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## Theater of the Obsessed

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# THEATER OF THE OBSESSED

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Department of Communication Studies

by  
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B.A., University of Missouri, 2012  
M.A., Auburn University, 2014  
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## **Abstract**

*Theater of the Obsessed* uses fandom to illustrate how audiencing can be a form of queer worldmaking. I begin by establishing that audiencing is a process that takes place over time and is not confined to the seat you're sitting in while consuming various media. Because audiencing is a nearly invisible process, I turn to fandom and fanworks to demonstrate what some of the other parts look like. From there, I take a mystorical approach. That is, I use mystory to braid my personal audiencing, popular culture examples, and professional scholarship together to create a wide image. What becomes apparent is the overlap between the transformative potential of audiencing and the aims of queer worldmaking.

## Chapter 1. Introduction

If I tell you right now where we will end up, do you trust me to get us there? It's not a spoiler. The ending won't be ruined. This isn't that kind of text. But I would like it if you were concerned about spoilers. If you would be willing to be that kind of reader. You know, a fanatical one. This dissertation will argue that some processes of audiencing marked by fandom are forms of queer worldmaking. It might be a while before I come back to that, though. I first need to define some terms. My terms. This is my dissertation, my proof of learning, an officiating of an unofficial process. How do I make visible the last six years of learning? How do I show you that I've taken it in, processed, analyzed, synthesized, Cynthia-sized and created something new? Because this is, in some ways, something new. It features many somethings borrowed. It is something that at times made me blue. It is old. Oh boy, is it old. I am ready to bury it even as you encounter it for the first time. My dissertation is my story of my degree. It is what Gregory Ulmer calls a "mystory," methodologically speaking. The "contribution of personal anecdotes to problem-solving in a field of specialized knowledge," but that's me getting ahead of myself again.<sup>1</sup> What are my terms of endearment? Our terms of engagement? What is our user agreement? How do I want you to interact with this document? I don't think I'm ready to answer that yet. Although, perhaps I've already begun to answer that in form if not in content. Perhaps we'll circle back before this section is over. Come to think of it, a little mystery wouldn't hurt.

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<sup>1</sup> Gregory Ulmer, *Teletheory: Grammatology in the Age of Video*. (New York: Routledge, 1989), 43.

## 1.1 The Historemix

The HopKins Black Box Theatre is a primary laboratory space for performance studies research in the Communication Studies Department at LSU. Every year during orientation for the HopKins Black Box Theater, they tell the same story, the history, rather the herstory, of how Mary Frances HopKins claimed the space for us. Every year one of the senior faculty invokes Mary Frances' enigmatic instructions to the workers transforming the classrooms into a theater: "Paint it black." Out of the light she decreed darkness and unto us a performance space was born. One year a professor told us she would often ask herself, "What would Mary Frances HopKins do?" That year, I got an idea. What if I made a T-shirt of Mary Frances that asked WWMFHD? What if I gave it to that professor because they just got a promotion?

So, I altered the image of Mary Frances HopKins on the website and put it on a grey t-shirt. Once it arrived from the online build-a-shirt vender, I unfurled it, shook the creases out and smiled. It wasn't exactly as I imagined, but it would get the job done. I showed it to one of the other senior faculty who expressed what I took to be envy. I got a second idea and ordered a second shirt. And a third. While, I waited for these new shirts to arrive in the mail, I presented the Mary Frances HopKins t-shirt to its new owner. She was delighted. She shared it on social media with her performance studies community, and they, too, were delighted.

Then, the other shirts arrived. I folded them tightly, the front image tucked inside. When envious senior faculty member saw the grey roll, she grinned. "Open it," I implored. She gently pulled the edges apart only to discover not the face of our beloved matriarch but my own face floating above the text "WWCESD?" Because what *would* Cynthia Erin Sampson do? An important question for both past and present audiences.

Answer: make another joke. Before she could react, I extracted another shirt. “Look, I got one, too!” I exclaimed, displaying another grey shirt with her face and her initials smushed inside the question. WWESFMD? What would Eminent Senior Faculty Member do? This became an urgent inquiry. Was this funny to her? She convinced me that she found it so. The story, now several desirous queries deep, attracted the attention of my advisor who exclaimed with (mock?) exasperation, “Where is my t-shirt?”

I thought about this. Did he need a t-shirt? Also, since he was asking for a t-shirt, shouldn’t I subvert his expectations by getting him something else? What is the opposite of a t-shirt, anyway? Scrolling through the build-a-shirt vendor’s website, I figured it out: a mouse pad with the image of a t-shirt declaring “I advised your dissertation and didn’t even get a t-shirt.”

I audience a ritual evocation of a matriarchal figure not just by acquiescing to the power of her myth in the moment of storytelling but by perpetuating, stretching, and refracting the myth, making my own deliberately humble secondary artworks, staking my own claim of belonging within an interpretive community and shaping some of the values that define that community. Henry Jenkins tells us that “translating [our] viewing into some type of cultural activity, by sharing feelings and thoughts about the program content with friends, by joining a community of other fans who share common interests” is the beginning of fandom.<sup>2</sup> Maybe they don’t call it a degree program for nothing? This is as good as a starting place as any for the journey ahead, should you choose to take it, my dear dissertation readers. WWMDDRD?

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<sup>2</sup> Henry Jenkins, “Star Trek Rerun, Reread, Rewritten: Fan Writing as Textual Poaching.” *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 5, no. 2 (1988): 88.



## 1.2 Equipment for Being a Lesbian

What if I didn't give you a map at all? What if gave you a legend? A little orphan Annie decoder ring? Part of being a lesbian in straight culture means looking for the signs. Is she gay? Is it safe? Am I welcome? So, here's your first clue: the t-shirts above all went to women. The obligatory mousepad to a man. Maybe I'm not as good at writing code as I like to think I am. Perhaps better to think of it as what Kenneth Burke calls a representative anecdote, which is "so dramatic a conception that we might call it the dramatic approach to dramatism: an introduction to dramatism that is deduced from dramatism, and hence gains plausibility in proportion as dramatism itself is more fully developed."<sup>3</sup> In other words, Burke defines a representative anecdote as "possess[ing] a systematically interrelated structure, while at the same time allowing for the discussion of human affairs and the placement of cultural expressions in such typically human terms as personality and action."<sup>4</sup> My t-shirt stunt is a piece of co-authored equipment for living, "a ritualistic way of arming [myself] to confront perplexities and risks."<sup>5</sup> Burke suggests that literature gives us "strategies for dealing with situations. In so far as situations are typical and recurrent in a given social structure, people develop names for them and strategies for handling them."<sup>6</sup> I offer making t-shirts. Well, not exactly. Maybe what I offer is what Jacqueline Taylor does in her essay "On Being an Exemplary Lesbian": "I'm hoping that if I behave as if what I believe *should* be true *is* true I can contribute to the transformation I believe must come."<sup>7</sup> WWELD?

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<sup>3</sup> Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives*, (New York: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1945): 60.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>5</sup> Kenneth Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press): 61.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 296-297.

<sup>7</sup> Jacqueline Taylor, "On Being an Exemplary Lesbian: My Life as a Role Model," *Text*

### 1.3 Welcome! Everything is Fine.

Audience can be a noun: the object to which a performance happens. Audience can be a verb: turning the performance into an object. Audience can be a process: objecting and objectifying in turn. Rather, we engage with performance before it happens, while it's happening, and after it's over. We engage with a performance with every bit of our lived experience every time. This is a process. As Linda Park-Fuller expounds "audiencing [is] a process that occurs over time—that can begin before the curtain rises and continue long after the dimming of the lights as an audience member 're-hear-ses' or 'plays back' stories in memory."<sup>8</sup> This is processing. How very gay of us. (Overprocessing is a lesbian stereotype. I am not one of those. Usually, I blame your mode of audiencing in this instance.)

Heteronormativity —the disciplining of discourses through which one sexual orientation is ubiquitously re-produced as the ideal standard, the guarantee-r of legitimacy— requires strict adherence to particular codes of conduct. That kind of restriction squeezes people out. These folks form alternative communities in order to find belonging and connection. Warner and Berlant call this process queer worldmaking: a way to create space for some marginalized lives within the cracks of dominant discourse.<sup>9</sup>

Here's what you need to know, formally, before we proceed. In what follows there are (at least) two competing structures: 1. t-shirt moments, feelers of encoded desire

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*and Performance Quarterly*, Jan 2000 no??: 60.

<sup>8</sup> Linda M. Park-Fuller, "Audiencing the Audience: Playback Theatre, Performative Writing, and Social Activism," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 23, no. 3 (2003): 306.

<sup>9</sup> Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, "Sex in Public," in *Queer Studies: An Interdisciplinary Reader*, eds. Robert J. Corber and Stephen Valocchi, (Malden, Oxford and Melbourne: Blackwell 2003), 1.

searching for a mode of belonging that works better than the ones I have inherited/have had foisted upon me. These are moments of fanfiction, obsession, recuperative audiencing. 2. mousepad moments, acquiescence to dominant discourse, appeasement offerings to the ghosts of dissertations past. These are moments of canon, restriction, required reading. My obligatory mousepadded advisor is in on the joke. Mostly. The joke is (at least) this: for some of us dominant forms of discourse aren't just hoops to jump through but whips with which we are flogged. Without space for a little irreverence, we fear for our survival or worse still that which survives will bear little resemblance to "us" that makes our life worth living. As the old adage definitely does not say, you can't have a t-shirt without chucking a few mousepads.

#### **1.4 Overview of Chapters (A Mousepad Moment)**

Chapter 2 devotes itself to a review of the literature in audience studies for performance, fan studies, and queer worldmaking. These three threads come together to offer a way to see the mostly invisible process of audiencing. Audience studies for performance has a long start/stop tradition that I lay out next to media studies and theater studies to develop an encompassing concept of audiencing as a process. Fan studies builds on the active audience to treat fans as producers of content and alternative social communities worthy of ethnographic exploration. The concept of queer worldmaking parallels the most transformative elements of fandom: envisioning a world that has room for more people. Exploring the ways the world can be remade through our audiencing practices, then, is the core of this dissertation.

Chapter 3 insists the mystory is the best method for this exploration. Mystory asks us to triangulate the personal, popular, and professional in order to see what we can learn from their kaleidoscoping. Just like the same pieces of translucent plastic makeup the

dozens of different images in the kaleidoscope, a wide image lets us see the myriad possibilities of audiencing. One twist and we see a different aspect. But it doesn't make any of them less real.

Chapter 4 uses musical theater fandom as a site to pull at the threads of audiencing. Bootlegs. Cast recordings. Fanworks. Charity events. There are so many facets of musical theater that offer a different way to conceptualize who the audience is and what it is doing. Headlining the chapter, Stacy Wolf defends our enjoyment and scholarly pursuit of musicals despite their low art status. I recount my encounters with the Miscast Gala and Broadway Backwards which give us complex formations of the audience in drastically different ways. No spoilers, though. You'll get there. In short, this chapter works to dislodge the audience from the uncomfortable auditorium seat and helps us to see the process of audiencing as all-encompassing process. Get ready to stan.

Chapter 5 teases out the ways my audiencing is rooted in queer worldmaking. That is to say, I don't watch TV like you do, probably. Unless you also chose what to watch based on the community that forms around it, which you might? Soaps, shows with queer subtext, whatever Gillian Anderson's new project is. The ultimate end of watching something is not to have seen it. It's to realize you're not the only one who thought that was gay. It's to join the community that forms on the other side. It's to enter into the possibilities of how this can be reimagined to include me.

Chapter 6 concludes my dissertation by turning to a concept I have given the deliberately clunky title "acafriends" and the relationships that form through shared audiencing academic experiences. In the simplest terms, I want to take Joli Jenson's contention that "academic" is an elitist replacement for "fan" and extend it to the max using my own experience with and as an academic. How do I find my place in the

academy? Can I remake the academy so that I feel welcome and part of it? Can I deploy the same language and tools I've used to conceptualize the process of audiencing to understand how to be an academic doing the job of an academic?

### **1.5 T-Shirt, Hairshirt, I'll Keep This Short**

When I was younger, I just wanted to look like the other girls at summer camp who had these complicated reverse braids that started at the nape of their necks and threaded up their scalp and gathered into two buns, one on each side of their heads. Small pieces sticking out in an intentionally messy look. I wanted to look like the other girls on my volleyball team who had beautiful, tight French braids that ran down the back of their heads and swung wildly as they hopped around after the ball. It never occurred to me that these girls braided each other's' hair. It never occurred to me that their moms might've braided their hair. It never occurred to me some of what I desired wasn't even possible to do by myself.

The girls on TV just had braids. Seemingly they did them themselves? Seemingly they just knew how to do it? The lie of TV is that no one works at anything. Probably, based on how braiding works, the moms of the girls on TV did the braids. Realistically, the hair stylist did the braids. That's why they are perfect. But, I am susceptible to lies. If I can't see it, it doesn't exist. I have concept impermanence. I believed I could just braid my hair. I believed it was innate. The girls on TV just knew it. I should know it, too.

I did not know it. And I did not work at it. For years, I never braided my hair. My mother would sometimes emerge from her room with delicate French braids. Only rarely, I would ask her to braid my hair. It felt like an imposition. It felt like a failing of my innate girly-ness. It felt like when Judith Butler said, "gender reality is performative which means, quite simply, that it is real only to the extent that it is performed" she

meant I wasn't girly because I couldn't/wouldn't/didn't perform.<sup>10</sup> And even if I did ask mom to make that girly-ness for me, it never looked the way I wanted it too. Mom would make it too loose, and it would fall apart quickly. Perhaps she wasn't good at braiding herself? I never considered her own insecurity with braids. But, at my lack of skill, I resigned myself to not being one of those girls. I must be a tomboy. Or some other kind of girl who doesn't know how to be feminine.

Eventually I reconciled that, perhaps, if I wanted to have nice braids, I'd have to practice. I drew the line at watching YouTube tutorials. I wouldn't get any help. I'd just try the motions I thought would form a French braid over and over until I could French braid. I now know how to do a Dutch braid. I could not figure out the motions that make a French braid. And without looking anything up, the closest I could get was Dutch. I think it looks like a stegosaurus spine. I do not like the aesthetic of it, but it is what I know.

I have tried to braid this dissertation together. Weave, perhaps. Thread. There are all kinds of synonyms for pulling disparate concepts together. "Juxtapose" if I want to use a word 12 years of college has taught me. I have tried to create a French braid, but here's this Dutch one. Here is fandom and queer theory and audiencing twisting together. Swirl, swirl, swirl. Here are germane personal, popular, and professional discourses. Here are important pasts, presents, and futures. Their braiding might not always look the way I want it to. But hopefully, it is good enough to show you some of how I, and other folks like me, remake given worlds into worlds we find more livable. It'll be awkward. No way around that. Let's not let that stop us from enjoying the process.

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<sup>10</sup> Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory" *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (December 1988): 527.

## **1.6 An Interlude**

Just one more thing. Before I forget. So what? Why should you go any farther than this? What are you reading for? Who are you reading for? What moves you to keep reading? What moves do I make? So many important questions and while I'd like to keep you waiting, you'd probably trust me more if I showed some of my cards right now. If I wear my methods on my sleeve like my heart. If I run some ideas of the flagpole to see if you'll salute them. If I stopped all these mixed metaphors and gave you some concrete details. Less abstraction, more satisfaction. So, here we go:

This dissertation demonstrates one way for marginalized people to become a part of academic discourses around performance. These pages argue that some folks need to create their own spaces in the world so that they can feel like they belong, so that they can create, so they can critique, so they can envision better futures, and so they can realize those futures now. Academia touts its rigor and its excellence while excluding and marginalizing the voices that will keep it going. As much as this dissertation is making an argument about audiencing, it is also engaging with academia and its traditions. So what? So what if the only way to survive is to write our way out, in and around so that we can know that we are here?

## Chapter 2. Introduction Part Deux, The Sequel

“There are only 10 *Falsettos* fanfictions,” one of the 14 year olds in my Hamilton-themed theater summer camp laments.<sup>11</sup> “There are only four for *The Ghost Quartet*,” she continues, “and they all suck.”<sup>12</sup> I try to help her think of places besides Archive of Our Own, an online archive of transformative works including fanfiction, that might host fanfiction for theatrical productions, but we come up short. I’m not particularly surprised by this because so few people have access to contemporary Broadway shows, and of those who have the means to attend them in person, only a handful probably have any inclination to write about them this way. In-person audiences are not necessarily fans. In fact, contrary to what I assumed given this camper’s level of enthusiasm for and knowledge of the musical, she has never seen *Falsettos* in-person. Of the other musicals these campers know by heart, including *Phantom of the Opera*, *Be More Chill*, and *Natasha, Pierre, and the Great Comet of 1812*, only one of them has seen one of these productions in-person. These campers spend much of their free time creating memes and sharing fanart of productions they’ve only seen through bootleg videos. That is to say, fans aren’t always in-person audience members first. This kind of fan activity was an exciting surprise when I agreed to help run a theater camp. It also got me thinking about some of the connections between theater, fandom, and audiences. Fandom, as defined by Henry Jenkins, is the “ability to transform personal reaction into social interaction, spectator culture into participatory culture.”<sup>13</sup> After spending two

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<sup>11</sup> Playmakers of Baton Rouge camper (name withheld for privacy reasons) in discussion with the author, July 2017.

