolved in musical numbers: space is alternatively animated as scarcity gives way to abundance, exhaustion to energy, dreariness to intensity, manipulation to transparency, and fragmentation to community. These tidy, harmonious and spectacularly capitalist resolutions consistently elide issues of class, race and patriarchy: “While entertainment is responding to needs that are real, at the same time it is also defining and delimiting what constitute the legitimate needs of people in this society.”⁵⁴

As illustrated earlier, much criticism waged against *Rent* rightfully focuses on the rampant commercialization and commodification in this musical’s transfer to the Broadway stage and adaptation to Hollywood film. Still, Dyer points back to the powerful contradictions underwriting musical theater’s production and reception, including the potential oppositional quality of “*almost all aspects of music and dance*” (his original emphasis).⁵⁵ Dyer finds particular promise for contesting normative structures in the musical’s “extra-ordinary mix of [...] two modes – the historicity of narrative and the lyricism of numbers,” foreshadowing Scott McMillin’s distinction between linear narrative time and repetitive lyric time.⁵⁶ Elaborating on this temporal excess of the genre, Dyer’s article also posits a link to Ernst Bloch’s theories of anticipatory illumination. Bloch seeks to locate concrete moments in history that point the way towards an actual transformation of the material world. The luminous aesthetic quality of these

⁵³ Richard Dyer, *Only Entertainment* (London: Routledge, 1992), 20.

⁵⁴ Dyer, *Only Entertainment*, 26.

⁵⁵ Dyer, *Only Entertainment*, 27.

⁵⁶ Dyer, *Only Entertainment*, 35. See also Scott McMillin, *The Musical as Drama: A Study of the Principles and Conventions Behind Musical Shows from Kern to Sondheim* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006).

moments, even though they are fragmentary, allows them to be used and reused for realizing what has not yet become, but can become.⁵⁷

To be sure, “Seasons of Love” is one of the most extracted and re-performed musical theater songs of the 1990s, from high school graduations to concerts benefiting an array of local, national and international causes. Songs such as “Seasons of Love” have also served to solidify the queer fan culture of Rentheads, who “came out” during an era in which musical theater was distinctly uncool. And while the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the United States may have subsided as early as 1996, the crisis is still palpable in Third World countries around the globe; *Rent* can thus serve as a vital invocation to memory and to present action. For instance, a 2008 concert featuring the then-current Broadway cast raised funds for Ubuntu Education Fund to promote HIV/AIDS education in South Africa. This organization draws its name and core values from the indigenous African philosophy of *ubuntu*: “a spirit of common humanity, mutual responsibility and interdependence.”⁵⁸ Working within and against capitalist structures, as well as within and against cultural specificity, “Seasons of Love” is vitally redeployed in this context to forge a hope-filled cross-cultural moment of connection.

Musical numbers do not strictly progress the plot, but often engage in a narratively open present. Even in a sung-through musical such as *Rent*, anthems, reprises, and other repetitive frameworks “queer” narrative time and capture a fragmentary sense of *communitas* that valuably blurs the lines among characters, performers, and audience members. While the genre of musical theater may seem steeped in abstract idealism, then, performers can step out of character and

⁵⁷ Ernst Bloch, *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature: Selected Essays*, trans. Jack Zipes and Frank Mecklenburg (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988), xxiii.

⁵⁸ Andrew Gans, "Seasons of Love: Big Give, a Rent Cocktail Party, Will Benefit Ubuntu Education Fund," *Playbill.com*, May 2, 2008, accessed September 27, 2012, <http://www.playbill.com/news/article/117362-Seasons-of-Love-Big-Give-a-Rent-Cocktail-Party-Will-Benefit-Ubuntu-Education-Fund>.

spectators can join the anthem, appropriating the formal difference and the utopian openness of the musical number to articulate more concrete desires and needs.

In the Meanwhile ...

Show queens such as D.A. Miller and John Clum often find openly “gay musicals” such as *Rent* to be less satisfying than their closeted predecessors, because explicitly gay characters too often flatten into stereotypes, while a queer narrative diminishes the deviant pleasures of diverging from an (officially) intended straight reading. D.A. Miller insists that homosexual desire circulates through a wide range of “‘other’ subjects, objects, relations, all over the form” of the Broadway musical – perhaps including its multiple concepts of time – but explicit gay content often diffuses the genre’s stylistic queerness.⁵⁹ Miller’s deeply personal *Place for Us: [Essay on the Broadway Musical]* ultimately concludes that there is no future to the musical genre for the show queen; Harvey Fierstein and Jerry Herman’s *La Cage aux Folles* (1983) marks an impasse at which “we no longer have a direction to give our progress, or even a destination to imagine for it.”⁶⁰

Although younger queens (like many of the Rentheads above) would certainly disagree about the genre’s present and future, Miller proposes a valuable retrospective project:

Should we, then, reversing course, seek to reenter that dense cloud of obfuscation in which, albeit at our own mortifying expense, the true grandeur and extent of homosexual desire had been preserved, and where, at any rate, we would now be compensated for our invisibility not only with the old thrill of stumbling on

⁵⁹ Miller, *Place for Us*, 132.

⁶⁰ Miller, *Place for Us*, 131.

obscure excitements, but the new, more deliberate pleasure of clarifying them?⁶¹

Miller's playful ethnographic study begins this recuperative, sentimental history of show queens' identification with musical theater. The remainder of this chapter will take up Miller's call and analyze a pre-Stonewall musical comedy that is palpably anxious about its queer components. Anachronistically applying theories of queer temporality to *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* (1962) can clarify the pleasures of this campy musical.

In a queer genealogy of the Broadway musical, composer/lyricist Stephen Sondheim offers a compelling link between the openly gay musical (such as *Rent*) and its narratively closeted predecessors (*Forum*). Jonathan Larson is the protégé of Sondheim, and Sondheim is himself the protégé of Oscar Hammerstein II, who pioneered the "integrated" musical of the 1940s and '50s with composer Richard Rodgers. Rodgers and Hammerstein's hit musicals, beginning with *Oklahoma!* (1943), emphasize "straight" linear storytelling and a developmental progression of plot – yet Sondheim cites this duo's first flop *Allegro* (1947) as a greater aesthetic influence than their canonized classics. In addition to its fluid cinematic staging, *Allegro*'s innovative attempts "to break down the sheer plot-telling chronology, to make an epic style out of a series of scenes" indelibly impressed the seventeen-year-old Sondheim, who served as a gofer for the production.⁶² This musical's episodic structure and Greek chorus temporally manipulate the show's linear narrative, dis-integrating the plot and commenting on the musical's action. Sondheim even jokes that his career has been spent trying to "fix" *Allegro* through storytelling with different concepts of time. Sondheim employs Brechtian choruses in *A Little Night Music* and *Sweeney Todd*; collapses of temporality in *Sunday in the Park with George* and

⁶¹ Miller, *Place for Us*, 133.

⁶² Steve Swayne, *How Sondheim Found His Sound* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 149.

Assassins; ghosting in *Follies*; and an episodic framework unfolding entirely in the mind of the main character in the concept musical *Company*.

Ravishing triple meter rhythms and scandalous waltzes drive the narrative of Hugh Wheeler and Stephen Sondheim's *A Little Night Music* (1973), a sophisticated musical romance of uncoupling and recoupling – or, more simply, a sex comedy.⁶³ Yet the powerhouse 11 o'clock number, "The Miller's Son," is assigned to a minor, lower-class character: the wildly promiscuous maid Petra, who tumbles on stage with manservant Frid towards the end of Act II. "The Miller's Son" embodies the tension between a plodding, normative life trajectory and the ecstatic pleasures of living "in the meanwhile." Although her life will inevitably end in marriage and children, Petra presently celebrates every rapturous rustle in the hay. By embracing every "meanwhile," Petra lives in a queer temporality – which, for Sondheim, is of central significance to the show. The song "is about how you waste time through flirtation," he explained during *Stephen Sondheim in Conversation* at Segerstrom Center for the Arts in July 2012. "The Bergman film ends with Petra and Frid fucking in the grass!"⁶⁴

Some critics attempt to fit "The Miller's Son" into *A Little Night Music*'s narrative, analyzing the song as if it were well integrated into the plot. For Stephen Citron, "The Miller's Son" is a quasi-operatic aria that "builds up the girl's fantasy about her future husband".⁶⁵ Thomas Adler similarly focuses on the narrative destination of marriage, analyzing "The Miller's Son" for "more than simply a hedonistic, carpe diem attitude." After all, Petra will ultimately "submit herself to the rhythms of life and, through the ritual of marriage, assume her proper

⁶³ Knapp, *Personal Identity*, 50.

⁶⁴ Stephen Sondheim, "Stephen Sondheim in Conversation," interview by Michael Kerker, Segerstrom Center for the Arts, July 13, 2012.

⁶⁵ Stephen Citron, *Songwriting: A Complete Guide to the Craft* (New York: W. Morrow, 1998), 52.

place in the social and cosmic orders.” The promiscuous servant’s recognition of her rightful place in wedlock extends to her superiors in the musical’s concluding waltz, which symbolizes proper coupling and restoration of the natural order for Adler. “Nature’s pattern, seen even in the temporarily unsettling condition of perpetual sunlight, becomes, therefore, the real hero of the play.”⁶⁶ Yet the “temporarily unsettling condition of perpetual sunlight” should not be so easily dismissed. The sun is visible for a continuous twenty-four hours in Sweden’s summer months, and this warping of time enables the destabilization and reconfiguration of relationships during Act II’s weekend in the country.

Despite some scholars’ attempts to shoehorn “The Miller’s Son” into the narrative, others draw attention to the song as an unusually disjunctive number that creates a critical warp in the narrative of *A Little Night Music*. David Craig considers “The Miller’s Son” to be a problem song that “suffers, I think, from a length far in excess of the importance of the character who sings it.” He elaborates, “One can do little more than sing the devil out of it (and the role is always cast to make that a certainty) while paying lip-service to post-coital positioning.”⁶⁷ In *Losing the Plot in Opera*, Brian Castles-Onion similarly calls this 11 o’clock number “one of opera’s strangest star spots.”⁶⁸ The disproportionate length of this rollicking musical number and its loose relation to the plot is directly tied to Petra’s sexual excess. “The Miller’s Son” also requires a dynamic performer, whose brash vocals and impressive command of Sondheim’s wordplay spotlight the actress in excess of her character.

⁶⁶ Thomas P. Adler, “The Sung and the Said: Literary Value in the Musical Dramas of Stephen Sondheim,” in *Reading Stephen Sondheim: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Sandor Goodhart (New York: Garland Pub., 2000), 523-524.

⁶⁷ David Craig, “On Performing Sondheim: A Little Night Music Revisited,” in *Stephen Sondheim: A Casebook*, ed. Joanne Lesley Gordon (New York: Garland Pub., 1997), 99.

⁶⁸ Brian Castles-Onion, *Losing the Plot in Opera: Myths and Secrets of the World’s Great Operas* (Auckland: Exisle, 2008), 89.

Many 11 o'clock numbers revel in excess to the narrative, but "The Miller's Son" goes far beyond the stylistic bounds of propriety.⁶⁹ Ben Gove offers a refreshing analysis of "The Miller's Son" that fully embraces Petra's – and her musical number's – radical promiscuity and excess. Linking this 1973 musical with the passing pleasures of "The Age of Promiscuity," Gove suggests Petra as a symbol of gay men's rights to sexual pleasure with multiple partners in the short-lived post-Stonewall and pre-AIDS period of the 1970s and 80s.⁷⁰ To be sure, "The Miller's Son" constructs a freewheeling multiplicity of potential life rhythms, and the promiscuous maid sees no reason to be stuck with just one. The song's continually shifting meters and tempos contribute to its temporal excess in relation to the linear narrative:

Slow 3/4 I shall marry the miller's son,
 Pin my hat on a nice piece of property.
 Friday nights, for a bit of fun,
 We'll go dancing. Meanwhile...

Quick 2/4 It's a wink and a wiggle and a giggle in the grass
 And I'll trip the light fandango,
 A pinch and a diddle in the middle of what passes by.⁷¹

Quick 3/8 It's a very short road
 From the pinch and the punch
 To the paunch and the pouch

⁶⁹ For a theorization of the function of the 11 o'clock number as an outlier to integration, see Raymond Knapp, "Getting off the Trolley: Musicals Contra Cinematic Reality," in *From Stage to Screen: Musical Films in Europe and United States (1927 - 1961)*, ed. Massimiliano Sala (Turnhout: Brepols, 2012).

⁷⁰ See the introduction to Ben Gove, *Cruising Culture: Promiscuity, Desire and American Gay Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000).

⁷¹ Raymond Knapp was reminded of a former TA's observation that rock 'n' roll substituted duple meter for the waltz's triple meter because "You can't fuck to ¾." The 2/4 section of this song is specifically coital.

And the pension.
It's a very short road
To the ten thousandth lunch
And the belch and the grouch
And the sigh.
In the meanwhile,
There are mouths to be kissed
Before mouths to be fed,
And a lot in between
In the meanwhile.
And a girl ought to celebrate what passes by.⁷²

Petra oscillates between dreams of marriage and licentious indulgence in the present moment throughout the song. Although she will eventually resign herself to the measured, plodding “Slow 3/4” of wedlock, she presently embraces the rapturous joys of the “Quick 2/4” and “Quick 3/8.” The “Quick 2/4” doubles the rhythms of the plodding first verse; this eruption into an energetic patter song then gives way to a sweeping, swirling chorus in a “Quick 3/8” that luxuriously lingers “in the meanwhile.”

Promiscuity is not inherently negative, although its definition as a “disorderly mixture – whether sexual or otherwise” is interpreted adversely.⁷³ Yet divergent life patterns that threaten to exceed the norm are often closeted. The shifting relations of book, song, dance, design, and other elements in such a radically hybridized genre as the musical are also often contained.

⁷² Citron provides this rhythmic sketch of “The Miller’s Son” in *Songwriting*, 72.

⁷³ Gove, *Cruising Culture*, 4.

Anxieties of Integration: *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* (1962)

With book by Larry Gelbart and Burt Shevelove, music and lyrics by Stephen Sondheim, the Tony Award-winning musical comedy *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* has been repeatedly mounted on the Great White Way, as well as in regional and school theaters, since its Broadway premiere in 1962. Sondheim claims that the show is almost foolproof: “It can be done by any high school class or a group of vaudevillians and the play holds up.”⁷⁴ He attributes the show’s success to the intricate plotting, witty dialogue, and brilliant situational comedy of his collaborators. However, Sondheim’s vibrant – and radically disjunctive – production numbers contribute just as significantly to *Forum*’s enduring success. “Farces are express trains; musicals are locals,” Sondheim writes, drawing attention to the showstopping qualities of song and dance in *Forum*.⁷⁵ As Mark Steyn elaborates, “Instead of, as in a musical play, advancing the situation or illuminating character, [production numbers] bring the play juddering to a halt; they’re a chance to stand still and catch your breath.”⁷⁶ Yet these “respite from the relentlessness of the comedy” were not always touted for their showstopping qualities.⁷⁷

The collection of Larry Gelbart’s papers in the UCLA Performing Arts Collections includes a five-page typed document considering the “Purpose of Songs” in *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, which may have been provided by director George Abbott.⁷⁸ This detailed analysis of the function of songs in an early draft of the show

⁷⁴ Stephen Banfield, *Sondheim's Broadway Musicals* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), 91.

⁷⁵ Stephen Sondheim, *Finishing the Hat: Collected Lyrics (1954-1981) with Attendant Comments, Principles, Heresies, Grudges, Whines and Anecdotes* (New York: Knopf, 2010), 80.

⁷⁶ Mark Steyn, *Broadway Babies Say Goodnight: Musicals Then and Now* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 313.

⁷⁷ Aaron Frankel, *Writing the Broadway Musical* (New York: Drama Book Specialists, 1977), 111.

⁷⁸ Larry Gelbart, "Purpose of Songs," 1940 – 2009, MS 22, University of California, Los Angeles, Arts Special Collections, Larry Gelbart Papers.

demonstrates a palpable anxiety about whether the songs progress the book in the tradition of a Rodgers and Hammerstein musical drama, popularized in the 1940s and 1950s. “Why does he sing this song?” Abbott asks. “The resort to song has to be for a reason.” “What is the purpose of this song? I can’t see how this title and this spot for a song advances the story.” “Could it be that this is incidental entertainment just interrupting here?” This anxiety about song and dance’s “integration” into *Forum*’s narrative is perhaps surprising since – following the show’s Broadway success – critics and scholars, as well as the creative team, openly acknowledge that *Forum*’s songs do not progress the plot. The *ex post facto* admission of the production numbers’ disjunction draws attention to complications in the historical narrative of the integrated musical and how this hybrid genre continually exceeds a straightforward narrative.

The integrated musical

Most histories identify Rodgers and Hammerstein’s *Oklahoma* (1943) as inaugurating the Golden Age of the sophisticated, integrated musical drama, in which “all elements of a show – plot, character, song, dance, orchestration, and setting – should blend together into a unity, a seamless whole.”⁷⁹ Rodgers and Hammerstein marketed *Oklahoma!* as elevating the musical comedy to a musical play, commercial fodder to a work of art: “Certainly the universality of the play’s appeal cannot be doubted, but what makes it noteworthy to my mind is the fact that its appeal comes from its ‘art’ qualities and its unwillingness to compromise with commerce,” Rodgers explains. “The result is a thoroughly integrated evening in the theater. The scenery looks the way the music sounds and the clothes look as though they belonged to the characters

⁷⁹ McMillin, *The Musical as Drama*, 1. *HMS Pinafore* in 1878 and *Show Boat* in 1927 are popular rival contenders for the title of the first integrated musical.

rather than the management.”⁸⁰ Adapting Wagner’s concept of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* for the American musical stage, Rodgers and Hammerstein aimed for all theatrical elements to dovetail with character and seamlessly progress the story.

Integration theory largely stems from a desire to elevate the musical from its “lower” roots in which book and numbers are separable (minstrelsy, extravaganza, pantomime, burlesque, and vaudeville) to the supposed cohesion of art works within a higher cultural stratum. In the normative reading of an integrated musical, then, all elements are subordinated to a singular (white, masculine, heteronormative) “Poetic Aim.” As evidenced in Rodgers’s quotation above, this Poetic Aim stands in for the dubious claim to the “universal.” The books of many Golden Age musicals promote a conventional, middle-class ideology along with a heteronormative marriage, explicitly or implicitly constructed in tandem with the United States’ historical narrative of citizenship. For instance, the musical so widely considered to be the first integrated show – *Oklahoma!* – ties two marriage plots to the cooperation of the once-rival farmers and cowhands, as well as to Oklahoma’s new statehood. The Western (re)productive body is united with the productive land, poised to become part of this great, forward-moving nation.

A third marriage is also of note: the Persian (coded Jewish) merchant Ali Hakim’s weds the silly Gertie Cummings; Andrea Most reads this marriage – and the musical’s form – as a performance of Jewish integration into the national community.⁸¹ The integrated musical, or “community musical,” thus structurally unites opposites and imagines a tolerant American world

⁸⁰ Larry James Evans, *Rodgers and Hammerstein's Oklahoma!: The Development of the "Integrated" Musical*, diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 1990, 154.

⁸¹ Andrea Most, *Making Americans: Jews and the Broadway Musical* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 102.

in which heterosexual couples unite different groups.⁸² For Bruce Kirle, the genre's happy or at least uplifting endings suggest that there are no class barriers in American society and "that all ethnicities, races, and genders can triumph and transcend perceived notions of identity through will and desire."⁸³ Such an evolutionary history elides the very real ruptures, limits, and barriers to acceptance and implies the "boundless" and "irresistible" development of mankind itself: improvements in individuals' abilities and knowledge, as well as mankind's collective perfectibility over generations.⁸⁴

Throughout Abbot's notes on *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, several comments highlight a nervous necessity to progress the plot in the tradition of the 1940s and 50s "integrated" musical. That Abbott should be concerned with fitting this musical farce into an "integrated" format is, in retrospect, rather farcical itself. In this intricately plotted musical inspired by the works of Roman playwright Plautus, a slave named Pseudolus strives for freedom by striking a deal with his young master Hero; Pseudolus will help Hero woo the beautiful courtesan next door, Philia, in exchange for his release from slavery. The comedy thrives on improbable situations, mistaken identities, witty wordplay, madcap pacing, and other carnivalesque qualities of hyperbole and exaggeration. Farce provided Sondheim with the ideal atmosphere for stylistic "cleverness, for list songs, for word-juggling: for playfulness" rather than straightforwardly presenting the plot.⁸⁵ But for the director Abbott, functioning as dramaturg, clean narrative advancement should be the song's primary function; his most

⁸² Wolf, *A Problem Like Maria*, 17.

⁸³ Bruce Kirle, *Unfinished Show Business: Broadway Musicals as Works-in-Process* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2005), 2.

⁸⁴ See, for instance, Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 260.

⁸⁵ Sondheim, *Finishing the Hat*, 100.

threatening criticism of a song – the criterion that puts a song on the chopping block – is its inability to progress the book. Handwritten comments in the margins of the document suggest that the creative team seriously contemplated his analysis as they made changes prior to the Broadway opening.

Abbott does praise some songs for progressing the plot: Philia’s “When I Kiss Him, I’ll Be Kissing You,” for instance, “advances the story nobly.” It is interesting to note, then, that this song was later renamed “That’ll Show Him” and moved to Act II; the ability to transpose the number to another narrative location casts doubt on whether the song was ever as closely tied to plot as the dramaturg believed. Several songs critiqued in this document were cut before the Broadway opening, at least in part because they failed to forward the plot. Abbott questions the purpose of “I Do Like You,” an Act I number for Pseudolus and master slave Hysterium. “I can’t see how this title and this post for a song advances the story. Is it stuck in here just to give Hysterium a solo? If so, it stops the story,” he concludes. Gelbart or another writer has emphatically underlined “stops the story” in pencil. “At the Market Place,” a song for Pseudolus, is similarly deemed “incidental entertainment” that interrupts the plot’s progression.

Yet several songs that openly delight in stopping the show – such as “Everybody Ought to Have a Maid” – remain. When Hero’s father Senex unexpectedly returns from a trip, Pseudolus must invent an excuse for Philia’s presence in his house; he quickly lies that Philia is his new maid. Delighted with this attractive new servant, Senex bursts into a bouncy song about maids, “something no household should be without.”⁸⁶ Abbott suggests a particular order of characters that could make this raucous, repetitive song progress the story. “If this song advances the plot, it can be only because it originates with Pseudolus, the plot advancer, or protagonist,”

⁸⁶ Burt Shevelove, Larry Gelbart, and Stephen Sondheim, *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* (New York: Applause Theater Book Publishers, 1991), 57.

he recommends. “It seems to me that [Pseudolus] should be feeding each thought to Senex, until Senex has enough of it to carry it away with his own enthusiasm.” Handwritten to the side, though, is a small X – presumably a rejection mark. Not only was this showstopper kept in the Broadway production, but the creative team also ignored Abbott’s suggested character order. If this song does not directly progress the plot, then what function does it fulfill?

Senex sings the first verse of “Everybody Ought to Have a Maid” alone, while Pseudolus encourages his distraction by pantomiming a maid; following musical theater conventions, Senex musically, lyrically, and choreographically elaborates upon an imagined or hypothetical situation of a maid puttering all around his house. Having such a “loyal and unswerving girl” becomes a collective daydream as Pseudolus and Hysterium join Senex in the first reprise. Lycus then enters to join the repetitive, rhyming crew for a second encore. Lycus has absolutely no narrative purpose in joining the song, but having heard the gleeful chorus from his house, he spontaneously enters the stage to join the fun:

LYCUS:	A maid?
HYSTERIUM:	A maid.
PSEUDOLUS:	A maid.
SENEX:	A maid! ⁸⁷

This simple and repetitive exchange, set over a “wrong note” vamp, launches the ensemble into an animated final encore, which is again structured by accumulative variation (in popular barbershop quartet style) rather than progress-driven narrative.

According to Stephen Banfield, “Everybody Ought to Have a Maid” “brings the house down with its simple expedient of additive encores.”⁸⁸ This tableau brings multiple perspectives

⁸⁷ Shevelove, Gelbart, and Sondheim, *Forum*, 58.

to bear on a single situation, mounting opinions – and humor – with every verse; by the end, the audience could even potentially join the refrain. Although the song contains its own progression in its additive technique, the production number flouts the rule of integration and the necessity of steadily progressing the plot through song, while delighting in the homosocial bonding of these motley characters. For the 1966 film adaptation directed by Richard Lester, the choreography of the camera gleefully manipulates the laws of time and space in this musical number, cutting from one location to another with increasing absurdity. Senex and Psuedolus wind up in bed together in the first verse; Hysterium flies away on the maid’s broomstick in the second; and when Lycus joins, overhead shots organize the men in a parody of Busby Berkeley choreography.⁸⁹ Lycus’s attempts to reestablish the narrative in the final chorus – “Tell me, the virgin. I want to know how she –” – are continually trumped by the exuberance of song and dance.⁹⁰ This endlessly repeatable number carries the entire crew away from the linear narrative drive.

At this point in the writing process, the creative team was attempting to condense the libretto. “The script seems much too long. There is plenty of room for tightening it up,” the dramaturg writes, urging the team to cut a good 40 pages from the book:

Length of the Show			
First Act	78 pages	Cut 25 pages	Down to 53 pages
Second Act	52 pages	Cut 15 pages	Down to 37 pages
Script now	130 pages	Cut 40 pages	Down to 90 pages

⁸⁸ Banfield, *Sondheim’s Broadway Musicals*, 97.

⁸⁹ Busby Berkley’s choreography for musical films of the 1930s used inventive camera angles and abstracted the female body into kaleidoscopic patterns.

⁹⁰ *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, dir. Richard Lester (United States: United Artists, 1966), DVD.

Yet even as they try to tighten the plot, the dramaturg recommends expanding the musical with repetition – such as a musical medley ballet chase in Act II and several reprises of Psuedolus’ motivating song “Free.” It is significant that, even as this dramaturg of *Forum* advocates for songs that forward the story, he simultaneously highlights the significance of circularity to the musical’s structure – and shows how this repetition can progress the story in its own way. Most prominent is the music suggested for a madcap chase in Act II, a common component of farce:

There should be some reprising of the earlier songs, no matter how briefly.

1. Hero should sing a few bars of “Love, I Hear” to express the lone drive that is keeping him on this chase.
2. Pseudolus should belt out a few couplets of “Free” to recharge his batteries during this pursuit of freedom.
3. Pseudolus, in desperation, should echo a snatch of “In the Tiber There Sits a Boat” in his attempt to bring Philia into line with his plan. All he needs is a phrase, and he can take off on the run again, and we will be reminded of what all the running is about.
4. And, of course, Philia could stand up for her scruples with just singing the phrase: “When I Kiss Him, I’ll Be Kissing You.”
5. Whereupon, Miles, with drawn sword, should come through, wailing out a tabloid reprise of “My Bride, My Bride.”
6. And Domina’s musical theme during the pursuit is “I Want Him.”

This musical medley, reprising all of the songs, could substitute for a lot of the dialogue and could bring up the action to the musical solution when Pseudolus overhears Philia driving poor Hero out of his wits with her song: “When I Kiss

Him, I'll Be Kissing You." where Pseudolus could get the inspiration to push Hero up on the rooftop and make him impersonate a god.⁹¹

Repetition in this musical medley reminds the characters – and “we,” the audience – of “what all the running is about”: Hero’s undying love for Philia, Pseudolus’s desire for freedom, Philia’s scruples in marrying the man to whom she is promised. This sequence certainly forwards the plot. Yet simultaneously, this medley accelerates time to a farcical frenzy; the chase scene creates a highly-animated tableau that draws attention to the construction of time in its wild contrast to the book’s normative narrative pacing.⁹²

Questioning formal integration

A wide array of temporal manipulations effected by music and dance exist between the extremes of showstopping standstills like “Everybody Ought to Have a Maid” and the farcical acceleration of *Forum*’s chase scene. The musical articulates a more complex structure than one of well-integrated linear progress, the paradigm upon which musicals were judged throughout the 1940s, 1950s, and beyond. A relatively early article questioning integration theory’s validity is Margaret M. Knapp’s “Integration of Elements as a Viable Standard for Judging Musical Theater” (1978), in which she points out the disjunction between book and numbers in not only pre-1943 musical comedies, but also in an array of new 1970s musicals. Stephen Sondheim and George Furth’s 1970 concept musical *Company*, for instance, employs musical numbers as commentary on the book’s action. “The variety of forms which recent musical comedies have employed makes the concept of integration, with its underlying assumption that all musicals

⁹¹ Gelbart, "Purpose of Songs."

⁹² Raymond Knapp pointed out that, interestingly, *A Little Night Music* resorts to this reprise structure after "The Miller's Son," although the reprises are background music rather than sung.

should be created according to the same rules, an unreliable standard of judgment,” Knapp concludes.⁹³ Like many other critics, Knapp fails to take into account Sondheim’s earlier work in *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, which was already beginning to skew the straight Rodgers and Hammerstein narrative by stylistically evoking the musical comedies of the 1920s and 30s.

Even as she advocates for an expanded understanding of the relationship between book and numbers, Knapp also maintains integration theory as a viable rubric for understanding Rodgers and Hammerstein era musical plays, which place musical numbers in service of the book’s progression. More recent scholarship challenges this paradigm of integration in *all* musicals, including those from the Rodgers and Hammerstein era that seem to wed book, music, lyrics, dance, and other dramatic elements together so seamlessly. While not necessarily disturbing the narrative, song and dance can temporarily displace the plot; and temporality is one of the grounds on which the musical’s seamless integration can be most questioned.

Scott McMillin addresses the temporalities of the musical most extensively in *The Musical as Drama*, one of the first aesthetic considerations of the genre. Fighting staunchly against integration theory, McMillin posits the musical as an art form reliant on the “crackle of difference” between two orders of time: the progressive time of the book and the repetitive time of the song and dance numbers.⁹⁴ He argues that these disparate elements are held in a relationship of “coherence” rather than seamless integration.⁹⁵ The integrated musical aims to create seamless flows between scenes and songs, a cause-and-effect structure of historical or

⁹³ Margaret M. Knapp, "Integration of Elements as a Viable Standard for Judging Musical Theater," *The Journal of American Culture* 1, no. 1 (1978): 118.

⁹⁴ McMillin, *The Musical as Drama*, 2.