<sup>12</sup> Playmakers of Baton Rouge camper (name withheld for privacy reasons) in discussion with the author, July 2017.

<sup>13</sup> Henry Jenkins, “Star Trek Rerun, Reread, Rewritten: Fan Writing as Textual Poaching.” *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 5, no. 2 (1988): 88.



weeks watching nine middle schoolers demonstrate extensive knowledge of actors' resumes, recount production histories, and re-stage their favorite ensemble performances, I am convinced I was in the midst of fandom. These preteens called dibs on various vocal parts, corrected and encouraged each other to recreate choreography, and truly embodied the spirit of their favorite performances. This kind of play is precisely what Jenkins' identifies: "one becomes a fan not by being a regular viewer of a particular program but by translating that viewing into some type of cultural activity, by sharing feelings and thoughts about the program content with friends, by joining a community of other fans who share common interests."<sup>14</sup> Fandom is about more than being an in-person audience member for the duration of a theatrical presentation, which is even more apparent when being in the in-person audience isn't possible.

I once swiped right on a popular dating app because the woman's profile contained a picture of her standing next to the marque for *A Streetcar Named Desire* with Gillian Anderson as Blanche DuBois. We exchanged several messages about her experience seeing the show before she offered to send me links of the bootleg video she made. Apparently *Fun Home* lyricist Lisa Kron was seated just a few rows behind her and was a vocal audience member. I curled up on my porch and plugged in my headphones while the video buffered. Where the woman who made the videos went through the process of buying a ticket, waiting in line, and finding her seat, I opened each of the links to get to the next act, waved to my roommate when she came home, tuned out the steady buzz of traffic, and swatted away bugs drawn toward my glowing computer screen. There on my porch, where I had just a week before watched the live-

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<sup>14</sup> Henry Jenkins, "Star Trek Rerun, Reread, Rewritten: Fan Writing as Textual Poaching." *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 5, no. 2 (1988): 88.

streamed talkback with Gillian Anderson, my relationship with that performance changed. But was it simply from fan to audience? It is not accurate to say that my audiencing began when I actually saw the performance; however certainly it changed in some ways when I did. Conversely, I assume some folks present for the live, in-person performance were not fans prior to their audiencing. I hazard to guess that I picked up on different aspects of the performance because of my fandom.

All this to ask, how did my relationship with the performance change after I saw it? What does it mean to be a fan of something I've never seen? What happens once I see it? How do fandom and audiencing co-construct one another? If audiencing is a continual process broken up by encounters with a performance event, what do we learn by studying other moments during the process outside of the face-to-face and curtain-to-curtain encounter? And how can we study those other moments? Fandom serves as a compelling and important point of entry into this research. What can understanding performance as an event embedded in a larger practice of audiencing reveal to us? How might such practices of audiencing be particularly salient for folks who are marginalized by dominant discourses? What kinds of alternative social worlds might we discover through a study of audiencing as a process over time? In other words, can fanatical audiencing be a form of queer worldmaking?

In this chapter, I lay out the theoretical groundwork for this project. I begin by examining the current state of audience studies for performance studies. From there I use fan studies to contextualize some of my claims about audiencing and fandom. Finally, I turn to queer studies to establish how queer worldmaking is rooted in hope and community. By braiding these areas of study together, I hope to demonstrate that

the aspects of audiencing activated by fandom are a particularly effective means of navigating and remaking the social world for many marginalized people.

## **2.1 Audience Studies for Performance**

“So commonplace is our experience as audience that its nature remains obscured,” Eric Peterson begins his introduction to the 1983 symposium on The Audience in Interpretation Theory featured in *Literature and Performance* (now *Text and Performance Quarterly*).<sup>15</sup> As he introduces two articles by Robert B. Loxley and Kristin M. Langellier, Peterson reminds his readers that “the recent upsurge in research on the act of reading, reader-response criticism, and reception aesthetics all affirm the need for a better understanding of what it is to be an audience.”<sup>16</sup> Until this point, the audience was configured as the third component of text/performer/audience constellation, but very little attention had been given to audiences. Written around the “performative turn,” these articles attempt to show the “shifts from an emphasis on literary and formal aspects of the text to a consideration of the social dimensions and ramifications of the context.”<sup>17</sup> To that end, Loxley, through a brief overview of performance scholars including Wallace Bacon, Elizabeth Burns, and David Cole, comes to the conclusion that “the real role of the audience is not one of a ‘consumer,’ who passively ‘takes’ from the performers but is one of ‘giving’—of helping the interpreters to create the work of art in performance.”<sup>18</sup> He suggests there are multiple hats the audience could wear at any given time: “perceiver, listener, appreciator, respondent,

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<sup>15</sup> Eric E. Peterson, “Introduction,” *Literature in Performance* 3, no. 2 (1983): 33.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Kristin M. Langellier, “From Text to Social Context,” *Literature in Performance* 6, no. 2 (1986): 65.

<sup>18</sup> Robert B. Loxley, “Roles of the Audience: Aesthetic and Social Dimensions of the Performance Event,” *Literature in Performance* 3, no. 2 (1983): 43.

evaluator (or critic), and even performer.”<sup>19</sup> Despite the acknowledged importance by oral interpreters’ work, Loxley challenges performance scholars to stop taking the audience for granted. Kristin Langellier answers this call by forming a phenomenological approach to audience, which “is concerned with this living through, or conscious experience, rather than an empirical analysis of spectators’ responses or a literary analysis of textual structures.”<sup>20</sup> Langellier’s conceptualization of audience ultimately “reveals its double experience of being situated simultaneously and ambiguously ‘outside’ the text as a performer and ‘inside’ the text as a witness.”<sup>21</sup> Drawing on the phenomenological work of Mikel Dufrenne and Wolfgang Iser, Langellier denotes five themes that attempt to recognize as many aspects of the audience experience as possible. These themes unite in the final conclusion that

the audience is not *one thing* but moves freely among numerous perspectives on the performance. Most importantly the audience cannot be reduced to either its role as a performer or its role as a witness. Rather, there emerges in performing a voice which belongs neither to text nor to audience and yet to both at once. Thus, audience does not designate a single listener or a group of auditors, whether they are real performers or ideal witnesses. More properly, the term *audience* defines a function involving action and change in the situation of performing.<sup>22</sup>

This formation of audience contests the idea that “the audience should never become the primary part of the interpretative event.”<sup>23</sup> Loxley and Langellier make clear that the audience is “the motor that drives the performance forward.”<sup>24</sup> But, as is apparent in

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Kristin M. Langellier, “A Phenomenological Approach to Audience,” *Literature in Performance* 3, no. 2 (1983): 34.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. 37.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. 37.

<sup>23</sup> Wallace A. Bacon, “An Aesthetics of Performance,” *Literature in Performance* 1, no. 1 (1980): 6.

<sup>24</sup> Frank O’Connor paraphrased by Robert B. Loxley, “Roles of the Audience: Aesthetic and Social Dimensions of the Performance Event,” *Literature in Performance* 3, no. 2 (1983) 43.

that description, Loxley and Langellier are only discussing the audience in the time-limited space of the performance event. Missing from their analysis is attention to the audience beyond the theater seats.

Previously Langellier, writing with Peterson, detailed how double bind theory informs oral interpretation theory and practice. They argue that “oral interpretation as double bind characterizes a system of relations within a theory of human communication.”<sup>25</sup> This emphasis on relationships leads them to conclude “the focus shifts from audience and performer as entities to audiencing and performing as *functional relations*.”<sup>26</sup> In perhaps the first intentional and defined use of the term “audiencing,” Langellier and Peterson demonstrate that multiple interpretive possibilities can lead to ambiguity through which the line between performer and audience is blurred.<sup>27</sup> Thus, audiencing requires interpretive skills at least equal to those of the performer’s. Much like the argument Langellier makes in “A Phenomenological Approach to Audience,” audience and audiencing take place because of a performance. Put another way, Langellier and Peterson explain, “That ‘I,’ as performing audience, ‘am able to’ opens up the theory and practice of oral interpretation as well as its response-ability.”<sup>28</sup> Audiencing, while more active than being in the audience, constitutes an ability to respond, to interpret, to be a function of performance. This seems to signal a move to consider the audience beyond their time in the theater seats, at least in the abstract.

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<sup>25</sup> Eric E. Peterson and Kristin M. Langellier, “Creative Double Bind in Oral Interpretation,” *Western Journal of Speech Communication* 46 (1982): 243.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. 246.

<sup>27</sup> In both the OED and Merriam Webster, “audience” is not defined as a verb, so there is no official record of first usage for audiencing.

<sup>28</sup> Eric E. Peterson and Kristin M. Langellier, “Creative Double Bind in Oral Interpretation,” *Western Journal of Speech Communication* 46 (1982): 252.

As scholars pursued social contexts and implications of performance, audience studies for performance continued looking at only audiences as functions of performance. That is, audiences were often considered only in the context of specific performance styles and valued for how those audiences could inform that style. The performances offered for analysis were no longer primarily oral interpretation but encompassed ethnography (Conquergood<sup>29</sup>), autoethnographic performance (Spry<sup>30</sup>), and performance for social justice (Boal<sup>31</sup>). While these studies offered insights into audiences in multiple contexts, they still centered their analysis and interpretations on the text of performance. Michael S. Bowman pointed out that “In literary and media studies, audience-oriented research has become an important and widely accepted practice. That nothing comparable has emerged in theatre and performance studies, at least in terms of quantity of research, is puzzling, if not embarrassing.”<sup>32</sup> Langellier’s assertion that audiences are “the least studied element of performance situations” continued to hold true.<sup>33</sup>

Meanwhile, media and cultural studies scholars were pursuing the audience in a slightly different way. Rather than holding focus on audiences in the context of a performance event, other disciplines branched out to explore audience on a larger scale. I want to offer two key shifts in audience-oriented research in order to demonstrate

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<sup>29</sup> Dwight Conquergood, “Rethinking Ethnography: Toward a Performative Cultural Politics,” *Communication Monographs* 58, (1991): 179-194.

<sup>30</sup> Tami Spry, “Performing Autoethnography: An Embodied Methodological Praxis,” *Qualitative Inquiry* 7, (2001): 706-732.

<sup>31</sup> Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, translated by Charles A. & Maria-Odilia Leal McBride, (New York: Theater Communications Group, 1979).

<sup>32</sup> Michael S. Bowman, “Introduction,” *Text and Performance Quarterly* 23, no. 3 (2003): 225.

<sup>33</sup> Langellier paraphrased by Linda M. Park-Fuller, “Audiencing the Audience: Playback Theatre, Performative Writing, and Social Activism,” *Text and Performance Quarterly* 23, no. 3 (2003): 288.

what Bowman was taking about: Stuart Hall's "Encoding/Decoding" and John Fiske's "Audiencing: A Cultural Studies Approach to Watching Television." Writing in 1973, Stuart Hall argues for the reconsideration of the circular model of mass communication most scholars had been working with. Rather than a loop created by the sender/message/receiver model, he suggests we consider production, distribution, circulation, consumption, and reproduction. Essentially, whoever is designing the message encodes a particular meaning into whatever form they are working with, and after distribution and circulation, the message is received by someone who decodes a meaning, but not necessarily the particular meaning the sender intended. Hall calls these discrepancies distortions, misunderstandings, or a lack of equivalency. The codes that are embedded in mass communication are, then, naturalized through their frequent use. These ideas opened the door for many of the most influential texts on media and spectatorship, including, but certainly not limited to, Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" and bell hooks' "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectatorship" giving us an increasingly intersectional and critical cultural approach to media.

John Fiske begins by making clear that "culture is the social circulation of meanings, pleasures, and values, and the cultural order that results is inextricably connected with the social order within which it circulates."<sup>34</sup> Using a small subset of the audience for *Married... with Children* as his site of analysis, Fiske theorizes that those viewers comprise a social formation, which is "identified by what its members do rather than by what they are, and as such is better able to account non-reductively for the

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<sup>34</sup> John Fiske, "Audiencing: A Cultural Studies Approach to Watching Television," *Poetics* 21 (1992): 353.

complexities and contradictions of everyday life in a highly elaborated society.”<sup>35</sup> To that end, he offers three understandings of audience, the most salient here being “audiencing as the process of producing, through lived experience, of their own sense of their social identities and social relations, and of the pleasures that this process gave them.”<sup>36</sup> “The definition of ‘the audience,’” he clarifies,

depends upon the way it is positioned in the social order: located within the economic system the audience is a market segment to be reached, and, simultaneously a commodity to be traded; located within the socio-ethical system, the audience is a site of acculturation or socialization; and when located in the materiality of everyday life the audience stops being a social category and becomes a process, a constituent element in a way of living. ... Each audience is distinguished from the others only in the process of analysis: in lived culture there are no boundaries between categories but only a complex of continuities.<sup>37</sup>

Ultimately, Fiske reaches the conclusion that audiencing is not merely a response to a text or performance. It is something continuously happening on multiple levels.

Although his aim in constructing this theory is to disrupt positivist and empiricist approaches to audiences, his argument challenges anyone interested in media and audiences to avoid the chicken/egg approach. As he says, “a text is no more nor no less an effect of the audience than is the audience of the text” and what remains to be examined is the relationships between the two and the other social, cultural, and historical influences at play.<sup>38</sup>

Returning to audience studies for performance, Linda Park-Fuller makes another attempt at reinvigorating this research with her 2003 article “Audiencing the Audience: Playback Theatre, Performative Writing, and Social Activism.” “Ironically,” Linda Park-Fuller laments, “the symposium [on The Audience in Interpretation Theory] “climaxed

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid. 351.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. 353.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. 354.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. 356.



two decades of interest in performance audience research, but as new theories and methods grew in popularity, interest in the audience receded.”<sup>39</sup> Linda Park-Fuller notes that “while contemporary theories and methods have given us vocabularies and frameworks in which to talk about audience, they have also problematized the concept of audience to the point of rendering it chaotic—an apparent abyss into which, as scholars, we tentatively venture.”<sup>40</sup> In an effort, then, to boldly venture, Park-Fuller draws on her own experiences working with a Playback Theater company to offer a new formation of audience. She uses performative writing to theorize from her field notes and recollections of various performances and conclude that “audiencing [is] a process that occurs over time—that can begin before the curtain rises and continue long after the dimming of the lights as an audience member “re-hear-ses” or “plays back” stories in memory.”<sup>41</sup> Rather than consider the audience a function of performance, as Langellier does, Park-Fuller implicitly builds on Fiske to suggest that audiences do work beyond participating in a performance.<sup>42</sup> Audiences process their expectations for performance prior to entering a theater; then, they process their lived experiences and their environment as they make sense of what they see in performance; and finally, they process the show throughout the days and weeks following. Audiencing gives greater agency and control to audiences by acknowledging that their work is not done once they leave the theater. Put another way, Park-Fuller shifts audience from noun to verb, object

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<sup>39</sup> Linda M. Park-Fuller, “Audiencing the Audience: Playback Theatre, Performative Writing, and Social Activism,” *Text and Performance Quarterly* 23, no. 3 (2003): 288.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid. 289.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. 306.

<sup>42</sup> Park-Fuller does not cite Fiske, but her use of term audiencing, which I can best trace to having an origin point around Fiske, suggests to me she is familiar with his notion of a more complex audience formation. It is unfortunate to me that she does not directly engage with him as his argument is very similar to hers, separated only by their objects of analysis.

to action, static to dynamic, in the theater to everyday life. This, of course, aligns with Playback Theater's desire to create more empathetic and socially engaged citizens. Park-Fuller reiterates, "We need more studies of audience per se... [n]ow that we have a more complex notion of audience and a more active sense of its role."<sup>43</sup>

Much of the work mentioning audiences after this article, to use Park-Fuller's apt description, "either demonstrate audiencing without discussing it, or discuss the concept in general terms that mask the complexities of specific acts."<sup>44</sup> Put another way, these more recent studies continue to treat audience as a function of performance rather than a process that incorporates but is not entirely focused on a performance event. Put yet another way, these studies use audiences to demonstrate something about a particular kind of performance. As I hope I've made apparent, though, audience studies for performance has evolved over time. The many starts and stops reflected in publication may not necessarily accurately represent how theorists and practitioners actually conceptualize or tend to audiences, but these studies serve to demonstrate as a discipline, audience studies is only occasionally prioritized. Even if in practice audiences are thought of complexly and discussed at large, little has been done to pursue our expanding conceptions of audience. How do we study the process of audiencing? What can we learn in doing so? I would like to offer this project as a step in this direction.

## **2.2 Fan Studies**

One way of looking at the process of audiencing is to locate an active and visible segment of the audience, and what better place than fandom. Fandom comprises communities formed around particular media texts. Fan studies looks to audiences not

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<sup>43</sup> Linda M. Park-Fuller, "Audiencing the Audience: Playback Theatre, Performative Writing, and Social Activism," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 23, no. 3 (2003): 306.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid. 290.

to better understand what I'll call the inspiring media, but in order to better understand the audience: Who are the fans? How do they form communities? What do they do in these communities? The inspiring media, while often lurking in the background, is merely that, background. It is not the driving purpose for the research nor is it usually related to the conclusions reached. Fan studies almost takes audiencing as a given. Certainly, there is cause to examine fans' points of connection with inspiring media, but that only represents a small percentage of fan activity. So, scholars focus on the process of audiencing as it plays out in broader practices of fandom.

By recognizing from the outset that "part of what distinguishes fans as a particular class of textual consumers is the social nature of their interpretive and cultural activity,"<sup>45</sup> Henry Jenkins offers at least four levels at which fandom operates: fans adopts a distinctive mode of reception, fandom constitutes a particular interpretive community, fandom constitutes a particular Art World, and fandom constitutes an alternative social community.<sup>46</sup> These levels taken together represent "a movement from social and cultural isolation... toward more and more active participation in a community receptive to their cultural productions, a community where they may feel a sense of belonging."<sup>47</sup> In *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*, Jenkins outlines the way fans, often women, come together around media texts and deploy tactics a la de Certeau. That is to say tactics are "calculated actions[s] determined by the absence of a proper locus" which is to say, "the space of the tactic is the space of

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<sup>45</sup> Jenkins, Henry. "Strangers No More': Filking and the Social Construction of the Science Fiction Fan Community," in *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media*, ed. Lesa A Lewis. (London: Routledge, 1992), 209.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid. 209-213.

<sup>47</sup> Jenkins, "Star Trek Rerun, Reread, Rewritten: Fan Writing as Textual Poaching," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 5, no. 2 (1988): 88.

the other.”<sup>48</sup> Jenkins argues “fans construct their cultural and social identity through borrowing and inflecting mass culture images, articulating concerns, which often go unvoiced within the dominant media.”<sup>49</sup> Because fans lack the power necessary to deploy strategies that could actually change the media production, fans use tactics to create space for narratives that represent themselves.

Describing fan studies, Francesca Coppa explains, “most academic studies take an ethnographic, not historical or literary, approach.”<sup>50</sup> Taking a moment for mapping a history can provide some insight as to why this phenomenon is important and because treating fandom historically “presupposes the relevance of specific fandom activities rather than seeing those activities as evidence in a case study that analyzes trends in communication or the rituals of a subculture.”<sup>51</sup> When we treat fandom purely as a subculture attached to particular media, we treat it as passive. That is, we think of fans and fandom as reactionary, as not having the kind of agency that could produce new work and new ways of being. Fans do more than respond. Fandom carves out space to engage with particular media. Think about the zines, platforms, conventions that fans have started. Coppa explains, “In addition to the structure of zines, APAs [amateur press association zines], and fan convention, science fiction fandom also invented a fannish jargon that is still in wide use today, often by people who have no idea of its age

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<sup>48</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, translated by Steven Rendall, (Los Angeles: University of California, 1984): 37.

<sup>49</sup> Henry Jenkins. *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*. (New York: Routledge 1992), 23.

<sup>50</sup> “A Brief History of Media Fandom,” in *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet: New Essays* eds. Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse, (Kindle Location 589). Kindle Edition.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, Kindle Locations 590-591.

or lineage.”<sup>52</sup> The development of a fan lexicon is important to its status as a subculture as Jenkins categorizes it.<sup>53</sup> But, it is also demonstrates the way fandom takes up space. We still use many of the words coined in the early days of fandom: con, fanboy, gafiate. During the first run of Star Trek, fandom grew exponentially. Many scholars would attribute most contemporary fan practices to that fandom. During this time, more and more women started taking visible roles in fandom. Coppa draws on fan historian Mary Ellen Curtin, who “has calculated that 83 percent of Star Trek fan writers were women in 1970, and 90 percent in 1973. However else they were participating in the community, male Star Trek fans weren’t writing fan fiction which “show[s] the beginning of a division of fan works.”<sup>54</sup> Coppa continues, “many of the stories have strong female leads (although the prevalence of strong, perfect women in Star Trek fan fiction would lead Paula Smith to coin the term Mary Sue to describe them in 1973 [Verba 1996, 15]) or deal with unexplored aspects of alien (and particularly Vulcan) cultures.”<sup>55</sup> This term, the Mary Sue, is a particularly contentious label.

The concept of a Mary Sue is closely linked to female fanfiction authors because they are historically female characters.<sup>56</sup> Bonnstetter and Ott theorize the Mary Sue as: usually an intensely personal, if public, performance for/of her individual author, she nevertheless names “types” of situations that may significantly and uniquely benefit other (typically) young women. I say uniquely because Mary Sue fanfic is an artistic mode that permits its authors and audiences to explore interests, questions, and desires

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., Kindle Locations 619-622

<sup>53</sup> Jenkins, Henry. “‘Strangers No More’: Filking and the Social Construction of the Science Fiction Fan Community” in *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media*, ed. Lesa A Lewis. (London: Routledge, 1992): 208-236.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., Kindle Locations 677-678

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., Kindle Locations 679-680).

<sup>56</sup> “Mary Sues,” n.d. [http://fanlore.org/wiki/Mary\\_sue](http://fanlore.org/wiki/Mary_sue)

that have historically been denied women in a society dominated by masculine voices, literature, and artistic practices. Indeed, Mary Sue fan fiction constitutes a distinctive and important challenge to the patriarchal economy of writing by enacting what Hélène Cixous terms *écriture féminine* (feminine writing). Specifically, Mary Sue fan fiction, as an instance of feminine writing, rhetorically undermines the patriarchal economy of writing by allowing women to write their own desires, deconstructing the Author-God function, and utilizing poetic language.<sup>57</sup> Astute readers will note the t-shirt ad mousepad narrative in my introduction to this document is a form of Mary Sue-ing: WWMSD?

But not all interpretations of the Mary Sue are as flattering. TvTropes' article "Avoid Writing the Mary Sue" tells us the Mary Sue is invoked when the powers that be are "unduly favoring a character by changing other characters or the environment in inappropriate ways. When the audience calls 'Mary Sue' on a character, the author has shattered their Willing Suspension of Disbelief."<sup>58</sup> The increasing number of women writing fic also saw the rise of femslash. It was only a matter of time, as I've said, before ficcers were queering female characters as well as male.

Mary Sue-ing is a trope in fanfic where the author inserts herself into the story she's writing. Many fanboys would point to Rey in the newest trilogy of Star Wars films. They would be wrong, at the very least, for saying it like it's a bad thing. But, Bonnstetter and Ott are writing before those movies came out. They unite two of my true loves: Cixous and fanfiction. They argue that Mary Sues can be, as Burke calls it, equipment

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<sup>57</sup> See (Re)Writing Mary Sue: *Écriture Féminine* and the Performance of Subjectivity in Text and Performance Quarterly, 31.4, October 2011, pp. 342-367: 346.

<sup>58</sup> See "Mary Sues" and "Avoid Writing a Mary Sue," TvTropes <http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/SoYouWantTo/AvoidWritingAMarySue>

for living.<sup>59</sup> Ficcers can cope or do other important processing by utilizing fictional worlds. Because fic is mostly written by women and Mary Sue is primarily used to disparage female ficcers, Bonnsetter and Ott argue that it is an example of Cixous' *écriture féminine*, which is feminine writing that "rhetorically undermines the patriarchal economy of writing by allowing women to write their own desires."<sup>60</sup> They do a pretty thorough overview of fic practices which are obvious to me because I'm a member of fandoms that follow these practices and mores, but I'm sure are useful to those outside. I won't remember them here because if readers desire to see them outlined they can go to the original text themselves. Doing that explanatory work is uninteresting to me and it takes some of the fun out of the process. I fear it would pull me further away from my own desires. And desire, a common theme in many of the articles above, is the whole point. Here's the dilemma in writing about Mary Sues: they are important but masking them as unimportant can be part of their tactical deployment. Furthermore, I'm not sure the audience for this dissertation are the people who need to be convinced. Academic writing wants to imbue the Mary Sue with purpose and radical potential for external audiences. I appreciate that Bonnsetter and Ott's careful and researched argument exists, but what is it doing? It's sitting behind a pay wall with fewer than 100 hits according to the tracking metric on the downloads page. I know it means something to the writer to validate her experiences through scholarly discourse. I know it's useful to critically engage with fandom practices. But I also know that the people Bonnsetter and Ott are critiquing don't care. They haven't changed. And

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<sup>59</sup> Kenneth Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, (IDK???): 296-297.

<sup>60</sup> Bonnsetter, Beth E. and Brian L. Ott. "(Re)Writing Mary Sue: *Écriture Féminine* and the Performance of Subjectivity." *Text and Performance Quarterly* 31 no. 4 (October 2011): 346.

perhaps that's the point. Just to write for yourself and to know you are doing something in the world that matters. But I still can't get past the fact that the real fandom critique here is impotent. Fanboys are still going to disparage. Astute readers will no doubt read some parallels between the anxiety of my fandom and my anxiety as a dissertating academic. For neither is the question of audience a neutral one. Fanboys are inevitably going to disparage both.

Fandom is a shared activity: "Fandom was automatically more than the mere act of being a fan of something," Gray, Sandvoss, and Harrington recount in their introduction to *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*, "it was a collective strategy, a communal effort to form interpretive communities that in their subcultural cohesion evaded the preferred and intended meanings of the 'power bloc' represented by popular media."<sup>61</sup> Gray, Sandvoss, and Harrington describe the development of fan studies in waves starting with Jenkins and his contemporaries, including Joli Jenson and John Fiske. Jenson, in "Fandom as Pathology: The Consequences of Characterization," begins with a thick description of how "fandom is seen as a psychological symptom of a presumed social dysfunction."<sup>62</sup> While working toward her conclusion "that the characterization of fandom as pathology is based in, supports, and justifies elitist and disrespectful beliefs about our common life," Jenson flips the script by asking "what happens if we change the objects of this description from

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<sup>61</sup> Gray, Sandvoss, and Harrington, "Introduction: Why Study Fans?," in *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*, eds. Gray, Sandvoss, and Harrington, (New York: NYU Press, 2007), 2.

<sup>62</sup> Joli Jenson, "Fandom as Pathology: The Consequences of Characterization," in *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media*, ed. Lesa A Lewis. (London: Routledge, 1992), 9.



fans to, say, professors?”<sup>63</sup> Ultimately, Jenson says diminishing fans and fandom “supports the celebration of particular values – the rational over the emotional, the educated over the uneducated, the subdued over the passionate, the elite over the popular, the mainstream over the margin, the status quo over the alternative.”<sup>64</sup> This reader wonders if some academics aren’t projecting their anxieties about their own discursive fanaticism onto fans of other discourses.

Where most of the first wave of fan scholars worked to legitimize fan studies as an academic pursuit by demonstrating fandom’s resistance tactics to dominant ideologies, Gray, Sandvoss, and Harrington suggest the “second wave of work on fan audiences highlighted the replication of social and cultural hierarchies within fan- and subcultures, as the choice of fan objects and practices of fan consumption are structured through our habitus as a reflection and further manifestation of our social, cultural, and economic capital.”<sup>65</sup> Scholars shifted away from de Certeau and toward Pierre Bourdieu as their grounding theorist. In particular, Bourdieu’s conceptualizations of habitus, taste, and cultural capital were important for changing how scholars approached fans. Where “taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier,”<sup>66</sup> and habitus is “the capacity to produce classifiable practices and works, and the capacity to differentiate and appreciate these practices and products,”<sup>67</sup> cultural capital marks the accumulation of embodied, objectified, and institutionalized capital that enables movement through social and

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid. 10 and 19.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid. 24.

<sup>65</sup> Gray, Sandvoss, and Harrington, “Introduction: Why Study Fans?,” in *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*, eds. Gray, Sandvoss, and Harrington, (New York: NYU Press, 2007), 6.

<sup>66</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, translated by Richard Nice, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984): 6.

<sup>67</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, translated

economic spheres.<sup>68</sup> As Gray, Sandvoss, and Harrington explain, “fans are seen not as a counterforce to existing social hierarchies and structures but, in sharp contrast, as agents of maintaining social and cultural systems of classification and thus existing hierarchies. These Bordieuan perspectives thus aimed to unmask the false notion of popular culture as a realm of emancipation.”<sup>69</sup> In short, the subversive nature of fandom was called into question, leading to thorough examination of how fans often reify cultural norms. This led to the third and current wave, which Gray, Sandvoss and Harrington say, “allows us to explore some of the key mechanisms through which we interact with the mediated world at the heart of our social, political, and cultural realities and identities. Perhaps the most important contribution of contemporary research into fan audiences thus lies in furthering our understanding of how we form emotional bonds with ourselves and others in a modern, mediated world.”<sup>70</sup> This emphasis on the alternative social community and its practices grounds fan studies in the process of audiencing. By exploring the affective nature of fandom and the resultant outpouring of fanworks puts focus on the “how” of audiencing. Following up on this idea of emotional attachment, Jonathan Gray and Kristina Busse, “find it useful to consider the overlapping but not necessarily interdependent axes of investment and involvement as two factors that can define fannish engagement.”<sup>71</sup> A move from fandom and

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by Richard Nice, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984): 170.

<sup>68</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, “The Forms of Capital.” in *The Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, edited by J. Richardson, (New York, Greenwood), 241-258.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid. 7.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid. 10.

<sup>71</sup> Kristina Busse and Jonathan Gray, “Fan Cultures and Fan Communities,” in *The Handbook of Media Audiences*, ed. Virginia Nightingale, (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), 426.

communities to the individual fan as the focus of fan studies provoked discussions of fans' agency. Gray and Busse succinctly recount:

Abercrombie and Longhurst critiqued Hall's incorporation/resistance model as often automatically (even if unintentionally) framing audience reactions as purely reactive. Instead, they attempted to initiate a new era of audience and fan studies with their spectacle performance paradigm that regarded the act of being an audience as performative and as constructive of identity... Hence, where previous fan studies had often considered the fan as one part of a greater whole, Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998), Hills, and Sandvoss all offered means by which one can examine the fan as an individual unit too or, rather, redefine the larger whole as a function of the individual. Moreover, this focus on individual subjects, with its larger scope of what constitutes fannish objects and activities, also permitted an approach that connected the multiple ways in which an individual engages fannishly with different objects, intensities, and levels of community involvement.<sup>72</sup>

This opening up of fandom by moving to the individual as a site of analysis creates more opportunities for study. Questions of what counts of fannish activity, while seemingly inconsequential, expand our understanding of participatory culture and how mass media invades many areas of our lives. Gray and Busse conclude that "fan communities and their audience responses remain exemplary cases of active readers, involved respondents, and an interactivity that creates a co-imaginary fan community that may be present but that is often far less pronounced in casual or individual fans."<sup>73</sup> As a parting thought, though, Gray and Busse remind "many still tend to see fandom as a practice endemic to "low culture" and to modern mass media."<sup>74</sup> They issue a challenge for fan scholars to broach the "consumption practices of aficionados and fans of high culture... perhaps demanding a more accurate accounting of the varying forms and cultures of consumption that exist across the class and cultural spectrum. Fan studies,

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid. 428-429.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid. 433.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid. 439.

in other words, still has much to study and still may have much to say about the politics of taste.”<sup>75</sup>

This notion of taste is seconded by John Tulloch writing about theater fandom. He tells us “the academic literature on fandom is both extensive and central within popular cultural studies. Yet there is little comparable analysis of fans of high-culture entertainment forms like theater.”<sup>76</sup> Setting aside the reductive discussion between high and low culture, Tulloch makes a fair point. Apart from Abercrombie and Longhurst’s *Audiences*, only a handful of articles look at fans of theater. In Tulloch’s study, he conducts surveys of multiple Chekhov plays to discover two kinds of fans in the audiences: playwright fans and actor fans. Unfortunately, Tulloch doesn’t move much beyond sorting the audience into categories. Stacy Wolf also takes taste to task by looking at teenage girl fannish attention for *Wicked*. After establishing the near dismissal of the musical by critics and through careful, intentional analysis of online interactions between fans, Wolf concludes that “girls’ active fandom and their insightful use of musical theater should urge us to take their tastes seriously and to value that space of girl bonding as a queer social practice, not merely as a stage to be gotten through and that only exists to lead up to heteronormative adulthood.”<sup>77</sup> Tulloch and Wolf both do work to overturn this idea that high culture doesn’t attract the same kinds of audience attention as popular culture. Wolf is a long-time champion of musical theater as an important object of study even as many dismiss it. In looking to these two

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid. 439.

<sup>76</sup> John Tulloch, “Fans of Chekhov: Re-Approaching ‘High Culture,’” in *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*, eds. Gray, Sandvoss, and Harrington, (New York: NYU Press, 2007), 110.

<sup>77</sup> Stacy Wolf, “Wicked Divas, Musical Theater, and Internet Girl Fans,” *Camera Obscura* 22, no. 2 (2007): 60.

articles in particular, I hope to show that there are varied ways of conducting audience research that extends beyond the time spent in the theater. Importantly, Wolf's insistence that fandom is a form of queer social practice serves to highlight the potential of audiencing.