⁹⁵ McMillin, *The Musical as Drama*, 208.

dramatic inevitability; the relationships between elements cannot be actively reconfigured as in vaudevillian comedies or revues, but must occur in the designated narrative order. An integrated musical appears to progress the book by easing the transitions between storytelling modes – for instance, by employing underscoring or rhyming dialogue to lead into a song. Contemporary musicals sometimes even eschew applause following production numbers; songs trail off into an instrumental underscoring that elides a break between shifting temporalities and, again, gives the impression of seamlessly progressing of the plot through the production number. But even when a musical number forwards the plot, the number’s primary function is to elaborate “in the spirit of repetition and the pleasure of difference.”⁹⁶

If artworks can “detach themselves from the empirical world and bring forth another world” as Adorno suggests, then a second mode of storytelling within that artwork – namely, song and dance within a musical – may enact a second layer of distancing with complex and contradictory effects: distancing the spectator from the forward motion of the plot while entrancing the spectator in the pleasurable, temporally-alternative universe of a musical number.⁹⁷ Could this layering open the potential for a simultaneous distanced and immersed response, a critically affective engagement with the artwork? Yi-Fu Tuan notes that music and dance can negate directional time and space, opening up a sphere that he likens to Erwin Straus’ “presentic,” unoriented space, liberated from a straight, directional progression.⁹⁸ Unmoored from a normative goal-oriented trajectory of the narrative, can the alternate temporality of the

⁹⁶ McMillin, *The Musical as Drama*, 8.

⁹⁷ Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 1.

⁹⁸ Yi-fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), 128-129.

musical number enact imaginaries of alternative subjectivities and modes of relation? And what makes this temporality particularly “queer”?

Queer temporalities

Like “Everybody Ought to Have a Maid,” “Lovely” provides another exuberant example of a song that remains in *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* although it fails to advance the narrative. As the dramaturg notes, this song “does not really advance the story and is not strictly necessary” – yet it is deemed “fun,” which seems enough to secure its place in the musical. Originally planned for Act II, “Lovely” was moved to Act I in the original Broadway version to provide a musical moment just after Hero and Philia first meet. “Lovely” does not particularly progress the plot; rather, it deepens character and heightens the youthful romance in effusive lyrical variations on Philia’s innocence and physical beauty.⁹⁹

I’m lovely,
All I am is lovely,
Lovely is the one thing I can do.
Winsome,
What I am is winsome,
Radiant as in some
Dream come true.¹⁰⁰

“Lovely” cleverly deepens Philia’s character by revealing her shallowness. Rather than a deep interiority, Philia is all style, all surface – and Hero is enraptured.

⁹⁹ Sometimes shifting a song’s position can enhance the plot advancement or simply change the perspective without detracting from its function; yet in musical comedies, a song’s movability can further emphasize its loose relationship to the narrative.

¹⁰⁰ Shevelove, Gelbart, and Sondheim, *Forum*, 45.

A showstopping tableau similarly “does” lovely by crafting a stylistically stunning elaboration of a fleeting instant. As Raymond Knapp notes, music “imposes a kind of *suspended animation* so as to intensify selected emotional moments.”¹⁰¹ A musical theater showstopper draws on a tradition of tableau in nineteenth century grand opera, which Carl Dahlhaus explains as “freezing” the plot for the musical elaborations of emotional heights. Tableau forms “an image that remains intelligible as a stage configuration *even without the text*, which is smothered by the multivoice texture.”¹⁰² While such smothering, multivoiced excesses are often theorized as dangerously disillusioning,¹⁰³ Wayne Koestenbaum provides a compelling counterargument for queer affective identification with these stylistic excesses of opera and musical theater. “Is opera queendom or immersion in an original-cast album a dreamland from which the body never returns, a narcotic space separate from companionship and speech, or do self-exposure and self-knowledge take root inside that moment of solitary, naked listening?” he wonders.¹⁰⁴

These stylistic pleasures open to a particularly queer temporality when repetition unmoors “Lovely” from its original heterosexual context; the Act II reprise features Psuedolus and Hysterium – dressed in Philia’s “virginal gown and wig.”¹⁰⁵ Musical reprises often delineate a narrative progression, such as Curly and Laurey’s “People Will Say We’re in Love” becoming “Let People Say We’re in Love” when the couple is united in *Oklahoma!* But repetition allows for pleasurable sites of recontextualization – both in and out of the theater. The drag re-

¹⁰¹ Raymond Knapp, *The American Musical and the Formation of National Identity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 12.

¹⁰² Carl Dahlhaus, *Nineteenth-Century Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 404.

¹⁰³ See Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theater: The Development of an Aesthetic.*, trans. John Willett (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964).

¹⁰⁴ Wayne Koestenbaum, *The Queen's Throat: Opera, Homosexuality, and the Mystery of Desire* (New York: Poseidon Press, 1993), 38.

¹⁰⁵ Shevelove, Gelbart, and Sondheim, *Forum*, 116.

performance of “Lovely” in Act II of *Forum* warps the song to suit the performers at hand; a simple change in key, context, and costume further queers the song’s “original” function of solidifying a heteronormative pair.¹⁰⁶ Even the most “integrated” musical can be queered when reprised by a fan in a piano bar like Marie’s Crisis, at Musical Mondays in West Hollywood, or in the intimate confines of a suburban bedroom.¹⁰⁷ Stephen Sondheim suggests that “Lovely” brings the house down not only because of its queered recontextualization, but because of its unexpected affect: “In the midst of a farce there occurred a sudden and weird emotional moment: Hysterium, initially reluctant at having to get into drag, begins halfway through the song, and clearly for the first time in his life, to feel attractive. As with the best of Chaplin, this *humanity peeking through the silliness* made for radiant comedy.”¹⁰⁸

“Lovely” thus tugs in two directions simultaneously: towards outrageously playful theatricality and deep emotional interiority. Raymond Knapp writes that this camp dimension is precisely what opens the musical to affective reappropriation by fans:

Musicals have proven to have an extraordinary capacity to overlap significantly with the lives and souls of their various constituencies, who learn to express themselves, to act, to conceive of themselves and the world around them, and often even to *be* themselves more fully and affirmatively by following their rhythms, living out versions of their plots, and singing their songs.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶ Shallow self-absorption and focus on surfaces is a strong trope for gay males, and Philia is already a decidedly gay version of an ingénue.

¹⁰⁷ See Samuel Baltimore, *Do It Again: Repetition, Reception and Identity on Musical Comedy's Margins*, diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2013, for a discussion of Musical Mondays. See also D.A. Miller, *Place for Us* for the poetics and politics of reperformance.

¹⁰⁸ Sondheim, *Finishing the Hat*, 107.

¹⁰⁹ Raymond Knapp, *The American Musical and the Performance of Personal Identity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 9.

The musical numbers punctuating a progress-driven narrative offer the most visceral experience of rhythmic alternatives to the present, in the present – and the particular queerness of the musical lies in these numbers. Just consider the description for facebook group “And WHY can't my life be a musical?,” in which musicality reads like an affliction: “Do you find yourself breaking out into song randomly? Do you wish you could be in the spotlight with a fabulous solo number? Do you sometimes just feel like dancing with a huge ensemble? You're not alone.”¹¹⁰ Rather than subsuming these musical fans into a normative life pattern, this group unites 126,415 show queens to the alternate beat of a musical number: “If you wish life was a musical and everyone knew the lyrics and choreography, please join.” For the fleeting moment of song and dance, a politicized imaginary of identities in difference and new forms of affiliation can expand beyond a musical’s narrative expectations, musically and choreographically embodying alternate structures of feeling in the here and now.

¹¹⁰ "About," Facebook page, May 4, 2010, Why Can't My Life Be a Musical?!, accessed October 30, 2011, <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Why-cant-my-life-be-a-musical/120604637965724>.

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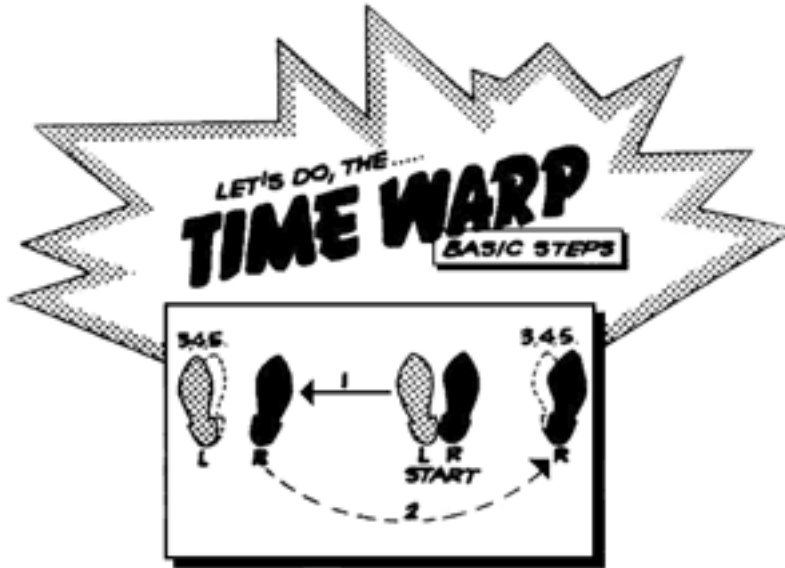
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Let's Do the Time Warp Again: Performing Time, Genre, and Spectatorship



1. (It's just a) *JUMP TO THE LEFT*, with hands UP.

2. *A STEP TO THE RIGHT*

(Time-Warper ANNETTE FUNICELLO suggests a very WIDE step.)

3. * (With your hands on your HIPS) *YOU BRING YOUR KNEES IN TIGHT.*

4. (Then) *THE PELVIC THRUST* (if repeated FIVE times, it nearly drives you insa-a-ane)

5. *HIPSWIVEL* (if not driven insa-a-ane by step four)

6. *LET'S DO THE TIME WARP AGAIN!*

* Those with LIMB DISABILITIES may find it necessary to ALTER or DELETE this action, but NO EXCUSES for alterations to steps four and five.¹

¹ "Participation: How to Do the Time Warp," TRHPS Official Fan Site, accessed November 3, 2012, <http://www.rockyhorror.com/participation/timewarp.php>.

When their car breaks down one stormy night, newly engaged Brad and Janet find a beacon of hope at a nearby castle. They approach the Frankenstein place hoping to call a mechanic and resume their steady narrative drive towards marriage. Yet upon entering the castle, Brad and Janet encounter an odd assortment of characters performing a strangely seductive “Time Warp.” In *The Rocky Horror Show*, “The Time Warp” introduces Brad and Janet to the transsexual Transylvanians’ alternative temporality and lifestyle. This participatory song and dance twists their perceptions of identity while rerouting their linear trajectory to marriage.

“The Time Warp” represents an extreme example of how musical performance can bend and even break normative narratives in musical theater; it implicates the spectator as a performer, actively involved in warping dominant ideologies by embodying a desire for difference. In Chapter 1, I demonstrated how musical numbers can complicate a linear, developmental narrative by accelerating and decelerating time, foregrounding repetition and circularity, dipping into memory and projecting into the future, and physicalizing dreams in a narratively open present. In other words, musical numbers can warp time. Their temporal excesses have the potential to contest naturalized constructions of historical, progressive time, as well as concordant constructions of gender, sexual, and racial identities. Fans often locate queer modes of relationality in the genre’s temporally divergent musical numbers, which expand upon an evanescent moment and delight in the possibilities of the present. This chapter locates an affective link across the time warping genres of musical theater and science fiction/fantasy, as well as their dedicated and overlapping fan cultures, through an analysis of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* and *Dr. Horrible’s Sing-Along Blog*.

In speculative fiction, a “time warp” enables rapid and radical time travel; it permits discontinuities and irregularities in a linear narrative by jump cutting across time and space. A

time warp is not a narrative destination unto itself, but a liminal timespace of projection into an alternative: a wormhole of open-ended possibilities, much like a musical number. Although often criticized for being escapist, speculative fiction imaginatively explores the possibilities of and alternatives to the present, both utopian and dystopian. Bliss Cua Lim suggests that anti-quotidian genres such as fantastic cinema – and, she hints, musical films as well – can probe the limits of what is objectively present by physicalizing a temporally divergent world in the here and now.² These hybrid, nonrealist genres can disintegrate the notion of a homogeneously unified present and make palpable alternatives to a normative life trajectory.

Genre studies are not without their detractors, especially as postmodern trends towards blending and blurring modes of discourse can cause genre studies to be perceived as an “idle” and even “anachronistic pastime.”³ Yet genre is a persistent reality that structures bookstores, Netflix queues, and university courses today. Tzvetan Todorov defends genre as an important intersection of poetics and history: a codification of discursive properties that works as a “horizon of expectation” for readers and as “models of writing” for authors.⁴ The construct of genre does not disinterestedly classify cultural texts, but simultaneously establishes hierarchies of value. Michael Chabon points out that genre fiction – constructed in opposition to literary fiction, or simply “fiction” – is “a thing fundamentally, perhaps inherently debased, infantile, commercialized, unworthy of the person’s attention.”⁵ Graphic novels, horror, mystery, romance, science fiction and fantasy, thrillers, and Westerns are physically separated from “fiction” or

² Bliss Cua Lim, *Translating Time: Cinema, the Fantastic, and Temporal Critique* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 28.

³ Tzvetan Todorov and Richard M. Berrong, "The Origin of Genres," *New Literary History* 8, no. 1 (Autumn 1976): 159, accessed October 12, 2012, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/468619>.

⁴ Todorov and Berrong, "The Origin of Genres," 162-163.

⁵ Michael Chabon, *Maps and Legends: Reading and Writing Along the Borderlands* (San Francisco, CA: McSweeney's Books, 2008), 8.

“literature” in bookstores, and rarely does a genre work receive a major artistic award. Often considered to be inferior and formulaic products targeted to a specific and passive consuming audience, genre works inhabit a paradoxical position of mass popularity and critical dismissal. Although genre films increasingly reign at the box office, the Academy Award still typically goes to dramas, social problem films, biopics, literary adaptations, and big budget epics.⁶ Meanwhile, musicals consistently outsell straight plays on the Great White Way, but critical reception can cut these flashy entertainments down to size. When rock musical *Next to Normal* received the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 2010, for instance, *LA Times* theater critic and chairman of the Pulitzer board Charles McNulty advocated for more deserving “dramatists” of the legitimate stage “who care about theater as an art rather than as an expensive diversion.”⁷

Socially constructed hierarchies of literary fiction and genre fiction, “straight” plays and musicals, classical and popular music, illustrate that genre is not an atemporal formal structure but a historically contingent and culturally embedded discourse intimately intertwined with an imagined distinction between art and entertainment. Pleasure and profit are the primary factors in defining this binary. While entertainment produces pleasure for a price, art is imagined as challenging audiences with edifying and refined works created beyond the boundaries of

⁶ Tim Dirks, "Academy Awards Best Pictures - Genre Biases," Film Site, accessed October 12, 2012, <http://www.filmsite.org/bestpics2.html>. Dirks identifies "serious dramas or social-problem films with weighty themes, biopics (inspired by real-life individuals or events), or films with literary pretensions" as the most likely to be nominated and win for Best Picture, as well as "glossy, large-scale epic productions with big budgets (of various genres)." Musical films occasionally fall into this latter category, and *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* – the last in the epic trilogy – became the first fantasy film to win the Oscar in 2003. Dirks also provides a detailed list of the least likely genres for Best Picture: "Action-adventures, family-oriented animation, ‘popcorn’ movies, suspense-thrillers, science-fiction, superhero films, horror, comedies (including teen comedies), Westerns, foreign-language films, and spy thrillers are mostly overlooked, as are independent productions and children's films (although there have been a few exceptions)."

⁷ Charles McNulty, "No Applause," *Los Angeles Times*, April 13, 2010, <http://articles.latimes.com/2010/apr/13/entertainment/la-et-pulitzer-mcnulty-20100413>

capitalism.⁸ David Savran advocates for theater scholars to overrule these class-based prejudices against entertainment and to historicize the popular forms that have held “millions spellbound.”⁹ The ongoing practice of genre studies identifies such gaps in our extant cultural histories, which too often disregard and devalue popular entertainment.

Savran’s choice of the adjective “spellbound” may suggest consumers’ passive reception of popular culture, but multiple parties interplay in producing any genre’s meaning. In a given genre, an *author* circulates a *text* to an *audience* belonging to a particular *interpretative community*. Thus a text has no single, stable meaning; its meanings mutate and multiply depending on the audience.¹⁰ Drawing on Foucauldian discursive theory, John Frow similarly defines genres as performative structures:

Rather than asking, What kind of thing is this text? we should be asking something like, What kind of world is brought into being here—what thematic topoi, with what modal inflection, from what situation of address, and structured by what formal categories? Who represents this world to whom, under what circumstances and to what ends?¹¹

The concept of a self-contained “text,” as well as broader definitions of genre and artistic form, lose stability if we refocus on the diverse interpretative communities that “perform” them.

Although the musical’s aesthetic is always determined by its commodity status, the uses and

⁸ Richard Dyer, *Only Entertainment* (London: Routledge, 1992), 6.

⁹ David Savran, "Toward a Historiography of the Popular," *Theatre Survey* 45, no. 02 (November 2004): 211-212.

¹⁰ Rick Altman, *The American Film Musical* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 2.

¹¹ John Frow, "'Reproducibles, Rubrics, and Everything You Need': Genre Theory Today," *PMLA* 122, no. 5 (October 2007): 1633, accessed October 12, 2012, <http://www.mlajournals.org/doi/pdf/10.1632/pmla.2007.122.5.1626>.

meanings produced by fan cultures can warp a commodity's exchange value to unpredictable identifications.¹²

In considering the time-warping hybridization of musical theater and sci-fi/fantasy fan cultures in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* and *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog*, I am particularly interested in exploring the ways that their exaggerated aesthetics exude a cult and camp sensibility that attracts a (broadly defined) queer audience. In different ways, each film digs through the sci-fi detritus of the past to create new narrative mash-ups of outrageously alien situations; the plots' artificiality is then further heightened by song and dance. Characters are intentional caricatures: drag queens with luscious red lips and supervillians with oversized lab coats and goggles. Behind these comical costumes, actors wink at the camera and welcome the audience into a stylized universe that continually draws attention to its own fabulous, low-tech construction. In such blatant theatricality and intentional gaps between character and actor, both *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* and *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog* point to sites of negotiation between a scripted part and its embodiment, or between performativity and performance.¹³ These films illustrate the possibilities of reiterating cultural norms with a difference; they locate agency in the potential to reconfigure a role from within.¹⁴ Fans of these Frankensteinian texts play on the tenuous borders between reality and fantasy, rapturously embracing the wormholes of imaginative alternatives to a normative identity and life trajectory.

¹² David Savran, "Toward a Historiography of the Popular," 213.

¹³ See Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (December 1988), accessed October 29, 2012, <http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0192-2882%28198812%2940%3A4%3C519%3APAAGCA%3E2.0.CO%3B2-C>.

¹⁴ Raymond Knapp, *The American Musical and the Performance of Personal Identity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 242.

Creatures of the Night: *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*

British writer/composer/actor Richard O'Brien's *The Rocky Horror Show* met with both critical and popular acclaim when it premiered at the Royal Court Upstairs in 1973. The 30 by 40 foot rehearsal room above London's prestigious Royal Court Theatre had been converted into a club for experimental new work only a few years earlier. Although the fringy first season of shows in 1969 was "a critical disaster," the space soon exploded into an acclaimed "in-yer-face" venue for theater artists such as Sam Shepard, Caryl Churchill, Sarah Kane, and Danny Boyle. As *Guardian* critic Michael Billington recalls, audience members "had nowhere to hide from the sex and violence that inevitably loomed large" in this intimate space, and the crowd's visceral involvement in the show contributed to *Rocky Horror*'s early success.¹⁵ *The Rocky Horror Show* soon transferred from the Court to the Classic Cinema (a converted movie theater) and the King's Road Theatre for a combined total of 2,960 performances in London. Beginning in March 1974, *Rocky Horror* also achieved a successful nine-month run at Los Angeles' Roxy Theater, a concert venue – and former strip club – on the Sunset Strip. These alternative venues catered to a queer audience eager for an evening of campy pleasure, poking fun at the mainstream while simultaneously creating a world of difference.

The Rocky Horror Show opens at the height of heteronormative bliss: a wedding. Wedding guests Brad and Janet are set on the fast track to marriage when Janet catches the bridal bouquet, but this couple's subsequent love duet "Dammit Janet" strikes a critical and ironic attitude towards their impending union. In the film adaptation, a man and a woman (later identifiable as transsexual Transylvanians Riff-Raff and Magenta) dress as the iconically dull

¹⁵ Michael Billington and Maddy Costa, "The Royal Court Upstairs Marks 40 Years of Scaling New Heights," *The Guardian*, July 21, 2009, accessed October 29, 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2009/jul/21/royal-court-upstairs-40-years>.

and weathered couple of Grant Wood's *American Gothic*; they punctuate each of Brad's sung professions of love with a flatly spoken "Janet." In the second verse, attendants carry a coffin into the church, transforming the space directly from a wedding to a funeral. Brad and Janet's kiss at the end of the song even takes place in a graveyard. The song openly mocks the clichéd, confining, and ultimately deadening social institution of marriage, as the vocals and visuals collapse the heteronormative trajectory of "cradle, wedding, [and] coffin: the socially-ordained milestones of life which, it would seem, we must inexorably reproduce."¹⁶

Perhaps Brad and Janet are fortunate that their car breaks down, sidetracking their predictable wedding plans. Once they are swept into the transsexual Transylvanians' "Time Warp" at the Frankenstein place, the straightforward linear plot is rerouted; *The Rocky Horror Show* spins into an episodic musical adventure, dominated by the powerhouse performance of sweet transvestite Dr. Frank-N-Furter (Tim Curry). In a glittering corset and fishnets, the Transylvanians' cool and confident leader brings to life a new creation: a muscular man with blonde hair and a tan named Rocky. He bludgeons a wayward rocker Eddie (Meatloaf) and serves him for dinner. Most importantly, he strips the baffled Brad and Janet down to their underwear and seduces them into increasingly outrageous fantasies, culminating in an orgy of fluid gender and sexual identities.

In retrospect, it is perhaps no surprise that in March 1975, then, *The Rocky Horror Show* flopped at the symbolic pinnacle of mainstream musical theater culture: Broadway, where it played only four previews and forty-five performances at the Belasco Theater. Although *Hair* had brought a hippie subculture of sex, drugs, and rock and roll to the Great White Way in 1968,

¹⁶ Amittai F. Aviram, "Postmodern Gay Dionysus: Dr. Frank N. Furter," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 26, no. 3 (1992): 187.

The Rocky Horror Show's sexual confusion and sci-fi fusion marked a lifestyle too extreme.¹⁷ Frank's monstrous creatures and cannibalism bothered Broadway critics less than his gender-bending sexual perversity. AP drama critic William Glover writes, "The key to 'The Rocky Horror Show' is that third word. Horror, as in vile." His review exudes anxieties about the performance of sexuality, especially in such an interactive space. "When not displaying explicit boy-girl and boy-boy conjunctions on an enlarging shadow screen, Curry and his gang caress and grope individually or at each other while screaming purported songs downstage, along a lighted runway or up on balcony structures," he complains.¹⁸

In "Taking a Camping Trip on Broadway," *Wall Street Journal* writer Edwin Wilson conveys even more explicit concerns about camp aesthetics that advocate for – and perhaps even indoctrinate audience members into – alternative (read: homosexual) lifestyles:

When Camp reaches this point it is no longer emphasizing style and aesthetics, as Ms. [Susan] Sontag insisted it was in the beginning, it has become an instrument for exploitation, a means to deliver a message. [...] In its original conception Camp was sophisticated but it also seemed innocent and fun. As we encounter it in 'The Rocky Horror Show,' however, there is little about it that is innocent. It has become didactic to the core.¹⁹

The Rocky Horror Show's carnivalesque inversion of compulsory heterosexuality in may indeed be didactic, but the Brads and Janets of the world could perhaps benefit from a playful

¹⁷ See Elizabeth L. Wollman, *Hard Times: The Adult Musical in 1970s New York City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013) for a discussion of Off and Off Off Broadway adult musicals which ruffled moral feathers, but ultimately made their way into the mainstream. While partaking in the same vision of sexual liberation, *The Rocky Horror Show* romped through campy genre films, which aesthetically set this musical apart.

¹⁸ William Glover, "Horror As In Vile Is Key To Show," *Sarasota Journal*, March 12, 1975, accessed October 12, 2012, <http://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=1798&dat=19750312&id=ZgwfAAAAIBAJ&sjid=TY0EAAAAIBAJ&pg=4664,2407510>.

¹⁹ Edwin Wilson, "Taking a Camping Trip on Broadway," *Wall Street Journal*, March 14, 1975.

interrogation of their sexual norms. Camp's style is its substance, and queer spectators may actually desire to be absorbed into glam mad scientist Dr. Frank-N-Furter's Unconventional Convention of transsexual Transylvanians. This musical's alternative ideology can be a liberatory fantasia for marginalized identities.

Like the Broadway production, the film adaptation *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* flopped in mainstream movie houses in its first general release on September 29, 1975.²⁰ *Chicago Tribune* critic Lynn van Matre gave the film a mediocre 2.5-star rating: "It's not exactly a great movie, but more often than not it's great fun, provided your heart belongs to drag parodies with overtones of dementia," she writes. Her review is tellingly titled "'Rocky Show' Bumps to a Different Beat," tying the film's alternative sexualities to a demented pulse, out of sync with the mainstream.²¹ The mythology of *Rocky Horror* is intimately bound up with what Halberstam calls the queer art of failure.²² *Rocky Horror* fan culture constitutes itself as reclaiming (what was once) an abject commodity; the musical's roots are decidedly located in subcultural fields that were immiscible in the 1970s mainstream.

Richard O'Brien's Frankensteinian musical is itself an anachronistic reclamation of earlier lowbrow commodities: a patchwork homage to low budget science fiction, horror, and other B films of the early twentieth century, particularly the 1930s and 1950s. The opening number, "Science Fiction / Double Feature," pays tribute to genre films, which were often billed as the "excess" of a double feature picture show. Motion picture studios' focus on big budget features meant that B films were both less marketed and critically disdained, if not entirely

²⁰ Raymond Knapp notes that this cinematic flop was the result of marketing, or the lack of it, as much as it was the result of the film's form and content.

²¹ Lynn Van Matre, "'Rocky Show' Bumps to a Different Beat!" *Chicago Tribune*, August 18, 1976.

²² Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

ignored; these movies were considered formulaic fodder preceding an artistically superior (and more expensively produced) feature film. Yet paradoxically, the studios' predominant focus on features meant B films could experiment in style and content, pushing moral boundaries with less systematic censorship. Although *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* and many of its constituent B films initially played in mainstream culture, their ongoing subcultural attachments are intimately intertwined with histories of their initial abjection, as well as their stylistic and ideological excess to the mainstream. Creators, producers, and fans had to locate alternative commercial structures in which these queer texts could thrive artistically, financially, and affectively.

In the early 1960s, filmmakers such as Kenneth Anger, Gregory Markopoulos, Stan Brakhage, Maya Deren, and Ron Rice began late night screenings of their independent films in alternative movie houses. Jonas Mekas' New American Cinema Group offered a pioneering structure for these artists; drawing inspiration from the Free Cinema in England, the Nouvelle Vague in France, and the young movements in Poland, Italy, and Russia, the New American Cinema Group explored alternative modes of financing, promoting, and distributing films.²³ A central part of the group's manifesto was a cooperative distribution center and partnerships with theaters such as the Charles Theater in New York's East Village, which held the first weekend midnight program in 1961. "Bizarre sexual extravaganzas" by Ron Rice, Ken Jacobs, Jack Smith, and Andy Warhol soon dotted the late night underground cinema scene.²⁴

This subcultural practice became more firmly established by the 1970s. Alejandro Jodorowsky's *El Topo*, a brutally bloody Spanish-language western, scared off distributors until

²³ Jonas Mekas, "History," The Film Makers Cooperative, accessed October 29, 2012, <http://film-makerscoop.com/about/history>.

²⁴ David E. James, *To Free the Cinema: Jonas Mekas and the New York Underground* (Princeton University Press, 1992), 10.

Ben Barenholtz introduced it as a midnight film in New York City's Elgin Theater on December 18, 1970. The evocative and incongruous imagery of *El Topo* quickly drew a crowd of fascinated repeat theatergoers; after the first showing, word of mouth packed the cinema each weekend. Particularly following the success of *El Topo*, theater owners "saw that [they] could create a world around the concept of midnight," according to Larry Jackson of Boston's Orson Welles Theatre, "that at 12 o'clock, a different world of movie-going took place."²⁵ Midnight screenings became an alternative business model for experimental and independent genre films that were immiscible in the mainstream, and theaters in urban centers like New York and Los Angeles, as well as college towns, began consciously seeking the next great midnight hits. Midnight movies both embraced and commercially exploited the liberatingly liminal age between childhood dependency and adult subsumption into normative life patterns to create a temporally dissident "world" around midnight theatergoing.

"It's the audience that creates the cult, it's not the film," says Barenholtz.²⁶ Yet following *El Topo*, mainstream failure and a re-release at an alternative screening time undeniably primed and positioned certain films to become cult classics. George A. Romero's black and white indie horror *Night of the Living Dead* developed a midnight following after a critically disastrous mainstream release in 1968, and gay spectators flocked to John Waters's flamboyant *Pink Flamingos* in 1972. Queer audiences embraced the shocking cinematic experience of films that endlessly deferred a singular meaning; these films' unconventional narratives elevated experimental style over coherent content. Midnight movies accrued an aura of opposition to

²⁵ *Midnight Movies: From the Margin to the Mainstream*, dir. Stuart Samuels (Stuart Samuels Productions, 2005), DVD.

²⁶ *Midnight Movies*, dir. Stuart Samuels.

mainstream values, overlapping with countercultural protests against the Vietnam War, racism, and gender and sexual norms in the 1970s.

This midnight mythology laid the groundwork for *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*'s first midnight showing at New York City's Waverly Theater on April 2, 1976. In fact, both *El Topo* and *Night of the Living Dead* had already achieved cult success at this same theater. *Rocky Horror* soon became a popular midnight happening, pushing on the tenuous boundaries of this fantastical film as a stable and self-contained text when repeat theatergoers began openly interacting with the movie; this performative phenomenon continues at theaters across the world today. Late on a Friday or Saturday night, life's regimented rhythms loosen their grip, and leisure time drags and suffuses into a pleasurable elongated present. Costumed crowds wrap around urban cinemas, waiting for earlier feature films to conclude. As fans dressed in fishnets and corsets shiver with anticipation, the queer time of a midnight movie slips into queer space. *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* is a local and embodied practice of creative world-making for these time-warping fans; participatory midnight screenings model a subject's performative navigation of cultural norms through complexly layered acts of synchronizing and syncopating time, creating a queer world in and through queer temporalities.