### **2.3 Queer Worldmaking**

Fandom, as alternative social communities, should be explored as part of the practice of queer worldmaking. Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner describe the potential for queer worldmaking, or what they call "the radical aspirations of queer culture building," as "the changed possibilities of identity, intelligibility, publics, culture, and sex that appear when the heterosexual couple is no longer the referent or the privileged example of sexual culture."<sup>78</sup> Stating it simply, Berlant and Warner tell us "heterosexuality is not a thing," and it has very little to do with sex.<sup>79</sup> Rather, heterosexuality can be thought of as an ideology that underlies many other cultural practices and creates an impulse toward heteronormativity, which insists that the heterosexual couple is the foundation of society. But, as with any ideology, heteronormativity is a carefully cultivated system that is not rooted in some capital "T" truth but in privilege and power. To disrupt this hegemonic structure, Berlant and Warner call for queer cultures and worldmaking projects. They explain, "queer culture has learned not only how to sexualize ["criminal intimacies"] and other relations, but also to use them as a context for witnessing intense and personal affect while

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<sup>78</sup> Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, "Sex in Public," in *Queer Studies: An Interdisciplinary Reader*, eds. Robert J. Corber and Stephen Valocchi, (Malden, Oxford and Melbourne: Blackwell 2003), 1.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid. 4.

elaborating a public world of belonging and transformation.”<sup>80</sup> Criminal intimacies are those that are not acknowledged by heterosexual cultures, like gal pals, tricks, and the like, and they offer versions of intimacy as separate from domestic spaces. Queer cultures rely on these kinds of intimacies as well as mobile and fringe sites to support what heterosexual culture calls an alternative lifestyle. Berlant and Warner want their readers to remember that queer cultures might lack institutionalized practices, but they still have histories and practices that sustain them.

Ending with a nod toward utopian desires, Berlant and Warner caution against pinning hopes on a future more inclusive culture. José Esteban Muñoz unites notions of utopia and queerness in *Cruising Utopia*. Drawing on Ernst Bloch’s categorizations of abstract and concrete utopias, Muñoz asserts, “concrete utopias are the realm of educated hope.”<sup>81</sup> Where abstract utopias are only useful in so far as they can critique power structures, concrete utopias are rooted in an awareness of historical struggle and consciousness. Muñoz characterizes his project as “a backwards glance that enacts a future vision.”<sup>82</sup> He states “queerness is essentially about the rejection of the here and now and an insistence about a potentiality or concrete possibility for another world.”<sup>83</sup> By this definition, queerness and utopia go hand in hand. They are both future-oriented. They both seek a different world. They both draw on hope. In a dialogue with Lisa Duggan on hope and hopelessness, Muñoz puts it succinctly

Practicing educated hope is the enactment of a critique function. It is not about announcing the way things ought to be, but, instead, imagining what things could be. It is thinking beyond the narrative of what stands for the world today by seeing

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid. 8.

<sup>81</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 3.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid. 4.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid. 1.

it as not enough. Concrete Utopianism is rooted in a kind of objective possibility. This is the most generative moment in the utopian function.<sup>84</sup>

He continues to link Bloch's concrete utopia to Marx's praxis, which is related to worldmaking. Educated hope, then, is crucial for enacting change or for reformulating the world. As Muñoz reminds, though, hope is not unerring, and it is a risk. Duggan expounds on risk and hope by discussing failures of each, the ways they can lead to failures. She concludes that the opposite of hope isn't hopelessness: it's complacency, "and complacency is the affect of heteronormativity."<sup>85</sup> To collapse queer worldmaking and utopia, then, I would like to suggest that utopia, when rooted in educated hope and treated like an ongoing process, is a form of queer worldmaking. We can only imagine utopias as compared to our current (or past) moments. Likewise, queer worldmaking works against heteronormativity and related cultural forces to envision alternatives. The only way to realize either concept is to take a risk on hope.

Jill Dolan sees this hope as springing from the theater. In *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater*, Dolan argues for moments of utopia found audiencing performance. Muñoz gently points to the ways that Dolan's utopia is rooted in a live performance event, whereas he looks at performance more broadly. While I agree Dolan's analysis of performance only engages with one iteration of it, I believe some of her most useful formulations can be applied to other kinds of performance. She begins her book detailing her family's sports fandom and her apathy for it. She takes them to a show that happens to include stories about their favorite football team, and Dolan notes that her experience in the theater is akin to their experience at the arena.

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<sup>84</sup> Lisa Duggan and José Esteban Muñoz, "Hope and Hopelessness: A Dialogue," *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 19, no. 2 (2009): 278-279.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid. 280.

She recounts their sense of *communitas*, the hope they feel while rooting for a win, the future playoff possibilities remade with each game. Her description of their fandom and her theater patronage are so remarkably similar that I can't help but wonder at her not considering her practices as fannish. I don't mean to use this example to reduce hope and utopia to the same feelings fan have for their sports teams. Utopia as a queer worldmaking practice has much larger significance and implications. But, if we consider the ways we can find hope in the audience of a performance, can't we also consider the ways we can find hope audiencing books and films? As Dolan establishes, *communitas* is crucial in a configuration of utopia. It is also a critical for fandom. Fandom as an alternative social community "offers a place to scrutinize public meanings, [and] also to embody and, even through fantasy, enact the affective possibilities of 'doings.'"<sup>86</sup> I've intentionally used her rationale for theater as a site to explore utopia to define fandom. The "doings" she's referring to is the performative in Austen's definition. Dolan argues that utopian performatives are the "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."<sup>87</sup> Later, Dolan clarifies that utopia is an on-going process, something that is always being reached for or imagined. Fandom is a community deeply committed to re-visioning the world around them. Queer fandom, in particular but all fandom generally, seeks to live in those affective and aesthetic excesses. Not to belabor the point, but fandom as a practice, is built on hope for what might be and what could be.

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<sup>86</sup> Jill Dolan, *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press 2005): 6.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.* 5.



From this performance of fandom/being a fan, I'd like to move to Jill Dolan's performative utopias. If we can accept, as I do, that fandom is a performance and each fan work itself is a performance, then Dolan's idea that "performance—not just drama—is one of the few places where a live experience, as well as an expression, through content, of utopia might be possible."<sup>88</sup> Dolan, as a theatre scholar, has a vested interest in live performance, but I think applying her notions to texts, especially fannish texts that seem to have a life of their own, offers new possibilities.

Part of what makes fanworks fascinating during an ongoing television show (which is where the bulk of my examples will come from) is that as the show evolves, so do the fics. Season one fics differ from season three fics, and the constant movement of the show requires constant movement from the fic. This sense of ever-changing-ness makes fandom feel alive. Each fic, especially as tied to particular episodes or seasons, becomes both a documentation of that moment and its reimagining. But even that fic is not static. It is in motion, it is alive and live just as much as its ongoing source text. To return to Dolan, she says "My concern here is with how utopia can be imagined or experienced affectively, through feelings, in small, incremental moments that performance can provide."<sup>89</sup> She turns to Richard Dyer's chapter on entertainment and utopia to illustrate her interest. He says "Entertainment does not . . . present models of utopian worlds. . . . Rather the utopianism is contained in the feelings it embodies. It presents . . . what utopia would feel like rather than how it would be organized. It thus works at the level of sensibility, by which I mean an affective code that is characteristic of, and largely specific to, a given mode of cultural production." This is where Dolan

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid. 37.

<sup>89</sup> Dolan, Jill. "Performance, Utopia, and the "Utopian Performative"." *Theatre Journal* 53, no. 3 (2001): 460.

derives her utopian performative. She is interested not in any actualizable utopia, but in an affective one.

In an introductory essay trying to unite 17 different essays on/of/about literary criticism, Sedgwick links a lack of consensus about where queerness is located (in a text or reader) with a “consensual hermeneutic of suspicion.”<sup>90</sup> Sedgwick starts with a nod to Ricoeur and then proceeds through a sweeping overview of psychoanalytic thought on the paranoid. While it might be worth my time to further investigate or acknowledge that here, I fully trust Sedgwick and conclude that the paranoid wants to know what is behind the curtain most of all, wants to unnest the matryoshka texts until there is only a wisp of a text, of a practice, of an interpretation remaining. All of this leads Sedgwick to realize that “the monopolistic program of paranoid knowing systematically disallows any explicit recourse to reparative motives, no sooner to be articulated than subject to methodical uprooting.”<sup>91</sup> Taken as something on the other end of the spectrum, the reparative position is about pleasure and is ameliorative, which is a word I cannot pronounce and had to look up.<sup>92</sup> Sedgwick asks what can be gained by stepping away from a near totalizing theory of negative affect and whether a reparative mode can offer hope in a suitably academically sustainable way? Where the paranoid takes apart, “the desire of a reparative impulse...is additive and accretive. Its fear, a realistic one, is that the culture surrounding it is inadequate or inimical to its nurture; it wants to assemble and confer plentitude on an object that will then have resources to offer an inchoate

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<sup>90</sup> Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading; or, You’re so Paranoid, You Probably Think This Introduction is about You,” in *Navel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction* edited by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997): 3.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid. 20.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

self.”<sup>93</sup> Once I was done dictionarying several of those words, I have come to understand that the reparative is about what a text offers rather than what it hides. Knowing already that ideologies are embedded in everything, operating from a reparative rather than paranoid position allows a reader to step away from the need to dismiss everything and to find the parts that can be saved, valued, appreciated for what they do. Sedgwick summates (to use a word she might for the first time in this paragraph) “what we can best learn from [reparative] practices are, perhaps, the many ways in which selves and communities succeed in extracting sustenance from the objects of a culture—even a culture whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain them.”<sup>94</sup>

Isaac West responds to an unseen question about the delineations of theory, method, and criticism by arguing that “these related forms of inquiry are available for rearticulation such that each mobilizes what is latent in the other to develop a more muscular connection between theory *and* criticism so that we might trouble the premature separation and bifurcation of criticism *from* theory and theory *from* criticism.”<sup>95</sup> He’s primarily worried about queer theory being deployed to show how something is “not as queer as it should be” or even “not queer at all” (these are my paraphrases because his language is next level and I’d rather not). In order to avoid the trap where “theory channels criticism into a forced choice between uncomplicated understandings of norms and normativities,” West reminds “texts and lived practices rarely if ever, fit neatly into our theoretical binaries.”<sup>96</sup> He calls for “more capricious theories of norms, the normative, and normativities capable of capturing the

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid. 25.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid. 32.

<sup>95</sup> West, Isaac. “Queer Generosities,” *Western Journal of Communication* 77, no. 5 (2013): 538.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid. 539.

multiplicities of texts and practices so that we may not render prematurely negative judgments against texts and practices capable of queering cultural formations.”<sup>97</sup> And while I’d rather stop quoting him at length, his language is both dense and precise, which is a hard combination to rephrase without losing some of its impact. But, I’ll try because this is getting a bit out of hand. Rather than wholesale rejecting texts or practices that have problematic aspects, West would encourage critics and theoreticians to examine whether or not there is something about the text or practice that still queers the world. Intentionally focusing on the deployment of queer as a verb and not simply examining how something measures up to the myriad norms at play allows scholars to better grasp the object of study in its context, complexities, and not just content. As West insists “we should want something more from our work to help us create worlds we want to live in as opposed to reinscribing at every turn the dominant order of things.”<sup>98</sup> We should want to do more than apply theory and dismiss that which doesn’t measure up. We should want to build theory that supports the way we actually move through the world. Ish.

My dissertation is a description of how I have audienceed both specific performances and performance studies, of how I have been a fan of both primary and secondary cultural texts, and of how I have engaged all the above as a way of making the cultural waters in which I swim less treacherous. In performance studies I draw on Linda Park-Fuller and Michael S. Bowman and Ruth Laurion Bowman. From fan studies I pull from Henry Jenkins and Francesca Coppa. In between those two fields, I think of Stacy Wolf and Jill Dolan. Though perhaps Dolan rounds out the queer studies

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid. 540.

folks I indebted to: Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Isaac West and Jose Esteban Muñoz. At times I lean on one of the above areas of study more firmly than others. I hope through these shifting perspectives, I can highlight the different ways these areas work together to create a wide image of audiencing.

## Chapter 3. The Method

Method is a dirty word for some fans. Spelling things out spoils the fun. In this chapter I will lay out my method, the mystory. In this chapter, I'll also obscure my method, by which I mean I'll demonstrate how a mystorical method uses what looks like obfuscation to queer dominant discourses. What is mystory? It's Jeremy Bearimy, baby. It's how Spongebob Squarepants ties his shoes. It's that Girl Scout song about friends. For those readers who get those references, your work here is already done. For the rest of you, here is a crude and unartful preview of what's to come:

My story = personal narrative

Mystery = poetic writing

Herstory = counter-normative discourse

Personal (author's cultural location)

+ Popular (mass culture)

+ Professional (officiating culture)

Braid

Mystory = Braid

Let's call such interludes mousepad moments, shall we? A means of giving the authorizing fanboy what he needs while still preserving what we can of the poetic obfuscation some of us require to find meaning in performances that didn't imagine us as anything more than eavesdroppers.

### 3.1 Ha Ha Nanette

"Jokes are the method," the mousepad recipient advisor told me over and over again. If I consult my fieldnotes (read: regular notes, this isn't an ethnography, but it's

not, not an ethnography. I'm getting ahead of myself), I will find my first notation of this on February 22, 2018. This is the same time he told me "it's all there," and yet, here we are in July, and I'm still not done with this dissertation?<sup>99</sup> But, we're talking about jokes right now. I make a lot of jokes. I'm very funny. So, I was advised to make this dissertation funnier and to teach my reader how to make *my* kind of joke by the end. This is all great advice. I devoted a whole page of my bullet journal to writing this in big, pretty letters. I thought a lot about what it means to make *my* kind of joke. I thought this dissertation is a joke. I won't beg you to laugh, dear dissertation reader, but I can't spell everything out for you clearly either. You have to get it on your own.

At the last academic conference I attended, I told everyone I was leaving academia to pursue a career in comedy. This is a lie. But a funny one, so perhaps a joke. Whether they got the "joke" or not, we laughed. Was I serious? Didn't I know how hard it is to make a career in comedy? (Didn't they know how hard it is to make a career in academia?) I was in the midst of "leaving" when I saw Hannah Gatsby's *Nanette*. Hannah tells us all she's "leaving comedy" throughout the comedy special. While an argument could be made her special was mislabeled comedy, I am struck by the ways she was using comedy to leave comedy. Wasn't I using academia to leave academia? We were using the form we wanted to leave to show that we were leaving which only cemented our relationship to the thing we were leaving.

Obviously, I haven't left. I'm scrambling to stay. I think in saying we're leaving, both Hannah and I were expressing our discontents with the way things are. Wouldn't it be better if they were different? We don't want to leave. We just want it to be easier to

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<sup>99</sup> Obviously, here we are in February 2020, a whole 19 months later, but I think it's useful to preserve the record of the amount of time I've spent with this document.

stay. We want it to not hurt. We joke about it to create distance, to process and cope and move forward. But, as Hannah explains, a joke stops the story before it is over. A joke crystalizes the trauma and prevents healing. Stories are the way to find resolution. Stories have endings. They have meanings. They build connections. I am often trying to use jokes to do the work of stories because it's easier. Hannah says jokes have two parts, but stories have three. I am only telling some of my story if I let myself end on the joke. Hannah also points out the joke is easier because sometimes the end is hard or uninteresting. I would point out a joke is easier because sometimes the dissertation is hard and uninteresting. But how can I write a dissertation that hopes to do anything in the world if I cut off the story before it's over?

### **3.2 Mary (Ci)xous**

"Write your self. Your body must be heard," Hélène Cixous implores in "The Laugh of the Medusa."<sup>100</sup> I first read this when I was a first semester master's student in a seminar with the woman who would become my master's advisor. Her hair was like aging paper, white with yellowed edges. She gave me a prize (a plastic whistle of all things) for excellence in that seminar before later telling me she'd never seen good writing from me. It's fair to say that she was confusing. But, Cixous was clear:

Women must write through their bodies, they must invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes, and rhetorics, regulations and codes, they must submerge, cut through, get beyond the ultimate reserve-discourse, including the one that laughs at the very idea of pronouncing the word "silence," the one that, aiming for the impossible, stops short before the word "impossible" and writes "the end."<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs* 1 no. 4 (Summer, 1976): 880.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.* 886



The fledgling feminist scholar I styled myself to be took this charge very seriously. The professor told us “no evidence was evidence,” and I heard “even silence speaks.” I heard that I had an obligation to reach back in time and give a voice to the women who’ve been lost or overlooked or maligned for unclear reasons. I dove into historical research. I was going to be part of the new wave of 18<sup>th</sup> century scholars who looked with fresh eyes to the past. Barely buckling one semester of theory under my belt, my first semester master’s zeal made me feel like I was on the verge of discovering something new.