Syncing time

I would like, if I may, to take you on a strange journey: a queer, anachronistic "jump to the left" to Gertrude Stein's American lecture circuit from 1934-1935. In "Plays," Stein explores theater "from the standpoint of sight and sound and its relation to emotion and time, rather than in relation to story and action."²⁷ In short, Stein is concerned with whether an audience member

²⁷ Gertrude Stein, "Plays," in *Writings, 1932-1946*, vol. 2 (New York: Library of America, 1998), 251.

can keep time with a play. Her dramaturgical model for synchronization with the drama’s emotional time – which she calls landscape – is suffused with circularity and repetition rather than a linear narrative drive. This queer temporality maps onto the stage much as the operatic stop-time examined in Chapter 1; an audience member does not follow a linear plotline, but indulges in the layered elaboration of a moment. After all, Stein believes the purpose of art is “to live in the actual present, that is the complete actual present, and to completely express that complete actual present.”²⁸

Stein’s landscape is a spatialized queer temporality; it “is exciting and it moves but it also stays.”²⁹ When fans play within and across *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, the ensuing performative landscape is similarly exciting, moving but also staying, intertwining a present performance with the repetition of a familiar film. Although it is impossible to pinpoint precisely how performative interaction with *The Rocky Picture Show* began, “The Time Warp,” while probably not the very beginning of the phenomenon, is nevertheless a very good place to start. This song and dance explicitly invokes audience participation, and instruction is built into the lyrics for “virgins” experiencing a midnight *Rocky Horror* for the first time: “It’s just a jump to the left and then a step to the right.” Perhaps more important is the song’s advocacy for repetition after these simple steps have been taught:

	Let’s	do	the	time	warp	again!		Let’s	do	the	time	warp	again!
Melody:	F	E	G	F#	F#-E		F	E	G	F#	F#-E		
Chords:	F	C	G	D	A		F	C	G	D	A		

²⁸ Stein, "Plays," 251.

²⁹ Stein, "Plays," 269.

This chorus maintains a “tight, quasi-hysterical circle of control” in the melody, underpinned by a strangely jolting, nonlinear chord progression: almost an all-major-key circle of 5ths progression in reverse.³⁰ This “again”-ness of the “Time Warp” is inherent to the number’s musical and choreographic structure, as well as to the audience itself: fans who return week after week to the same theater’s midnight showings. The participatory invocation of “The Time Warp” enables O’Brien’s kaleidoscopic musical landscape to sprawl beyond the movie screen; *Rocky Horror* becomes a localized participatory playground built upon intimate familiarity with and repetition of the film.

In West Los Angeles, performance troupe Sins o’ the Flesh has time warped at the Nuart Theatre since “late '87 / early '88 (there was soo much alcohol consumption, no one from the era is quite sure!).”³¹ Each Saturday night, the cast of rotating performers generates a party atmosphere by pumping pop music and dancing as crowds pour into theater; they sell *RHPS* T-shirts and buttons created by local artists; and, following an elaborate pre-show ritual of reciting rules and sacrificing the *Rocky Horror* virgins in an orgy of newbies, they sync with the screen in a live shadowcast performance. Although audiences often consist of dozens of virgins, Sins o’ the Flesh represents *Rocky Horror*’s raucous and repetitive theatergoing cult(ure); when troupe members are not performing with the shadowcast, these fans attend anyway to participate from the audience and support their friends. Sins o’ the Flesh solidifies their fan community by hosting theme nights around other geeky intersections with genre entertainment; they have previously crossed *Rocky Horror* with zombies and superheroes, *Austin Powers* and *Animal House*. They delight in premiering shadowcast productions of other cult classics such as *Clue*,

³⁰ Knapp, *Personal Identity*, 250.

³¹ "Sins O' the Flesh: Los Angeles, CA," TRHPS Official Fan Site, accessed October 14, 2012, http://www.rockyhorror.com/profiles/cast_2007_08.php.

Romy and Michelle's High School Reunion, and *Shock Treatment* – Richard O'Brien's ill-fated sequel to *Rocky Horror*. *Sins of the Flesh* emerges at the intersection of these marginalized popular entertainments, with *Rocky Horror* as the group's dominant organizing landscape.

I have previously explored how repetition is an act of performative place-making in *The Sound of Music*; across time, musical reprises constitute a nuclear family, a value system, and a transportable sense of place for the displaced von Trapps.³² However normative this Rodgers and Hammerstein classic may be as a “self-contained” text, cultural phenomena like the annual *Sing-A-Long Sound of Music* at the Hollywood Bowl constitute (and re-constitute, year after year) a musical fan culture surprisingly in excess of an expected white, heteronormative, middle-class fan base.³³ Syncing with the musical does not mean direct interpellation into its authorially intended ideology; rather, the audience and interpretive community can perform a horizon of meanings in excess of the creators' expectations. While not as campy as cult classics like *Mommie Dearest* or *Reefer Madness*, *Sound of Music* fans sing along and dress up as everything from girls in white dresses to Academy Awards in head-to-toe gold lamé. Like *Rocky Horror* fans, they delight in the plural possibilities of mimesis and explore the creative possibilities of the landscape. Fans perform in fluid synchronicity with the film, theatrically navigating between self and other in mimetic acts that sometimes soar in an uncanny likeness to their cinematic counterparts and sometimes fail to step in time, disclosing how all identifications are fragmentary and partial.

Rocky Horror cast members invest both time and money in elaborate costumes, wigs, makeup, and props to performatively subsume themselves in the filmic landscape of *The Rocky*

³² Sarah T. Ellis, "Establishing (and Re-establishing) a Sense of Place: Musical Orientation in *The Sound of Music*," *Studies in Musical Theatre* 3, no. 3 (2009).

³³ See "'Tradition: Queer Musical Comedy Sings Along" in Samuel Baltimore, *Do It Again: Repetition, Reception and Identity on Musical Comedy's Margins*, diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2013.

Horror Picture Show. Though Fox began producing flimsy mainstream Halloween costumes for the film's major characters in 2001, fans pride themselves on obsessive detail; whether rummaging thrift shops for adaptable costume pieces or ordering custom sequined material to make Columbia's bustier, fans emphasize the time and labor spent in the creative act of reconstruction. Costume construction is even a semi-profitable side job for particularly skilled fans. Sins o' the Flesh cast leader Elizabeth Stockton designs wigs for *Rocky Horror* theater productions and shadowcasts across the nation, ranging from \$45 (Rocky Horror's simple blonde shag) to \$85 (Magenta's lightning bolt beehive space wig).³⁴ Functionality is as essential as accuracy; Sacramento-based costumer Shawn Anthony sews a hidden side zipper into every corset to enable quick costume changes, particularly the pesky transition into the floor show.³⁵

For LA's Sins o' the Flesh as with most shadowcasts, actors are not typecast by gender, sexuality, race, or other physical attributes, and an actor may specialize in several roles. Performing since 1993, Elizabeth Stockton has worked her way up from a Tranny to primary Janet and understudy Frank-N-Furter. Stockton even played Frank-N-Furter in an all-star shadowcast filmed at the Wiltern for the 35th anniversary blu-ray. Yet the frequent casting of women in men's roles both conceals and reveals the gender binary at work in *Rocky Horror* fan culture. Women such as Stockton often assume the roles of Frank-N-Furter, Brad, Riff Raff, and the Criminologist out of necessity as much as desire; *Rocky Horror*'s playful affront to traditional masculinity attracts few (straight) men to the Sins o' the Flesh cast. While Tim Curry's husky-voiced, cross-dressing Frank-N-Furter seduces a beautiful blonde man on screen, a corseted female Frank-N-Furter may seduce a male Rocky Horror on stage; the homoerotic

³⁴ Elizabeth Stockton, "My Favorite Obsession" - Liz's Rocky Horror Wigs, accessed October 14, 2012, <http://rockywigs.com/>.

³⁵ Shawn Anthony, Shawn Anthony's Custom Garments, accessed October 31, 2012, <http://shawnanthony.com/>.

relationship of the film is erased in this particular shadowcast embodiment, although a woman is placed in a pleasurable position of power. When a female Janet is paired with a female Brad, the filmic parody of this couple as a 1950s ideal of heteronormative bliss is instantly upended. Shadowcast performers sync with the screen in a kaleidoscopic array of gender and sexual patterns, shifting from week to week and cast to cast. Yet the lack of men – and the even more notable absence of racial diversity – points to the potential limits of *Rocky Horror*'s carnivalesque fan landscape.

As the film is mapped into the 300-seat Nuart Theater, the shadowcast performance also draws attention to the disjunctive time and space of the filmic medium. Although editing can create the illusion of a seamless and integrated flow, the live performance of a film often discloses its radically disintegrated temporality; film editing enables quick cuts across time and space, not to mention camera angles and special effects that cannot be replicated on stage. Having originated as a live performance, *Rocky Horror* creates fewer staging complications than would, for instance, a stage adaptation of a Busby Berkeley spectacular or Baz Luhrmann's fast cutting musical films such as *Moulin Rouge* ("ADD aesthetic," according to John Clum). Still, *Sins o' the Flesh* must creatively navigate character entrances and exits, often using the theater's double aisles for a more encompassing interactive experience, and performers must imaginatively fill in the cuts of each scene with appropriate (and sometimes impishly inappropriate) action for his character.

The final scenes of the film present a wide array of problems for live performance. After Dr. Frank-N-Furter uses his sonic transducer to freeze Brad, Janet, Rocky Horror, and Columbia into nude statues, he dresses them in corsets and fishnet tights, then unfreezes them to perform the floor show: a choreographically mechanical performance of alternative sexualities.

Performers have only a short interlude – slightly over a minute of narration from the Criminologist – to scramble into position for “Rose Tint My World.” As The Fantasie Factory Players advise in the Transylvanian University online manual for shadowcasts, floor show makeup is nearly impossible: “Don't even try when you're first starting out. You'll have a hard enough time getting changed into costumes.”³⁶ Layered costume components and corsets with side zippers are invaluable, as are helping hands from fellow cast members and techies, to effect this quick transition. As Frank-N-Furter enters to croon “Don't Dream It, Be It,” he plunges into a foggy pool of fluid identities: a scenic impossibility for the movie theater stage. Although Sins o' the Flesh has conducted an underwater photo shoot to replicate this scene, the weekly shadowcast embraces the theatricality of Frank “floating” vertically in a Titanic lifesaver and of characters “swimming” across the stage with exaggerated arm movements to embrace one another. The ensuing orgy is deliciously low-tech; thus the “impossibilities” and “failures” of live performance become rich sites for creative synchronicity. Shadowcast performances do not simply replicate the film, but play in the margins of a gapped and incomplete artifact; they shift and shape the landscape through intimate, embodied mimesis.

Syncopating time

Gertrude Stein theorizes that the theater causes nervousness because an audience member's emotional time is never precisely in sync with the emotional progression of the play:

The thing that is fundamental about plays is that the scene as depicted on the stage is more often than not one might say it is almost always in syncopated time in relation to the emotion of anybody in the audience. What this says is this. Your

³⁶ The Fantasie Factory Players, "Participation: Transylvanian University," TRHPS Official Fan Site, accessed October 14, 2012, <http://www.rockyhorror.com/participation/transuniv.php>.

sensation as one in the audience in relation to the play played before you your sensation I say your emotion concerning that play is always either behind or ahead of the play at which you are looking and to which you are listening. So your emotion as a member of the audience is never going on at the same time as the action of the play.³⁷

Stein wonders whether what is seen or what is heard dominates an audience member's perception; whether hearing replaces seeing; whether the audible interferes with the visual.³⁸

Theatrical elements do not fuse together into a seamless narrative for Stein, but create an unnerving sensation of syncopation. How is an audience member to keep pace with the drama?

Perhaps the better question is whether the audience *desires* to keep time with the drama, to be seamlessly interpolated into its narrative progression. Elin Diamond locates postmodern possibilities in the very concept of syncopated time that causes Stein such anxiety; for Diamond, this "visceral and cognitive sense of temporal otherness" can dislodge myths of a unified time and a unified subject.³⁹ As illustrated above, synchronization with the film is always a fluid and creative act that elaborates on the film's landscape. Yet participatory audiences at *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* also delight in syncopating time with the film: speaking back to the movie in cacophonous counterpoint to the original text.

Louis Farese first began speaking back to the screen on Labor Day weekend of 1976, according to fan club president Sal Piro's history of the participatory phenomenon.⁴⁰ As the

³⁷ Stein, "Plays," 244.

³⁸ Stein, "Plays," 249.

³⁹ Elin Diamond, *Unmaking Mimesis: Essays on Feminism and Theater* (London: Routledge, 1997), 104.

⁴⁰ Sal Piro, "It Was Great When It All Began," in *Creatures of the Night: The Rocky Horror Experience* (Redford, Mich.: Stabur Press, 1990), accessed October 14, 2012, <http://www.rockyhorror.com/history/howapbegan.php>.

narrating Criminologist’s opened the story – “I would like, ah, if I may, to take you on a strange journey” – Farese spontaneously called back, “How strange was it?” If the film is a self-contained object, then the Criminologist’s story proceeds oblivious to Frarese’s question; the narrator pulls a black book from the shelf and continues, “It seemed a fairly ordinary night when Brad Majors and his fiancée Janet Weiss, two young, normal, healthy kids, left Denton that late November evening to visit a Dr. Everett Scott, ex-tutor, now friend to both of them.” But if the audience gives weight to Frarese’s interjection, then the remainder of the film can be a response to that query: “How strange was it?” Having seen the film multiple times, Frarese’s question anticipates the narrative proceedings with glee and rips into the temporal fabric of the “finished” text.

Counterpoint dialogue, which has emerged over years of collective midnight movie improvisation, syncopates with and against textual authority. Each audience’s script defers a singular meaning, alternatively underpinning and undermining Richard O’Brien’s original script. The film seems ready-made for participatory interjections since the pacing of the acting often drags, filled with awkward pauses at the end of lines and expansive rests at the end of musical phrases. Take, for instance, the chorus of the opening number, “Science Fiction / Double Feature.” The underlined portions represent rests, available for interjections:

1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4
_____		Sci-	ence	fic-	tion	_____	
_____		Dou-ble	fea-	ture		_____	
_____		Doc-	tor	X		_____	
_____		Will build	a	crea-	ture	_____	
_____		See an-	droids	fight-ing		_____	

_____ Brad and Ja- net _____
 _____ Anne Fran- cis stars in _____
 _____ For bid- den Pla- net. Oh oh oh
 Oh Ohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh. _____ At the late
 Night _____ Dou- ble fea- ture _____ Pic- ture
 Show _____
1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4

Although the script of counterpoint dialogue shifts from location to location, audiences often fill the temporal gap after “Doctor X” with the rhyming chant “Sex sex sex sex,” making the film’s eroticism more explicit. “See androids fighting” is frequently followed by “*and fucking and sucking on*” “Brad and Janet.” Both the authorially intended line (“See androids fighting Brad and Janet”) and the modified meaning (“See androids fighting and fucking and sucking on Brad and Janet”) can be simultaneously upheld. Why settle for a single meaning when one can read double at the late night “anal friction” double feature “Rocky Horror” picture show?

When the host theater allows, fans also physically participate in the film; they pelt virgins with rice during the wedding scene, literalize the lyric “You’re a hot dog” by throwing wieners, and toss “cards for sorrow” and “cards for pain” during Dr. Frank-N-Furter’s heartwarming “Going Home.” Such audience participation multiplies the tracks of signification at play, creating a heterotopia of temporalities that are never fully subsumed into one another.⁴¹ The counterpoint dialogue and prop usage complicates the relationship between text and frame; the boundaries between what lies inside and outside the text become pleurably porous, and an

⁴¹ Lim, *Translating Time*, 28.

audience's immersive participation in the landscape of *Rocky Horror* is simultaneously a counterpoint to and commentary on that landscape.

This interpenetration of frame and text can trace its lineage to the horror hosts of late-night B movies, televised in the 1950s. In the fall of 1957, when Universal Pictures released their library of 30s and 40s horror films to television, local stations across the country signed vampires, mad scientists, and other campy costumed personalities to frame the late night proceedings.⁴² With cheap costumes and shabby sets, horror hosts improvised intriguing material to liven up these low-budget movies at the midnight hour. The witty frameworks soon surpassed the films in popularity. John “The Cool Ghoul” Zacherle, for instance, became an enduring personality as the vampire Roland – accent on the second syllable. While hosting horror films for Philadelphia’s WCAU, Roland inhabited a dungeon with his coffin-dwelling wife and assistant Igor. He conducted gruesome experiments in his laboratory, played with his fuzzy pet amoeba made of jello, and occasionally sang a monster tune; his debut album *Dinner with Drac* launched the second leg of his career on New York’s WABC. At Channel 7, Roland became known as “Zacherley” and enjoyed an elaborate set with more realistic props, as well as a live band; one episode featured Transylvanian folk music, while another premiered the new opera *Il Draculare*.⁴³

Film critic Leonard Maltin reflects on Roland’s antics as silly and sophomoric, but also exciting and spontaneous: “Looking back now, you know, as a film buff and something of a historian and a purist, I shudder to think at the idea of interrupting the movie or mocking the movie, dismantling the movie in some cases. But to a kid it was just a lot of fun.”⁴⁴ This “fun”

⁴² *American Scary*, dir. John E. Hudgens (POOB Productions, Z-Team Productions, 2006), DVD.

⁴³ Welcome to the Home of Zacherley: The Cool Ghoul, accessed October 14, 2012, <http://zacherley.com/>.

⁴⁴ *American Scary*, dir. Hudgens, DVD.

fundamentally shifted the shape of the movies for spectators, particularly as horror hosts began intentionally confusing frame and film. Zacherle developed a technique at WCAU for inserting himself into the movie. During a broadcast of *The Black Cat*, Roland's face appeared among a series of close-ups for participants at a devil worship ceremony; and during a broadcast of *The Raven* at WALB, Zacherley injected his own name into the film: "Who's on the case?" "Zacherley and Gasport." These "break-ins" or "jump-ins" pleasurably disrupted the film's temporality, and fans often tuned in to the worst B films just to see Roland's affectionate antics. Across the country, other local horror hosts – Elvira, Vampira, Svenghoulie, Ghoulaurdi, "Chilly Billy" Cardille, and more – were independently experimenting with similar acts of synchronizing and syncopating with the screen. Numerous horror host fans became *Rocky Horror* devotees, including current *RHPS* fan club president Sal Piro.

Within *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* itself, the narrating Criminologist inhabits the tenuous borders of the filmic frame much like a television horror host – although he was more directly modeled on Edgar Lustgarten, a host of popular British crime programs syndicated for airing in the US.⁴⁵ From his leatherbound library, the Criminologist guides the audience through the action of the film with a British accent and quasi-academic distance. As the investigator of Frank-N-Furter's crime, he strives for a detached and objective perspective even as he himself is imbricated in the proceedings. His narrative reconstruction of the events unfolds through a massive collection of evidence, from a dense black book of photos and victims' statements to a pull-down diagram of "The Time Warp." But his academic analysis of the proceedings, verging on voyeurism, breaks down in – what else? – "The Time Warp." Although the Criminologist typically provides transitions between disparate scenes and settings, he is pleasurably interjected

⁴⁵ Knapp, *Personal Identity*, 245.

throughout this musical number in increasing states of disarray; by the end of the song, the Criminologist shimmies on the top of his mahogany desk in time with the transsexual Transylvanians. This series of Roland-like jump-ins complicates his distanced authority and discloses his pleasure in the fantastical, circuitous story.

The Criminologist embodies the crisis of Matt Hills' scholar-fan, who transgresses the norms of both (distanced) academic and (immersed) fan subjectivities.⁴⁶ The scholar-fan is often excluded from both academic and fan circles; academics imagine that his critical eye is blinded by immersion in the fan landscape, while fans imagine that a critical distance blunts the ecstasies of pure and unadulterated fandom. Yet *Rocky Horror*'s participatory experience thrives on double meanings and upholds contradictions. Like the repetitive theatergoers who simultaneously sync and syncopate with the time of the film, the Criminologist can be read as both a part of and a counterpoint to the narrative. He crosses and confuses the binary between intellectual and embodied knowledge, giving himself over to physical pleasure even as he analyzes "these insects called the human race, lost in time, and lost in space – and meaning."

Anything can happen on Halloween?

The Rocky Horror Picture Show may have had its midnight premiere on April Fool's Day of 1976, but today the movie is more readily associated with the carnivalesque and costumed culture of Halloween. In fact, West Hollywood's Annual Halloween Carnaval in 2010 was Rocky Horror themed; 8,239 people danced "The Time Warp," breaking the Guinness Book Record in honor of the film's 35th anniversary.

⁴⁶ Matt Hills, *Fan Cultures* (London: Routledge, 2002), 19.

Decades after the film's premiere, as thousands of fans do "The Time Warp" in a gay friendly Los Angeles neighborhood, critics may question the ongoing identificatory charge of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. This once maligned subcultural object has entered into – and wildly succeeded within – the mainstream media. Young fans increasingly consume *Rocky Horror* in a setting far from the charged alterity of a midnight movie; *Rocky Horror* was released on VHS for the first time in 1990 and had its television premiere on FOX in 1993, complete with an edited audience participation track.⁴⁷ When fans attend a midnight movie production, the event rarely holds the same countercultural charge as in the 1970s. Mainstream films often premiere at midnight, drawing a youthful but not necessarily "queer" audience for the latest summer blockbuster. (It is notable, however, that these summer blockbusters are often sci-fi, fantasy, comic book, and other genre films with an established fan base, and the time of their release positions them as box office fodder, not "serious" and "important" works of art.) *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* arguably contains little more than a nostalgic memory of its past immiscibility into cultural norms.

How, then, can we reconcile the persistent shock of contemporary fans' first encounter with *Rocky Horror* – whether at a midnight movie, on television, or on DVD? Perhaps the hybridity of this "horror-rock-transvestite-camp-omnisexual-musical parody" still marks a limit to our aesthetic frames of reference; its charged "otherness" induces a complex crossing of anxiety and intrigue.⁴⁸ A hint of immiscibility is further encoded in the film's censorship for the small screen; provocative scenes are carefully cut away and curse words are dubbed over, but

⁴⁷ Raymond Knapp remembers seeing the movie on television in the late 1970s or early 1980s, but according to the official fan site, the film's television premiere was 1993. See "History: Rocky Horror Timeline," TRHPS Official Fan Site, accessed October 14, 2012, <http://www.rockyhorror.com/history/timeline.php>.

⁴⁸ Roger Ebert, "The Rocky Horror Picture Show," review, *Chicago Sun-Times*, August 18, 1976, accessed October 14, 2012, <http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/19760818/REVIEWS/608180301/1023>.

traces of these erasures remain in the asynchronous movement of those lush red lips. An entire episode of the hit television series *Glee* debates issues of censorship and the musical's appropriateness for teens. And no matter how many times a fan has seen the film on TV, attending a midnight movie "in the flesh" becomes an important rite of passage; the resulting fan community can imagine itself in excess of the mainstream, even as the film becomes increasingly accessible.

What's more, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* maintains its identificatory power for a queer fan base because it persists in such a contradictory, frayed, and fragile present. The acceptability of queer lifestyles is an uneven flux across times and spaces; hate crimes can (and do) arise on topsy-turvy Halloween or a more mundane day, in West Hollywood or a Bible Belt suburb. *Rocky Horror* insists on the cacophonous coexistence of these times and spaces. Within the film itself, Frank-N-Furter's sexually liberated reign is only a flashing, fleeting moment. Deeming his lifestyle too extreme, the mad scientist's own followers Riff-Raff and Magenta ultimately kill Frank and rocket back to Transylvania, leaving cracked and confused remnants of human culture in their wake. Yet Dr. Frank-N-Furter is resuscitated as his fans do "The Time Warp" week after week, co-creating another utopian moment of cultural acceptance.

We'll Make Time Stand Still: *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog*

Warping time is the ultimate power for supervillain / countercultural heroes Dr. Frank-N-Furter of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* and Dr. Horrible of the viral web series *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog*. While Frank uses a sonic transducer to stop time and manipulate his guests into performing the floor show, Dr. Horrible invents a Freeze Ray to stop time, get the girl, and rule the world: an undoubtedly ambitious mission. In fact, *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog* was born of equally ambitious aims during the Writers Guild of America (WGA) Strike against the

Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP) from November 5, 2007, to February 12, 2008. Wielding their Freeze Rays on film and television studios, writers sought to explore alternative methods of artistic production and distribution during this work stoppage.

In a blog post addressed to his friends (i.e., fans) in spring 2008, Joss Whedon cast himself as the protagonist in a horribly familiar fantasy:

Once upon a time, all the writers in the forest got very mad with the Forest Kings and declared a work-stoppage. The forest creatures were all sad; the mushrooms did not dance, the elderberries gave no juice for the festival wines, and the Teamsters were kinda pissed. (They were very polite about it, though.) During this work-stoppage, many writers tried to form partnerships for outside funding to create new work that circumvented the Forest King system. Frustrated with the lack of movement on that front, I finally decided to do something very ambitious, very exciting, very mid-life-crisisy.⁴⁹

While time stood still for the studios, Whedon gathered writers Zack Whedon and Maurissa Tancharoen, composer Jed Whedon, and a stellar cast and crew to self-produce a three-act web series: *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog*. When Act I debuted on July 15, 2008, free and without ads, traffic to drhorrible.com crashed the servers. *Dr. Horrible* was subsequently released as an affordable iTunes download, as well as a DVD loaded with extras created for – and sometimes by – the web series' devoted fans. As a “Sing-Along,” *Dr. Horrible* explicitly invites fans to be supervillainous co-conspirators, collectively navigating new methods of artistic creation that circumvent the corporate studio system.

⁴⁹ Joss Whedon, *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog*, accessed October 14, 2012, <http://drhorrible.com/>.

Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog emerges from a field of parallel fiction that explores familiar texts and genres from alternative perspectives. Gregory McGuire's *Wicked* – adapted into the wildly popular Stephen Schwartz and Winnie Holzman musical in 2003 – reconfigures *The Wizard of Oz's* Wicked Witch of the West as a misunderstood, green-skinned outcast and political activist.⁵⁰ John Gardner's novel *Grendel* similarly skews *Beowulf* to the sympathetic monster's side. This flipping of a familiar narrative can even be traced back to Greek satyr plays, which employed a chorus of hairy, horny goat men in a carnivalesque retelling of a favorite story to close the annual Festival of Dionysus. The only fully intact satyr play is Euripides' *The Cyclops*, adapted into a rock opera by Psittacus Productions in 2011; this play lampoons Odysseus' heroism by recounting one episode of his epic odyssey through the monster Polyphemus' eye.⁵¹

Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog upends the superhero genre by flipping narrative focus to the supervillain. The straightforward story of good vs. evil is reconfigured to reveal a more complicated range of perspectives, continually deferring moral certainty and closure. In *Dr. Horrible*, the “hero” Captain Hammer is actually a cheesy corporate tool who grows hilariously insufferable over the three act series. With a bombastic baritone voice and ripped body, the hypermasculine Hammer may convince the Mayor to convert an old building into a homeless shelter, but his underlying motive is always to boost his own ego and bash his competition. The nightly news lavishes praise on this political crusader and the newspapers cover his every triumph, but the mainstream media's portrayal never coincides with the reality; the airheaded

⁵⁰ Stacy Ellen Wolf, *Changed for Good: A Feminist History of the Broadway Musical* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010). See in particular Chapters 6 and 7 (“‘Changed for the Better’: Queer Conventions in *Wicked* (2003)” and 7 “‘It’s All About Popular’”: *Wicked* Divas and Internet”) for a discussion of the green-skinned outsider Elphaba and *Wicked's* fangirl culture.

⁵¹ Mary Hart, “Satyrs in L.A.,” *Didaskalia* 8, no. 6 (2011), accessed November 01, 2012, <http://www.didaskalia.net/issues/8/6/>.

Captain's advocacy for the public good is a byproduct of advocacy for himself. Captain Hammer is all surface: a comic caricature drawn in bold and brash strokes.

Audiences are more apt to align themselves with the sympathetically awkward anarchist Dr. Horrible.⁵² Like Clark Kent and Superman, or Bruce Wayne and Batman, Neil Patrick Harris' character uncomfortably straddles two identities: boy-next-door Billy and supervillain Dr. Horrible. Both Billy and Dr. Horrible are nerdy misfits marked by failure; an oversized eggshell lab coat and black rubber gloves can never wholly transmute this geeky boy into a triumphant antihero. "May I suggest a drinking game where every time I do a ridiculously awkward long blink, someone does a shot of some alcohol?" proposes Harris in the DVD commentary.⁵³ In his everyday life, Billy longs for recognition by Penny, the soft-spoken girl from the Laundromat, but he stumbles over words and struggles to make a "real, audible connection" with her.⁵⁴ Meanwhile, Dr. Horrible plots how to gain acceptance to the elite Evil League of Evil. He may not be as lame a supervillain as Moist, who wields the questionable power of making objects damp, but Dr. Horrible's career is also tainted by failure. His overlapping operations in love and supervillainy are continually thwarted by Hammer.

Dr. Horrible becomes a particularly charismatic and queer countercultural hero when a third identity is layered onto the character by Neil Patrick Harris himself: a beloved theater, film, and television actor. Harris' career began with the title role of *Doogie Howser, M.D.*, a teenage doctor with a boyish charm that still accrues to the actor today. Following an expansive range of roles including a parody of himself in *Harold & Kumar Go to White Castle* (2004) and the

⁵² Anouk Lang, "'The Status Is Not Quo!': Pursuing Resolution in Web-Disseminated Serial Narrative," *Narrative* 18, no. 3 (2010).

⁵³ "Filmmaker's Commentary," *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog*, dir. Joss Whedon, perf. Nathan Fillion, Felicia Day, and Neil Patrick Harris (Timescience Bloodclub, New Video Group, 2008), DVD.

⁵⁴ Joss Whedon and Jane Watkins, *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog: The Book* (London: Titan Books, 2011), 20.

womanizing Barney in *How I Met Your Mother* (2005 – present), Harris came out as “a very content gay man” in an exclusive November 2006 *People* article.⁵⁵ His popularity subsequently soared; “NPH” became a gay icon, showcased most spectacularly in the realm of musical theater. Only a few months after the web debut of *Dr. Horrible’s Sing-Along Blog*, Harris was featured in Marc Shaiman’s 2008 viral web short *Prop 8: The Musical*, advocating for gay marriage in California.⁵⁶ Harris also played the queer character Bobby in the 2011 New York Philharmonic concert production of *Company*, and he hosted the Tony Awards in 2009 and 2011; the latter awards show featured an opening number that proclaimed, “Broadway: it’s not just for gays anymore.” Harris’s public persona as an out and proud song-and-dance man is perhaps his most charmingly popular character yet – and indelibly linked to his portrayal of Dr. Horrible.

Dr. Horrible would never be the subject of an exclusive magazine story like NPH or make headlines like Captain Hammer. Instead, this “low-rent super villain” projects himself into the world via alternative media; Dr. Horrible updates viewers on his latest heists and answers fan email from a webcam set up in his home laboratory.⁵⁷ Thwarting expectations for a big opening musical number, *Dr. Horrible’s Sing-Along Blog* abruptly leaps into one of the supervillain’s amateur webcam posts. From his lair, Dr. Horrible announces a new weapon designed to solve all his problems: “So transmatter is 75% and more importantly, the Freeze Ray is almost up. This is the one. Stops time.”⁵⁸ Dr. Horrible then reaches out to his viewers, implicating them in his villainous Master Plan: “Freeze Ray. Tell your friends.”

⁵⁵ "EXCLUSIVE: Neil Patrick Harris Tells PEOPLE He Is Gay," PEOPLE.com, November 03, 2006, accessed October 14, 2012, <http://www.people.com/people/article/0,,1554852,00.html>.

⁵⁶ "Prop 8 - The Musical." Funny or Die. December 2008. Accessed November 01, 2012. <http://www.funnyordie.com/videos/c0cf508ff8/prop-8-the-musical-starring-jack-black-john-c-reilly-and-many-more-from-fod-team-jack-black-craig-robinson-john-c-reilly-and-rashida-jones>.

⁵⁷ Whedon and Watkins, *Dr. Horrible’s Sing-Along Blog*, 9.

⁵⁸ Whedon and Watkins, *Dr. Horrible’s Sing-Along Blog*, 16.

The utopian moment: “My Freeze Ray” / “Strike!”

“My Freeze Ray” was the first song to be written for *Dr. Horrible’s Sing-Along Blog* and neatly encapsulates the time-warping spirit of the entire artistic endeavor. Light, staccato C major chords sneak into the background as Dr. Horrible reads an email from long time watcher DeadNotSleeping: “You always say in your blog that you will show her the way, show her you are a true villain. Who is ‘her’ and does she even know that you’re ...”⁵⁹ Dr. Horrible stares into the webcam and trails off into a musical dream world. With endearingly simple music and lyrics, “My Freeze Ray” expands the space of the supervillain’s video blog (or vlog) beyond the four walls of his secret lab and into the Laundromat, where Penny tosses her underthings into the wash. The supervillain’s multiple identities coexist in this song: the scheming Dr. Horrible on his webcam, the awkward Billy at the Laundromat, and – most importantly – the debonair supervillain anarchist he dreams of becoming.

“My Freeze Ray” employs a short and simple popular song structure: verse, chorus, verse, chorus, bridge, verse, and truncated chorus. In the choppy and short-breathed phrases of the verses, Billy fumbles for words that always fall short of describing how Penny makes him feel: “What’s the phrase? / Like a fool / Kinda sick / Special needs / Anyways.” Fortunately, Penny cannot hear him shuffle through these embarrassing and even offensive compliments. Caressing his Freeze Ray on his web cam, Dr. Horrible plans to stop time, elongating it into a present of open-ended potential; in the best of all possible worlds, he will finally “find the time to find the words” to eloquently express his feelings for her.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Whedon and Watkins, *Dr. Horrible’s Sing-Along Blog*, 16.

⁶⁰ Whedon and Watkins, *Dr. Horrible’s Sing-Along Blog*, 18.

Music and lyrics already empower this supervillain with greater verbal coherence than he has in everyday conversation, and in the chorus, his idealized self – which Whedon calls the “one where he’s actually freezing things and being awesome” – finally takes cool and confident control of the Laundromat. The idealized Dr. Horrible presses an imaginary pause button that suspends Penny in the midst of dumping laundry into the washing machine; free from his typical nervous tics, he relaxes onto a nearby machine to admire her. He musically elongates phrases and explores a greater melodic range through the chorus, with the bridge expanding into his most articulate and lyrical confession of emotion yet: “I’m the guy to make it real / The feelings you don’t dare to feel / I’ll bend the world to our will / And we’ll make time stand still.”⁶¹

This prolonged utopian moment reveals that the supervillain is a softy at heart. Dr. Horrible’s Freeze Ray is not a weapon of mass destruction, but an enabler of alternatives to the present; he is intent less on “destroying the status quo” than on bending it to discover its multiple potentialities.⁶² What’s more, Dr. Horrible’s ideal world relies on collaboration with a partner in crime: Penny. “[Penny] *is* fighting ‘the man,’” albeit in her own quiet way, according to Zack Whedon; her method of putting power in different hands involves volunteering to serve meals and collecting signatures to support a new homeless shelter, rather than enacting supervillainous plots.⁶³ While Captain Hammer’s triumphs are broadcast in the mainstream media and Dr. Horrible wields the power of the web, Penny’s labors often go unrecorded and unrecognized. In fact, as the web series continues, Captain Hammer usurps credit for Penny’s work, and her selfless, collaborative labor is crushed between two increasingly competitive male egos.

⁶¹ Whedon and Watkins, *Dr. Horrible’s Sing-Along Blog*, 18-19.

⁶² Whedon and Watkins, *Dr. Horrible’s Sing-Along Blog*, 16.

⁶³ Whedon and Watkins, *Dr. Horrible’s Sing-Along Blog*, 13.

In the battle between selfish “supers,” everyone loses. Dr. Horrible grows dark and destructive when his nemesis gets the girl; he ultimately uses his Freeze Ray in tandem with a Death Ray, which backfires and kills the innocent Penny in the hotly debated Act III.⁶⁴ Yet, for the utopian moment of “My Freeze Ray,” Dr. Horrible and Penny peacefully warp the world together. During a lighthearted instrumental break after the bridge, the idealized supervillain and Penny dance in a sunny dream version of the Laundromat in which only they exist; Billy twirls and dips his partner with the perfect poise that he lacks in everyday life. “That’s the plan / Rule the world / You and me / Any day,” Dr. Horrible croons to the webcam.⁶⁵ Though that “any day” is not today, “My Freeze Ray” physicalizes the possibility of a partnership between this sympathetic supervillain and dedicated local activist, dancing their way towards subversion of the status quo together.

Joss Whedon explicitly connects Dr. Horrible’s subversion of the status quo to his own exploration of alternatives to the studio system in a DVD special feature, *Commentary! the Musical*. Like the counterpoint dialogue that creates a layered range of meanings for *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, *Commentary!* reframes the popular web series with an array of behind the scenes stories. This additional audio track bends the genre of filmmakers’ commentary into a heightened, campy, and memorable musical form. After a densely self-referential opening number (“Commentary!”), Joss Whedon contextualizes the creation of *Dr. Horrible’s Sing-Along Blog* with a workers’ anthem: “Strike / For all the writers / Strike / For a living wage / Until these wrongs are righted / We won’t write another page.”⁶⁶ The juxtaposition of visuals

⁶⁴ Lang, “The Status is not Quo!,” 370. While some were shocked and saddened by the ending, many avid Whedon fans were disappointed and angry because Whedon’s oeuvre – such as *Serenity*, *Angel*, and *Buffy* – frequently resorts to these unhappy endings.

⁶⁵ Whedon and Watkins, *Dr. Horrible’s Sing-Along Blog*, 19.

⁶⁶ Whedon and Watkins, *Dr. Horrible’s Sing-Along Blog*, 83.

from “My Freeze Ray” with the unified patter and percussive drive of the new audio track – “Strike!” – encourages audiences to read the writers’ strike as a utopian moment of creative solidarity, akin to Dr. Horrible’s own dream collaboration with Penny.

While freezing work on mainstream projects, writers sent the studios scrambling to fill the gaps in the television schedule and redirected their imaginative energies to blogs and viral videos. Maurissa Tancharoen, Jed Whedon, and Zack Whedon primed themselves for *Dr. Horrible’s Sing-Along Blog* by creating clever web shorts throughout the strike. Their YouTube hit “WGA vs. AMPTP” even foreshadowed the battle between Dr. Horrible and Captain Hammer by exaggerating the binary between poor, well-meaning writers and wealthy, heartless studio heads. Executives at CBS, FOX, and NBC worried that the WGA would win the public relations battle through their compelling storytelling strategies and Dr. Horrible-like command of alternative media.⁶⁷ In fact, the mix of new shows and repeats during the three-month strike hardly changed television viewership, but cable and Internet viewership increased during the strike, and viral videos such as “WGA vs. AMPTP” seem to have swayed public opinion. In a survey for the April 2008 Nielsen Report on the strike’s impact, 100% of respondents knew about the strike, and 77% supported the writers either strongly (55%) or somewhat (22%).⁶⁸

Despite audience support, the writers’ supervillainous mission was at least partially a failure; many studios took advantage of the strike to sever existing contracts, replace scripted shows with reality television, and pull back on developing pilots.⁶⁹ Still, the writers won

⁶⁷ Brian Stelter, "Strike News: Writers Gain P.R. Advantage," NYTimes: Media Decoder Blog, November 19, 2007, accessed October 14, 2012, <http://mediadecoder.blogs.nytimes.com/2007/11/19/strike-news-writers-gain-pr-advantage/>.

⁶⁸ The Nielsen Company, *Television in Transition: The Initial Impact of the Writers’ Strike*, report (April 2008), 11-12, accessed October 14, 2012, http://www.broadcastingcable.com/file/2329-click_here.pdf.

⁶⁹ David Carr, "Who Won the Writers Strike?," *The New York Times*, February 12, 2008, accessed October 14, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/12/arts/television/12strike.html?_r=0.

residuals for digital media, and *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog* emerged as “our small proof not only that things can be done differently in this business, but that the greatest expression of rebellion is joy,” according to Joss Whedon.⁷⁰ How better to rebel than by singing along?

All art is fan art

“Strike!” comes across as “a really, really long history class” in comparison to the wonderfully wacky array of songs in the rest of *Commentary! the Musical*, which freely converge on – and, more often, diverge from – the expected filmmaker’s commentary. The cast and crew play scripted versions of “themselves,” and no backstage anecdote is too small to be elaborated into song, even the iPhone game that bonded the cast and crew (“Ninja Ropes”). The songs are rarely about the web series and more often self-contained gems about the creators themselves. “That’s like breaking the ninth wall. It’s pointless,” Zack Whedon complains.⁷¹ Yet precisely by diverging from the typical behind-the-scenes narrative, these songs give voice to the diverse writers, actors, and fans who have conspired in this web series’ success. If *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog* focuses on a marginalized supervillain, then *Commentary! the Musical* pays gleeful homage to the margins of the margins in another fantastic genre flip.

Felicia Day’s character Penny may be continually overshadowed by the competing supers in the musical, but *Commentary!* gives Day time to shine – and to publicize her pioneering web series *The Guild*, one of the inspirations for *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog*. In quick patter verses of her solo “The Art,” Day admits to using surface level performance strategies during *Dr.*

⁷⁰ Ash Kalb, "Wait, Aren't The Emmys Supposed To Be For TV Shows?," September 20, 2009, accessed October 14, 2012, <http://www.mediaite.com/tv/wait-arent-the-emmys-supposed-to-be-for-tv-shows/>.

⁷¹ Whedon and Watkins, *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog*, 84.

Horrible, stumbling and stammering simply “‘cause that’s what it says to do in the script.”⁷² Everything from a live horse to a soldier-boy extra seems destined to distract Day from her serious acting process. Only in the song’s slow and serene chorus, tinged with exotic Eastern instrumentation, does Day find creative zen. In this oasis, Felicia Day elevates her own web series to the mystical realm of “art”: “Memory, method, primal and deep / All Stanislavsky, Strasberg and Streep / Truth, Mr. Lipton, that’s how you build / *The Guild*.”⁷³

In reality, Day’s episodic comedy *The Guild* is solid, unpretentious entertainment; the web series follows the intersecting online and offline lives of the Knights of Good, a diverse group of MMORPG (massively multiplayer online role-playing game) players. Although Day originally scripted the show as a television pilot, studio producers “loved it, but said it was too ‘niche.’”⁷⁴ So Day and her friends decided to self-produce the series, entertaining their fellow geeky gamers with easily digestible YouTube webisodes. Launched on July 27, 2007, *The Guild* was endearingly “D.I.Y.” (do it yourself) but had smart writing and high production values, which Joss Whedon particularly respected.⁷⁵ Actors worked for free during the first season, which was funded by family, friends, and a rapidly expanding legion of fans. By October 2007, *The Guild*’s first episode had been featured on YouTube’s front page, garnering over 850,000 hits and 18,000 channel subscribers.⁷⁶

Yet even as Felicia Day’s song lampoons a sacred conception of art, it points to a serious gap in the recognition of web video as a legitimate medium of artistic production. Similar to a

⁷² Whedon and Watkins, *Dr. Horrible’s Sing-Along Blog*, 85.

⁷³ Whedon and Watkins, *Dr. Horrible’s Sing-Along Blog*, 86.

⁷⁴ Wagner James Au, "NewTeeVee Pick: The Guild," GigaOM, October 31, 2007, accessed October 14, 2012, <http://gigaom.com/video/the-guild/>.

⁷⁵ Whedon and Watkins, *Dr. Horrible’s Sing-Along Blog*, 10.

⁷⁶ The Guild, accessed October 14, 2012, <http://www.watchtheguild.com/>.

hierarchy of genres, a hierarchy of media often privileges film and television above the Internet. Joss Whedon's crossover from film and television to the World Wide Web with *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog*, as well as web shorts from the writers of *The Office*, began to complicate productively the distinction between "amateur" and "professional" media in the late 2000s. In fact, Day credits *Dr. Horrible* for "legitimizing" web video; Whedon's prior work within the studio system on cult shows such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Firefly* brought credibility to his own web series and, by extension, to others' online productions. Although *The Guild* had racked up recognition among gamers since its inception, Day's web series soared in popularity as it extended to a pre-established Whedon fan base post-*Dr. Horrible*.⁷⁷ While the medium may not yet qualify as "art," *Dr. Horrible's* success at least opened the door for recognition of web series' entertainment value. In fact, *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog* won a 2009 Emmy Award in a new category recognizing the merit of alternative media: short format live-action entertainment programs.⁷⁸

Dr. Horrible hijacked that year's Emmy ceremony to proclaim, "The future of home entertainment is the Internet!" But in making this announcement, the supervillain symbolically crossed the lines from the "alternative" media to the "mainstream." Had the web series been created only a few years later, *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog* could have even been streamed directly to audiences' web connected televisions. Flexible cross-media content proliferates across computers, smartphones, tablets, and televisions today, and corporate presence is increasingly palpable across them all. In theory, a web series can skirt the film and television studio system, captivate an audience, and go viral on the "alternative" platform of the Internet, but in practice,

⁷⁷ Rick Marshall, "What Does Felicia Day Want To See In The 'Dr. Horrible' Sequel?," MTV Splash Page, March 31, 2010, accessed October 14, 2012, <http://splashpage.mtv.com/2010/03/31/felicia-day-dr-horrible-sequel/>.

⁷⁸ Whedon and Watkins, *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog*, 80.

the most enduring web series now strike a balance between creative experimentation and corporate sponsorship. *The Guild*, for example, is currently distributed by Xbox Live and Microsoft, and sponsored by Sprint. Production quality has improved with corporate funding, but writer/actor Day has striven to uphold the web series' homespun collaborative community by, for instance, using fan art for the opening titles.⁷⁹

Similarly turning to his fans, Joss Whedon aspires to become the Roger Corman of the Internet, referring to a low budget genre filmmaker who churned out dozens of cult hits for American International Pictures in the 1950s and '60s. Corman founded indie producing and distributing company New World Pictures in 1970, supporting up-and-coming talent such as Jack Nicholson, Francis Ford Coppola, Peter Fonda, Robert DeNiro, Martin Scorsese, and Ron Howard.⁸⁰ "He's responsible for a slew of the greatest directors of the last couple decades, because he was the only B-movie system that there was," Whedon explains. "Now the whole world can be that system."⁸¹ *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog* set out not to overturn the film and television studios, but to question their authority and dominance; in fact, Whedon continues to work within the studio system and achieved unprecedented success writing and directing Marvel Studios' *The Avengers* in summer 2012. But Whedon's fans, established in and through his studio work, are essential to his mission of shifting the system to enable more creative innovation and to break down artificial hierarchies of artistic production. Whedon is no egomaniacal supervillain. Rather, he embodies the utopian moment of "My Freeze Ray" by constantly

⁷⁹ Felicia Day, accessed October 14, 2012, <http://feliciaday.com/>.

⁸⁰ "About," New Horizons Pictures, accessed October 14, 2012, <http://www.newhorizonpictures.com/info/About>.

⁸¹ Lisa Rosen, "New Media Guru: Meet Joss Whedon the Web Slayer," editorial, *Written By*, January 2009, accessed October 14, 2012, <http://www.wga.org/writtenby/writtenbysub.aspx?id=3438>.

crediting his co-conspirators – or, more precisely, by encouraging these “writers, fans and friends of mine” to sing along with the musical series and its meta-musical commentary.⁸²

As a result, fans pop into the frame at every textual and paratextual level of *Dr. Horrible’s Sing-Along Blog*. Beginning with the opening number of Act III, a campy chorus of groupies interject in the web series; dressed in homemade Hammer t-shirts, they stalk the superhero, promise weird sexual favors, and collect creepy memorabilia like clippings of Captain Hammer’s hair and his laundry list (“Four sweater vests!”).⁸³ The fans swoon and croon along with their hero in “Everyone’s a Hero,” although Captain Hammer insists on a hierarchy of heroism that places him at the top. *Commentary! the Musical* then amplifies these fans’ voices exponentially, to the point that superstar Neil Patrick Harris grows frustrated at his lack of air time, which has been turned over to “people who don’t matter.” The groupies share a song entitled “All About Me,” with each groupie (#1, #2, and #3) insisting that the web series is actually all about their marginal character. Each fan also receives a full length solo in *Commentary!* A lisping homosexual named Steve (Groupie #3) wonders whether he was hired for his linguistic quirks or his legitimate talents; Stacy (Groupie #2) buys herself a “\$10 Solo” (that NPH duly interrupts); and Maurissa (Groupie #1) laments that her Asian ethnicity condemns her to stereotypical sidelined roles. Within the frame of the film, Maurissa Tanchoren is a writer cross-dressing as a groupie; but Tanchoren could equally be considered a fan cross-dressing as a writer.

In both *Dr. Horrible’s Sing-Along Blog* and *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, the textual poaching of sci-fi films and musical conventions creates a palimpsest of cultural references

⁸² Whedon and Watkins, *Dr. Horrible’s Sing-Along Blog*, 83.

⁸³ Whedon and Watkins, *Dr. Horrible’s Sing-Along Blog*, 56.

culled from the creators' own diverse and obsessive fandoms. Their Frankensteinian creations embrace the fact that all artistic labor is fan labor, warping a sweeping array of influences into a tentatively "original" creation. It is perhaps no surprise, then, that Whedon's work has become a mainstay of sci-fi / fantasy conventions like Comic-Con. At these unconventional conventions, alternative worlds pleurably mix and mingle; although a hierarchy of fame is still palpable, creators and fans overlap significantly. The "real triumph" of *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog*, according to the writers, was not the "finished product," but the physicalization of their product's ever-expanding *potentialities* through the fans who dressed and performed as Dr. Horrible, Captain Hammer, the Bad Horse cowboy chorus – and their own supervillainous creations.⁸⁴

Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog epitomizes a type of creative consumerism that does not deny its imbrication in capitalism, but refuses to reduce its product to its exchange value. Warping time and genre, *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog* not only acknowledges but encourages fans' imbrication in and commentary on its ever-expanding world. In fact, the Evil League of Evil began accepting online applications for membership in fall 2008; ten new members were awarded with inclusion in the DVD's special features. Over a thousand supervillainous fans produced short YouTube and Vimeo video applications to be considered by the League and its designated agents. Winning spin-offs of the original singing supervillain included the clever Tur-Mohel and his Minyan, Mr. Terrible, and Lord Stabbington; their "fan labor" garnered recognition alongside Whedon's "legitimate" web series.

One ELE winner embraces the "Sing-Along" spirit of *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog* unlike any other. Miss Broadway Dork is a frighteningly exuberant fangirl whose weapon of choice is a performative act rather than a physical object: She sings showtunes. With a girlish

⁸⁴ Whedon and Watkins, *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog*, 76.

giggle, the high-spirited Miss Broadway Dork admits that showtunes may seem to inspire jazz hands more than fear and terror. But the strangeness and alterity of song and dance can stop time, much like Dr. Horrible's Freeze Ray: "Have you ever gone out in the middle of a crowded street and just started singing at the top of your lungs? People stop. People stare. People look at you like you are horrible and have done the worst thing in the world," she explains. Miss Broadway Dork views this stoppage of time as a potential enabler of chaos; showtunes can snap out of the time of capital, as well as out of a heteronormative genealogy, by distracting people from looking after their cash registers, their children, and their elderly. Miss Broadway Dork concludes her Evil League of Evil application with a sinister smile, "Showtunes. They're not all happy and cheery. And even when they are, they can be used ... for evil." Miss Broadway Dork realizes that the uses of any cultural text hinges not on an authorially intended meaning, but on its performative deployment and redeployment by a specific interpretive community. And as a particularly open and unfinished art form, musical theater creates a tuneful structure ripe for a time-warping, embodied subversion of the status quo.⁸⁵

⁸⁵ Bruce Kirle, *Unfinished Show Business: Broadway Musicals as Works-in-Process* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2005).

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Ragging Race: Spectral Temporality in the American Musical

Books are acts of composition: you compose them. You make music: the music is called fiction.

E.L. Doctorow, *The Paris Review*¹

And by that time the era of Ragtime had run out, with the heavy breath of the machine, as if history were no more than a tune on a player piano.

E.L. Doctorow, *Ragtime*²

At the turn of the twentieth century, the syncopated sounds of ragtime captured the bustling American city in its increasing industrialization and ethnic diversity. In musical terms, syncopation displaces a regular metrical pattern by placing accents off the strong beats; this alternate rhythmic pattern is a common feature of African-derived music including ragtime, jazz, reggae, funk, rap, and other percussive dance music. Ragtime maintains a basic 2/4 beat in the left hand with an embellished, syncopated melody in the right; the coordination and balance of the competing rhythmic components is essential. For Scott Joplin, the foremost composer and performer in this new idiom, “The blending of the improvisatory spirit with a precise beat helps give the beat a living, vital swing which flows from pulse to pulse.”³ As with the syncopated spectatorship described in Chapter 2, the ability to play within and against a regimented rhythm

¹ "E. L. Doctorow, The Art of Fiction No. 94," interview by George Plimpton, *The Paris Review*, Winter 1986, accessed November 10, 2012, <http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/2718/the-art-of-fiction-no-94-e-l-doctorow>.

² E. L. Doctorow, *Ragtime* (New York: Random House, 1975), 270.

³ Scott Joplin, "School of Ragtime," in *The Best of Ragtime Favorites & How to Play Them* (New York: Charles Hansen Educational Music and Books, 1973), 13.

constitutes ragtime's pleasures and politics of difference.⁴ The music's "weird and intoxicating effect" is achieved "by giving each note its proper time and by scrupulously observing the ties" in the accented melody. "Play slowly until you catch the swing, and never play ragtime fast at any time," Joplin advises.⁵

The burgeoning businesses of sheet music publication and the manufacture of player piano rolls transported the racialized urban sounds of ragtime from Harlem nightclubs to the parlors of white middle class Americans in the early 1900s. In this process, the music's African American roots were increasingly elided, and black composers' essential contributions to American popular culture were rendered spectral as the music was promoted as a national rather than a racial sound. Yet the player piano's heavy breath and invisibly pounded keys persistently pointed to the layers of human labor embedded in the machine. The temporally and spatially distant composer/arranger of the piano roll, the machine manufactured by an array of hands, and the human operating the machine collaborated in a present act of producing new music. Though the machine's breath would run out at the end of a song, all it took was the push of a button or a pump of the bellows to revivify the phantom fingers. What ghostly collaborations were being performed across these 88 black and white keys?

This chapter explores the translations of ragtime music across history, race, and media. I employ E.L. Doctorow's 1975 novel *Ragtime* and its 1998 musical adaptation by Lynn Ahrens, Stephen Flaherty, and Terrance McNally, as a lens through which to revisit the music popularized in the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; I consider how imaginative and embodied histories can shape our understanding of the past, whose

⁴ Syncopation also derives from the grammatical term syncope, the omission of unstressed sounds or letters within a word. While syncopated music emphatically emphasizes the off beats, the linguistic syncope points to erasures and elisions, the structurally essential yet unvocalized components of a word.

⁵ Joplin, "School of Ragtime," 2.

construction is always an ongoing endeavor of the present. Much as the musical fan cultures in Chapter 2 probe the boundaries between reality and fantasy, this chapter explores how creative reconstructions of the past play on the borders of the historical and fictional, enabling new ghosts to flicker into view. This chapter structurally syncopates *Ragtime* on the page and the stage with historical performances of ragtime music, locating the piano as a spectral site of working through social tensions of unacknowledged labor, artistry, and collaboration in the white, middle class U.S. household. Performing ragtime tunes on this instrument enabled a mediated performative encounter between black artists and white consumers in the antebellum parlor.

My work on ragtime follows from David Savran's analysis of jazz as a structure of feeling emblemizing the cultural revolution of the 1920s. As the culture of racialized and working-class citizens emerged in the burgeoning white, middle class mainstream via new technologies such as the phonograph, the ensuing culture wars pitted jazz against classical music, "legitimate" theater against vaudeville and musical comedy, Jews and African Americans against gentiles, the old middle class against the new, and advocates of the machine against its adversaries.⁶ Many of the musical, moral, racial, and class-based anxieties of jazz in the 1920s – which were later echoed in controversies about rock 'n' roll in the 1950s and hip-hop in the 1990s – can trace their roots to the tensions circulating around the production of ragtime only a few decades earlier.

By juxtaposing the historical phenomenon of ragtime with works of fiction that riff on these syncopated sounds, I conceive of art as a social relation and show the imbrication of the "historical" and the "fictional." As Hayden White explores in *The Content of the Form*, narrative is the predominant mode of discourse for both history and fiction. Whether or not the content of

⁶ David Savran, *Highbrow/Lowdown: Theater, Jazz, and the Making of the New Middle Class* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009), 10.

a narrative account is factual, the discursive form is always a creative and ideological construction, “always finally about the function of imagination in the production of a specifically human truth.”⁷ In a historical account, the narrative form is problematically perceived to be a transparent simulacrum of real events.⁸ Rather, historians actively shape the story by dictating the perspective from which events are told, not to mention which events and personages merit inclusion. In the United States’ shared historical narrative, racialized identities are often sidelined; histories of slavery and social injustice riddle the historical record with shameful truths and tragic gaps in our knowledge. Anne Anlin Cheng accordingly describes race as a melancholic formation in USAmerican culture. Racialized others have been constitutionally integrated into the United States, yet they are still marginalized in the national narrative due to their difference from the dominant, imagined white ideal.⁹ These “hyphenated” Americans (African-Americans, Asian-Americans, Mexican-Americans, et al) occupy a liminal space between citizenship and persistent difference from the norm, and their essential contributions to USAmerican culture are often derealized. The cultural impulse is often to devalue products of a racialized origin, to devalue the contribution of the specific group to the product, or to claim that racial difference is irrelevant to the work.¹⁰

This racial melancholia extends to the formation of artistic canons, as well. Toni Morrison considers African American presence to be a “formative but denied ghost” in

⁷ White, *The Content of the Form*, 57.

⁸ See, for example, Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (New York: Verso, 1991), 26, for an analysis of how the nation is conceived of as a monolithic community "moving steadily down (or up) history" as if on a neatly plotted timeline.

⁹ Anne Anlin Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 10.

¹⁰ Raymond Knapp, *The American Musical and the Formation of National Identity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 5.

American literature,¹¹ while Susan McClary notes the refused centrality of African American contributions to popular music around the globe, from ragtime to hip-hop.¹² For McClary, the problem of racial exclusion in historical content is also intertwined with a problem of form; narrative histories cannot represent African American music making traditions in all their embodied, participatory complexities. Historians have traditionally constructed narratives from a stable archive of newspapers, correspondence, and tangible objects of analysis while disregarding corporeal systems of knowledge; performance studies scholars intervene to incorporate events and processes, performances and repeated rituals into the histories. Diana Taylor's notion of the archive and the repertoire valuably differentiates a traditional set of artifacts from embodied practices, such as music making. The repertoire complicates a linear chronological view of the past as irrevocably behind us, as performance both repeats and transforms the past in the present moment. As Taylor explains, the past should be conceived of not only as a linear timeline, "but also as a multilayered sedimentation, a form of vertical density rather than a horizontal sweep – not an either/or but a both/and."¹³

Performance thus becomes a mode of engaging and transforming history in the here and now. Particularly since African American history has gone "unrecorded, dismembered, [and] washed out" in the United States, playwright Suzan-Lori Parks perceives the iterative and embodied nature of performance as a quintessential mode of rewriting and creating history

¹¹ Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race*, 12.

¹² Susan McClary, *Conventional Wisdom: The Content of Musical Form* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), xi.

¹³ Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 83.

anew.¹⁴ Parks considers it her responsibility to dig through the sedimented layers of the past in order to recover and write her ancestors' stories:

One of my tasks as playwright is to – through literature and the special strange relationship between theatre and real-life – locate the ancestral burial ground, dig for bones, find bones, hear the bones sing, write it down. The bones tell us what was, is, will be; and because their song is a play – something that through a production *actually happens* – I'm working theatre like an incubator to create 'new' historical events. I'm re-membering and staging historical events which, through their happening on stage, are ripe for inclusion in the canon of history.¹⁵

Parks's theatrical techniques depend upon a manipulation of a linear, calendrical sense of time that derives from the improvisational traditions of jazz. Repetition and revision, or "Rep&Rev," allows her work to expand beyond a linear timeline, to vitally re-embody the past, and to play like music in a dense "drama of accumulation."¹⁶ What histories can be imaginatively unearthed by repeating and revising ragtime music in the genres of literature and theater?

Ragtime Music

The African American origins of ragtime were a significant source of anxiety in the early 1900s. A few early writings attempt to claim exclusively European origins for ragtime, occluding black contributions. For others, this new music was quintessentially American – although not explicitly *African American*. Hiram Moderwell, for instance, defined ragtime as the "folk music of the American city" at the turn of the century:

¹⁴ Suzan-Lori Parks, *The America Play, and Other Works* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1995), 4.

¹⁵ Parks, *The America Play*, 4-5.

¹⁶ Parks, *The America Play*, 9.

As you walk up and down the streets of an American city you feel in its jerk and rattle a personality different from that of any European capital. This is American. It is our lives, and it helps to form our characters and conditions and our mode of action. It should have expression in art, simply because any people must express itself if it is to know itself. No European music can or possibly could express this American personality. Ragtime I believe does express it. It is to-day the one true American music.¹⁷

Irving Berlin similarly connected the “speed and snap” of ragtime to a country moving at a faster pace, particularly in this burgeoning era of industrialization; ragtime captured “the hum of an engine, the whirr of wheels, the explosion of an exhaust” from the Model T Fords rolling off the assembly line and into the city streets.¹⁸

Black cultural critic James Weldon Johnson grapples with this brazen white appropriation of ragtime. “Before the Negro succeeded fully in establishing his title as creator of his secular music, the form was taken away from him and made national *instead of racial*,” he writes.¹⁹ It is true that technologies of mass production – an expanded publishing industry, piano rolls, and phonograph records – engendered a new national homogeneity in popular music at the turn of the century.²⁰ Jewish songwriters often employed ragtime styles to perform their way into America – foreclosing the perpetually “othered” African Americans in the process. Tin Pan Alley publishers developed the style into big business, and middle class Americans gradually adopted and adapted

¹⁷ Edward A. Berlin, *Ragtime: A Musical and Cultural History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 51.

¹⁸ Craig H. Roell, *The Piano in America, 1890-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 33.

¹⁹ Berlin, *Ragtime*, 6.

²⁰ Berlin, *Ragtime*, 32.

the music into their social life.²¹ Yet despite attempts to occlude its African American roots, ragtime often remained a stubbornly racialized style.