“Write your self. Your body must be heard,” Hélène Cixous implores in “The Laugh of the Medusa.”<sup>102</sup> I read this again and again after we discussed it as a class. I got especially stuck on, “She alone dares and wishes to know from within, where she, the outcast, has never ceased to hear the resonance of fore-language...Her language does not contain, it carries; it does not hold back, it makes possible.”<sup>103</sup> It makes possible. I could write my way in. I could write my way out.<sup>104</sup> I could write *my* way.

### **3.3 Puncception Is a Joke Someone Else Made First**

[A JOKE]

Gregory Ulmer invents the mystory because he hopes to wholly utilize the newfound potential of the internet. Mystory is a pun of the ultimate caliber:

mystery+mastery+history+herstory+envois = mystory

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid. 88o.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid. 889

<sup>104</sup> I was told I have to cite Hamilton. Here’s the script: Miranda, Lin-Manuel. “Hamilton: An American Musical.” In *Hamilton: The Revolution*. Edited by Jeremy McCarter. New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2016. Here’s the cast recording: Miranda, Lin Manuel. *Hamilton: An American Musical*. Atlantic Records, 2015, MP3. And here’s the first run live performance, which I haven’t seen but I want to cover my bases: *Hamilton: An American Musical*, music and lyrics by Lin-Manuel Miranda, dir. Thomas Kail, Richard Rodgers Theatre, New York, NY, February 2, 2016.

All hail Gregory Ulmer Fudd, the great jokester who derived the concept of the puncept from Derrida: “puncts: sets of fragments collected on the basis of a single shared feature.”<sup>105</sup> When the “punct replac[es] the concept” it opens up new dimensions of thinking and new possibilities of being in the world.<sup>106</sup> The flattening discourse of the concept seeks a single shared dimension. The puncept makes a joke and moves in several directions at once. This is of great comfort to those of us who rarely feel like we belong in that “shared” dimension. With the term puncept, Ulmer describes Derrida doing a thing he likes. Taking something and exposing new parts by making a joke. Ish.

In deploying the term puncept, I describe Ulmer describing Derrida who is describing

Francis Ponge...has represented if not systematized, the science of the signature in which a text is written in the key of the author's name. Derrida has devoted considerable effort in a variety of books and articles to show that not only poets but also philosophers sign their texts in this way, establishing homonymy between the personal and the disciplinary registers of discourse (the puncept inventio). In mystory it is not a question of proving that texts have been authored this way, but that they could be, and will be in the new academic discourse.<sup>107</sup>

[YOU CAN STOP WAITING FOR THE JOKE]

### **3.4 To Eth or To Auto-Eth?**

In trying to understand the process of audiencing, I immediately considered my own experiences as an audience member. I've been consuming media consciously for about 25 years if we go by my first memories. Much of that time I was watching movies and TV shows none of my friends were, which made for some lonely nights spent cataloguing what I've seen and what was next. I was pretty religious from ages 12-17,

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<sup>105</sup> Gregory Ulmer, *Teletheory: Grammatology in the Age of Video*. (New York: Routledge, 1989), 209.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid. 147.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid. 156.

which made much of mainstream media unpalatable to me. Too much sex and swearing. So, I only watched movies made before 1970, a somewhat arbitrary cutoff date that roughly coincided with the collapse of the studio system. When you can't talk with friends about something, you can always make a spread sheet of all the movies you've ever seen that's sortable by title, lead actors, year, and genre. (I was not clued into the idea that directors mattered as a younger person.) I kept a VHS tape to record my favorite musical numbers. At last count, I had 215. I maintained a handwritten list of every scene that included the name of the movie and the title of the song being performed. Because it was handwritten, space was at a premium, so I created a system of symbols that represented the most frequent stars of the clips. Two stick figures for Rogers and Astaire, a heart for Cyd Charisse, and music notes for Judy Garland. When I was 12 my mother wanted to relax after work and sent me to the spare room to watch *Breakfast at Tiffany's* so she could be alone. For the following year I only drank out of coffee mugs and called animals by their species rather than their names. Actually, I still primarily call animals by their species because I can hear Holly lamenting that she hasn't any right to name the poor things. I'm still looking for a place that makes me feel like Tiffany's makes her feel. Once MySpace became popular, I started following pages for my favorite celebrities: Bette Davis, Joan Crawford, Lana Turner. I noticed there wasn't a good page dedicated to Ava Gardner, so I started one. I spent hours poorly editing photos to share and researching day-in-the-life posts. It was far and away the most popular fan page for the femme fatale, with hundreds of friends.

But, that gets me to the reason telling only my experience isn't enough. Audiencing can be a quasi-solo activity, but, more often than not, it's a communal experience. None of my friends in high school knew who Doris Day was, but I still made

pins for us to wear every April 3rd to celebrate Doris Day Day. I enjoyed sharing my media consumption with others even though they didn't have the same connection to it that I did. When I discovered fandom in my last year of high school, I figured out some of what I was missing. It was infinitely more fun to talk *Star Wars* with other people who cared about it as much as I did. And the fanworks were spectacular. I loved *Gone with the Wind* but, like most people, hated the sequel *Scarlett*. Searching the world wide web to find lengthy, insightful commentary on the novels as well as fanfiction re-writing *Scarlett's* narrative was exciting. I had moved from being alone to part of a group.

To keep moving the discussion forward chronologically, embarking on this dissertation project in grad school, I considered which research methods would allow me to draw on those experiences. I knew it would behoove me to approach audiencing with community in mind and to find ways to more fully capture how audiencing is about making connection. (Isn't writing this dissertation just a similar movement from being on my own to sharing with the group?) At the very least, audiencing is more easily traceable when it results in fanworks and public declarations of being a part of the audience. So, I could conduct an ethnography of audiencing, using my history as fan and audience member to connect with other fans. Or perhaps, I could use autoethnography to make myself an exemplar of the practices I am interested in exploring.

Imagine a more artful transition with relevant quotations here if you must.

But, even in these two methods, I find I'm left wanting. Autoethnography can give me a clear picture of myself and the power structures and social formations that have shaped me. Ethnography can help me understand how a group creates their own culture and functions in a larger environment. Both methods proceed to particular ends. They create narratives that explain their objects of analysis that conclude with somewhat

definitive explanations. Audiencing, however, is supremely subjective and at times a matter of taste. An autoethnography would explain my audiencing habits, which are naturally very interesting and everyone should care about them (that's sarcasm), but apart from using myself as an exemplar, I don't think I'd offer much to the conversation about audiencing. An ethnography could usefully capture one segment of the audience, but that segment will by all likelihood be vastly different than another segment. This is not to say that I'm trying to present a totalizing idea of audiencing, but I am trying to offer more than this is how "Oncers" operate, for instance. There is useful information to be gleaned through ethnographic studies of fandoms, but each fandom is its own entity. "Oncers" are not "Xphiles" are not "Whovians" are not "Wayward Sisters."

I think what I'm trying to get at here is that ethnography is too specific for what I'm after. I don't want an understanding of one fandom. I want a better understanding of audiencing which is broad and also a process in which everyone participates. I want to explore audiencing with fandom as one example since it is a clearly visible and vocal part of the audience. But not everyone in an audience is a fan. By conducting an ethnography, I would be limited in the range of the audience I could explore. (Given my limited ability to access audiences for various media and given the limitations in trying to study what has been described as a nearly invisible practice.)<sup>108</sup>

Additionally, Francesca Coppa explains, "most academic studies take an ethnographic, not historical or literary, approach" to fan studies.<sup>109</sup> Coppa's concern is that scholars are undervaluing fandom by treating it as only a group to be studied.

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<sup>108</sup> This is a rough paraphrase of Eric E. Peterson, "Introduction," *Literature in Performance* 3, no. 2 (1983): 33.

<sup>109</sup> "A Brief History of Media Fandom," in *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet: New Essays* eds. Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse, (Kindle Location 589). Kindle Edition.

Fandom is more than an insular group activity. Fandom produces work in relationship to dominant discourses that deserves serious treatment. Much like musicals are often dismissed as undeserving of critical attention, fandom is neglected as a producer of new work rather than as solely a consumer.

### 3.5 My Mystory Story

What I'm winding up to is this: mystory.

Ulmer doesn't define mystory in concrete terms so much as offers parameters: "Mystory continues to include narrative knowledge, but prefers to work with forms such as the anecdote and joke in order to expose the way grand metanarratives position the subject in a particular ideology."<sup>110</sup> This kind of definition is developed across his book *Teletheory*. This is important because he often says in the book that he is inventing the form as he writes the book. It creates a permanent, perpetual state of invention which is fitting as mystory is a never-really-finished kind of genre. That is to say

mystory learns from them to approach a discourse formation, a knowledge practice from the angle of personal experience in which a general science exists as a collection of stereotypes and as an idiom; at the level of practice these two dimensions cross and exchange properties, such that the life story may become the vehicle for theoretical research, and the disciplinary concepts operate in terms of the prejudices of common sense.<sup>111</sup>

I feel that mystory best fits this topic for myriad reasons. Mystory is a method of exploring the self though exploring culture. Conversely, it is also a way of exploring culture through exploring the self.

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<sup>110</sup> Gregory Ulmer, *Teletheory: Grammatology in the Age of Video*. (New York: Routledge, 1989), 86.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid. 118.

To paraphrase, mystory is, at its core, I say, we say, they say.<sup>112</sup> It's a conjugation of an experience or phenomenon. It's trying on different declensions to better understand the object. (And though I've mixed my metaphors there, mystory can be seen as caught between verb and noun. A doing and a thing done as most performances are.)<sup>113</sup> As Dan Heaton quoting Ruth and Michael Bowman summarizing Greg Ulmer reminds, "the proper response to a mystory should be the desire to create your own."<sup>114</sup> You should encounter the mystory (n) and leave doing your own mystory (v). Each of the three strands that comprise the body of a mystory prompts questions and reminders of related texts. Personal narratives beget comparison of personal experiences. Popular texts call to mind similar texts or different critical lenses to view it through. Professional texts encourage deeper digging to learn more. Like fanfiction perhaps. Mystory is a generative genre.

In their *Handbook for CMST 3040: Performance Composition*, Michael Bowman and Ruth Laurion Bowman explain "the mystory method is aimed at engaging students in the politics, problems, and pleasures of intertextual composition"<sup>115</sup> as such, "the mystory asks the researcher to investigate the story of him- or herself as it is enciphered through another subject of study."<sup>116</sup> They conclude their introduction to the method by reassuring students that even if they don't fully understand it at the time of attempting a

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<sup>112</sup> At the risk of ruining the joke, this is a play on Graff and Birkenstein's popular composition textbook *They Say, I Say: The Moves that Matter in Academic Writing*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Co): 2010.

<sup>113</sup> Elin Diamond, *Unmaking Mimesis: Essays on Feminist Theater*, (New York: Routledge, 1997).

<sup>114</sup> "Fake ID: A Mystory/Response to Busted Flat in Baton Rouge," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 25, no. 1 (2005): 83-89.

<sup>115</sup> Michael S. Bowman and Ruth Laurion Bowman, *Handbook for CMST 3040 Performance Composition Part 3*. Louisiana State University, 2003, 2.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.* 3.

mystory, that “understanding comes after or through the doing of it.”<sup>117</sup> I’d similarly say, that perhaps you, dear dissertation reader, might not understand what I’m doing at this moment, but hopefully by the end, all the pieces will hang together in a meaningful way. Right now, we’re still weaving. We haven’t made the braid yet. Furthermore, “the value of the mystory experiment is not so much in the product but in the process of creation, just as much of the value of autoperformance as practice cannot be comprehended externally but only through experience.”<sup>118</sup>

Last semester, my students and I tackled mystory together.<sup>119</sup> They got very good at naming the three parts of mystory, and they got very good at challenging me to find new ways of explaining the genre. My first attempt to explain sent me back to my roots in literary analysis. I explained the mystory was about using different lenses to understand something. Just like we could approach a text from different standpoints, mystory allowed us to examine something in our world from different points of view. From there the metaphor evolved: imagine a pair of 3D glasses. One red lens and one blue lens together make the image on the other side come alive. To stretch the analogy too far, imagine the frames are your personal story holding together the popular and the professional. When you wear the glasses, you can see things you hadn’t noticed before. It takes all three parts, though, to see something new.

To take the concept out of the abstract, I drew a giant three-way Venn diagram on some butcher paper. We circled up around the large sheet and took turns sorting the

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid. 3.

<sup>118</sup> “Performing the Mystory; A Textshop in Autoperformance,” *Teaching Performance Studies*, eds Nathan Stucky and Cynthia Wimmer, (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2002): 170.

<sup>119</sup> Last semester here refers to Spring 2018, but I am choosing to leave the time marker as is to preserve some of the reality of this document. It has taken time. I like that it can reflect that.



threads of Michael S. Bowman's *Killing Dillinger* into various categories.<sup>120</sup> Once we identified some of the main components, we worked on the overlapping sections. What connections existed between personal and popular, etc.? Then we arrived at the center. Here was where we could speculate on the ultimate purpose of the mystory. What was the at the core of all three narratives? (All cards on the table: this activity failed miserably because no one read.)

Ultimately what I learned in teaching mystory is that "the purpose of a mystory is to discover rather than to argue, to feel rather than to know."<sup>121</sup> My students and I learned so much about each other and about ways of being in the world. Most performances were met with overlapping comments of similar experiences or never having thought about it that way. Not every performance ended up being a mystory per se, but each one was very honest and earnest. My students had two performances before their mystories, one of which did not include a personal narrative, and they infinitely preferred being able to tell their stories. The moments they realized the power of the personal and how a simple story can transform into a performance that has impact are some of my most treasured memories of the class.

To be honest, I'm not exactly sure where this is going or how exactly it fits except I wanted to include my students because I loved them, and they helped me do this and I feel less alone when I can cite them. I think they will have my back when the fanboys come.

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<sup>120</sup> Michael S. Bowman, "Killing Dillinger: A Mystory," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 20, no. 4 (2000): 342-374.

<sup>121</sup> Marc C. Santos, Ella R. Bieze, Lauren E. Cagle, Jason Carabelli, Zachary P. Dixon, Kristen N. Gay, Sarah Beth Hopton, Megan M. McIntyre, "Our [Electrate] Stories: Explicating Ulmer's Mystory Genre," *Kairos: A Journal of Rhetoric, Technology and Pedagogy* 18, no. 2 (2014) accessed January 28, 2018, <http://technorhetoric.net/18.2/praxis/santos-et-al/index.html>

### 3.6 Digging Up Bones (Boooooooooooooone?)

I watch a lot of TV documentaries about ancient civilizations. I'm endlessly fascinating by what the world was thousands of years ago. Also, I love *Ancient Aliens*, which seem to me just a group of history and religious text fanboys.<sup>122</sup> (I mean, basically in an absence of canonical texts providing meaning, ancient astronaut theorists offer their own interpretations of events. That's exactly what headcanons and fanon are.)<sup>123</sup> Many of the documentaries I watch have titles like *Secrets* or *Secrets of the Dead* or include words like "mystery" and "uncovering." "The Truth Behind." I like this idea that we can solve the past like it's a puzzle or that we can glean some forbidden knowledge. I especially like that I can watch three different documentaries about the Sphinx and hear three tenured Egyptologists tell me three different origin stories. How *was* it built? No one can ever know because there is no text or person to tell us. One of the archaeologists says, "in the absence of text, we have to rely on context."<sup>124</sup> Then, he argues that Khufu built the Sphinx because he can match the layers in the rocks from the temple in front of the Sphinx to the layers in the Sphinx itself. While I have nothing to say about his archaeological research, I am drawn to his declaration about context. On some levels it reminds me of my master's advisor reminding me that "no evidence is evidence." Not

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<sup>122</sup> I do want to recognize that *Ancient Aliens* is racist in its assumptions that ancient humans from Africa and South America in particular are incapable of complex and intelligent design. The wild speculation is only fun insofar as it allows us to think broadly about what our ancestors were capable of, not when it is dismissive of their ingenuity.

<sup>123</sup> Headcanon being personal belief of what is a part of canon despite not explicitly being part of it and fanon being a shared belief in the fandom that something is true despite not being part of canon.

<sup>124</sup> *Secrets*, "Great Pyramid," Directed by Anna Thomson, Smithsonian Channel, October 20, 2014.

having something might mean there's a reason for its absence. Or, it might just be that there are some unknowable things, no matter how much we may want to know them.

One of the most interesting (to me) methods of archaeological research is called ground truthing. The archaeologist commissions a pilot to fly a scanning device over a patch of land that may hold some hidden treasure. The device will map the geological features and reveal anomalies that could be ancient buildings. After reviewing the data gathered from the aerial scan, the archaeologist will set out on foot to the places that look like they could be ruins. Ground truthing has uncovered Viking settlements and where workers lived around Angkor Watt. It's very cool. This two-prong method of discovery is very appealing to me. Theories are developed from a wide image of the area, and then there is an up-close investigation to test those theories. In trying to uncover the location of Pi-Ramesses, the capital city of Ramesses the Great, archaeologists were first fooled by the presence of many monuments bearing his name at Tanis. The small finds, pottery and the like, all dated several hundred years too late, but because there was physical evidence linking Ramesses to Tanis, many archaeologists thought they had found it. Eventually one scholar couldn't ignore the inconsistencies of the site and set out to remap the area. They consulted topographical maps looking for traces of the Nile's movement thousands of years ago. After finding a possible location, they began the process of ground truthing. Scans uncovered a major city hundreds of miles from Tanis. On the ground, they dug up the stables and the walls of the city. The only remnant of the city on the surface was the feet of a colossus found in the middle of a farmer's field. This example speaks to me the importance of perspective. Somethings are not as they appear. Sometimes things require both a wide angle and a close up in order to fully grasp its complexity.