While most studies of ragtime focus on the rowdy and male-dominated music halls, Stephanie Dunson probes the meanings this racialized music generated in the antebellum parlor, such as the parlor of the white family's "house at the crest of the Broadview Avenue hill in New Rochelle, New York" in *Ragtime*.²² The house described in Doctorow's novel is the actual home in which the author lived while writing *Ragtime*. Doctorow and his family had inhabited this "six-bedroom, four-bathroom house, a beige-shingled Victorian-Colonial hybrid with a broad glassed-in porch on half an acre" since 1964.²³ The author recalls struggling with writer's block while working on a new novel based on the life of James Pike, an outspoken Episcopalian bishop who disappeared in the Judean Desert in 1969. Staring at the blank walls of his study, he began imagining Pike's childhood in the early twentieth century. "Suddenly I made the connection: 'Hey! This house!' And all these images came to me. I was off on my book and it had nothing to do with James Pike'."²⁴ Through the blank walls, Doctorow began to chronicle the changing demographics of the surrounding city: the waves of immigration, industrialization, and artistry

²¹ See Knapp, Raymond, and Mitchell Morris. "Tin Pan Alley Songs on Stage and Screen Before World War II." In *The Oxford Handbook of the American Musical*, edited by Raymond Knapp, Mitchell Morris, and Stacy Ellen Wolf, 81-95. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011 for a discussion of how Tin Pan Alley pushed jazz into mainstream popularity. See also Charles Hamm, "The Music of Tin Pan Alley," in *Music in the New World* (New York: Norton, 1983).

²² Doctorow, *Ragtime*, 3.

²³ Lisa W. Foderado, "Doctorow's House, His 'Ragtime' Inspiration, Is for Sale," *The New York Times*, December 2, 1999, accessed November 11, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/1999/12/02/nyregion/doctorow-s-house-his-ragtime-inspiration-is-for-sale.html>.

²⁴ Bruce Weber, "The Myth Maker," *The New York Times*, October 20, 1985, accessed November 11, 2012, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/425536911?accountid=14512>.

that shifted the landscape of New York and its suburbs at the turn of the century, and the spectral negotiations of identity in this new world.²⁵

Nineteenth-century sheet music that would have been played in these parlors offers a rich, multifaceted site of cultural criticism, extending from the actual musical scores to the cover images, from systems of publication and distribution to performance practices. Beginning in the 1830s and well established by the Civil War, blackface minstrel songs thrived in the market of U.S. sheet music, posing race as a central cultural anxiety to be negotiated in musical performance. In the Victorian cult of domesticity that pressed into the early twentieth century, the parlor was a stage for middle-class families to perform their refinement and “[offer] ‘proof’ that they understood how to be polite.”²⁶ “We cannot imagine a model New England home without the family Bible on the table and the family piano in the corner,” said Vice President Calvin Coolidge in the early 1920s.²⁷ Most families flaunted a parlor instrument and at least one accomplished (female) pianist, around whom husband, wife, sons, and daughters gathered to act out the “emerging national identity of family.”²⁸ The parlor piano symbolically aggregated middle class values of a strong work ethic, as well as spiritual and moral fortitude, performed through the burgeoning genre of American popular song.²⁹

²⁵ Foderado, "Doctorow's House."

²⁶ Stephanie Dunson, "The Minstrel in the Parlor: Nineteenth-Century Sheet Music and the Domestication of Blackface Minstrelsy," *ATQ (The American Transcendental Quarterly)* 16 (December 1, 2002): 245. See also "'Girling' at the Piano" by Ruth A. Solie in *Music in Other Words: Victorian Conversations* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004) for a discussion of the sacred aura of domesticity that accrued to Victorian representations of girls at the keyboard.

²⁷ Roell, *The Piano in America*, 1.

²⁸ Dunson, "The Minstrel in the Parlor," 243.

²⁹ Roell, *The Piano in America*, xii. This trope functions particularly well in *Meet Me in St. Louis*, both in the early title song sequence and when Mary Astor uses the piano to reconcile the family by singing "You and I."

In popular minstrel numbers performed at the parlor piano, white composers like Stephen Foster (often considered the father of “American” music) constructed musical counter-images of black family relations. These songs carried racist ideology into the American home, suggesting that African Americans were incapable of normative, respectable familial bonds and pitting African American relations in striking contrast to the upstanding middle class family gathered at the instrument.³⁰ Only in nostalgic musicalizations of plantation life, when African Americans were brought into a white family circle, could these racialized others be characterized as noble and upstanding. Denigrating musical portraits of African American life assured white families of their own propriety and superiority by comparison.

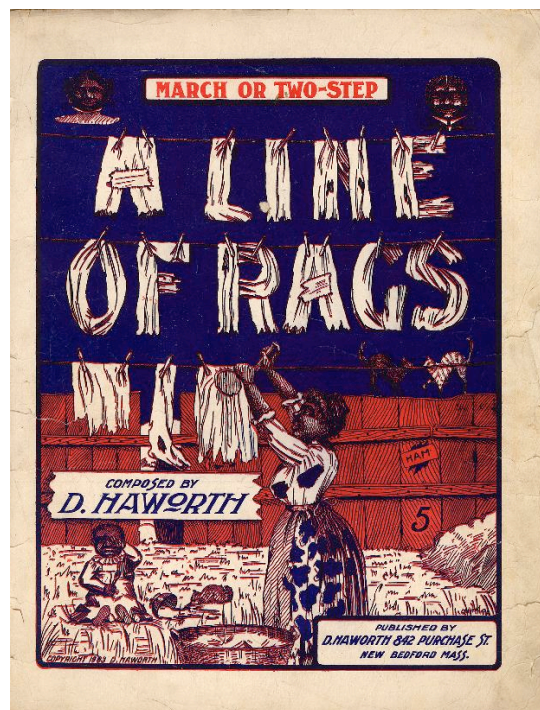
These persistent stereotypes also played an active role in barring African Americans from full citizenship – particularly in the antebellum South. In fact, the state and local laws that maintained discriminatory practices into the twentieth century were nicknamed for a minstrel character: Jim Crow. Originating among black performers in the 1820s, Jim Crow was initially an emancipatory folk trickster, an “agent for tribal Africans exploring their black mutualities within American unfreedom.”³¹ Yet in the 1830s, Jim Crow was appropriated by white blackface performer Thomas “Daddy” Rice. With racial anxieties heightened in the decades immediately preceding the Civil War, Rice’s blackface routine swept the nation, and his popular song “Jump Jim Crow” joined the domestic repertoire of racial stereotypes. After “Jump Jim Crow” was published in 1832, an array of minstrel sheet music trading on the character followed. Persisting into the antebellum era, Jim Crow became a paradoxical icon, representing at once a liberated

³⁰ Dunson, "The Minstrel in the Parlor," 249-250.

³¹ W. T. Lhamon, *Jim Crow, American: Selected Songs and Plays* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009), viii.

trickster and a clampdown on African American citizenship. The first published reference to the oppressive “Jim Crow laws” date from the 1890s, towards the beginning of ragtime’s reign.

The earliest sheet music explicitly labeled as “ragtime” also consists of “coon songs” that perpetuate racist ideology, overlapping and interacting with the minstrel tradition. Vocal rags in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries spread detrimental tropes of black “violence (especially with a razor), dishonesty, greed, gambling, shiftlessness, cowardliness, and sexual promiscuity.”³²



Cover of “A Line of Rags,” 1903³³

What’s more, the word “rag” often indicates not only the “ragged” or syncopated time of the music, but the rags worn by the music’s racialized originators and the rag-picking vocation. One of D. Haworth’s 1903 compositions, for instance, is a “pure” instrumental piano rag that

³² Berlin, *Ragtime*, 33.

³³ "Line of Rags; March or Two Step," digital image, Historic American Sheet Music - Duke Libraries, 1903, accessed November 11, 2012, http://library.duke.edu/digitalcollections/hasm_b0828/.

perpetuates stereotypes through its title and cover illustration. The cover image contrasts the servile African American woman hanging her family's ragged laundry – which forms the title “A Line of Rags” – to the pristine domestic space of the white family gathered at the piano.

While such a stereotyped cover image may intrigue a consumer, the sheet music inside – a collection of black notes arranged in striking patterns across the white page – suggests a more complex relation being performed at the parlor piano. Much as the music articulates a syncopated melody within and against a regular metrical accompaniment, a ragtime song can pit racist lyrics, titles, and cover images against a tune that stems from tenuous African American origins: spirituals, plantation work songs, and other African folk sources.³⁴ Many U.S. cultural leaders were disquieted by this “savage” music’s intrusion into popular culture; “America is falling prey to the negro,” warned Walter Winston Kenilworth in 1913.³⁵ Meanwhile, African American composers strove to establish pride in the music’s racialized roots; they aimed to define ragtime as distinct from, and even in opposition to, the offensive coon song. Scott Joplin – whose music inspires the African American pianist Coalhouse Walker in *Ragtime* – was a particularly key figure to instill pride in the new musical style.

Sheet music publisher John Stark purchased Joplin’s “Maple Leaf Rag” for fifty dollars plus royalties in 1899; selling over a million copies, this piano rag catapulted Joplin to greater fame, praise, and respect than any other ragtime composer, black or white.³⁶ Stark & Son soon began advertising their sheet music as “classic ragtime”: a designation that began to distance ragtime from its racist – but not necessarily its racial – origins. Starks’s “House of Classic Rags”

³⁴ As an example, see the analysis of “Under the Bamboo Tree,” based on “Nobody Knows the Trouble I’ve Seen,” in Raymond Knapp, *The American Musical and the Performance of Personal Identity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 394.

³⁵ Berlin, *Ragtime*, 44.

³⁶ Berlin, *Ragtime*, 74.

promised music that rivaled the European classics, fusing black folk melodies and art music into an “American” sound that was increasingly acceptable in the white middle class home. Although the folk source of such “classic rags” is largely mythological, the awareness of and emerging pride in the music’s racial origins is notable. Edward Berlin even considers ragtime to be the first widespread black influence in mainstream American culture.³⁷ He observes a trend towards milder lyrics, downplayed Negro dialect, and fewer racialized titles and cover images post-1902 with the rise of Joplin’s classic rag style.³⁸

No wonder Coalhouse Walker selects “Wall Street Rag” and “Maple Leaf Rag” by “the great Scott Joplin” to showcase his piano skills for the white family in *Ragtime*.³⁹ Coalhouse emphasizes a difference, rather than a crossing and continuity, between coon songs and ragtime: “Coon songs are made for minstrel shows, he said. White men sing them in blackface.”⁴⁰ Rather than cater to desires for a degrading coon song to be played on their parlor piano, Coalhouse promises the white family an “authentic” performance of a racialized music in which he can take pride. *Ragtime* the novel vitally restores this music to African American bodies and performs cross-cultural negotiations at the turn of the century in and through this syncopated sensation.

The Novel

When *Ragtime* was published in 1975, E.L. Doctorow’s panoramic American novel was awarded the National Book Critics Circle Award and became the bestselling novel of the year. Its experimental form intertwined historical and fictional characters in a cross-cultural tapestry of

³⁷ Berlin, *Ragtime*, 196.

³⁸ Berlin, *Ragtime*, 36, 123.

³⁹ Doctorow, *Ragtime*, 132.

⁴⁰ Doctorow, *Ragtime*, 133.

life in the early twentieth century United States. The book centers on three archetypal families: an upper class white family in New Rochelle (Father, Mother, The Little Boy, Grandfather and Mother's Younger Brother); poor Jewish immigrants in pursuit of the American Dream (Mameh, Tateh and The Little Girl); and a set of urban African Americans (ragtime pianist Coalhouse Walker Jr., his fiancée Sarah, and their son). As these families' lives become indelibly intertwined, the fictional characters intermingle with historical symbols: the escape artist Harry Houdini, ex-chorus girl Evelyn Nesbit, anarchist Emma Goldman, psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud, Henry Ford, and others. "Ragtime' works--and works so effortlessly that one hesitates to take it apart," wrote the awestruck Christopher Lehmann-Haupt in *The New York Times*. "Still, the questions persist: How does it work? Why do these historical images—half documentary-half invented—seem truer than the truth?"⁴¹

While many readers were entranced by Doctorow's imaginative history, other critics accused the author of willfully confusing historical fact through a mongrel hybridization of fiction and nonfiction. Doctorow's 1977 essay "False Documents" does not explicitly address *Ragtime*, but nonetheless provides a defense for the author's genre-bending style. Doctorow identifies two types of power in language: the power of the regime, which has a factual attachment to the real world, and the power of freedom, which imaginatively discloses "what we threaten to become."⁴² These designative and evocative functions of language are not a strict binary; literature, for instance, blends and blurs the two. Yet in a technologically developed society that privileges empirical thought, fact and fiction are more firmly differentiated, and literature is rendered ornamental rather than useful:

⁴¹ Christopher Lehmann-Haupt, "'Ragtime'" review, *The New York Times*, July 8, 1975, accessed November 10, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/1975/07/08/books/doctorow-ragtime.html>.

⁴² E. L. Doctorow, "False Documents," in *Jack London, Hemingway, and the Constitution: Selected Essays, 1977-1992* (New York: Random House, 1993), 153.

Our primary control of writers in the United States [...] operates on the assumption that aesthetics is a limited arena where, according to the rules, we may be shocked or threatened, but only in fun. The novelist need not be taken seriously because his work appeals largely to young people, women, intellectuals, and other pampered minorities, and, lacking any real currency, is not part of the relevant business of the nation.⁴³

Doctorow yearns for a (perhaps mythical) ancient time when storytelling wielded social power, when “it bound the present to the past, the visible with the invisible, and it helped to compose the community necessary for the continuing life of its members.”⁴⁴

Yet for contemporary readers willing to ascribe truth value to fiction, Doctorow’s work radiates something more penetrating and perceptive than historically established facts. Using the syncopated rhythms of ragtime as its organizing structure, *Ragtime* stages cross-cultural connections that wield the power of imaginative truth; his impressionistic history enlivens negotiations of class and ethnic identity during a period of heavy immigration and rapid industrialization at the turn of the century. In the end, Doctorow’s work even obliterates the distinction between fact and fiction: all is narrative. Whenever a reader approaches Doctorow to ask, “Did it happen? Did J.P. Morgan ever really meet Henry Ford?”, he simply replies, “He has now”⁴⁵ These imagined encounters are vitally reembodyed in the musical adaptation.

⁴³ Doctorow, "False Documents," 159.

⁴⁴ Doctorow, "False Documents," 154.

⁴⁵ Eleanor Randolph, "America, the Musical," *Los Angeles Times*, March 30, 1997, accessed November 10, 2012, http://articles.latimes.com/1997-03-30/entertainment/ca-43409_1_musical-theater.

The Musical

Producer Garth Drabinsky approached E.L. Doctorow with the idea of turning *Ragtime* into a musical in 1994. After being disappointed with the film adaptation in 1981, Doctorow hesitated at first, but he recalled the success of a few public readings he had performed with musical accompaniment – “programs with excerpts from the book punctuated by musical interludes” – and he began to contemplate how music could contribute to a theatrical adaptation.⁴⁶ Doctorow agreed to a stage adaptation only if he had approval of the creative team and input throughout the writing process. Bookwriter Terrence McNally (*Love! Valour! Compassion!* and *Master Class*) was secured first, then Drabinsky invited composers and lyricists to audition for the job; from the demo tapes of eight teams, Drabinsky and Doctorow chose lyricist Lynn Ahrens and composer Stephen Flaherty, whose previous work had included *Once on This Island* and *My Favorite Year*. Frank Galati, whose epic scale production of *The Grapes of Wrath* at Steppenwolf had impressed Doctorow in 1988, was signed as the director.

“The interesting thing that occurs, vis a vis the show, is that it's not in the nature of musicals to keep their distance from the characters – where everyone sings how they feel. They love or hate or they're upset about something, and they'll sing it,” Doctorow explains.⁴⁷ For Doctorow, the genre of musical theater would mean a fundamental stylistic shift from the novel, which maintains a critical emotional distance through the use of third person narrative and never differentiates what the characters say from what is narrated. Rather than subsuming the reader into a character’s psychology, Doctorow’s book sweeps across subjectivities in short and simple sentences. McNally’s libretto often uses direct audience address and has characters speak in the

⁴⁶ Rick Lyman, "Learning to Hear What Music Has to Say," *The New York Times*, December 11, 1997, accessed November 10, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/books/00/03/05/specials/doctorow-musical.html>.

⁴⁷ Randolph, "America, the Musical."

third person, but the theatrical adaptation cannot sweep through the spectator's imagination in the same manner. The musical's generic conventions nonetheless "[register] very clearly the American allegory that's implicit in the book," Doctorow believes.⁴⁸

To be sure, the musical – considered a quintessentially “American” art form – has been central to the construction of our national mythos; Raymond Knapp even contends that national identity is “arguably, *the* central theme in American musicals.”⁴⁹ While European nationalism privileges a “pure” strain of citizenship with a deep history tied to a specific landscape, the younger American nation promotes a melting pot model by which – at least in theory – anyone can become a citizen and attain the American dream of fame and fortune. The diverse components of this melting pot are spectacularly musicalized in the opening number of *Ragtime*. “Prologue: Ragtime” introduces each of the story's intersecting ethnic groups – upper middle-class whites, African Americans, and Eastern European immigrants – sharing the same ragtime melody, but with divergent physicality, vocal styles, and orchestration.

The original Broadway production begins with an oversized wooden stereopticon – a magic lantern or slide projector that dissolves between two projected images to create the illusion of depth – suspended in front of the proscenium. As this lens onto fantastical images of the past rises, a slow and simple piano rag floats from the orchestra pit, and The Little Boy enters the stage. He peers into a small stereopticon viewer of his own; images of a Victorian house appear on scrims upstage left and right, then cross and travel off to disclose the three-dimensional house upstage. The Little Boy narrates in direct address to the audience with a line adapted from the novel's first chapter: “In 1902 Father built a house at the crest of the Broadview Avenue hill in

⁴⁸ Randolph, “America, the Musical.”

⁴⁹ Knapp, *National Identity*, 8.

New Rochelle, New York, and it seemed for some years thereafter that all the family's days would be warm and fair.⁵⁰ "Fair" links the pleasant atmosphere of the neighborhood to the monolithic fair skin tone of its residents. In front of the mansion, the white, upper middle class residents of New Rochelle pose for a photograph. Dressed in crisp cream costumes, the poised Victorians sing the gentle chromatic melody and syncopated ragtime rhythms with vocal reserve and propriety. Their 2/4 tune verges on a patriotic march, with chimes and light big band orchestration. Ragtime is still a "distant music" for the white families of New Rochelle; the new music permeating the air is "simple and somehow sublime," yet safely detached from their physical existence.⁵¹

After all, ragtime music originates not with these New Rochelle WASPs, but with the urban African Americans who bound onstage in the next verse. This ensemble immediately signifies difference through earthen colored costumes, brash vocals, and bold physicality. Coalhouse Walker thumps out the ragtime music with panache at an upright piano in a New York nightclub. He narrates, "In Harlem, men and women of color forgot their troubles and danced and reveled to the music of Coalhouse Walker, Jr. This was a music that was theirs and no one else's."⁵² The syncopated sounds vibrate in and through the African Americans' bodies; the orchestration mounts in liveliness and color as the men punctuate the cymbal hits with high kicks and the ladies swing their hips and swirl their skirts in rhythm. Their jazzier sound and open movement exhibit greater improvisational freedom over the controlled musical structure established by the white chorus.

⁵⁰ McNally, Terrence, Stephen Flaherty, and Lynn Ahrens. *Ragtime*. Music Theatre International (MTI), 1.

⁵¹ McNally, Flaherty, and Ahrens, 1.

⁵² McNally, Flaherty, and Ahrens, 3.

The third group to enter the stage is a group of Eastern European immigrants, dirty and weary, yet filled with hope as they board a rag ship bound for the United States. In this opening number, the immigrants are as dark and different from the pristine white Victorians as the African Americans; the Jews' heavy black coats and thick accents set them apart both visually and vocally. Their underscoring is additionally tinged with a Jewish klezmer sound; the violins voice a particularly somber, straining melody (à la *Fiddler on the Roof*) as Tateh dreams of a brighter future for his Little Girl. "It would be a long journey, a terrible one. He would not lose her, as he had her mother," he tells the audience.⁵³ The Latvian immigrants sway to the ragtime even as they are burdened with babies and luggage to transport to America.

After each ethnic group's distinctive style is introduced, differences in orchestration begin to be subsumed into one another and the ensembles sing together with increasing force:

And there was music playing,
Catching a nation in its prime...
Beggar and millionaire,
Everyone, everywhere
Moving to the ragtime!⁵⁴

The last syllable of "ragtime" lands on an F major chord, the V of the Bb major key signature. While the melody remains on the same pitch, the harmonic grounding is suddenly destabilized; the foundation is ripped away from this stable note and the tonality drastically shifts to an Ab⁷ on the next downbeat – the V chord of the new Db major key. The performers' awareness of space shifts with this musical cue; while the ethnic groups have previously occupied their own

⁵³ McNally, Flaherty, and Ahrens, 3-4.

⁵⁴ McNally, Flaherty, and Ahrens, 6.

imagined separate spheres of New Rochelle, Harlem, and Latvia, Graciela Daniele choreographs a sudden change in focus by which these diverse communities (and the audience) realize that they share the same (national) stage.

A carnivalesque instrumental rag follows the key change, full of hemiolas that rhythmically spill over the barlines and spin into a series of uncomfortable encounters; the unassimilated groups find themselves in awkward moments of contact and confrontation. In this “tense, tremulous dance,” the whites, blacks, and Jewish immigrants cling to their own kind; the separate choruses weave around one another, testing boundaries of proximity but never mixing.⁵⁵ Even as they harmonize and occupy the same stage space, the groups remain stubbornly separate at the number’s conclusion: the white ensemble commands center stage, framed by the ethnic others with whom they will increasingly find themselves in contact – and conflict – over the course of the show.

Let us now set up our own stereopticon and fade across fiction and history, *Ragtime* and ragtime, to illuminate the negotiations of racial identity at the turn of the century in and through the new music sweeping the nation.

Histories of Integration

In his review for *Theater Journal*, Rick Simas calls *Ragtime* “arguably the most perfectly structured and integrated musical play ever written.”⁵⁶ The choice of “integrated” is notable, since this musical adaptation employs a formally integrated structure to consider the politics of racial integration at the turn of the century. Terrance McNally rightly traces the lineage of

⁵⁵ Rick Simas, "Ragtime," review, *Theatre Journal* 50, no. 4 (December 1998): 540, accessed November 10, 2012, http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/theatre_journal/summary/v050/50.4pr_mcnally.html.

⁵⁶ Simas, "Ragtime," 542.

Ragtime to Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein II's *Show Boat* (1927) and Rodgers and Hammerstein's *South Pacific* (1945), "stories with a lot of plot, a moral fabric to the center of them and a real involvement with the society we live in" – that is to say, questions of national and racial identity.⁵⁷ These shows were also pioneers in the formal integration of the musical; both adapt a respected literary work (Edna Ferber's novel *Show Boat* and James Michner's short stories *Tales of the South Pacific*, respectively) into a "seamless" *Gesamtkunstwerk* for the American stage.

As explored in Chapter 1, the "integrated" musical is often hailed as the height of this artistic form. With the aim to minimize sensations of difference and disjuncture between theatrical elements, however, the formally integrated musical is a contentious model for considering racial integration on a narrative level. The form seems to promote a homogenizing melting pot: a model popularized by Israel Zangwill's *The Melting Pot*, first produced in 1909. In this play, music is an organizing metaphor for harmonizing ethnic differences. Russian-Jewish immigrant David Quixano, survivor of a pogrom, aims to occlude his past by imagining a bright American future in a symphony that blends ethnicities into a harmonious whole of the new American. Yet the symphony's title – "The Crucible" – foretells the violence of this assimilation. One playbill illustration shows diversely colored people streaming past the Statue of Liberty into a fiery crucible emblazoned with an eagle and American flag; swirling, separate strands of immigrants disappear into the sizzling pot, which will melt their differences into a normalized American citizen.

⁵⁷ Larry Rohter, "Finding New Meaning in a Pageant of Dreams," *The New York Times*, November 4, 2009, accessed November 10, 2012, <http://theater.nytimes.com/2009/11/08/theater/08roht.html>.



Cover of the theater program for a 1916 production⁵⁸

For the numerous Jewish composers, writers, directors, actors, and other musical theater creators in the early twentieth century, this melting pot form of assimilation was a viable political option. By pushing the biological notion of race into a performative notion of ethnicity, first- and second-generation European immigrants such as Irving Berlin, George and Ira Gershwin, Jerome Kern, and Leonard Bernstein performed their way into popular American culture. According to Andrea Most's *Making Americans*, these artists pioneered a genre of musical theater that grappled with anxieties of difference and offered opportunities for imaginative self-invention; the Broadway stage enabled Jews to envision an ideal nation and write themselves into that imagined community.⁵⁹ "Jews" had disappeared from view onstage by the late 1930s, having

⁵⁸ University of Iowa Libraries Special Collections Department. Cover of Theater Programme for Israel Zangwill's play "The Melting Pot," 1916. Digital image. Wikimedia Commons. Accessed November 10, 2012. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:TheMeltingpot1.jpg>.

⁵⁹ Andrea Most, *Making Americans: Jews and the Broadway Musical* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 1-2.

effectively “become white” by performing themselves into the culture; since Jews’ “otherness” was not tied to skin color, adopting alternate personas in mainstream white culture was a distinct possibility.⁶⁰ Yet this mode of performative assimilation notably foreclosed African Americans, Asian Americans, many Latin Americans, and other divergent races that were visually marked as different from the imagined white ideal.

In E.L. Doctorow’s *Ragtime*, Tateh embodies this American dream of assimilation – although his path to cultural acceptance, fame, and fortune is tumultuous. Upon first arriving in America with his wife and daughter, Tateh peddles silhouettes on the streets of New York and struggles to make ends meet. He disowns his wife after learning that she is prostituting herself for additional money, and his sickly daughter nearly dies in the crowded tenements of the Lower East Side; she is nursed back to health by celebrity Evelyn Nesbit, who temporarily sustains the family by commissioning dozens of silhouettes of herself and The Little Girl. After years of backbreaking labor and increasing disillusionment with the American dream, Tateh finally begins to turn a profit by binding his silhouettes into movie books, and he later becomes a director in the burgeoning film industry. Like the escape artist Harry Houdini, and like the Jewish composers, playwrights, and performers of the Broadway stage, Tateh navigates his assimilation into America through the entertainment industry; by producing new fictions, he and other Jewish immigrants performatively negotiate their way into the culture.

Tateh’s new American persona requires reframing his identity and erasing his past as a working class immigrant. He dyes his hair and beard to conceal his world-weary looks. He renames himself the Baron Ashkenazy, inventing an exotic and royal lineage that allows his

⁶⁰ Most, *Making Americans*, 25.

Yiddish accent to pass as an elevated foreign inflection, rolled off his tongue “with a flourish.”⁶¹ Even more importantly, Tateh incorporates himself into the American capitalist system by founding a new film company: Buffalo Nickel Photoplay, Inc. “He was a new man,” Doctorow writes. “He pointed a camera. His child was dressed as beautifully as a princess. He wanted to drive from her memory every tenement stench and filthy immigrant street. He would buy her light and sun and clean wind of the ocean for the rest of her life.”⁶²

When *Ragtime* was adapted for the musical stage, issues of formal and racial integration were compounded precisely by the “Inc.” – the commercialization of the art form and the increasing vertical integration of the theatrical industry in the early 1990s. Rather than an “organic” writing process originating with the authors, *Ragtime* originated with the production company Livent – The Live Entertainment Corporation of Canada, Inc. – which primed spectacular megaproductions such as *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, *Fosse*, and a wildly successful revival of *Show Boat* for Toronto, the West End, and Broadway. Livent represented a new corporate presence on the Great White Way, pioneered by Disney Theatricals in 1994 with *Beauty and the Beast*. The musical adaptation of *Ragtime* had been in the public eye since 1995 with public readings, workshops, a cast recording, a 1996 production in Toronto, and a 1997 production at the Ahmanson Theater in Los Angeles. This systematic development of the show contributed to an early critical backlash, and its slick corporate production values seemed particularly at odds with the story’s socialist leanings.⁶³ For Ben Brantley, the carefully constructed spectacle resulted in “less a celebration of theater per se than of theatrical technology and its smooth manipulation.” He even compared *Ragtime*’s production process to that of a

⁶¹ Doctorow, *Ragtime*, 218.

⁶² Doctorow, *Ragtime*, 218.

⁶³ Simas, "Ragtime," 540.

Model T Ford, fresh off the assembly line and loaded with mechanical wonders – but lacking heart and humanity.⁶⁴

Jessica Hillman further struggles with the musical's de-radicalization of Tateh's path to success, which partakes in a "positivistic and nostalgic understanding of the immigrant era" that reinscribes the American dream while eliding the realities of racial injustice and the limitations of the social class system in America.⁶⁵ The sexually devious Mameh is eliminated from the musical, and Tateh's socialist affiliations are countered; he tells radical Emma Goldman, for instance, "Trade unions are fine but they are not for me. [...] I was in your socialist frying pan over there; I'm not jumping into the same fire over here."⁶⁶ In the musical, Tateh is an apolitical figure driven solely by a desire to provide for his family. His troubles are only temporary, easily smoothed over by the gentle waltz "Gliding." This song provides a release from his and his daughter's financial challenges; Tateh's musical imaginary of a brighter future becomes reality when the old man sells his first flipbooks of silhouettes midway through the song. "Gliding" sweeps into a full and hopeful chorus:

And we're
Gliding,
Gliding far away.
Pirouettes,
Figure eights,
Silver skates

⁶⁴ Ben Brantley, "'Ragtime' Beckons to Nostalgia of Another Century's Turn," *The New York Times*, January 19, 1998, accessed November 10, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/specials/ragtime/rag-show.html>.

⁶⁵ Jessica Hillman, "From Rags to Riches: Ragtime and the Jewish-American Dream," proceedings of Association for Theatre in Higher Education, Denver, CO (2008), 1.

⁶⁶ McNally, Flaherty, and Ahrens, 28-29.

Just down the track.
Glide with me, little one.
Glide with your Tateh.
We'll never
Look back!⁶⁷

The image of skating is derived from the novel, yet its use is significantly altered for the stage; the musical focuses on the bodies gliding *away* from their troubles, while the novel emphasizes the tracks left behind, “traces quickly erased of moments past, journeys taken.”⁶⁸

Still, the music of “Gliding” contains its own trace of Tateh’s past that cannot be so easily elided. The major key tune closes on an unexpected minor chord, and a mournful clarinet repeats the melody of “A Shtetl is Amerike,” echoing the klezmer sounds of the immigrants’ earlier musical numbers. Tateh’s heritage musically strains into his present, and his new American identity is legislated through the painful remembrance of his “original status as alien, other, illegitimate.”⁶⁹ This musical phrase is not only a ghosting from a song earlier in *Ragtime*, but also a musical citation of a popular Yiddish theater song “Lebn zol kolumbus” (“Long Live Columbus!”) with lyrics by Boris Thomashevsky, music by Arnold Perlmutter and Herman Wohl. Translated from Yiddish, it begins:

America is a *shtetl*
Where, I swear, life is great.

⁶⁷ McNally, Flaherty, and Ahrens, 57-58.

⁶⁸ Doctorow, *Ragtime*, 99.

⁶⁹ Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race*, 44.

The Divine rests on her;
We should all get to live so.⁷⁰

Introduced in the 1915 musical comedy *Der grine milyoner* (*The New Millionaire*), this song digs into the contradictions of the immigrant experience and the American Dream with tongue-in-cheek irony. Although much of the sarcastic tone is stripped away in *Ragtime*, this musical haunting nonetheless points to the conflicted process of becoming American; the road to the American dream of fame and fortune is far from a seamless glide into the future. If “everything in the theatre, the bodies, the materials utilized, the language, the space itself, is now and has always been haunted” as Marvin Carlson suggests, then musical theater is a particularly haunted genre; it can multiply the ghostly presences at play through musical pastiche.⁷¹ Specific songs and familiar musical styles can drag personal and cultural memory into the present, troubling a homogeneous conception of time and disturbing a present that strives to ignore the past.

Haunting Me, Just Like a Melody

Music is, in fact, framed as a “haunting” in the musical adaptation of *Ragtime*.⁷² Early in the narrative, Mother finds a black baby buried in her garden: Sarah and Coalhouse’s illegitimate son. Rather than turn Sarah over to the police for attempted murder, Mother takes responsibility for the single mother and her child. As Coalhouse expresses regret for abandoning Sarah and longs to reestablish their relationship, he frames this woman – and music – as a spectral return:

⁷⁰ "Lebn Zol Kolumbus," Milken Archive, accessed November 11, 2012, <http://www.milkenarchive.org/works/lyrics/568>.

⁷¹ Marvin A. Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001), 15.

⁷² See Raymond Knapp, *The American Musical and the Performance of Personal Identity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 266-273, for a discussion of *Lady in the Dark* and the trope of a haunting melody.

Now she is haunting me
Just like a melody –
The only song I seem to know.
Sarah, my life has changed.
Sarah, I miss you so.
Sarah, I did you wrong.
Sarah, where did you go?⁷³

The tender rag introduced in this moment, gently vacillating between major and minor keys, echoes across the score of *Ragtime*; the melody returns at peak narrative moments and traces the shifting relationship between Coalhouse and Sarah, as well as between the African American and white communities.

When Coalhouse learns of Sarah’s location in New Rochelle, he immediately hops into his new Model T to find her. “Such was the coming of the colored man in the car to Broadview Avenue,” instantiating the emergence of the African American into the white middle class.⁷⁴ Coalhouse begins driving to New Rochelle every Sunday to woo the stubborn Sarah with his music, and Mother’s Younger Brother is shocked to hear the racialized, urban sounds of ragtime – familiar from his nightlife in New York City – reverberating throughout his sister’s home. In the musical adaptation of *Ragtime*, Coalhouse plays his own ragtime composition rather than Scott Joplin’s acclaimed music. His reprise of Sarah’s haunting melody symbolically domesticates the African American pianist, who is now ready to build a stable family with Sarah and his child. This “New Music” simultaneously delineates a transformation in the white family:

⁷³ McNally, Flaherty, and Ahrens, 33.

⁷⁴ McNally, Flaherty, and Ahrens, 44.

YOUNGER BROTHER

His fingers stroke those keys

And every note says, ‘Please,’

And every chord says, ‘Turn my way.’

MOTHER, FATHER

I thought I knew

What love was

But these lovers play

MOTHER, FATHER, YOUNGER BROTHER

New music!

Haunting me,

And somehow taunting me –

My love was never half as true.

FATHER

And I ask myself,

Why can’t I sing it, too.⁷⁵

Coalhouse’s new music demands attention; his piano playing not only draws Sarah back to his arms, but invokes the white family’s participation in the performance, enacting a complex negotiation of ethnic identities at their parlor piano.

Although McNally, Ahrens, and Flaherty aimed for an equal balance among storylines in adapting Doctorow’s novel for the stage, Coalhouse’s courtship of Sarah has an emotional heft that undeniably foregrounds the African Americans – particularly with the star-making

⁷⁵ McNally, Flaherty, and Ahrens, 48.

performances of Brian Stokes Mitchell and Audra McDonald in the 1998 original Broadway production. In the novel, Coalhouse and his lover Sarah are the only characters to be given names rather than subject positions, which further individualizes their roles.⁷⁶ The music of the entire show also stems from African American bodies. “Small clear chords hung in the air like flowers .the melodies were like bouquets,” Mother’s Younger Brother narrates as he listens to Coalhouse play. “There seemed to be no other possibilities for life than those delineated by the music.”⁷⁷

Josh Kun might term ragtime music a turn-of-the-century “audiotopia,” holding out the promise of a vibrant, hybrid, multicultural future in the U.S. Kun identifies popular music as one of our most valuable sites for performing racial and ethnic difference “against the grain of national citizenships that work to silence and erase those differences.”⁷⁸ Working within and against ongoing racial prejudice, ragtime produced a space for racial negotiations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This music constructed an arena for white Americans to potentially “enter into, encounter, move around in, inhabit” – and, most crucially – “learn from” the racialized others in the nation.⁷⁹ For Kun, even the act of listening is a performance of negotiation: “a form of confrontation, of encounter, of the meeting of worlds and meanings, when identity is made self-aware and is, therefore, menaced through its own interrogation.”⁸⁰ In their encounter with ragtime music, white middle-class Americans performed what we might call

⁷⁶ In the musical, the Little Boy also has a name – Edgar. The entire story emerges through his youthful eyes, which are wide open to social and political transformation.

⁷⁷ McNally, Flaherty, and Ahrens, 45.

⁷⁸ Josh Kun, *Audiotopia: Music, Race, and America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 12.

⁷⁹ Kun, *Audiotopia*, 2.

⁸⁰ Kun, *Audiotopia*, 13.

an act of rhizomatic listening: listening across genres with an understanding and perhaps a newfound appreciation of racial difference.

Yet it is unlikely that an African American pianist such as Coalhouse Walker would be invited into a white middle class home in the early 1900s. A wide array of media and new technologies at the turn of the century – from sheet music to phonograph records to piano rolls – safely separated the racialized composer from the white consumer. Doctorow’s historical fiction nonetheless wields an imaginative, if not factual, truth: phantom racial negotiations were certainly being performed through the syncopated sensation of ragtime in the domestic sphere. In addition to the popularity of ragtime sheet music played on traditional pianos, the player piano offers a particularly complex, layered location to consider the process of “ragging race” in the early 1900s. African American composers were often spectral performers on these popular domestic instruments; the heavy breath of the machine points back to their labor and artistry.

The Player Piano

As an early twentieth century Aeolian Company ad touts, “Grand and light operas, Lizst’s Rhapsodies, Sousa’s marches, and the latest rag-time hits are practically ‘on your fingers’ ends” with this new technology.⁸¹ From roughly 1897 to the stock market crash in 1929, the automatic player piano instigated a new musical democracy, allowing amateurs and even the musically uneducated to enjoy a wide range of musical performances in their home. Take, for instance, E.L. Doctorow’s account of the adventurer Admiral Peary performing on the player piano in his comfortable stateroom:

⁸¹ "Original Player Piano Advertising," The Player Piano Page, accessed November 11, 2012, <http://pianola.com/ppadvert.htm>.

He was a large man with a heavy torso and thick red hair turning gray. He wore a long moustache. In a previous expedition he had lost his toes. He walked with an odd gait, a kind of shuffle, pushing his feet along the floor without lifting them. He pedaled his player piano with his toeless feet. He was supplied with rolls of the best Victor Herbert and Rudolf Friml numbers as well as a medley of Bowdoin College songs and a version of *The Minute Waltz* of Chopin which he could pump out in forty-eight seconds.⁸²

As Peary's collection demonstrates, piano rolls encompassed an array of styles, from classical music to contemporary operetta. Yet one of the most popular styles was undoubtedly ragtime, whose reign from 1896 to 1917 closely coincides with that of the player piano.⁸³ Like sheet music, these piano rolls are more than simply products, instead enlivening a series of complex and embodied performative processes.

Advertisements of early twentieth century player pianos foreground the act of mediated, liminally embodied performance and focus on the instrument's domestic use: "A Player Piano is the Heart of a Happy Home," according to the Standard Pneumatic Action Co.⁸⁴ These ads present at least three overlapping understandings of the new technology:

- 1) *Possession: emphasizing the piano operator's control over the machine/music*
- 2) *Mediated presence: emphasizing the machine's human touch and even the composer's unique touch coming through the machine/music, and*
- 3) *Collaboration between machine and operator/player in the production of music.*

⁸² Doctorow, *Ragtime*, 61.

⁸³ Berndt Ostendorf, "The Musical World of Doctorow's Ragtime," *American Quarterly* 43, no. 4 (December 1991): 579, accessed April 23, 2012, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2713082>.

⁸⁴ Roell, *The Piano in America*, 42.

To these advertising statements, I will add a fourth category engendered by frequent slippage among the machine, music, and the spectral composer/musician:

4) *Collaboration between (racialized) musician/composer and operator/player.*

Ragging race on the player piano is never reducible to a site of African American enslavement or liberatory self-presentation, but a constructive site to imagine mediated encounters and racial negotiations at the turn of the century.

1) Possession and control

Excitement about the new technology of the player piano prompted advertisements touting the owner's complete control over the machine and music. "The ability to play any and every kind of music becomes yours immediately," brags one ad.⁸⁵ Years of laborious study are rendered unnecessary by this "universally" accessible machine; a child can crawl up to the keys to play like a professional with the simple flip of a switch, as can a toeless Admiral Peary.⁸⁶ Ads often credit the operator/player with control over not only the selection of music, but also the creative expression, or "soul," of the music: "The operation of the Cecilian is perfectly simple and yet its musical performance is artistic in every sense of the word. It is under your absolute control all the time."⁸⁷ Particularly in the case of African American composers, this fetishistic control of the machine can be read as an ongoing, mediated form of slavery, erasing the problematic racialized body after extracting its productive artistic labor. The physical labor behind the music – years of piano study, composing, playing, and cutting the piano roll – is

⁸⁵ "Original Player Piano Advertising." The Player Piano Page.

⁸⁶ Roell, *The Piano in America*, 41.

⁸⁷ "Original Player Piano Advertising." The Player Piano Page.

occluded; the resultant product is stripped of its history, replicated, commercialized, and consumed in white American households across the nation.

2) Mediated presence

Alongside the excitement of a new mechanization was an undeniable anxiety about this reproductive technology's displacement of the artist; this tension is perhaps epitomized by Benjamin's "Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," mourning the artwork's loss of unique presence and aura.⁸⁸ Industrial anxieties thus prompted another trend in advertising: insistence on the musician/composer's mediated presence at the keys.

The earliest player pianos were detachable "push up" machines with mechanical "hands" that performed on a freestanding piano.⁸⁹ "The Pianola does not injure the piano in any way," one ad assures. "Its felt-covered fingers rest upon the piano keys and strike the notes in the proper relation one to another as indicated on the music-sheet."⁹⁰ Ads frequently claimed to perform "just as the fingers of the performer strike" and to touch down on the machine "as a human musician."⁹¹

⁸⁸ Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 2007).

⁸⁹ Andrew Durkin, "The Self-Playing Piano as a Site for Textual Criticism," *Text* 12 (1999): 171, accessed November 11, 2012, www.jstor.org/stable/30228031.

⁹⁰ "Original Player Piano Advertising." The Player Piano Page.

⁹¹ "Original Player Piano Advertising." The Player Piano Page.



An early push-up model⁹²

Later models were enclosed within the piano case, sometimes requiring an operator to pump the bellows, sometimes requiring simply the push of a button to begin the musical entertainment. By about 1907, player pianos had developed more extensive controls for tempo, phrasing, dynamics, and pedal effects to replicate “the full virtuosity of the artist – the nuances, the phrasing, and all the shadings.”⁹³

In addition to work by arrangers, piano rolls were “recorded” by renowned composers and pianists. Early technologies notated music via pencil markings created by the depression of the keys in performance; these markings were then cut to become functional piano rolls.⁹⁴ As the notation process grew more precise, Ampico’s spark chronograph technique transcribed key and pedal movements, as well as hammer velocity of the keys, leading the company to claim their

⁹² "Original Player Piano Advertising." The Player Piano Page.

⁹³ Roell, *The Piano in America*, 42.

⁹⁴ Durkin, "The Self-Playing Piano," 176.

instruments’ “perfect recording *plus perfect re-enactment.*”⁹⁵ The Duo-Art similarly marketed the artist’s “individuality,” “style and identity” coming through the instrument, while the slogan, “The Master’s Fingers On Your Piano” succinctly captured the Welte-Mignon’s advertising campaign that “the artist himself is playing” the family’s parlor piano.⁹⁶

Beyond the domestic sphere, the mediated presence of the musician/composer was marketed for studio and conservatory training: “What would it be worth to the Teacher or the Conservatory of Music to have such an artist as Ornstein ready to play for the pupils at a moments [sic] notice?” asks a 1925 Ampico ad. The Aeolian and American Piano companies even collaborated in a series of promotional concerts in the late 1910s, featuring the Duo-Art and Ampico player pianos as “unmanned soloists” with the Philadelphia Orchestra, New York Symphony, and San Francisco Symphony orchestras. Preceding the high-fidelity phonograph and magnetic tape recorder, the reproducing piano was the most advanced technology available to document virtuoso performances. “Those fortunate enough today to hear a restored instrument perform a recording cut by Gershwin, Rachmaninoff, Paderewski, Debussy, Scriabin, Grieg, Busoni, or others will be shocked by the ghostly realism,” assures Craig Roell.⁹⁷

In fact, early twentieth century advertisements sometimes portray the composer as a ghost, occupying a liminal space between embodiment and disembodiment, presence and absence, Benjaminian aura and mechanization. In one ad, a phantom Beethoven poises his hands above the keys: “The Apollo Reproducing Piano Brings to Your Home the Playing of” many renowned European composers.

⁹⁵ Roell, *The Piano in America*, 43.

⁹⁶ Roell, *The Piano in America*, 44.

⁹⁷ Roell, *The Piano in America*, 44.

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Address

Apollo Reproducing Piano Ad⁹⁸

Now mentally replace this “European genius” with “classic” ragtime composers Scott Joplin, Jelly Roll Morton, or Eubie Blake. Suddenly, a racialized specter has entered the middle class white American home, delighting the family with the latest ragtime tunes. In none of the advertisements that I have examined are African American musician/composers portrayed or even named, but their spectral presence is imaginable given this popular marketing technique. If Beethoven is a ghost at the player piano, however, then an African American ragtime composer like Scott Joplin is rendered doubly spectral, diminished almost to the point of derealization.

⁹⁸ Durkin, "The Self-Playing Piano," 178.

3) Collaboration of machine/music and operator/player

Echoing both Adorno and Benjamin, Roell posits mechanical reproduction in the player piano as a revolutionary – and detrimental – transition from an active musical culture to “passive music for a consumer society.”⁹⁹ Yet early player models required – and were often advertised – as an active *collaboration* between machine/music and operator/player. “The average person of today wants to take an active part in his pleasures – does not want too much done for him,” suggests one ad. “The Pianola Piano demands intelligent co-operation on the part of its performer. *It does not merely play itself* – the *performer* plays it; puts into the music the best expression that is in him, and takes keen personal satisfaction in the musical results that he achieves.”¹⁰⁰ Artis Wodehouse even reportedly “played” her Gershwin piano rolls nearly a hundred times in rehearsal for a 1911 performance at a player piano.¹⁰¹ Sitting at the piano, pumping the bellows, and manipulating the expression levers creates an undeniably active engagement with the composer’s pre-recorded performance; Roell acknowledges a certain art to the player piano performance, requiring intimate familiarity with the music and the instrument to achieve the desired sound.

In “The Self-Playing Piano as a Site for Textual Criticism,” Andrew Durkin foregrounds this act of collaboration to argue that the player piano challenges the notion of a solitary artistic genius without entirely destroying acknowledgement of or appreciation for artistry. This new technology blurs categories of composer, performer, editor/arranger, and technician. “How do we really determine where one ends and another begins? And how do we know which category

⁹⁹ Roell, *The Piano in America*, 45.

¹⁰⁰ "Original Player Piano Advertising." The Player Piano Page.

¹⁰¹ Durkin, "The Self-Playing Piano," 185.

identifies who is the ‘true’ creator of a piece?” he asks.¹⁰² The blurring between machine and human, the pre-recorded performance on the piano roll and the live performance of the human pumping the bellows, creates a boundary-crossing series of productive artistic possibilities.¹⁰³ These collapsed lines among composer/musician, the machine, and the player/operator of the piano engender an even more challenging site of negotiations in the turn-of-the-century United States when a racialized specter haunts the machine.

4) Collaboration of (racialized) musician/composer and operator/player

By ragging race on the player piano, does the white upper middle class operator/player displace the African American composer’s body and occlude the labor behind the music (and the machine)? Does the operator/player honor the black musician’s work by performing it in his parlor alongside European classics? Or does the operator/player engage in a mediated collaboration with the spectral composer, musician, and/or arranger of the ragtime roll? The phantom linkage between white, middle-class musical amateurs and African American ragtime composers at the parlor player piano is a densely layered space of cultural negotiation at the turn of the twentieth century. With every pump of the bellows or flip of an expressive switch, the operator/player collaborated in the production of ragtime, both exerting control over and newly appreciating the sounds produced, both cognizant and forgetful of the music’s racialized origins.

The American parlor player piano can thus be considered one of Kun’s “almost-places” of cultural encounter, inspired by Foucault’s concept of a heterotopia. While never fully physicalized, this imaginary of the player piano gives rise to a “sonic space of effective utopian

¹⁰² Durkin, "The Self-Playing Piano," 168.

¹⁰³ Durkin, "The Self-Playing Piano," 186.

longings where several sites normally deemed incompatible are brought together, not only in the space of a particular piece of music itself, but in the production of social space and the mapping of geographical space that makes music possible as well.”¹⁰⁴ Fraught and palimpsestic, ragtime encodes the convergences and contradictions of ongoing racial negotiations at the turn of the century, the utopian hopes as well as the inherent violence: a steady bass underpinning a syncopated melody, always threatening to veer off course.

Ragging Race

In E.L. Doctorow’s novel, Mother’s Younger Brother feels these conflicting ragtime rhythms as he balances between train cars en route to New Rochelle:

He considered throwing himself under the wheels. He listened to their rhythm, their steady clacking, like the left hand of a rag. The screeching and pounding of metal on metal where the two cars joined was the syncopating right hand. It was a suicide rag. He held the door handles on either side of him listening to the music.¹⁰⁵

Rather than simply employ music as a metaphor for harmonizing differences, the novel and musical adaptation draw continual attention to ragtime as “a rhythmic *process* as well as a genre.” To “rag” a tune is to syncopate a normally regular melody, to modify time, to insert difference.¹⁰⁶ The music’s intense participatory negotiations are rife with disturbances played out in the pianist’s body, and the music actively engages tensions of rhythmic and racial difference.

¹⁰⁴ Kun, *Audiotopia*, 23.

¹⁰⁵ Doctorow, *Ragtime*, 143-144.

¹⁰⁶ Berlin, *Ragtime*, 12.

Coalhouse Walker becomes newly attuned to the discrepancies in these rhythms when a group of white firemen, led by fire chief Willie Conklin, vandalizes the uppity black man's Model T Ford. What provokes the firemen is not so much Coalhouse's race as his brash disavowal of both race and class; as the African American pianist presses his way into the white middle class, "apparently it did not occur to him to ingratiate himself."¹⁰⁷ Yet Coalhouse's cries of injustice go unheeded in the white courts. His mounting awareness of social barriers escalates into an armed rebellion – a portent of the Black Nationalist movement in Doctorow's contemporary moment – that costs numerous lives. In Act II of the musical adaptation, Coalhouse is emboldened to violent retribution, particularly for the murder of his fiancée Sarah. "Coalhouse's Soliloquy" comprises choppy musical hauntings of the pianist's unfulfilled dreams: Sarah's impassioned song "Your Daddy's Son," Sarah and Coalhouse's hopeful anthem "Wheels of a Dream," and the exuberant opening "Prologue." Over the course of the black man's musical breakdown, this mash-up of melodies grows increasingly cynical and aggressive. "Coalhouse's Soliloquy" can, in fact, be read as Coalhouse's suicide rag; as the ideal life Coalhouse once dreamed comes crashing down, the clashing rhythms accumulate.

Coalhouse and his followers ultimately occupy J.P. Morgan's library, a symbolic bastion of (white) history that contains such treasures as a Gutenberg Bible, four Shakespeare folios, and a letter written by George Washington.¹⁰⁸ These African American anarchists threaten to destroy centuries of historical artifacts with bombs provided by Mother's Younger Brother, an explosives expert at Father's fireworks factory. If Coalhouse blows up the Morgan Library, he will die in the explosion; if he reduces his demands and surrenders, he is at the mercy of the

¹⁰⁷ Doctorow, *Ragtime*, 147.

¹⁰⁸ Doctorow, *Ragtime*, 230.

white policemen surrounding the building. At this tragic crossroads, Sarah and her haunting melody return in “Sarah Brown Eyes.” This musical dream sequence physicalizes the memory of Coalhouse and Sarah’s first meeting: a gentle romance of ragtime and dance: a narrative respite that stops time to temporarily defer her – and his – death. But the spectral Sarah’s song fades into the clang and clatter of an elevated train all too soon, snapping Coalhouse back to reality like the jerky sensation of the suicide rag. The plot then charges forward to Coalhouse’s demise; when his Model T Ford is restored, Coalhouse exits the library and is met with a volley of percussive shots that instantly kill him.

With both Sarah and Coalhouse dead, the surviving black baby is left to Mother and Tateh, who are newly united after Father passes away on an expedition. Raymond Knapp theorizes the “divorce trope” as a parallel to the “marriage trope” of conventional Golden Age musicals. While the marriage trope uses the union of a heteronormative couple as a synecdoche of broader social relations, the divorce trope uses the splintering of a relationship to facilitate a newly liberated musical world for the once disempowered female, who can now construct her own musical alternative to the “real” (male-dominated) world.¹⁰⁹ In *Ragtime*, the divorce trope and the marriage trope work in tandem; several splintered relationships enable Mother to choose her life partner, and the successful immigrant filmmaker – renamed the Baron Ashkenazy – completes his national assimilation by marrying into the white family. The musical’s ending offers a sentimental vision of racial conflict being harmoniously resolved in a rapturous reprise of Sarah and Coalhouse’s anthem, “Wheels of a Dream.” Although Sarah and Coalhouse have passed away, their son will ride into a bright utopian tomorrow.

¹⁰⁹ Raymond Knapp, "Getting off the Trolley: Musicals Contra Cinematic Reality," proceedings of American Musicological Society, San Francisco (2012).

In the final stage image of the original Broadway production, the miscegenated nuclear family strolls into the sunset as the era of ragtime draws to a close. Yet the embodied performance of this finale incorporates the ghosts of Sarah and Coalhouse, whose presence can potentially disturb the musical's forward-looking vision. What histories, voices, and bodies have been left behind in a steady march into the future? What spectral tales have been elided? Can musical memory sweep us back to the tense and haunted negotiations of race at the turn of the century, and can an anthem encode unfinished visions of social justice still in need of reprises beyond the theater? Perhaps we should locate the utopian potential of *Ragtime* not in its sentimentally harmonized narrative conclusion, but in a model of imaginative historiography as an ongoing process that can enable such specters to flicker into view, compelling us to take responsibility for our cultural ghosts as they coexist in our present.

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**“I Just Projected Myself Out of It”:
Rehearsing Identities in Youth Musical Theater**

SUE

High school is a caste system. Kids fall into certain slots. Your jocks, your popular kids, up in the penthouse. The invisibles and the kids playing live-action druids and trolls in the forest? Bottom floor.”

WILL

And where do the Glee kids lie?

SUE

Sub-basement.

"Pilot," Glee¹

For cheerleading coach Sue Sylvester, musical performers fall even lower than dorky sci-fi/fantasy fans in the high school hierarchy. Like the subjectivity of the white gay male show queen explored in Chapter 1, the pecking order of high schoolers – from the popular football players and cheerleaders to the marginalized musical theater fans – is both a persistent stereotype and a reality of the contemporary public education system in the United States. As Sue is quick to quip, liking showtunes doesn’t make you gay, “It just makes you awful.”² How did the American musical, once a pinnacle of mainstream popular culture, come to be so marginalized by the early twenty-first century? Moreover, who are these strange theater geeks and self-identified Gleeks who persist in belting from the sub-basement of the high school social strata?

The marginalization of the musical in contemporary youth culture – and the attendant marginalization of its young fans – can be traced to at least two intertwined issues: a sharp divide between showtunes and today’s popular music, and a sidelining of the arts in the US public

¹ *Glee: The Complete First Season*, "Pilot," prod. Ryan Murphy, Ian Brennan, and Brad Falchuk, perf. Matthew Morrison, Lea Michele, Jane Lynch, Cory Monteith, Chris Colfer (20th Century Fox, 2010), DVD.

² *Glee: The Complete First Season*, "Laryngitis."

education system. During the early decades of the twentieth century, musical theater and popular music were coextensive. Tin Pan Alley composers churned out songs that were performed on the Broadway stage and published as sheet music that spread across the nation. Popular singers such as Ella Fitzgerald and Frank Sinatra recorded the emerging American Songbook of hits by composers such as Irving Berlin, Cole Porter, and George and Ira Gershwin, which were easily extractable from the revues and musical comedies in which they were introduced. With the rise of the integrated musical in the 1940s, original cast albums tracked songs in the show order (or in an order that made narrative sense for the record) and sometimes included dialogue to provide narrative context; the record sleeves featured plot summaries and photos that enabled the listener to imagine the Broadway show coming to life in his or her home. Extracting these integrated songs into popular music became more difficult as lyrics were more closely tied to character and plot.³ Still, original cast albums and musical soundtracks topped the US LP charts throughout the 1950s and 60s. *South Pacific* – in original cast album and film soundtrack forms – was number 1 for over two years and stayed in the charts for over thirteen years total, while *The Sound of Music* and *My Fair Lady* remained in the charts for almost a dozen years.⁴

Yet popular music criticism of this era rarely includes Rodgers and Hammerstein, Lerner and Loewe, or Meredith Wilson; the rise of rock and roll often overshadows and even elides musical theater's ongoing popularity. From the 1960s onward, the musical is increasingly relegated to a Golden Age earlier on the timeline of music history. In other words, musical

³ Many songs, however integrated, can work beyond stage and screen with altered lyrics. Arguably, popular styles moved too quickly away from Tin Pan Alley for shows to keep up.

⁴ Dave Harker, "Still Crazy After All These Years: What Was Popular Music in the 1960s?," in *Cultural Revolution? The Challenge of the Arts in the 1960s*, ed. Bart Moore-Gilbert and John Seed (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 190. See also George Reddick, "The Evolution of the Original Cast Album," in *The Oxford Handbook of the American Musical*, ed. Raymond Knapp, Mitchell Morris, and Stacy Ellen Wolf (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

theater is confined to the past while rock and roll propels popular music into a divergent future.⁵ Nostalgic show queens exacerbate the musical's relegation to the past by hailing the death of musical theater post-1970; the very title of Ethan Mordden's *The Happiest Corpse I've Ever Seen: The Last Twenty-Five Years of the Broadway Musical* denies the possibility that the genre might still live in the present in revivals, revisals, and new musicals.⁶ Because musical theater is imagined not only as separate from contemporary popular music but as a dead relic of a previous generation, the genre has a distinctly anachronistic charge today. Musical theater is a genre out of time and out of place. So, too, are its contemporary fans.

Teenage musical theater fans are perhaps most affected by the genre's anachronistic associations. While teens are culturally and commercially expected to follow the latest pop music trends, young musical theater fans identify instead – or, in some cases, also – with a passé genre. While their friends keep up with the Billboard Hot 100 and the latest music videos, show queen teens add to their cast album collection of Broadway shows, old and new. They scour YouTube for bootleg videos of performances by their favorite actors; and, in the absence of fellow musical theater friends in their (small, middle of nowhere) hometowns, they solidify their fandom with an online community on twitter, tumblr, facebook, listservs, and message boards such as All That Chat and BroadwayWorld.com. For SmallTownIngenuie, for example, the forum on musicals.net “is really the one place where I can talk about theater and not be ashamed or scared of boring

⁵ See Elijah Wald, *How the Beatles Destroyed Rock 'n' Roll: An Alternative History of American Popular Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). Wald points out that music histories are often strictly divided by genre (popular, classical, jazz, etc.), and the canon within each musical style tends to encompass the original and unique, rather than the generic. His alternative history explores continuities across genres while paying particular attention to artists whose work was popular and commercial, rather than groundbreaking. His exploration accounts for the ongoing popularity of styles such as musical theater in the 1960s, even as the fresh sounds of rock 'n' roll dominate most music histories of the era. See also Raymond Knapp, "Performance, Authenticity, and the Reflexive Idealism of the American Musical," in *The Oxford Handbook of the American Musical*, ed. Raymond Knapp, Mitchell Morris, and Stacy Ellen Wolf (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁶ Ethan Mordden, *The Happiest Corpse I've Ever Seen: The Last Twenty-Five Years of the Broadway Musical* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

people like my family or non-theater friends.” SianZena agrees, “Here I feel like I can truly be myself, as theatre is a part of me, and people won't think I'm weird for doing so.”⁷

Mickey Rapkin, author of *Theater Geek: The Real Life Drama of a Summer at Stagedoor Manor, the Famous Performing Arts Camp*, identifies the first use of “theater geek” in a 1995 *Washington Times* tribute to director, playwright, and producer George Abbott. But the term “theater geek” had been in colloquial usage for years before: sometimes as a pejorative label, sometimes reclaimed as a self-empowering identification. Rapkin’s book begins with his own “coming out” as a theater geek: crying during the overture to *Les Miserables* in 1994 as he “imagined the raw anticipation, the all-for-one camaraderie, the happy thrill that those lucky few actors must have felt to do what they loved eight times a week.”⁸ Being a theater geek is more than just being “a different breed of kid,” as camp director Barb Martin suggests: it marks a desire for a different way of life.⁹ Rapkin defines theater geeks by a longing cultivated from a young age: a desire for theatricality, for fantasy, and for a community with whom to share those dreams.¹⁰ In the late 20th century without significant representation in mainstream media, theater geeks seemed to be few and far between.

In *The Geeks Shall Inherit the Earth*, Alexandra Robbins develops the notion of “quirk theory” to describe those “geeks, loners, punks, floaters, nerds, freaks, dorks, gamers, bandies, art kids, theater geeks, choir kids, Goths, weirdos, indies, scenes, emos, skaters, and various

⁷ “Positive Ways MdN Has Affected You,” April 18, 2007, Musicals.Net, accessed October 17, 2012, <http://musicals.net/forums/viewtopic.php?t=76158>.