Obviously, these archaeological metaphors can translate to the kind of work I hope to do. I want to attempt a kind of ground truthing of audiencing. But, I also don't want to get caught up in the metaphor. Ragan Fox has already offered one use of archaeology for performance studies.<sup>125</sup> Granted his emphasis is on artifacts, Fox relies on the Foucauldian definition of archaeology to ground his work. For Foucault, archaeology is "concerned with discourse in its own volume, as a monument."<sup>126</sup> Archaeology is— Well, perhaps I should focus on what archaeology is not as that's primarily how Foucault defines it:

archaeology does not try to restore what has been thought, wished, aimed at, experienced, desired by men in the very moment at which they expressed it in discourse; it does not set out to recapture that elusive nucleus in which the author and the oeuvre exchange identities; in which thought still remains nearest to oneself, in the as yet unaltered form of the same, and in which language has not yet been deployed in the spatial, successive dispersion of discourse. In other words, it does not try to repeat what has been said by reaching it in its very identity. It does not claim to efface itself in the ambiguous modesty of a reading that would bring back, in all its purity, the distant, precarious, almost effaced light of the origin.<sup>127</sup>

Archaeology simply put is "nothing more than a rewriting."<sup>128</sup> Archaeology doesn't seek origin stories or secret messages. It simply offers a reexamination of the object of its attention. Fox coined the term auto-archaeology to better capture what it means to use artifacts in uncovering the self. Because artifacts are steeped in the cultures and power structures that made them, they afford a different kind of knowledge about the self than introspection and self-reflexivity alone. The retelling of self through the examination of those artefacts provides a wide image, much like mystory. I think I've spent enough time

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<sup>125</sup> "Tales of a Fighting Bobcat: An 'Auto-archaeology' of Gay Identity Formation and Maintenance," *Text and Performance Quarterly*, 30 no. 2, (2010) 122-142.

<sup>126</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and The Discourse on Language*, translated by A.M. Sheridan Smith, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 138.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid. 139-140.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid. 140.

on this diversion, and I'd like to move on. But, the mystory, like archaeology, doesn't seek to invent or create ex nihilo. It simply reflects and refracts the many facets of its focus.

### **3.7 Big Wide Image Picture**

I've just noticed that I've been using the term "wide image" without ever having defined it. Have you figured it out? Used the context clues to fill in the blanks? Probably, though, you're wondering why I didn't just define it the first time. I forgot. Also, it wouldn't have made sense until you'd read the rest. So, what is a wide image? Gregory Ulmer parenthetically asides that it is "(the core image guiding [the researchers'] creativity)." <sup>129</sup> Maybe that's why I've assumed it needs no definition. If Ulmer primarily offers definition through example, then I can also do that. I think. But, if he's using examples, then I guess I need examples and that means I'd have to tell you right now the image I'm holding in my mind as I build this document and that takes some of the mystory out of the mystory and I don't want to spoil the ending. So maybe I'll offer a challenge, a game, a hunt, a diversion, a puzzle. Actually, a question: as you sift through these fragments and theories, what image is forming in your mind? What discoveries are you making? And then, when we conclude our time together, dear dissertation reader, we'll hopefully be seeing the same thing. I've offered you a mousepad. A braid. They are enough to get us started.

And, at the risk of putting too fine a point on this, let me conclude the chapter. Here's the mousepad: methodically, I will be mystorying my way through audience as a personal gerund, a collective verb, and scholastic noun. Audiencing audiences audience,

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<sup>129</sup> Gregory Ulmer, *Internet Invention: From Literacy to Electracy*, (New York: Longman, 2003): 10.

if you will? You'd probably rather not and say you did. I don't think that joke works, but it's all part of the puncept I'm pursuing. I'm hoping this "language does not contain... does not hold back... [but] makes possible."<sup>130</sup> Can you see where we're headed? This is discovery, not argument. We are feeling our way through because we can't know it all right now. The braid is beginning to twist. Hold on to your hats.

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 889.

## Chapter 4. You Can Take the Fan out of the Audience, But That's about It

If you can believe it, *Hamilton* has been out for five years. Some days it feels like I grew up with *Hamilton*. Other days the musical still seems fresh. My play count for the soundtrack and the subsequent mixed tape is in the hundreds. I'm not throwing away my shot.<sup>131</sup> I know about whispers.<sup>132</sup> I am in the eye of the hurricane.<sup>133</sup> I'll write my way out.<sup>134</sup> I have the t-shirt and buttons. I even have a 3 second video of Renee Elise Goldsberry telling me to "work, Cynthia. Work." (I'm trying Elise, I promise.) But, I've never seen *Hamilton*. I'll never get to see Lin Manuel Miranda as Hamilton (or Goldsberry as Angelica). I am a fan of *Hamilton*, and yet I've never walked into a theater, taken a seat, and watched the show. What I'm trying to establish here is that being in the audience and being a fan are not mutually inclusive categories. I would like to explore that further in this chapter.

Using musical theater fandom as an example, I'd like to pull at the threads of audiencing to show that it is broader and more potent than we currently configure it. Musicals and their fandoms occupy a unique position in our current media landscape because Broadway shows are often inaccessible due to both economic and geographic concerns, and yet they have a thriving, robust fandom on Tumblr and YouTube. These fans who have never audienced (based on our current conception of the term) the object

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<sup>131</sup> Lin Manuel Miranda, Anthony Ramos, Daveed Diggs, Okieriete Onaodowan, Leslie Odom Jr., & the Cast of *Hamilton*, "My Shot," track 3 on *Hamilton: An American Musical Act 1*, Atlantic Records. 2015. MP3.

<sup>132</sup> Hamilton, "First Burn," YouTube video, 3:06, April 30, 2018.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r2ys-AimNbE>

<sup>133</sup> Lin Manuel Miranda, "Hurricane," track 13 on *Hamilton: An American Musical Act 2*, Atlantic Records. 2015. MP3.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

of their fandom prove there are multiple ways to be present with a performance. Specifically, in this chapter, I look at the Miscast Gala and Broadway Backwards, which are complex sites of audiencing, and recount my own participation in musical theater fandom. What I hope to show, ultimately, is the forces of queer world making at work.

#### 4.1 In Which I Introduce Some Terms

Eminem coins the term “stan” in his eponymous 2000 song. A stan is “an overzealous maniacal fan for any celebrity or athlete.”<sup>135</sup> To stan is to “go to great lengths to obsess over a celebrity.”<sup>136</sup> Eminem, perhaps a stan or just a man who can’t handle rejection, which really isn’t the same thing at all, mentions Mariah Carey in several songs over the course of nearly a decade.<sup>137</sup> Sorry to this man, but Mariah does not know him. She does, however, release “Obsessed” in 2009 in which she dresses up as a hoodie wearing, goateed man in a room papered over with her face. She never confirms that the song is about Eminem. But, come on. You don’t have to be a stan to make the connection. And, we have no choice but to stan our petty Christmas queen.

Somewhat relatedly, Lilian Min traces “fandom trash” back to the Mick Jagger song “Put Me in the Trash” from *Wandering Spirit*.<sup>138</sup> (Perhaps I should be making a playlist? We could call it “Not That Kind of Diss Tracks.”) Typically shortened, trash is “when your entire reason of existing is a certain thing, you are \_\_\_\_\_ trash. More

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<sup>135</sup> Urban Dictionary, definition 2, <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Stan> accessed January 5, 2020.

<sup>136</sup> Urban Dictionary, definition 1, <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Stan> accessed January 5, 2020.

<sup>137</sup> Justin Kirkland, “Nick Canon Released a Diss Track Accusing Eminem of Voting for Trump,” *Esquire*, <https://www.esquire.com/entertainment/music/a30182483/nick-cannon-eminem-mariah-carey-the-invitation-lord-above-lyrics-feud-explained/> accessed January 7, 2020.

<sup>138</sup> Lilian Min, “The Strange Story of How the Internet Reclaimed the Insult Trash,” *Splinter*, <https://splinternews.com/the-strange-story-of-how-internet-superfans-reclaimed-t-1793856895> accessed January 7, 2020.



obsessed than a fan, but not a stan.”<sup>139</sup> A more succinct definition might be when you are “so utterly obsessed with something that you become useless to society. Kind of like trash/garbage.”<sup>140</sup> I have been listening to the same musical for the last three weeks. I’m fairly confident my upstairs neighbors could sing the words if someone asked. I am trash for *Six: The Musical*. I never knew I needed to know the answer to the question “what if the wives of Henry VIII were autobiographical pop stars?” But I can’t make it through the day if I don’t sing about their temporary emancipation from being known only as “divorced, beheaded, died, divorced, beheaded, survived.”<sup>141</sup>

So, where do we draw our lines? Fan, audience, stan, trash. There are dozens of other terms we could toss out, but this is more than enough. If we made a Likert scale, maybe it would look like— Well, just imagine that. I don’t want to format any figures in this document. Save it for the mousepad. But seemingly it would go “Audience < Fan < Trash < Stan” with the audience being the least invested and stan the most. How does unapologetic, fully committed stanning change the audiencing of a performance? What can we learn about the process of audiencing by examining that excess of feeling?

#### **4.2 In Which I Examine Why Theater Fandom is a Productive Site**

Bootlegged videos hosted on YouTube and Vimeo are how many fans are able to experience their favorite Broadway shows. For musicals, there are soundtracks, professional photographs and even recorded performances of specific numbers, but by and large most Broadway shows are inaccessible to their fanbase except through

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<sup>139</sup> Urban Dictionary, definition 4,

<https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Trash> accessed January 7, 2020.

<sup>140</sup> Urban Dictionary, definition 6,

<https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Trash> accessed January 7, 2020.

<sup>141</sup> The Queens, “Ex-Wives,” track 1 on *Six: The Musical (Original Cast Recording)*, 6ix Music. 2018.

national tours or regional performances, which have different casts than the one that attracted them in the first place. As Stacy Wolf notes, fans of musicals often gravitate toward particular performers, but this is necessarily complicated by access to the musicals.<sup>142</sup> It's wonderful to watch the Tony's and see meticulously staged numbers, but it's not the same as seeing the whole show, of seeing the numbers in context. Sydney Lucas' Tony performance of "Ring of Keys" is exceptional. But, I vividly remember watching the bootleg of *Fun Home*, hearing the bootlegger laughing along with the audience, feeling like I was there even as the camera jostled from one hand to the other. I was curled up in my bed, lights off, pillows and blankets walled around me. The music slightly tinny from the recording only amplified by my cheap headphones. The actors glowed, and the set dressing melted together in the background. I'm often struck by the primacy of the music over the individual actors in bootlegs. Granted the vocals of the individuals are important, their bodies are hard to distinguish at times. They are obscured by the videographers attempts to zoom in/out to capture movement and set pieces. Light cues change and make the image harder to decipher. But this does not stop fans like myself from watching and connecting to what they are viewing. Full shows like *Bonnie and Clyde* or *Anything Goes* or *25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee* have over 200,000 views. Individual numbers from shows like *Hamilton* have over a million views. These bootlegs range in quality from stellar to pitiful. I imagine it's hard to covertly record in a theater when you know you'll be asked to leave if caught. Even when the show isn't visible, it's always audible. The music carries through.

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<sup>142</sup> Stacy Wolf, "Wicked Divas, Musical Theater, and Internet Girl Fans," *Camera Obscura* 22, no. 2 (2007): 39-71.

The cast album occupies an interesting place in this discussion of how fans experience the musical. The cast album is recorded and released as its own performance. It is a complete text. While it may be referential to a stage performance, it does not need one for fans to enjoy and connect to it. I only know so many musicals through their cast album, but that doesn't stop me from describing myself as *In the Heights* trash. The nature of musicals having essentially two primary texts (the staged production and the cast album) makes them a complex performance to consider. Is knowing the music the same as knowing the musical? After all, things happen when the characters aren't singing. Is knowing a "bad copy" of the musical the same as knowing the musical? Surely some of the show is lost in translation when the video is fuzzy and out of focus.

#### **4.3 In Which I Cliffs Notes an Important Debate**

If you are a scholar of performance studies who came of academic during the last few decades, you might be thinking: this sounds like a question of liveness and mediation. You might be reaching back into your memory of the scholars who engage with this question. Peggy Phelan, you might recall, is invested in the ephemerality of performance and might insist these videos are not the performance. Whereas Philip Auslander, you remember, might say that it's all already mediated, and these bootlegs are the musical, so the audience experienced it. Obviously, I'm not Peggy Phelan or Philip Auslander trash or even particularly invested the question. Rather, while they want to figure out how to conceptualize when performance happens, I want to conceptualize how audiencing shifts us away from the performance and toward our engagement with it. When does audiencing happen is not exactly what I'm after, but I would agree that's a useful place to start when contemplating this "debate."

To be fairer to Phelan, she might say “in performance art spectatorship there is an element of consumption: there are no left-overs, the gazing spectator must try to take everything in.”<sup>143</sup> That level of engagement could approach stanning if she didn’t go on to say “performance’s independence from mass reproduction, technologically, economically, and linguistically, is its greatest strength.”<sup>144</sup> So, Phelan argues “performance’s being...becomes itself through disappearance.”<sup>145</sup>

Philip Auslander begins with the “anxiety that infects all who have an interest in maintaining the distinction between the live and the mediated”<sup>146</sup> which is “understandable given the economy of repetition privileges the mediatized and marginalizes the live.”<sup>147</sup> However, he also points out “theorizations that privilege liveness as a pristine state uncontaminated by mediation misconstrue the relation between the two terms.”<sup>148</sup> In other words, if stans would take a step back, they might understand how performance is mediated in multiples ways and “live” only exists because reproduction exists. So, these questions about performance can be applied to audiencing in that often we think of audiencing as being limited to the time/space of a performance, but we come in contact with the performance before it actually starts and will likely remember it occasionally after it is over. So what I’m getting at here is: this question of liveness and mediation for performance is not my bag. But the liveness and

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<sup>143</sup> Peggy Phelan, “The Ontology of Performance: Representation without Reproduction,” *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, (London: Routledge, 1993): 148.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid. 149.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid. 146.

<sup>146</sup> Philip Auslander, “Liveness: Performance and the Anxiety of Simulation,” in *Performance and Cultural Politics*, edited by Elin Diamond (London: Routledge, 1996): 203.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid. 199.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid. 199.

mediation of audiencing, well, you're about halfway through my argument about that and there's plenty more I have to say. Put in more mousepad terms: this dissertation argues that obsessive theoretical questions about the ontological relationship between performance and liveness obscure some of the ways obsessive fans form a particularly lively audience in mediated formats separated in time and space from the always already disappearing moment of performance.

#### **4.4 In Which I Re-examine Why Theater Fandom Is a Productive Site**

Hopefully my inclusion of this debate can shed light on the fact that audiencing itself can have the same qualities as performance. Parts of audiencing can only be experienced simultaneously with the performance. However, some folks are always already audiencing in some capacity even before the curtain opens. This kind of engagement with a performance is not limited to live interaction. That's what makes bootlegs so important. Fans already have an affinity for the show. Often, they have read about it and have listened to the music. They might stan a particular performer, which brings them to a new show. They experience a kind of liveness rooted in their first connection with a show that they have already come to care about. That first time watching a bootleg has the potential to be a transformative experience. It might be the only way a fan has access to the show. I know I can see a regional performance of *Fun Home*, but it's not the same as seeing the original staging. There's something about knowing that I can watch the original cast and production team, the ones that worked with Alison Bechdel. Also, some fans don't have access to regional performances or national tours, or they don't live in an environment where they can safely see an explicitly queer show like *Fun Home*. These bootlegs are not solely stand-ins for going to the theater. They are a performance of their own and deserve further comment than I

can offer here. Hopefully, though, I've outlined why bootlegs should be considered part of our understanding musical theater fandom/audience.