⁸ Mickey Rapkin, *Theater Geek: The Real Life Drama of a Summer at Stagedoor Manor, the Famous Performing Arts Camp* (New York: Free Press, 2010), 1.

⁹ *Stagedoor*, dir. Alexandra Shiva (Blumhouse Productions, Gidalya Pictures, 2006), DVD.

¹⁰ Rapkin, *Theater Geek*, 1.

types of racial and other minorities” who are excluded from a school’s in crowd.¹¹ Although an ever-expanding set of subcultural labels is now available to describe teenage identities, the high school hierarchy still frequently collapses into a binary of popular and unpopular – and the theater geeks usually fall on the quirky, unpopular side of the divide.¹² Quirk theory suggests that the differences that cause a student to be excluded in school are precisely the qualities that others will value in adulthood and outside of school: artistry, creativity, and innovation.¹³ Yet quirk theory relies on a promise of futurity; it validates students’ refusal to conform to the status quo with the confidence that “once they leave the school setting, their lives can improve.”¹⁴ Much like the It Gets Better Project, quirk theory promises a brighter future for teenage outsiders while struggling to answer the more critical question: What can be done to improve their *present*?¹⁵

However cliché, the arts can be a safe haven for these outsider identities.¹⁶ In the visual and performing arts, participants can create divergent realities, imagine different ways of being, and establish affective communities. Yet the US public education system often fails to cultivate the free time and space for youth involvement in the arts. Particularly since the passing of the No Child Left Behind Act in 2001, high stakes testing has emphasized core academic subjects to the

¹¹ Alexandra Robbins, *The Geeks Shall Inherit the Earth: Popularity, Quirk Theory, and Why Outsiders Thrive After High School* (New York: Hyperion, 2011), 6.

¹² Robbins, *The Geeks Shall Inherit the Earth*, 42. To be sure, the high school hierarchy is specific to each school. Theater geeks, musicians, and other artists may reign at high schools with lauded and well-supported arts programs. With increasing budget cuts and emphasis on high stakes testing in core academic subjects, though, the arts – and artistic individuals – often fall to the fringe.

¹³ Robbins, *The Geeks Shall Inherit the Earth*, 8.

¹⁴ Robbins, *The Geeks Shall Inherit the Earth*, 46.

¹⁵ "It Gets Better Project | Give Hope to LGBT Youth," It Gets Better, accessed January 24, 2013, <http://www.itgetsbetter.org/>.

¹⁶ See Robin Bernstein, ed., *Cast Out: Queer Lives in Theater* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006), in which queer theater practitioners share their personal histories in all their contradictions and complexities.

detriment of arts education.¹⁷ A 2008 survey of 349 public school districts found that 58 percent of districts have increased instructional time for reading and language arts and 45 percent have increased instructional time for math since NCLB was passed, but arts instructional time has decreased by 16 percent.¹⁸ Standardized curriculum and testing create a high school assembly line, mechanically moving students from grade to grade while allowing little creative divergence from the regimented norm. Perhaps it is no surprise that many contemporary students perceive life “as ‘a conveyer belt,’ making monotonous scheduled stops at high school, college, graduate school, and a series of jobs until death.”¹⁹ Along this linear trajectory, the arts are framed as hobbies to be practiced in leisure time, but frivolous and inessential to an education, normative career, or productive life. Teenagers with talents and interests in these neglected disciplines – such as musical theater and the performing arts – are often marginalized not only by their peers, but also (and first of all) by the overarching educational system that structures much of their childhood existence.

This chapter explores the fictionalizations of marginalized youth musical theater communities in the cult movie *Camp* (2003) and the hit television show *Glee* (2009 – present). In these delightfully campy productions, the teenagers who identify with and participate in the arts are outsiders defined by alternative sexualities, ethnicities, and other geeky differences from the popular jock and cheerleader mold. As I explored in Chapter 1, musical theater’s identificatory charge for such queer spectators often derives from its hybrid layering of the arts: a shifting array of theater, music, dance, design, and other elements. Song and dance can diverge from a linear,

¹⁷ Nick Rabkin and E.C. Hedberg, *Arts Education in America: What the Declines Mean for Arts Participation*, report, February 24, 2011, 21, accessed October 17, 2012, www.nea.gov/research/2008-SPPA-ArtsLearning.pdf.

¹⁸ Jennifer McMurrer, "Instructional Time in Elementary Schools: A Closer Look at Changes for Specific Subjects," *Arts Education Policy Review* 109, no. 6 (2008).

¹⁹ Robbins, *The Geeks Shall Inherit the Earth*, 7.

language-dominant narrative to offer compelling sites of aesthetic and temporal difference that enable queer subjects to imagine different ways of being in the world. In *Camp* and *Glee*, musical numbers are glimmering sites of transformative potential that punctuate the dreary, linear high school trajectory. Quirky teens can rehearse new subjectivities and forge alternative communities in the quasi-utopic time and space of the musical. Singing and dancing can make the fleeting present not only bearable, but beautiful – no matter what they say.

Camping it up at *Camp*

“Who *are* you people? What planet did you beam down from?” disillusioned musical theater camp counselor Bert Hanley asks in the cult favorite *Camp*.²⁰ When writer/director Todd Graff’s indie film premiered on a grand total of three screens across the United States in 2003, teenage show queens were an alien – and accordingly alienated – group living in a parallel universe, or at least in a bygone era. “Michael Bennett’s dead. Bob Fosse is dead. Times Square is a theme park now,” the one hit wonder composer tells the kids at the fictional Camp Ovation. “The foundation that’s being laid here is not going to help you in the real world. It’s going to lead to waitressing jobs and bitterness and the obsessive, pointless collecting of out-of-print original cast albums.” Yet the drive to achieve fame is beside the point for most of these marginalized kids; rather than focus on the future, the kids care about how this summer theater program can improve their present by providing a respite from a relentless school year of isolation and bullying. At Camp Ovation, social outcasts – gay boys, nerdy musical theater girls, cross-dressing divas and more – annually return to a cultural community that shares their penchant for performance and their esoteric knowledge of Sondheim shows.

²⁰ *Camp*, dir. Todd Graff, perf. Don Dixon, Daniel Letterle and Joanna Chilcoat (IFC Productions, 2003).

In *Children's Nature: The Rise of the American Summer Camp*, Leslie Paris examines how summer camps, first established in the late nineteenth century, are a rite of passage that often offer kids their first experience navigating identity beyond their family and home neighborhoods. The intensified summer camp experience fosters the potential to experiment with identity in a protected environment. Camps exist in a charged time and space of children's leisure; whether kids are away for a single week or several, they are separated from their everyday lives long enough to perceive themselves differently upon return. Including the hours spent sleeping, the concentrated time at camp can add up to the equivalent of a school year; camp accordingly has its own heightened rhythm and intensity, full of encounters with different personalities, politics, cultures, and religions.²¹ The monumental scale of camp events such as performances, competitions, and dances can further raise the emotional pitch of each moment – almost like a musical number – and “[heighten] the sense that camp space and time [stand] outside the ordinary mundane world.”²²

The fictional *Camp Ovation* of *Camp* is based on the real-life Stagedoor Manor, which director Todd Graff attended as a teen. Graff's experience at this Catskills performing arts program pervades the film, intertwining the fictional and the “real.” *Camp* was shot on location at Stagedoor for twenty-three days in 2002, and the narrative structure accordingly follows the Stagedoor schedule; this theater training intensive for kids ages 10 to 18 mounts twelve productions during each three week session. As Mickey Rapkin chronicles in *Theater Geek*, Stagedoor has provided a “safe, nonjudgmental environment” for teens to explore their emerging identity since it was founded in 1975. This “oasis” is particularly a refuge for gay teens, “but you

²¹ Leslie Paris, *Children's Nature: The Rise of the American Summer Camp* (New York: New York University Press, 2008), 130.

²² Paris, *Children's Nature*, 120.

could replace the word *gay* with *awkward, self-conscious, green, blue or purple,*” he writes. “The camp provides a haven for any child with a love of the arts who, for whatever reason, feels *other than.*”²³ Todd Graff has aligned Stagedoor Manor with Oz, a sepia world turned Technicolor the minute one steps off the bus. Former camp counselor Eric Nightengale similarly calls Stagedoor an “island of lost toys” for kids who have no community in their high schools.²⁴ “Oz, Neverland, Hogwarts – pick your favorite childhood fantasy metaphor,” Rapkin decides; Stagedoor Manor is a fantastical parallel universe that many marginalized children come to call “home.”²⁵ Tumblr user watchagirlunfold blogs about waking up in her own room for the first time after returning from camp and hashtags it “#i miss home already,” referring to her Stagedoor community.²⁶ shebelongstothestars even reads her personal experiences of Stagedoor Manor through the lens of *Camp* with a post entitled “Here’s where I stand, here’s who I am.” While crying over this empowering ballad in Graff’s movie, she blogs about being homesick for her Stagedoor friends: yet another case of “#stagedoormanorproblems.”²⁷

Camp is rife with performances that similarly cross fiction and reality until the two are no longer so easily divided. Graff’s film opens on an outdoor amphitheater where a troupe of theater geeks perform “How Shall I See You Through My Tears” from *The Gospel at Colonus*, a relatively obscure show in Broadway-centric musical theater fandom; the musical achieved only a short-lived Broadway run in 1988, although it was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize following its

²³ Rapkin, *Theater Geek*, 3.

²⁴ Rapkin, *Theater Geek*, 130.

²⁵ Rapkin, *Theater Geek*, 65.

²⁶ Watchagirlunfold, “I Just Woke up at Home, in My Own Room.,” *Time Is the Longest Distance between Two Places* (web log), 2011, accessed October 17, 2012, <http://watchagirlunfold.tumblr.com/post/8470676056/i-just-woke-up-at-home-in-my-own-room>.

²⁷ Shebelongstothestars, “HERE’S WHERE I STAND, HERE’S WHO I AM.,” I Belong to the Stars, 2011, accessed October 17, 2012, <http://shebelongstothestars.tumblr.com/post/10630987576/heres-where-i-stand-heres-who-i-am>.

1983 premiere at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. Rendering Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus* as a parable in a Pentecostal gospel service, this critically acclaimed musical by director Lee Breuer (founding artistic director of Mabou Mines) and composer Bob Telson crosses classic and contemporary, pagan and Christian traditions, in a compelling morality play.²⁸ Ismene sings "How Shall I See You Through My Tears" when she finds her long-suffering father Oedipus and her sister Antigone at Colonus. With ecstatic improvisational riffing, Ismene brings a promise of restitution for her family's pains: "A world that casts you out forgives you, and those who blame you sing your praises now," she proclaims.

Whether or not the moviegoer knows the original narrative context for the song, this gospel ballad provides an empowering message of acceptance and inclusion that embraces the community of artistic misfits on screen and off. In fact, *The Gospel at Colonus*' relative obscurity within the musical theater canon makes the song readily available for recontextualization – while marking those rare spectators who are familiar with the original musical as insiders of the theater geek culture, close kin to the teens performing the musical number in the film. With the opening lines, "Father, Sister, Dearest voices," the young African American soloist in *Camp* invokes her theatrical family of fellow actors as much as she invokes her character Ismene's biological family. Her chosen family at Camp Ovation supports one another through the trials and tribulations of their marginalized high school lives. The Greek chorus – a choir of gospel singers – brings sonic emphasis to community through tight, supporting harmonies on the repeated incantation, "How shall I see you through my tears."

²⁸ PBS has documented the show as part of their *Great Performances* series. See *Great Performances: The Gospel at Colonus*, dir. Kirk Browning, perf. The Blind Boys of Alabama, Morgan Freeman and Jevetta Steele (WNET Thirteen, 1985), DVD.

Three cutaways during the song's instrumental breaks establish the main characters of the film – Vlad, Ellen, and Michael – as marginalized theater geeks in their hometowns, thereby amplifying the significance of the *communitas* they find at camp. Sporty, straight guy Vlad makes a speech of self-empowerment into his bedroom mirror: “I only am who I am 'cause I was born that way. I have a gift, and I'm trying not to be selfish about it, but to use it. Okay? If you're gonna knock me for that, that's your problem. Jealousy will get you nowhere. And I'm gonna keep rockin' on.” Being “born that way” refers not to homosexuality in this context, but to being born a theatrical personality and to being born with obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), a disorder that Vlad can only shut out when he inhabits a theatrical character in a focused stage performance.²⁹ In a second cutaway, a dorky girl named Ellen begs her brother to take her to the school dance; he taunts her and refuses, calling her a loser as he tosses pesky little objects into her shower. Camp is the one place where Ellen feels loved, supported, and understood – particularly by her show queen friends like Michael.

In the third and most affecting cutaway, gay Latino Michael is rejected from his junior prom for dressing in drag: a feathered leopard print dress and a long curly wig topped with a tiara. Not only does a male teacher rip up his admission ticket and dismiss him from the dance, but Michael is beaten by a group of bullies on his shameful walk out. As “How Shall I See You Through My Tears” climaxes, Michael lies prone on the school hallway; his battered face convulses in ecstasy as he projects himself into the alternate world of Camp Ovation. The blocking diverges from the theatrical narrative of *The Gospel at Colonus* as Michael imagines himself back at camp; the stripped and vulnerable boy – playing “himself,” not a character in the

²⁹ Lady Gaga's pop single "Born This Way," released in February 2011, quickly topped the charts and became an empowering gay anthem. When "Born This Way" was performed in a Gaga tribute on *Glee*, the musical number extended its reach to the wide array of theatrical misfits, whom Gaga calls her Little Monsters. Gaga has mythologized herself as a high school theater geek who has since turned her youthful pain into wildly popular performance art. The Madonna of her time, Gaga often aims to empower marginalized groups through theatricality.

drama – is encircled and embraced by his fellow theater geeks during the final chorus of the song. Michael’s act of projection cannot stop the bullies from beating him or erase the scars on his face, but neither is his musical imaginary sheer escapism. Rather, Michael’s musical community at Camp Ovation emboldens him to survive a tumultuous present and serves as a sonic balm to his worldly wounds.

This multi-layered performance of “How Shall I See You Through My Tears” positions *Camp* in a deep history of intertextuality and adaptation, transforming texts to the concrete needs of the present moment. Every contemporary performance of Greek tragedy is necessarily a translation and an adaptation, since the original theatrical, musical, and choreographic conventions are speculative; unbound from specific historical expectations, Greek drama lends itself to experimenting with aesthetic intersections of diverse world theater traditions and transpositions to different social, political, and personal situations.³⁰ The outsider kids in *Camp* are well accustomed to reconfiguring a song or monologue – such as the rapturously emotional “How Shall I See You Through My Tears” – and applying it to their own lives as a healing balm and empowering encouragement.³¹ A degree of campiness arises in taking high school drama (in both senses of the word) so seriously, particularly when likening these teens’ travails to Oedipus’ own. Yet issues of teen identity formation are, in fact, monumentally important and certainly feel all-consuming to a teenager at the time. For theater geeks, performance is a mode of survival.

If “by your pupils you are taught,” then even the cynical Bert Hanley learns to let the sun shine in by the finale of *Camp*. Hanley has struggled with alcoholism and depression ever since

³⁰ Helene P. Foley, "Modern Performance and Adaptation of Greek Tragedy," *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 129 (1999): 4, accessed August 22, 2012, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/284422>.

³¹ Particularly while working as an accompanist at Harlem School of the Arts in 2012-2013, I have witnessed the kids take songs from their musical theater workshops into their own lives. "Out Here on My Own" (*Fame*, 2009 remake) resonated deeply with these theatrical outsiders, and one student interpreted "If My Friends Could See Me Now" (*Sweet Charity* 1966) as the story of a girl (or boy) who was teased until she became a great success.

his fictional one hit wonder *The Children's Crusade* in 1989. He never stopped composing, yet he never produced another show out of a crippling fear of failure. Hanley now lives in drunken regret for chances never taken; teaching at a kids' performing arts camp and accompanying esoteric new musicals in Brooklyn is far cry from composing for Broadway. One night when Vlad confronts Hanley for insulting his fellow campers' ambitions, the teen stumbles upon a treasure trove of unperformed sheet music sprawled across the songwriter's bedroom floor. "It's like the Holy Grail of musical theater," Ellen exclaims. Championing Hanley's rejected works, the campers redeem the composer and his music through performance; a revue of Hanley's genre-bending songs closes the summer, reviving the art form by pulling Hanley's work to life in the present and by attempting to bridge between musical theater and popular music once more. "There's funk, gospel. There's this awesome, like, rootsy Neil Young song," Vlad explains to the utterly confused show queen Ellen. Both *Camp* and *Glee* locate the revivification of musical theater in the hands of a youth culture that can turn their iPods to shuffle, navigating across multiple styles and eras. (Whether teenagers' iPods actually contain such a diverse collection of music and whether this eclecticism levels the hierarchy of genre are, however, questionable.)³²

While Vlad idolizes Hanley's genre-bending style, composer/lyricist Stephen Sondheim's musicals are the most lauded throughout *Camp*. Michael keeps a framed picture of the composer on his bedside table, and Sondheim even makes a delightfully campy cameo at the end of the summer revue, when he is attacked by a group of squealing teenage fans as if he were a pop star. It is no wonder that the theater geeks at Camp Ovation connect to Sondheim's canon; his musicals are sympathetic to alienated outsiders such as the perpetual bachelor Bobby in

³² In a notable scene on the rooftop with Ellen, Vlad pits his "regular" R&B music against her mixtape of musical theater ballads: "Sometimes it's nice to listen to what everyone else listens to, just to be normal for once." Even as he aims to cross genres, he maintains popular music as the norm and musical theater as a strange and separate entity.

Company (1970), the vengeful barber *Sweeney Todd* (1979), and even a community of alienated individuals who become assassins of the Presidents of the United States in *Assassins* (1990).³³

The pointillist artist Georges Seurat – protagonist of *Sunday in the Park with George* (1984) – is particularly akin to Sondheim’s celebrity persona; Sondheim composes what has been criticized as unemotional, academic music on darker themes, stylistically subverting musical theater’s typically hummable hit songs and happy endings. Indeed, Sondheim’s musicals defer the happily ever after to consider what it means to survive when dreams go unfulfilled or fall apart; he gives voice to struggle, suffering, and disillusionment, with the occasional glimmer of hope in human connection and artistic fulfillment. After being critically maligned and underappreciated in his early years, Sondheim has only recently been elevated to the “fucking king of musical theater,” as the avid fan tumblr Fuck Yeah Stephen Sondheim so eloquently puts it.³⁴

Sondheim is the most frequently produced musical theater writer in the repertoire at Stagedoor Manor; kids clamor for the opportunity to play cynical middle-aged married couples, aging Follies girls, and disillusioned fairy tale characters. The Stagedoor ethos is to learn by doing, which sometimes means performing age-inappropriate material – and which makes for one of the campiest aspects of the movie *Camp*.³⁵ In an audition sequence, an array of female campers performs the showstopping “I’m Still Here” from *Follies*. These diminutive 10 to 18 year olds sing the role of a diva three or four times their age with compelling conviction. Rather

³³ See Jim Lovensheimer, "Texts and Authors," in *The Oxford Handbook of The American Musical*, ed. Raymond Knapp, Mitchell Morris, and Stacy Ellen Wolf (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011) for a discussion of the problematics of elevating a single author – most often the composer – in such a collaborative art form as musical theater. To be clear, Sondheim does not sympathize with the assassins in his 1990 musical, but he does sympathize with their sense of alienation in a country that guarantees everyone the right to be happy. See also Raymond Knapp’s discussion of *Assassins* in *The American Musical and the Formation of National Identity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 162-176.

³⁴ David Levy, "Fuck Yeah Stephen Sondheim," Fuck Yeah Stephen Sondheim, accessed November 8, 2012, fuckyeahstephensondheim.tumblr.com.

³⁵ Rapkin, *Theater Geek*, 16.

than channel their teenage trauma through angsty, “age-appropriate” rock and roll, these girls pronounce their endurance in a determined musical theater number; they proclaim, “I got through all of last year, and I’m here,” with a whole year of high school marginalization supporting their right to belt out Carlotta’s big number. In a production of *Company* later that summer, a little girl named Fritzi – who has long attempted to ingratiate herself to the camp’s elite by serving camp favorite Jill – finally steps up to the spotlight. The unexpectedly conniving little diva poisons Jill’s drink and shows up backstage at the opportune moment, ready to take her place for the showstopping “Ladies Who Lunch.” After tugging Jill out of the spotlight, Fritzi – played by musical theater favorite Anna Kendrick – commands the stage as the cynical Joanne, a role made iconic by Elaine Stritch. As she belts, “Rise! Rise! Rise!” at the number’s chilling conclusion, the audience actually begins to rise to its feet, in awe of this “scary little girl” who has finally wrangled her way into a lead role. Attention must be paid.³⁶

The social hierarchy at Camp Ovation may serendipitously differ from the kids’ everyday high school lives, but a hierarchy stands nonetheless. Long-term campers and established divas like Jill can dominate younger kids like Fritzi – until they mutiny. The “honest-to-God straight boy” Vlad still occupies a privileged position at the camp, even though he is a decided minority; Vlad is not only a favorite with the female – and a few of the male – campers, but also a prized talent since he can “play straight” without issue. At performing arts summer camps, a talent model reigns: a “meritocracy” that Mickey Rapkin asserts “makes sense” to the kids.³⁷ Raymond Zilberberg, a director at Stagedoor since 2006, assures me that “even the oddest and ‘least’ talented kids find connections there. The only time someone is really ostracized is when they

³⁶ Raymond Zilberberg directed *Company* in his first summer at Stagedoor Manor (2006) and vividly remembers his Joanne actually breaking her wine glass during a toast, just like Anna Kendrick’s character in *Camp*. This moment is also an obvious homage to *All About Eve*.

³⁷ Rapkin, *Theater Geek*, 87.

don't work hard.” In addition, Stagedoor has an unwritten policy that children who have attended several summers must graduate from chorus to a cameo or supporting role at some point; dedication is paramount.³⁸ Yet the drive to win a lead role can occasionally override the *communitas* fostered in this collaborative art form.

At Stagedoor, kids may worry about their place in this talent hierarchy. The Stagedoor Manor message boards are full of messages from teens who are concerned about being unmoored from their familiar social lives, including a Newbie nicknamed “Red”:

Honestly though, the more I see the more it seems as if everyone at Stage Door is like a soon to be professional actor or actress and I'm really not and I'm so worried that I'm going to spend three weeks as this outcast because I'm so inexperienced and that people are going to get frustrated that I'm not better or more professional or something. Am I nuts?³⁹

Despite reassurances that Stagedoor Manor is a supportive and welcoming community, the stress lingers – especially when one factors in the growing reputation of the camp as an elite training ground for young talent. Stagedoor counts among its alumni *Camp*'s own director Todd Graff, as well as Natalie Portman, Robert Downey, Jr., and *Glee*'s Lea Michele. When summer camp is perceived as a stepping stone to fame, the focus shifts from its value in the present to its potential value in the future, and a collaborative community can be traded for cutthroat competition.

According to the American Camp Association, the number of performing arts camps has rapidly escalated over the past decade; camps with a focus on arts education grew from 527 in

³⁸ Zilberberg, Raymond. "Camp Section." E-mail message to author. November 3, 2012.

³⁹ Red, "A Little Scared...", Message board, March 22, 2010, Stagedoor Manor Message Board, accessed October 17, 2012, <http://stagedoormanor.invisionzone.com>.

December 2001 to 811 in June 2009, marking an increase of over 40 percent.⁴⁰ While these camps fulfill a desperate need for arts education no longer provided in the public schools and offer a haven for artistic identities, they also capitalize on a budding fantasy of fame and fortune cultivated by reality shows such as *American Idol* (2002 – present) and *So You Think You Can Dance* (2005 – present). Stagedoor Manor is one of the three golden standards in performing arts programming, along with French Woods and Michigan’s Interlochen Center for the Arts; of these three, Stagedoor is the only camp to focus exclusively on theater. What’s more, Stagedoor is located within easy distance of New York City, which makes it a prime location for agents and managers to scout talent. In recent years, the camp has even collaborated with MTI and Disney to workshop and cast new youth musicals.⁴¹

Although the increasing corporatization of this camp gives cause for concern, Stagedoor’s production director insists that community and collaboration are still the camp’s first priorities: “If your child finds something in this experience – finds an outlet they need, or finds self-confidence – how could you say it’s wasted money?” says Konnie Kittrell.⁴² Yet the cost is precisely the most glaring limitation to Stagedoor Manor and other specialty camps. However utopian the vision of diverse ethnicities, sexualities, genders, and talent levels in the theatrical community cultivated at camp, social class is rarely factored into the equation. While the average overnight summer camp costs \$400 to \$700 a week (or \$1200 to \$2100 for a three week session), Stagedoor Manor’s cost will be \$5,545 per session in summer 2013.⁴³ Scholarships are sometimes available, but financial support from Stagedoor is most often reserved for return

⁴⁰ Rapkin, *Theater Geek*, 9.

⁴¹ Rapkin, *Theater Geek*, 11.

⁴² Rapkin, *Theater Geek*, 16.

⁴³ Rapkin, *Theater Geek*, 10.

campers whose families have fallen on hard times; other kids seek support through Big Brother, Broadway Kids, community theaters and local organizations. Meanwhile, the Stagedoor Manor message boards are dotted with unanswered messages from kids seeking financial aid, knowing that their parents could never afford the tuition.

If actual cultural community can come at an unaffordable cost, *Camp* acts as a mass-mediated balm in the meanwhile. Todd Graff's film has become a calling card for young theater geeks worldwide; although limited in its original theatrical release, the VHS and DVD formats opened *Camp* to a cult audience of young fans at a time when the musical was at a decided low point in mainstream popularity. Theater geeks who were unable to attend a performing arts camp such as Stagedoor Manor themselves imagined themselves into Camp Ovation and delighted in the campy on screen adventures of their fellow teen misfits; they belted along with the onscreen divas and danced "Turkey Lurkey Time" while seeking out what artistic opportunities they could in their own local schools and communities.

Finding *Glee*

"By its very definition, glee is about opening yourself up to joy," reads a plaque honoring the director of William McKinley High School's show choir, Lillian Adler. Alas, the stuffy, puffy-faced Mrs. Adler died in 1997, and the glory days of the glee club passed on with her; the last time this fictional high school's show choir won the national championship was 1993. The club has since sunk to the lowest rungs of the social ladder in the cultural wasteland of Lima, Ohio. In the pilot episode of *Glee*, which premiered on FOX in May 2009, the enthusiastic Spanish teacher Will Schuester takes over the student organization. Renaming the group New Directions, Mr. Schue plans to rebuild glee club to its former glory, on a par with Sue Sylvester's

award winning cheerleading squad. In the process, he hopes to create a time and space for the school's unpopular, invisible kids to find their voices. After all, Mr. Schue recalls how musical performance gave him a feeling of wholeness and belonging in his tumultuous teenage years. Performing with Mrs Adler's glee club in the national championships is one of his fondest memories: "Being a part of that, in that moment, I knew who I was in the world."⁴⁴

Creators Ryan Murphy, Ian Brennan, and Brad Falchuk drew on their own quirky show choir memories in conceptualizing the television series. "It still strikes me as weird that people dress up in sequins and perform song-and-dance numbers," says Brennan, who sang in his high school show choir in Mount Prospect, Illinois. "But, at the same time, I find it interesting that there is something in everybody, a longing for something transcendent, particularly in a place like Mt. Prospect, a place that's very suburban and normal and plain. Even in places like that, there's this desire to shine."⁴⁵ Producer Ryan Murphy, best known for his dark comedy television series *Nip/Tuck* and *Popular*, similarly remembers the transcendent sensation of singing in his college glee club: "You sort of feel that the world is suddenly available to you, and you have so much optimism about what you can become. [...] It doesn't even have to be about being a performer. It's about a belief in yourself."⁴⁶ For the ephemeral moment of performance, music can seem to expand the potentialities of the present, enabling teenagers to explore and express "selves" that diverge from the norm. This exploration of different identities is particularly valuable for the outsider kids that constitute the glee club New Directions.

⁴⁴ *Glee: The Complete First Season*, "Pilot."

⁴⁵ Colleen Mastony, "'Glee Club' TV Series Creator Uses Mt. Prospect High School for Inspiration," *Chicago Tribune*, September 8, 2009, accessed October 18, 2012, http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2009-09-08/entertainment/0909070170_1_show-choir-glee-ryan-murphy.

⁴⁶ Edward Wyatt, "Not That High School Musical," *The New York Times*, May 15, 2009, accessed October 18, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/17/arts/television/17wyat.html?pagewanted=all>.

Glee functions on a dual narrative structure. The overarching plot of each season follows this competitive show choir's road to nationals, while each individual episode shows the trials of adolescent identity formation, negotiated in song and dance. Not every episode directly progresses the plot; some explore hot-button high school issues like sexuality, bullying, drugs, and alcohol. *Glee* typically draws on an established catalogue of showtunes and popular music rather than original songs, with the notable exception of one episode in season two, "Original Song." In this way, *Glee* aligns itself with the jukebox musicals, movies turned to musicals, and other recycled pop culture increasingly common on the corporatized Great White Way. As in a backstage musical, the musical numbers are most often diegetic, performed as part of a rehearsal or staged performance. Yet this TV musical is strongest when its tunes serve a double function: preparing the glee club for competition and reflecting thematically on the characters, an ensemble of McKinley High's minorities and misfits. *Glee*'s aesthetic structure walks a fine line between musical numbers' integration and extractability – and at its heights, the show manages to locate a deep interiority beneath the flashy surfaces of popular culture.

In the pilot episode, McKinley High School's finest losers audition for New Directions, and their audition song choices immediately indicate the teens' marginalization and desire for social recognition. African American diva Mercedes Jones wails a demand for "Respect" à la Aretha Franklin, and flamboyant, falsetto-voiced show queen Kurt Hummel identifies with Roxie Hart's invisible husband Amos in a 16 bar cut of "Mr. Cellophane" from Kander and Ebb's *Chicago*. The centerpiece of the auditions is "Jewish American Princess" Rachel Berry, who takes the stage with the confidence and professionalism of a seasoned actress. "Hi, my name is Rachel Berry, and I'll be singing 'On My Own' from the seminal Broadway classic *Les Miz*," she announces to Mr. Schuester. As a diegetic audition song, "On My Own" showcases Rachel's

strong mezzo belt and clinches her role as the female lead of glee club. Yet “On My Own” simultaneously serves as a mode of personal expression for this lonely teen.