#### **4.5 In Which I Make Some Productive Cite(at)ions)**

Musicals, as a whole, are an understudied genre in theater. David Savran describes theater's "long-standing, class-based prejudices about the superiority of art to entertainment" as one of the reasons musicals have been relegated to the margins of theater research.<sup>149</sup> You know, like trash. The divide established roughly in the 1920s between the popular and the Art has dismissed the genre almost entirely, often garnering only a few paragraphs for their whole history. Because musicals blend what is marketable and what is art, they are often considered commercial sell-outs. Just look at the recent spate of movie-based musicals: *Pretty Woman*, *Shrek*, *SpongeBob SquarePants*, *Heathers*, to name a few. They make a tremendous amount of money, but they win very few awards for their work. Savran challenges scholars to "expand our fields of study by interrogating and setting aside our Eurocentrism and cultural elitism."<sup>150</sup> In short, we should take musicals seriously, especially because they are some of the most popular theatrical productions. But, he argues it's not merely a matter of doing more work on musicals within existing frameworks, as "the form requires even the most theoretical interventions to bow to the exigencies of production and consumptions."<sup>151</sup> Just think of the bootlegs I've been talking about and the lack of research discussing the role they play for musical theater. Stacy Wolf responds to Savran's challenge with one of her own. As she explains in her self-proclaimed

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<sup>149</sup> Savran, David. "Toward a Historiography of the Popular." *Theatre Survey* 45 no.2 (November 2004): 211.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid. 211.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid. 213.

manifesto, her students didn't honor the cultural hierarchies Savran's argument relies on. These students, and presumably the generations they belong to, "have grown up being thoroughly postmodern, moving easily among media in a culture that privileges what John Seabrook calls the 'nobrow.'"<sup>152</sup> (52). Meaning, students and younger academics, like myself, don't mark musicals as unworthy of scholastic attention, even if there is still something of a dearth of research on musicals. Wolf champions more classes on musical theater, most importantly for her history of the genre.

Somewhat relatedly, Michael Schiavi began to question the cultural importance of musicals after being asked about a musical number, "What I Did for Love" from *A Chorus Line*, playing at a gay bar. Because his own coming out experiences were shaped by musical theater, including clandestine afternoons spent lip-syncing Ethel Merman songs, Schiavi wondered how gay men formed community if it wasn't around shared texts like musicals. Older gay men found something in musicals, the research told Schiavi, and "gay men who came of age after Stonewall—i.e., those born in 1960 or later—are reductively presumed to find musical-theatre fandom revolting."<sup>153</sup> Those same researchers argued that dance clubs now provided a physical space to replace the mental world musicals constructed, and modern musicals (1940s forward based on the cited examples) more than ever "invented themselves through rehearsals of compulsory, monogamous heterosexuality."<sup>154</sup> But, Schiavi as a post-Stonewall gay man, doesn't identify with that research. In fact, he contends *Mame*, *The Wiz*, and *A Chorus Line* are abundantly queer and abundantly appealing despite the arrival of public spaces and new

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<sup>152</sup> Wolf, Stacy Ellen. "In Defense of Pleasure: Musical Theatre History in the Liberal Arts [A Manifesto]." *Theatre Topics* 17 no. 1 (March 2007): 52.

<sup>153</sup> Schiavi, Michael. "Opening Ancestral Windows: Post-Stonewall Men and Musical Theatre," *New England Theatre Journal* no. 13 (2002): 78.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.* 86.

points of connection afforded young gay men. He ultimately concludes, “musical theatre continues to provide many young gay listeners with a sense of rhetorical control that they cannot exercise while living in heterosexist environments.”<sup>155</sup> Which is to say that no physical space can replace the world-building potential of queer readings of popular texts. Sure, it’s great to share space with someone who is like you, but it’s also great to have texts that you can identify with to help you process the spaces you aren’t welcome in.

What Wolf and Schiavi establish is that musicals are popular texts that lend themselves to queer readings. Wolf delves deeper into queer readings of musicals in her book *A Problem Like Maria*. As she explains, the book aims to “model feminist and lesbian readings of musicals that are readily available to spectators willing or inclined to look and hear in certain ways.”<sup>156</sup> Are you willing or inclined? I certainly hope so or the rest of this document will be difficult for us.

#### **4.6 In Which I Introduce the Main Events**

Fans engagement with musicals goes beyond simply watching and listening. Musicals inspire traditional fan works like fanfiction, fanvids, and cosplay as most other media do. Additionally, musicals encourage the memorization and performance of the music itself. Just think of all the high school students goofing around before and after rehearsal, and you can get a sense of what this looks like. This performance-based fanwork can trouble the boundary between fanwork and original work because, given the number of productions that many shows have over time, a fan could eventually be cast in the show they enjoy. Getting paid doesn’t negate being a fan, but it does seem to

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<sup>155</sup> Ibid. 94.

<sup>156</sup> Stacy Wolf, *A Problem like Maria: Gender and Sexuality in the American Musical*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002): 5.



shift the work out of the realm of fan activities. Theater further complicates fan culture because of the widely disparate amounts paid for various productions –from millions of dollars for Broadway productions to community theaters operating at a loss for performers and companies alike. This begs questions about the role of money as a dividing line between fan work and original work, and also it asks who can be a fan.

Enter MCC Theater’s Miscast Gala and Broadway Care’s Broadway Backwards. Both of these events share a premise: Broadway stars perform songs they would never professionally be cast to play. Where the Miscast Gala doesn’t directly discuss its queering of various performances, Broadway Backwards makes the queer world making potential central to its project, only staging what they consider queer performances of popular songs from the canon of Broadway. Florence Henderson belts out “There Ain’t Nothing Like a Dame” and lays a wet one on an Alice the Maid look-alike. Chita Rivera soft shoe shuffles her way through “All I Care about is Love” surrounded by a bevy of babes. It’s delightful.

On the surface, Miscast and Broadway Backwards allow celebrities to reveal what they are fans of and enjoy performing in numbers they never would do professionally, but they are also original, professional productions that presumably have permission for the songs performed and go through a structured rehearsal process to ensure the quality of the final show. Fanworks can and often do meet professional standards in terms of aesthetics and quality, but typically they do not work with those who create the source texts. Miscast and Broadway Backwards are, then, a professionally produced fan performance that results in original work for fans to celebrate. For example, at Miscast 2016, Aaron Tveit and Gavin Creel, two celebrity performers, clearly enjoy their time performing *RENT*’s “Take Me or Leave Me,” approaching it as fans. Audiences are

clearly responding to both the music, presumably as fans of the musical themselves, and the power of the stars, of whom they are presumably also fans. This work of fan performance also becomes an original work that garners its own following as its almost three and a half million views, hundreds of YouTube comments and Tumblr posts can attest. Celebrities enjoy media as much as non-celebrities, but when a celebrity performs work they are not being paid for, are they acting as fans? Was Jane Krakowski simply being a fan when she performed the opening number of *In the Heights* for Miscast 2013? And could the audience enjoy her performance without being familiar with either *In the Heights* or Jane Krakowski? Can the star's enjoyment of a song transcend the economic and social dynamics of one performance and rise/sink to the level of fan performance? How much does Krakowski's performance rely not only on her execution of the song but also on her performance of self? And how does the professional nature of the gala alter the 'fannishness' of the performance? And, finally, how does the charitable aspect of the gala also alter how we think of it? Is the opportunity to be a co-fan along with celebrities part of how the economics of "charity" function in the space of such performances?

Miscast and Broadway Backwards are entirely derivative, hovering between parody and homage, tribute and satire. They sit at on the axis of fanwork and original work and the cult of celebrity and Broadway fandom. (And, the Broadway fandom is already a joining of celebrity fans and music fans.) The multiple threads to pull out of these two events make them a compelling site of audiencing. It complicates the boundaries between consumers and creators, performer and audience. The layering of fans and fan knowledges makes Miscast and Broadway Backwards complex sites to explore who exactly a fan is and what constitutes fanwork, in addition to what does

audienicing look like and how can audienicing change a performance. Such questions, I argue, are not only of formalist concern. They are central to the queer worldmaking potentials of the performances. Questions of who counts as a fan can queer the social and economic power dynamics of audience performer relationships.

#### 4.7 In Which I Drink the Pinot Noir

January 6, 2015, *Playbill* announces, “Tituss Burgess Will Be The Witch in Miami *Into the Woods*; Sondheim Gives Blessing.”<sup>157</sup> Similarly, *HuffPo’s Queer Voices* declares, “Tituss Burgess Will Play The Witch In ‘Into The Woods’ Production In Miami.”<sup>158</sup> *The Advocate’s* coverage states the significance of this plainly, “Stephen Sondheim Approves Gay Man to Play *Into the Woods* Witch.”<sup>159</sup> This national press attention for a regional theater production played up how unexpected and unconventional this choice was. Each article mentions the witch’s role as being created for Bernadette Peters and usually performed by a woman. Usually meaning always except for Tituss according to the Internet Broadway Database list of actresses who’ve held the role.<sup>160</sup> While the race and age have varied, it’s always been a woman’s role. (At least in recorded productions. Who knows what all the high schools who do this show have done under the radar.) How exciting, then, that Tituss, who has cultivated a diva

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<sup>157</sup> Andrew Gans, “Tituss Burgess Will Be The Witch in Miami *Into The Woods*, Sondheim Gives Blessing,” *Playbill*, <http://www.playbill.com/article/tituss-burgess-will-be-the-witch-in-miami-into-the-woods-sondheim-gives-blessing-com-338577>

<sup>158</sup> Curtis M. Wong, “Tituss Burgess Will Play Witch in ‘Into The Woods’ Production in Miami,” *Huffington Post*, [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/01/13/tituss-burgess-into-the-woods-\\_n\\_6464540.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/01/13/tituss-burgess-into-the-woods-_n_6464540.html) accessed January 5, 2020.

<sup>159</sup> Brandon Voss, “Steven Sondheim Approves Gay Man to Play *Into the Woods* Witch,” *The Advocate*, <https://www.advocate.com/arts-entertainment/theater/2015/01/12/stephen-sondheim-approves-gay-man-play-woods-witch> accessed January 5, 2020.

<sup>160</sup> “*Into the Woods*,” *Internet Broadway Database*, <https://www.ibdb.com/broadway-show/into-the-woods-4753#nyc-productions> accessed January 5, 2020.

persona, would get to play such an iconic character. What magic would he bring to the part? Was this casting a fulfillment of a long-time dream? How hard did he and the theater company have to work to get approval for his casting? Not very, it would seem. Natalie Caruncho, co-founder of DreamCatcher Theater, simply followed procedure and sent a letter to the company in charge of royalties for *Into the Woods*. As repeated in each article, “Natalie told *Playbill*, ‘We wrote a letter, through MTI, addressed to Mr. Sondheim and Mr. Lapine regarding Tituss playing the Witch and we were approved! It was a special moment for us.’” While a special moment for them, it would seem many fans had no idea it happened. For the MCC Theater’s 2016 Miscast Gala, Tituss Burgess performed “Stay with Me,” and the YouTube comments for the performance are almost entirely pleas for a full production. Some commenters pointed out there was indeed a full production the year before, but that begs the question, what does it mean that Tituss performed a song from a role he was actually cast in at an event highlighting mis-castings? I also have to wonder, if an actor does regional theater or some other less public performance work, how’s a fan to know? (You know, if a tree falls in the woods?)

Tituss performing “Stay with Me” for Miscast is the exception that proves the rule. Despite an endorsed production, the part is still written for a woman and likely will be played by women moving forward. Tituss was special but will always be mis-cast in the role. That said, it is unclear how much gender-play was actually involved.

DreamCatcher had permission to stage the part as written, which includes pronouns and other gender marked words in addition to the key of the music. Did Tituss perform in drag? Was his higher vocal range part of why he was awarded this part? Pictures of the production show him in a long wig and skirts, but none of that indicates whether he was playing as a woman. The Miami Hurricane reports, “In the first act, [Tituss] did a

seamless job leaving audience members none the wiser that there was anything different in this portrayal of the iconic figure.”<sup>161</sup> This would suggest that there was an element of passing. The witch wasn’t a warlock, if you will. The review continues, “However, in his more tender moments singing ‘Our Little World,’ it felt he was reaching to hit the notes as he sang in falsetto.” Seemingly, then, high-notes a woman makes? That leaves me with the impression this production, while excited about its nontraditional casting, did very little to embrace what nontraditional casting can do (and demonstrated why nontraditional casting doesn’t often work).

I’ve also found very little by way of promotional material, meaning fans of Tituss and/or the musical didn’t have much access. There are a few photos and very little else. Like most regional and community theater, it lives with its live audience, which explains why so many of the commenters for the Miscast performance of “Stay with Me” long for a full production. Even with Playbill and The Advocate running stories about the show being mounted, no follow up stories happened. It was announced and dismissed. So, months later when Tituss restaged “Stay with Me” for Miscast, fans saw it not as a reproduction but as a performance of possibilities. YouTube fans got to imagine what that show might look like, what Tituss would bring to the stage, what absolute fun it could be. This potential performance seems to have drummed up more discussion than the actual performance in Miami. Not that those in Miami didn’t enjoy the actual performance. Rather, what is most interesting to me is those people who were never in the audience of the DreamCatcher production of *Into the Woods*. Those people who can

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<sup>161</sup> Ashley Martinez, “*Into The Woods* Weaves Together Classic Fairytales Post- ‘Happily ever After,’” *The Miami Hurricane*, <http://www.themiamihurricane.com/2015/01/29/into-the-woods-weaves-together-classic-fairytales-post-happily-ever-after/> accessed January 5, 2020.

be described as “fans of Tituss Burgess” have invested so much time imagining something they didn’t know existed and something they would have loved to see. For those fans, being in the audience isn’t the only way to experience a performance. They watched the single song from the Miscast Gala and dreamed up a whole production. The fact that there are no accessible recordings of Tituss as the witch make their desires even more layered because even if they had known, unless they could have attended the show, the whole thing is left in the realm of the imagined. Whether it happened or not, Tituss as the witch had limited live audiences, but the performance of Tituss as the witch will live on for fans as a great source of potential.

The Miscast performance of “Stay with Me” begins lightheartedly.<sup>162</sup> The audience can be heard laughing until the song switches gears from admonition to yearning. Tituss approaches the song with care and attention. I don’t have much of an ear for music, but there are moments I hear that Miami Hurricane reviewer whispering “this note was a little beyond Tituss’ range.” Perhaps I’ve been biased by my research, but this performance has never appealed to me as much as others, even others by Tituss. I know some of this is the serious nature of the song. Unlike many Miscast and Broadway Backwards choices, “Stay with Me” isn’t as open to parody or humor, which is my preference. Initially, I was confused by the laughter at the beginning of this video. But, as I (re)watched it, I realized the laughter starts before the song. It starts when “Tituss Burgess” is projected on the screen upstage, and he walks out. I would like to speculate that the audience was reacting to Tituss and his celebrity persona before reconciling that with the somber song. Tituss Burgess is perhaps most widely known for

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<sup>162</sup> MCCTheater, “Tituss Burgess sings 'Stay with Me' from Into the Woods,” Uploaded on April 8, 2016, YouTube video, 3:11 min, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YC8jpJbTA4Q>

Tituss Andromedon on *The Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* even though his career began a decade before that. When the audience in 2016 saw Tituss was up next, I think their expectations were for something different than what they got. Not to say they were disappointed. But, I think where they expected Pinot Noir, they got cabernet sauvignon. (Because pinot noir is “light bodied and fruity” whereas the cabernet sauvignon is “full bodied and savory” according to the wine infographic I found. I made a joke.)

That same night, Tituss Burgess and Tina Fey dueted “You’re Nothing Without Me” from *City of Angels* for Miscast. The video begins mid-conversation with Tituss saying, “This isn’t the time to, like, try and take my moment,” while Tina emerges from the audience and insists “Tituss, I am your moment.”<sup>163</sup> At the risk of implying this isn’t their best work, they are very obviously singing as themselves and for each other. How trashy. Several of the seemingly adlibbed interjections refer to their work on *The Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt*. It’s a joy to watch their friendship on display as Tituss occasionally breaks, and Tina grins throughout. The performance is fun. YouTube user Michael Ehrhardt makes my case: “I don’t know what I love more: the actual performance or Lea Salonga and Gavin Creel freaking out in the background.”<sup>164</sup> What a stan. It’s joyful and silly and plays to what we love about Tituss (and Tina when she’s being cool). However, I don’t think the tonal shift or embodiment of persona in “You’re Nothing Without Me” is what makes it more interesting to me than “Stay with Me.” So, what is?

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<sup>163</sup> MCCTheater, “Tina Fey and Tituss Burgess sing 'You're Nothing Without Me',” Uploaded on April 5, 2016, YouTube video, 3:39 min, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z4dYogIQ28E>

<sup>164</sup> MCCTheater, “Tina Fey and Tituss Burgess sing 'You're Nothing Without Me',” Uploaded on April 5, 2016, YouTube video, 3:39 min, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z4dYogIQ28E>

Let me add another example to this trash heap. For the 2013 Broadway Backwards concert, Tituss performed “And I Am Telling You I’m Not Going” from *Dreamgirls*.<sup>165</sup> As its 1.7 million views can attest, it’s 8 minutes and 20 seconds of intense emotional extremes. Tituss rages against the men on stage before crumbling to desperation alone in a single spotlight before regaining the confidence only a deluded Effie can muster. The entire last minute of the clip is just the audience applauding and cheering. When the camera pulls back, you can see arms in the air waving and people moving to stand. Even as the video fades to the Broadway Cares logo, the clapping continues. Given that I immediately replayed the video about five times after my first viewing, I fully understand the audience’s excitement. The song itself is powerful, but Tituss really makes it his. The song is every bit as big and bold as Tituss™.