The original context of “On My Own” is pivotal to Rachel’s song selection. In Alain Boublil and Claude-Michel Schönberg’s 1987 megamusical *Les Misérables*, “On My Own” is performed by the lovelorn Eponine, who wanders the moonlit streets of Paris and dreams of a man who she knows would never return her affections. On the surface of “On My Own,” Eponine longs for romance – yet Chris Castiglia argues that Eponine’s desire for the student revolutionary Marius can be read as a broader wish for a shift in the social order. In the genre of musical theater, a man – or, more often, a woman – “dreams herself into being” via a musical crush. The crush operates on a hierarchy that makes an actual romance with the more powerful character unlikely, but rather than internalize this impossibility as shame, the character assumes the more powerful person’s characteristics in a showstopping song. In “On My Own,” Eponine creates an evocative dreamscape of possibilities, “an affective world where power operates at the bidding of the person disempowered in the ‘real’ world.”⁴⁷ Eponine knows that her visions of walking with Marius ’til morning are only in her mind, yet her pleasurable, self-generating representations temporarily reconfigure the power dynamics on stage; in one of *Les Miz*’s most memorable musical numbers, Eponine’s soaring vocals hold the plot – and the audience – captive to her romantic fantasies. For Castiglia, the self-generating visions of “On My Own” are closely aligned with the self-generating political revolution of the collective anthem “One Day More,” the rousing Act I finale that propels the 1832 Paris Uprising. Musical performance

⁴⁷ Chris Castiglia, “The Genealogy of a Democratic Crush,” in *Materializing Democracy: Toward a Revitalized Cultural Politics*, by Russ Castronovo and Dana D. Nelson (Durham [N.C.: Duke University Press, 2002), 198.

contains transformative potential that is realized in the moment of the song – and may seep into the surrounding “reality” to effect concrete social change.⁴⁸

Projecting into the theater as if it were a packed Broadway house, Rachel begins the familiar strain: “On my own, pretending he’s beside me.” The floating piano accompaniment continues as the camera cuts to the audition sign up sheet in the hall. “On My Own” initiates a flashback sequence that explains Rachel’s character and amplifies the significance of her song choice; the scene juxtaposes Rachel’s visions of fame with the reality of her miserably unpopular high school life. Earlier that day as Rachel signs up for the show choir audition, she posts a gold star next to her name; in voiceover, she explains that this star is a “metaphor” for her dreams of stardom. The shimmering symbol bursts into flames to reveal Rachel’s beaming face – which is soon doused in a cherry slushie. “On My Own” stops abruptly when football player Puck pummels Rachel with the icee, shattering her aspirational song. After a beat, this reminder of Rachel’s low social standing propels the obnoxious girl to action. In a flashback set to a buzzing a cappella rendition of “Flight of the Bumblebee,” Rachel connives to get glee club coach Sandy Ryerson fired so that she can assume her rightful place as queen of the club. To a peppy “Golliwog’s Cakewalk,” Rachel next chronicles her family history; her two gay dads put their little showoff in voice and dance lessons to give her a competitive edge from an early age. The strains of “On My Own” pick up again as present-day Rachel sets up a video camera in her bedroom and records herself singing a cappella. Rachel explains in a voiceover that her MySpace schedule – posting a video a day to develop her talents – keeps her far too busy to date any of the boys at school. Yet her heartfelt performance of the lyrics, “Without him, the world around me changes,” reveals that her unwanted isolation is another motive for Rachel to project herself onto

⁴⁸ In *Dr. Horrible’s Sing-Along Blog*, further explored in Chapter 2, Billy’s crush on Penny similarly inspires his revolutionary supervillainy.

the Internet. Rachel's rampant pursuit of fame is a way of coping with and combating her loneliness.

With select lyrics emphasized, "On My Own" crosses and confuses Rachel's character (Eponine) and her "self." Piano accompaniment sneaks back into the sound mix as Rachel uploads her video and reads cruel comments from the high school cheerios: "If I were your parents, I would sell you back," "I'm going to scratch out my eyes," "Please get sterilized." At the song's emotional peak – "A world that's full of happiness that I have never known!" – the camera cuts from a close-up of Rachel staring at her computer screen back to Rachel at her glee club audition. As she belts and extends the word "known," Rachel transfers her gaze; from directly addressing the audience, she shuts her eyes tightly, then looks to the sky with tears in her eyes. In this shift, Rachel takes Eponine's song into her own person. She relives the painful slushie from earlier that day in a flashback with an extended reaction shot, her awestruck face dripping with red ice. When the camera finally cuts back to her audition, Rachel calmly returns her gaze to the audience, reassumes character, and sees the song through to the end. Rachel navigates the trials of her high school existence through the contours of "On My Own," and she emerges triumphant in her performance – if not in her social life.

By selecting "On My Own" as her audition piece, Rachel Berry could be performing her crush on popular football player Finn, who is undeniably out of reach for a glee club loser. More aptly, though, Rachel's musical crush is Eponine. The megamusical ballad empowers Rachel to adopt Eponine's performative strength and to envision an alternate reality, to "dream herself into being" as a star and to temporarily shift the social structures at William McKinley High.⁴⁹ For the moment of "On My Own," Rachel doubles herself into someone new by dreaming herself

⁴⁹ Castiglia, "The Genealogy of a Democratic Crush," 198.

into showstopping fame, or at least into a community of belonging with fellow musical performers. If only her musical imaginary of a more equitable social world could alter her peers' perspectives: "Being a part of something special makes you special, right?"⁵⁰

Rachel's rendition of "On My Own" highlights a central paradox of musical performance: Rachel expresses her "self" by assuming a theatrical character, and her self-knowledge is inextricable from her desire for acknowledgement by others. The musical body can thus exhibit a thrilling hybridity, not only crossing and confusing performer and character, but rupturing a continuous sense of self in the transitions across performance modes of speech, song, and dance.⁵¹ Drawing on Brechtian theory, Scott McMillin suggests that a musical number does not advance or deepen characterization so much as it doubles identity: "The numbers *interrupt* our normal sense of character and plot with song and dance, and what we are left with is not the 'one' but the 'multiple'."⁵² Andrea Most similarly champions the quasi-religious transition from dialogue into song as offering the performer a chance "to create somebody new, somebody *different* from the character in the dialogue scenes."⁵³ In an integrated musical, this transformation is often framed as delving deeper into character by performing a "true" or "hidden" self, yet the notion of a single, bounded identity can be destabilized by the shift in performance modes. The act of "coming out" in song does not reveal character interiority so much as it reveals that the character has been – and always will be – a performer.

⁵⁰ *Glee: The Complete First Season*, "Pilot."

⁵¹ As I explored in Chapter 1, a showstopping musical number can bring the performer to the forefront in excess of the character and narrative. In the case of this performance of "On My Own," the *Les Miz* character Eponine is crossed with the *Glee* character Rachel Berry, which are also crossed with Broadway actress Lea Michele.

⁵² Scott McMillin, *The Musical as Drama: A Study of the Principles and Conventions Behind Musical Shows from Kern to Sondheim* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 21.

⁵³ Andrea Most, *Making Americans: Jews and the Broadway Musical* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 10.

The potentialities of this hybridity and multiplicity in performance can threaten a high school social structure in which teens are expected to fit stable stereotypes. As Sue Sylvester sees it, “Children like to know where they stand”; blurring the lines between the popular cheerleaders and football players, the geeky sci-fi invisibles, and the sub-basement Gleeks would only complicate the “natural” hierarchy that assigns each student to a single, fixed position. Football coach Ken Tanaka agrees that “the herd” will take care of reining in anyone who “tries to rise above, be different.”⁵⁴ Yet as the first season of *Glee* progresses, football players and cheerleaders gradually join the ranks of show choir singers – and vice versa. Mr. Schuester might have to blackmail straight, white, popular football player Finn Hudson into joining glee, but soon, Finn can’t fight the feeling that he might actually belong to this band of misfits. Performing with the glee club taps into the instability and performativity of his own social position; although he may come across as cool and collected at the top of the social ladder, and although he undeniably comes from a more privileged position than many of the Gleeks, Finn struggles with basically “the same thing others kids do: peer pressure, bacne.” As Finn comes to realize, everyone in high school is a loser: insecure in his identity, uncertain of where he belongs, awkwardly performing a role. At least the Gleeks embrace the performance.

At its best, *Glee* emphasizes the performed nature of all identities, riffing off the familiar high school stereotypes in order to complicate and destabilize them. (At its worst, *Glee* perpetuates these problematic stereotypes – although whenever the writers falter, the episodic structure can function as a corrective.) The extracurricular glee club becomes a ludic time and

⁵⁴ In “Stick to the Status Quo” from Disney’s *High School Musical*, teenagers are inspired to share alternate identities after basketball star Troy Bolton gets a callback for the high school musical. A sports jock confesses his passion for baking, a brainy girl reveals her secret hip hop skills, and a skater boy whips out his cello – all to the notable disdain of their cliques. The chorus attempts to rein these hybrid identities back into stable stereotypes: “Stick to the stuff you know /If you wanna be cool /Follow one simple rule/ Don’t mess with the flow, no no/ Stick to the status quo.” Yet in the course of this musical number, all the characters bridge into a different performance mode of song and dance that inherently doubles their identities and enlivens the space with an exhilarating diversity.

space for these kids to rehearse identities that defy the narrow norms of high school popularity. For black diva Mercedes, show queen Kurt, aspiring Broadway star Rachel, football player Finn, goth Asian Tina Cohen, and wheelchair-bound Artie Abrams, the stage offers a realm of potential in which difference and “loserdom” is not only accepted, but celebrated in song and dance. In fact, the loser hand gesture – an L formed by extending the thumb and index fingers of the right hand – has become an iconic image for *Glee*, often taking the place of the L in the logo. The glee kids at McKinley High, as well as their avid fans, reappropriate this gesture by proudly applying it to their own foreheads to signify their unabashed difference from the norm.

For a television show that prides itself on difference and bills itself as a “musical comedy,” *Glee* arguably employs an overabundance of mainstream popular music. Of the 132 total songs in season 1, 17 are from stage musicals and 3 from movie musicals, making up only 15% of the music; of the 138 songs in season 2, 23 are from musical theater and 7 from movie musicals, making up 22% of the music.⁵⁵ According to Jessica Sternfeld, *Glee* circumnavigates the anxieties of self-expression in song by “forcing the music to be diegetic, or substituting pop songs for show tunes, or using both of these strategies” – in other words, by avoiding artifice and self-conscious theatricality. Musical aficionados Rachel and Kurt are the most apt to perform theatrical numbers (generally in a diegetic format, such as an audition or when performing a musical is part of the plot), while other characters more often perform popular music of the past and present. For Sternfeld, “vapid pop songs” allow characters like macho football player Finn to

⁵⁵ Barrie Gelles, "Glee and the 'Ghosting' of the Musical Theatre Canon," *Popular Entertainment Studies* 2, no. 2 (2011): 92, accessed October 18, 2012, <https://novaojs.newcastle.edu.au/ojs/index.php/pes/article/view/66>.

perform with an “earnest, untrained enthusiasm” that reveals little about his character, but that clearly defines him in opposition to the theatrical personas in the glee club.⁵⁶

Perhaps more precisely, *Glee* demonstrates how popular music is always and already theatrical. A pop song may not have a preexisting narrative context, although a slew of rock musicians from The Who to Bono have written for the stage and an even longer list, including the Beatles’ *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967) and David Bowie’s *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars* (1972), have conceptualized albums by projecting fictional characters into a narrative. Even without this kind of theatrical projection, a dense history accrues to a song: the history of the artist, the song’s shifting reception across time and space, and the song’s resonance in the (re)performer’s personal history. When the glee club performs popular music as a rehearsal, performance, and/or soundtrack to their personal lives, they theatrically don these pop music histories much as Rachel Berry dons the role of Eponine in her performance of “On My Own.”

Take, for instance, the triumphant finale to the pilot episode, in which the quirky members of the new glee club first unite in song: Journey’s “Don’t Stop Believin’.” When the single was released in 1981, “Don’t Stop Believin’” hit #9 on the Billboard Hot 100. The studio album on which the song appeared, *Escape*, was Journey’s most successful, soaring to #1 on the Billboard 200. Yet the song’s reputation – more aptly, the reputation of the band and the entire decade of the 1980s – had devolved into affectionate parody by the 2000s. The power ballad had become a cheesy standard of tribute bands and drunken karaoke performances. “Don’t Stop

⁵⁶ “‘Everything’s Coming Up Kurt’: The Broadway Song in the Pop World of Glee,” proceedings of SAM/IASPM National Conference, Cincinnati (2011), 4. I wish to thank Jessica Sternfeld for allowing me to cite her paper prior to publication. In *Camp*, as well, straight guy Vlad is more likely to perform songs that verge on folk, rock, R&B, and other popular genres.

Believin” even serves as the finale of *Rock of Ages*, an unapologetically silly jukebox musical (and 2012 feature film) of 80s hair bands.

In the pilot episode of *Glee*, a flashback to Finn’s childhood emphasizes the ridiculous, outdated taint to the power ballad – yet the campy quality of this flashback stems precisely from its earnest performance. Finn’s single mother Carole had a fling with an Emerald Dreams lawn specialist in the 90s; the teen remembers crooning Journey’s first top 20 hit, “Lovin’ Touchin’ Squeezin’,” while spray painting the lawn with the greasy, mullet-haired Darren. “That was the first time I really heard music,” Finn explains in voiceover. “It set my soul on fire.” Father figure Darren encourages the boy’s youthful passion and talent; he ruffles Finn’s hair and urges him, “Seriously, if I had that voice, my band would still be together. Stick with it!” In a way, a power ballad is not unlike Emerald Dreams: self-consciously kitschy, but capable of brightening a mundane day when the theatrical veneer is wholeheartedly embraced.

Alas, Darren leaves Finn’s mom for a hot young blonde he meets at Pic-n-Save. “Lovin’ Touchin’ Squeezin’” swells as Darren drives out of their lives; Ms. Hudson, decked out in a light wash pair of mom jeans and a denim vest, chucks a carton of milk at the disappearing Emerald Dreams truck and breaks down in the middle of their desolate suburban street. Much as Rachel Berry navigates the trials of her high school career through the empowering strains of “On My Own,” Finn navigates life through the contours of the soaring 80s power ballads he once shared with Darren; in fact, Finn selects “Don’t Stop Believin’” as the glee club’s first group number after spotting Darren singing and spray painting the football field at McKinley High. Although the relationship between popular song and the Broadway musical has shifted significantly since the mid twentieth century, the two have never wholly split, and the synth-tastic power ballads of 1980s rock are close kin to the quasi-universal anthems of epic megamusicals like *Les*

Miserables.⁵⁷ With memorable major key melodies and expansive emotions, both genres of the power ballad aim to *empower* their performers, if only for the space of a fiercely belted song – and in the 2000s, both genres needed rescue from the cultural detritus of the 80s. Perhaps all they needed was a little *Glee*. Even when employed ironically or parodistically, these inspirational Broadway tunes continue to “work” for a willing audience or performer.

Raymond Knapp’s concept of MERM (Musically Enhanced Reality Mode) is particularly useful in considering how *Glee*’s musical numbers function. MERM refers to a two-pronged approach common in film musicals: setting up a number as naturally as possible (as part of a rehearsal or performance, for instance), then moving into a Musically Enhanced Reality Mode that allows audio and visual violations of what would be possible in reality.⁵⁸ In *Glee*, MERM’s aesthetic expansions often include auto-tuned vocals, sweetened backing tracks, and music video-like dreamscapes that plunge the viewer into a fantastical world beyond the rehearsal room or performance stage. MERM also paves the way for the sensation of direct personal expression in song; it shines a “sonic spotlight” on the singer(s), giving the moment “a heightened sense of reality” and an “extra charge.”⁵⁹ For the marginalized teenagers in *Glee*, MERM also activates a sensation of expanded social possibilities. In the glow of a musical number such as “Don’t Stop Believin’,” the Gleeks sense the potential to transform their social landscape by bonding as an ensemble and perhaps even shifting audience members’ perceptions of their social standing.

“Don’t Stop Believin’” chronicles the glorious intensity of a midnight encounter between a lonely man and woman, although the song’s narrative takes on a decidedly more innocent

⁵⁷ See Jessica Sternfeld, *The Megamusical* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006).

⁵⁸ Raymond Knapp, *The American Musical and the Performance of Personal Identity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 67.

⁵⁹ Knapp, *Personal Identity*, 68.

veneer when performed on the teen-friendly TV show. With minimal staging and only a few flashes of theatrical lighting, wearing only basic red tees and black pants as costumes, the newly formed glee club accesses their performative potential on the stage of their high school theater. In this first hit song (and in most early episodes of *Glee*), Rachel and Finn are positioned as the club's male and female leads: the "small town girl" and the "city boy" of the power ballad. Yet the ensemble always serves an essential role. In fact, "Don't Stop Believin'" establishes a semi-democratic relationship among the glee club members – Finn chooses the song, Rachel choreographs, Artie recruits the jazz band, and Mercedes designs costumes – and the song's driving piano riff is performed *a cappella* at the top of the number, emphasizing the collective. The ensemble of young performers must listen to one another, syncing their vocals in a pulsing foundation from which Finn and Rachel's soaring solos can emerge. Although the ensemble is staged as backup singers during the verses, the entire company belts the final chorus together: "Don't stop believin' / Hold on to that feelin' / Streetlight people." As in many a musical theater number, the take-away message of "Don't Stop Believin'" – set to an equally catchy take-away melody – is to embrace the present moment, together. The teens reinvigorate this simultaneously mainstream and maligned song by performing it in earnest and by proudly donning its performative optimism. Glowing in the showstopping aura of the song, the Gleeks' Musically Enhanced Reality actively improves their present.

'80s Rock (♩ = 126) *mp cresc. poco a poco*

Soprano Alto
Dah dah dah dah dah dah dah dah

Baritone
mp cresc. poco a poco
Dah dah dah dah dah dah dah

Piano
'80s Rock (♩ = 126)
If instrumentalists are not needed to set key and tempo, m.1 is optional
(Play in absence of rhythm section)
p *mp*
let ring

dah dah dah dah dah dah dah dah dah dah dah dah dah dah

— dah dah dah — dah dah dah dah dah dah dah

4

SAB (Soprano Alto Bass) edition⁶⁰

The reactions of the glee club’s unseen audience demonstrates the transformational potential of the musical number for performers and audience members alike. On the verge of quitting his job to pursue a more profitable career and raise a family, Mr. Schuester hears the strains of “Don’t Stop Believin’” floating down the hallway. The kids’ performance transports him back to his high school glory days, and the talent and potential radiating from the glee club’s song convinces him to stay at McKinley High. Meanwhile, a group of cheerleaders – with a stern

⁶⁰ Steve Perry, Neal Schon, and Jonathan Cain, *Don't Stop Believin'*. arr. Roger Emerson. SAB, Featured in the Twentieth Century Fox Television Series GLEE (Cherry Lane Music Company, 2009).

Sue Sylvester at the helm – glares down on the glee club from the balcony, and football player Puck steps into the theater out of curiosity. This talented ensemble of singers threatens to unmoor the high school hierarchy that elevates these sports stars above the rest.

Most importantly, the glee club performs to an unseen television viewership. Just before *Glee* premiered in May 2009, critics highlighted the musical flops of recent decades and shed doubt on the long-term viability of the show. Although *Fame* – a television series about a high school for the performing arts – attained cult success and a five season run in the 1980s, most experiments in musical television shows throughout the 1990s and early 2000s met with a quick and devastating demise. *Cop Rock*, a 1990 musical police drama on ABC, barely survived a season and was subsequently ranked #8 on TV Guide’s Worst TV Shows of All Time; *Hull High*, a soap opera high school musical, played only eight episodes that same year on NBC; and *Viva Laughlin*, a 2007 mystery drama, was canceled after only two episodes on CBS. Based on these television trends, *Glee* seemed primed for a ridiculed, short-lived stint on Fox. “The scripts are written as though the kids are underdogs and I tell the actors all the time, this show feels like an underdog,” explained Ryan Murphy in a 2009 interview.⁶¹

Yet *Glee* also premiered at the apex of a reemerging interest in the performing arts on screen. Television audiences auditioned in the nationwide searches and voted for their favorite competitors on reality TV talent competitions. Fox hoped to tap into a pre-established audience of aspirational music lovers by previewing the pilot episode of *Glee* immediately after the season 8 finale of *American Idol* on May 19, 2009, and the tactic paid off; the *Glee* premiere ranked #7 in that week’s Nielsen ratings among adult viewers ages 18-49 and #14 among all viewers. In the UK, Andrew Lloyd Webber piggybacked on the reality TV phenomenon by casting leads for

⁶¹ Maria Elena Fernandez, "What 'Glee.' Choir Kids Rule," *Los Angeles Times*, April 26, 2009, accessed October 18, 2012, <http://articles.latimes.com/2009/apr/26/entertainment/ca-glee26>.

West End revivals of *The Sound of Music* (2006), *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* (2007), *Oliver!* (2008), *The Wizard of Oz* (2010), and *Jesus Christ Superstar* (2012) on BBC One; in the US, the pop musical *Legally Blonde* scouted out their next Elle Woods on MTV (2008). *Glee* accordingly introduced its own companion casting series – *The Glee Project* – on Oxygen in 2011. Meanwhile, the movie musical resurfaced with Baz Luhrmann’s *Moulin Rouge* (2001) and Rob Marshall’s *Chicago* (2002), not to mention Disney’s *High School Musical* trilogy (2006 – 2008). Although Ryan Murphy consistently denies that *Glee* was inspired by *HSM*, this series of made-for-TV movies undeniably paved the way for *Glee* in style, substance, and commercial potential. The poppy strains of “Start of Something New” and “We’re All in This Together” heralded a *Grease* for a new generation, where the all-star basketball player boy and the nerdy new girl could unite in song and dance. *High School Musical* ignited a tweenage franchise that ultimately included a national tour, lunch boxes, karaoke games, melodic toothbrushes, and more.⁶²

Although this reemerging interest in the performing arts primed *Glee* for success, the musical TV series was continually touted as an underdog success story when the show began to win widespread critical acclaim. The first season captured the 2010 Golden Globe for Best Television Series (Musical or Comedy), as well as Emmy Awards for Jane Lynch, guest star Neil Patrick Harris, and Ryan Murphy’s direction of the pilot episode. After its second season, *Glee* again claimed the Golden Globe for Best Television Series, as well as Best Supporting Actor and Actress awards for Chris Colfer and Jane Lynch. With an avid teenage fan base, *Glee* erupted into a lucrative franchise with merchandise ranging from t-shirts and hoodies to a 3D concert movie, from an Official William McKinley High School Yearbook to a special edition Yahtzee

⁶² Dave Itzkoff, "Move Over Mickey: A New Franchise at Disney," *The New York Times*, August 20, 2007, accessed October 18, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/08/20/business/media/20disney.html>.

game with a Slushie dice cup. *Glee*'s discography is undoubtedly its hottest commodity, currently consisting of thirteen soundtracks, three compilation albums, and dozens of additional singles released digitally. As of February 16, 2011, the cast of *Glee* surpassed Elvis Presley's record for hit singles on the Billboard Hot 100, with 203 hits compared to Elvis Presley's 108.⁶³ The pilot episode's "Don't Stop Believin'" is still *Glee*'s top ranked hit. Peaking at #4 on the Billboard Hot 100, *Glee*'s version even surpassed Journey's original, which ranked #9 in 1981.

The pilot episode might be identified as the utopian moment of *Glee*: a promising balance of art and commerce that gradually caved to the commercial as the series continued. With the tunes increasingly tangential to narrative, this hit factory franchise feeds into Jean Baudrillard's conception of the hypermarket, a fourth-level simulacra in which the "original" no longer retains its primacy. Where techniques of mass reproduction prevail, "objects no longer have a specific reality: what is primary is their serial, circular, spectacular arrangement."⁶⁴ According to Talbot and Millman, even music education is presented as a spectacular "product valuing enterprise, rather than process valuing enterprise" in *Glee*.⁶⁵ The show rarely shows the process of learning music or dance steps; rather, rehearsals are fully staged production numbers that just happen to take place in a rehearsal room. With the addition of auto-tuning to correct pitch in the recording studio, even the cast's diverse array of voices is processed into product-driven perfection. These aesthetic choices can sometimes negate *Glee*'s narrative celebration of difference.

⁶³ Gary Trust, "'Glee' Cast Tops Elvis Presley for Most Hot 100 Hits," *Billboard.com*, February 16, 2011, accessed October 18, 2012, <http://www.billboard.com/news/glee-cast-tops-elvis-presley-for-most-hot-1005036732.story#/news/glee-cast-tops-elvis-presley-for-most-hot-1005036732.story>.

⁶⁴ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 77.

⁶⁵ Brent C. Talbot and Margaux B. Millman, "Discourses Surrounding Marginalized Groups, LGBTQ Issues, and Music Learning and Teaching Practices in Season 1 of *Glee*," proceedings of Establishing Identity: LGBT Studies and Music Education, University of Illinois School of Music, Champaign, IL, 2011, 16, accessed October 18, 2012, http://bcrme.press.illinois.edu/proceedings/Establishing_Identity/14_Talbot_Millman.pdf.

What's more, a spectacular disjuncture exists between the economic situation of the fictional William McKinley High and the multi-million dollar franchise that *Glee* has become. The budget cuts to the public education system drive the plot from the pilot episode. Principal Figgins relegates the bulk of the school's limited extracurricular funding to Sue Sylvester's cheerleading squad, whose high visibility on Fox Sports Net makes them profitable for the school. Figgins even demands that Mr. Schuester pay \$60 a month to maintain glee club, and the organization must use costumes and props that the school already owns; New Directions will only be allocated funding once they begin to garner prestige in the community. Granted, *Glee* is a campy musical comedy that makes little pretense to dramatic realism – but the sparkling abundance of costumes, sets, and special effects in the glee club's performances stand at striking odds with the economic realities on which the plot often hinges. The disjuncture is even greater when juxtaposing the blockbuster television show to struggling public schools across the nation.

Then again, perhaps such an entertaining spectacle is precisely the splashy boost that arts education needs in the US. According to Alexandra Robbins, the politics of visibility play a huge part in how social groups are treated in high schools; providing equal support and recognition to extracurricular activities – not just to the money-making sports teams – helps to level the high school social hierarchy.⁶⁶ *Glee*'s mainstream visibility has certainly drawn attention to the precipitous decline of arts education in the US and the potential marginalization of kids who are passionate about these sidelined pursuits. According to Ralph Opacic, founder and director of the Orange County High School of the Arts in Santa Ana, *Glee* may not free up money to support the performing arts in public schools, but students have demonstrated “a real grass-roots commitment” to the arts since *Glee*'s premiere. Opacic has himself been a determined advocate

⁶⁶ Robbins, *The Geeks Shall Inherit the Earth*, 387.

for music education through its darkest decades. When he started as a high school choral teacher at Los Alamitos High School in 1982, the program had only thirty students, but by 1985, the program had expanded to 300 students in five choirs – including the future Mr. Schuester himself, actor Matthew Morrison. “I had the star football players and cheerleaders, and show choir became cool,” Opacic remembers. “It broke down all of the traditional cliques, and over time it created a culture of acceptance.”⁶⁷ Opacic has no such utopic hopes for *Glee*, although he appreciates the show’s arts advocacy. On a strictly practical level, he foresees the television show affecting the aesthetics of glee club: specifically in more challenging choreography and an increase in popular song arrangements.

Of all the products circulating in the *Glee* franchise, one of the most exciting is undoubtedly the sheet music arrangements published by Hal Leonard. A search on Sheet Music Plus currently locates over 600 arrangements for sale: templates for teens’ own aspirational performances of pop songs and showtunes, old and new. The sheet music collection emphasizes finding *Glee* as a performative process, rather than a static series of spectacularly arranged products. Filled with uplifting messages of survival, acceptance, and empowerment, *Glee*’s choral arrangements range from Katy Perry’s “Firework” to Bruno Mars’ “Just the Way You Are,” from Madonna’s “Express Yourself” to *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*’s “Time Warp.” Glee clubs across the nation can now don the performative optimism of New Directions in their own high school – and perhaps begin to transform the social landscape in the process.

Even as the NEA’s *2008 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts* reported a 5% decline in arts participation across the United States, *Glee* creator Ian Brennan has heard anecdotally of several school arts programs being preserved thanks to a resurging interest in glee club among

⁶⁷ Schuyler Velasco, "How 'Glee' Is Changing High School Choir," *Salon.com*, September 21, 2010, accessed October 18, 2012, http://www.salon.com/2010/09/21/glee_changing_show_choir/.

teens.⁶⁸ Misfit kids who are already musical performers have identified strongly with the television show's quirky outsiders, and other youth have decided that trying out for their school's show choir or musical may not be social suicide after all. In fact, when the National Association for Music Education polled choir directors about *Glee*'s impact, 43% indicated a rise in student interest and enrollment in music programs as a result of the show; teachers also noted an increase in student requests for *Glee* songs in their choir repertoire.⁶⁹ At Arizona State University, music education majors started a show choir called GLEEders for local Tempe middle and high school students; working on a small budget of undergraduate student grants and local business donations, their club features themed weeks – just like the popular television show.⁷⁰ In my own former high school in Albemarle, NC, the choir program reemerged post-*Glee* with a dynamic new teacher who has incorporated popular music and contemporary musicals, such as *In the Heights* and *Rent*, into their repertoire.

“Every time I try to destroy that clutch of scab-eating mouth breathers it only comes back stronger like some sexually ambiguous horror movie villain,” Sue Sylvester complains.⁷¹ Indeed, musical theater is currently enjoying its greatest popularity since the pre-rock era – particularly among young people.⁷² As composer Michael Friedman explains, musical theater has reemerged in the mainstream, or “for lack of a better term, [come] out of the closet,” with recent successes

⁶⁸ NEA Office of Research & Analysis, *2008 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts*, report no. 49 (Washington, DC: National Endowment for the Arts, 2009), 5, accessed October 18, 2012, <http://www.arts.gov/research/2008-SPPA.pdf>.

⁶⁹ Christopher Loudon, "The Glee Effect," *Jazz Times*, September 16, 2010, accessed October 18, 2012, <http://jazztimes.com/articles/26514-the-glee-effect>.

⁷⁰ Mary Shinn, "ASU Glee-inspired Show Choir Returns," *The State Press*, February 9, 2011, accessed October 18, 2012, <http://www.statepress.com/2011/02/09/asu-glee-inspired-show-choir-returns/>.

⁷¹ *Glee: The Complete First Season*, "Vitamin D."

⁷² David Kamp, "The Glee Generation," *The New York Times*, June 11, 2010, accessed October 18, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/13/fashion/13Cultural.html>.

such as *The Book of Mormon* and *Glee*: “It’s become fashionable, which is shocking and even a little upsetting to somebody like me who still thinks of it as a little bit shameful.”⁷³ The musical’s historical trajectory is not a linear progression from birth to artistic culmination to death, then, but a cyclical and cumulative phenomenon whose imaginary of different ways of being in the world can occasionally flash into view. The musical occupies a queer, hybrid position as an accessible bastion of American popular culture with a distinct poetic and political charge of difference for those attuned to its siren call. Let’s do the Time Warp again.

⁷³ Rebecca Panovka, "On the Phone With Composer J. Michael Friedman '97," *The Harvard Crimson*, November 8, 2012, accessed November 10, 2012, <http://www.thecrimson.com/article/2012/11/8/on-the-phone-friedman/>.

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