Maybe this whole discussion just means I like some songs more than others. Maybe this all means some songs are more “queer accessible” than others. Queerable? Let’s, for a minute, just for fun, shoehorn some queer readings onto these songs just to see where we end up. “Stay with Me” sounds like a guardian telling their child not to come out, to hide who they are from the world. It’s a message of warning, of testing the waters before you make a splash. “And I’m Telling You I’m Not Going” projects an “I’m here, I’m queer and I’m not going anywhere” attitude. The exultant “you’re gonna love me,” even as it sounds so desperate, evokes a forceful determination to change minds and practices. Maybe I’m responding more to the positive encouragement rather than the cautious closeting because the latter is too close to my lived experience? Maybe I just like *Dreamgirls* more than *Into the Woods*? Maybe I just wanted to watch as many

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<sup>165</sup> BroadwayCares/Equity Fights AIDS, “Tituss Burgess ‘And I Am Telling You...’ - Broadway Backwards 2013,” Uploaded on March 26, 2013, YouTube video, 8:20 min, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8qoOtUMQ12k>



Tituss YouTube clips as I wanted but couldn't justify the amount of time that would take except to write about it? Part of stanning means I don't have to care why. I just get to enjoy.

#### **4.8 In Which I Most Certainly Did the Reading (I Did Not Do the Reading)**

I was assigned to read *Fun Home* for a class, and instead I downloaded the soundtrack and read the Wikipedia plot synopsis. I have since rectified this because how could I not after listening to the soundtrack? But, my original point is that I first encountered *Fun Home* through its music. The opening notes see-sawed through my mind. Daddy, oh daddy.<sup>166</sup> Well, I don't have a particularly close relationship with my dad (or the three guys that came after him), so I was skeptical about this show. Wait. I've left something out.

I was assigned to read *Fun Home*, so I downloaded the soundtrack and started listening before I read anything about it. I had no idea what I was encountering. I knew who Alison Bechdel was because I owned some anthologies of *Dykes to Watch Out For*, but I did not know how she connected to the plot of *Fun Home*. By the end of the first song, I was involved. Alison was charming, the mother exhausted, the father mercurial, and the siblings delightful. Family drama, coming of age, sad mom. All my boxes were ticked. Once I hit "Changing My Major," I was crying on the bus, which unfortunately for me happens at least once a month, more when I was still listening to *Hamilton* every day. As I approached my house, "Ring of Keys" began, and I collapsed on my bed in tears. I felt. *I felt*.<sup>167</sup>

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<sup>166</sup> Sydney Lucas, Michael Cerveris, and Beth Malone, "It All Comes Back (Opening)," track 1 on *Fun Home (A New Broadway Musical)*, PS Classics, 2015, MP3.

<sup>167</sup> Sydney Lucas and Beth Malone, "Ring of Keys," track 18 on *Fun Home (A New Broadway Musical)*, PS Classics, 2015, MP3.

By the time I made it to class the next day, I was on what was probably my fifth re-listen. I had read the plot summary on Wikipedia and started the graphic novel (because I will still admit to not having read nearly enough before class even though I should've). As class discussion took off, I began hunting fanworks to make my screensavers on all my devices. I wanted to have a visual reminder of how the show made me feel when I wasn't listening to it. Despite feeling an intense connection to *Fun Home*, or maybe precisely because of my feelings, I was unsure of myself in our discussion. I didn't want to tip my hand that I hadn't read the graphic novel even though I also wanted to talk about the use of time and memory throughout the story. Mousepads were flying. I needed a t-shirt. Thankfully, our professor queued up a couple YouTube clips so we could discuss the musical. This I was more confident in.

I swiveled my chair around to face the screen, ready to see what the staging looked like. I had opted only to listen to the show the night before, so I had very little idea what it would look like apart from what I'd read of the production history. We watched the Tony's performance of "Ring of Keys" first. The camera's intense focus on Sydney Lucas as she portrays Alison's possible first encounter with a different potential future for herself only increases the power of the song. It's breathtaking. The emotions flittering through young Alison: frustration, understanding, longing, connection. Next was a bootleg of "Changing My Major," which comes earlier in the musical despite being sung by an older Alison. The exuberance of post-coital Alison was so familiar to me. Where I was happy for young Alison during her epiphany, I lived college-aged Alison's reaction. I remember the morning after my first night with a woman. I couldn't stop grinning. But, feeling that in a classroom was foreign. As I watched Alison dance around her Joan-filled bed, my face flushed.

That was my story. We were all watching it, gearing up to theorize and academize the scene. I couldn't open my mouth. I knew I had become visibly upset, tears lined my eyes and my ears were burning. I sniffled back a sob and looked toward the door. I could excuse myself. But, I didn't want everyone to see me leave. Which didn't make a lot sense because I knew everyone could see me barely holding it together. Somehow it felt like the better option was to stay, even silently. I think I wanted to be present for whatever critiques were lobbed at this show that represented parts of me so thoroughly. I think some part of me was winding up to fight for this show. As one of only a couple queer women in the room, I was trying to pull it together to defend something that held so much meaning for me even as I reminded myself I hadn't read the whole thing or watched it yet. This stanning was unsteady. Maybe there were valid concerns that I didn't even know about? What if this music that made me feel so seen, was actually "problematic"? This fear of loving something I didn't even fully know yet collided with my overwhelming desire to tell everyone to step off because this was my story and what did they know about it.

The rest of class was a bit tense. The presence of an obviously emotional person can do that in a small room. The class talked about contract disputes and the father's dominant arc, but I barely remember it. My eyes traced a path between the table in front of me and door, still contemplating leaving. I stayed, though. I sat rather still and just tried to breathe. I felt. And I wanted to listen, to learn, to understand what other's saw in the show that touched me so deeply. I think I hoped I could rally and plead with the class to see just how special, how necessary, how important this show was. Not that the class was dismissive or unaffected. But in those moments after watching the videos, in their ability to move on to an analytical discussion while I was entrenched in feelings, I

was so adrift. What if I missed something because I didn't do the reading? Why was my reaction so different than everyone else's? What did they know that I didn't? I cycled through a list of reasons why my emotional response was wrong because I was the only one having it.

#### **4.9 In Which I Went from Athlete to Athletic Supporter**

When I arrived at my new high school for tenth grade, I was, in high school TV drama terms, a jock. I'd played volleyball for the last five years, and playing volleyball was how I hoped to make new friends. This resulted in sneaking into see *Deuce Bigilo 2* underage to impress the only girls who seemed at all interested in making a new friend. Long story short, I learned I couldn't rely on sports to help me make friends, at least not friends who had similar interests. Because I was a new kid with a schedule a guidance counselor made, I ended up in a public speaking class taught by the theater director. He was also the debate team coach and recruited heavily out of his classes. So, weekends that I didn't have games, I started competing in extemporaneous events. Once the volleyball season was over, I started debating as well, and I met the theater kids who did the interpretive events. These kids would break out into song and were outgoing and seemingly much cooler than any I'd ever spent time with. Unlike the volleyball team, they opened their arms to a new kid. We developed inside jokes and nicknames like all the teens I'd seen do on TV but had yet to really experience. (I know nicknames are a jock stereotype, but I was never given one, so this was exciting and new to me.) We created a game called "pennies" that involved tossing them down the front of each other's button ups and dared each other to see what we could get away with on the days our director got his Cortisol shot, which made him uncharacteristically happy and easy going. (I got to switch my interp piece which had been a point of contention for weeks.)

It took me another year to fully “become” a theater kid because I really liked playing volleyball. But I reasoned it was more fun to watch the theater kids tease each other than it was to have to warm up with the freshman team again because they needed the numbers and JV could spare me. At the time it felt like trading something I enjoyed for a community I enjoyed. (This sounds like I didn’t enjoy theater, which is far from the truth, but I lost the confidence years of experience gave me and the vulnerability required to perform was a hard adjustment after being a quiet jock, if you can imagine me as that.)

The director was a gruff man in his forties with wire-framed glasses and a grey-flecked beard. He had two sons I used to babysit so he could take his wife on dates. He had a five-drawer-tall filing cabinet completely full of plays, and while my Catholic friends celebrated Lent, I read a play a day. When he’d misplace his glasses (which was often), I’d wear them until he realized I had them. I got out most of my art history class so I could mix paint and help him set lights. Apart from my English teachers, he was my favorite. Even if he was often cranky. He complained about administration issues to anyone who would listen even though he really shouldn’t have told us. When we would rehearse a show, he would sit at his director’s table and bang his empty Diet Coke against the side like a metronome until we’d tighten up the pace. Once he threw the bottle. But he was so surprisingly nurturing. Compliments were rare, and he always had at least a dozen notes. When I sent mom to parent/teacher conferences, I’d give her a list of my teachers ranked by priority with notes about what to ask them. (In tenth grade I wasn’t sure my English teacher actually knew who I was because she ran a very quiet, busy-work oriented class, and my mother told the teacher I said that leading to my mortification when the teacher made sure to pointedly say my name several times the

next class.) The director was always top of list, though. I wanted to know what he thought and how I could do more. He was always willing to teach me something new and despite his “grumpy old man” vibe, his classroom was one of the warmest in the school. Students gathered there and flourished there and found something they couldn’t anywhere else there.

#### **4.10 In Which I Didn’t Get the Joke**

While reading a review of 2017’s Broadway Backwards, I was blown away by the number of performances and by all the stars who turned out. I was feeling absurdly proud that I knew as many of the songs selected as I did until I got about two-thirds of the way through the list. The recap praised Elizabeth Stanley for “a riotous, ribald rendition of what may be the ultimate break-up song, ‘The Sensitive Song’ from *Cops: The Musical*.”<sup>168</sup> I stopped reading right then. *Cops: The Musical*? What is that? How have I not heard of this? I am, of course, fascinated. My grandpa lives on a steady diet of *COPS*, *America’s Dumbest Criminals*, and YouTube hunting videos. I have to know more about this. “X-COPS” is one of my top ten favorite episodes of *The X Files*. This musical could only be an excellent critique of a very problematic show, at least in my imagination. I wanted to find it, and I want to know why I hadn’t heard of it yet.

Thirty minutes of Googling later, and I hadn’t learned much. Lawrence “Larry” O’Keefe is credited as the composer on the sites that sell the sheet music. His Wikipedia page told me he and his partner Nell Benjamin wrote the librettos for *Heathers: The Musical*, *Legally Blonde: The Musical*, and several others. But, *Cops: The Musical* did

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<sup>168</sup> BWW News Desk, “York Theatre’s ‘NEO 2017’ Celebrates Emerging Musical Theatre Writers Tonight,” *Broadway World*, Oct. 16, 2017, accessed February 7, 2020, <https://www.broadwayworld.com/off-broadway/article/York-Theatres-NEO-2017-Celebrates-Emerging-Musical-Theatre-Writers-Tonight-20171016>

not seem to exist. It had to, though. It was featured in a line-up that included songs from *Anything Goes*, *The Sound of Music*, *Chess*, and *The Jersey Boys*. How could a seemingly nonexistent musical be a part of an event that played so heavily into the Broadway canon? Frustrated and confused, I clicked to yet another page of my Google search. I'd tried various keywords: "cops the musical," "sensitive song," "sensitive song cops," "o'keefe sensitive cops." There were several YouTube clips of "The Sensitive Song" done by high schoolers. How did high schoolers know about this when I couldn't find anything?

Then, I discovered a lone forum from 2008 at [broadwayworld.com](http://broadwayworld.com) that asked the same question I did. It starts with praise for the song. User Harpz2006 posts the song and exclaims, "I know not everyone here is into the MT college kids craze, but this song is GREAT."<sup>169</sup> "Ahh - that's a classic 'oldie' by Larry O'Keefe of Bat Boy and Legally Blonde fame," Craig elaborates.<sup>170</sup> Yes, Craig, complete with a picture of an average looking white guy. Then Not Barker, Todd simply asks, "Is this from 'Cops The Musical'? And what is 'Cops The Musical'? I found it on the title card to another version of this song on YouTube."<sup>171</sup> At last, someone else who's as confused as I am. But, the following responses are merely affirmations that this is a funny song. I just groan as I keep scrolling down. "I don't think O'Keefe ever intended for 'Cops: The Musical' to be taken seriously," dramarama2 writes. "I highly doubt he wrote many other songs for this show. It's a joke."<sup>172</sup> And with that, I reached the end of the forum posts. I have learned very little. But if Craig and dramarama2 are in on the joke, surely, I can be, too. It's unlikely

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<sup>169</sup> Harpz2006, "Sensitive Song," May 5, 2008, *Broadway World*, <https://www.broadwayworld.com/board/readmessage.php?thread=965178>

<sup>170</sup> Ibid.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid.

they're friends with Larry O'Keefe. They must have read about it somewhere, so back to Google I go.

After several more pages of search results, I break out my headphones and wade into what YouTube has to offer. Video upon video, a different fresh-faced man belts out "you skanky, skanky, skanky whore," which is, of course, the chorus of the "The Sensitive Song." Most of the performances are comedy nights at local clubs or solo competitions. For each I read the entire "about" section, if it has one, only to see the only information I have: written by Larry O'Keefe. Two dozen videos later, I click on a thumbnail of what looks like a very bro-y dude on a futon. TommyB765 uploaded his home recording of the song nine months ago, and I am his 25th (and 26th) view.<sup>173</sup> He's lipsyncing along to an official recording of the song, which he links to, so I click on it. Seeing the cover art, I have to laugh because the actual first hit for "The Sensitive Song" on YouTube uses the cover as its image. It hadn't occurred to me that it was what I'd been looking for. I'd assumed it was a flyer for a performance night. Admittedly, a star-studded performance night, but still, a performance night. As far as I know this song is some underground secret being kept from me. Why would I be able to find it in the iTunes Store? Also why hadn't I thought to search the iTunes Store?

I decide to pull up both the iTunes Store and Amazon to see what this album is about. NEO (Original Cast) [Live Recording from The York Theater, New York] is "a celebration of emerging talent in musical theater." There are a total of seven reviews. On iTunes, krsmith tells me to "take note of The Sensitive Song - it will make you laugh out

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<sup>173</sup> TommyB765, "The Sensitive Song," Uploaded January 16, 2017, YouTube video, 2:33 min, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iE23sTmL584>



loud.”<sup>174</sup> Amazon’s mikerman challenges, “anyone to listen to the song ‘The Sensitive Song’ from the planned musical ‘Cops’ (!!), as performed by Deven May, not to leave with a smile on your face. (Caution: adult lyrics.)”<sup>175</sup> Beyond that, the reviews are overviews of the whole album. And it’s what the label says: a live recording of a benefit concert featuring songs from projects in the works. I’m hopeful, though, because each song has an intro. Maybe I’ll learn more about Cops: The Musical? I download the album and wait. “The Sensitive Song” is the penultimate track, and my Internet is slow.

Excitedly, I queue up “Intro 19.” As applause tapers off, Bryan Batt introduces Laurence O’Keefe, his partner Nell Benjamin, and song performer Deven May. When Batt sets up “The Sensitive Song” as part of the “upcoming musical based on the television show Cops,” the audience chuckles, almost groaning at this ridiculous idea.<sup>176</sup> One member of the audience in particular guffaws. There’s really no other word for it. “It has come to that ladies and gentlemen,” Batt continues while the laughter breaks out in earnest, “reality TV meets Broadway.”<sup>177</sup> Then, applause leads into the soft, almost twinkling opening notes I have come to know well. Despite the fact that this song is quite hilarious, I’m disappointed to not learn more about it. I hold out hope that perhaps “Intro 20” will in some way respond to the previous song. Surely those in the

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<sup>174</sup> krsmith, review of *NEO (Original Cast) [Live Recording from The York Theater, New York]*, accessed February 7, 2020, [itunes.apple.com](https://itunes.apple.com)

<sup>175</sup> mikerman, review of *NEO: A Celebration of Emerging Talent in Musical Theatre, Benefiting the York Theatre Company*, accessed February 7, 2020, [https://www.amazon.com/Neo-Celebration-Emerging-Musical-Benefiting/product-reviews/B00096S44E/ref=cm\\_cr\\_dp\\_d\\_show\\_all\\_btm?ie=UTF8&reviewerType=all\\_reviews](https://www.amazon.com/Neo-Celebration-Emerging-Musical-Benefiting/product-reviews/B00096S44E/ref=cm_cr_dp_d_show_all_btm?ie=UTF8&reviewerType=all_reviews)

<sup>176</sup> Bryan Batt, “Intro 19,” track number 17 on *NEO (Original Cast) [Live Recording from The York Theater, New York]* Disc 2, JAY Productions Ltd. May 10, 2005, MP3.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid.

audience 12 years ago have as many questions as I do right now?<sup>178</sup> How can the night just move on without taking some time to dwell on this? But, as you might have predicted, Batt barks out a laugh and reassures he's "not worried about the future of musical theater... not as long as they're writing them like that. I love that."<sup>179</sup> He sounds as though he's wiping tears of joy from his eyes as he segues into the next song. I start to zone out while Laura Benanti croons about needing a "Leading Man (from Joe)." Could I have reached the end? Here was an album proving this song exists, but I've known that since the beginning. I muster together what remains of my drive and begin to look into the producers of the album.

The York Theater has devoted its 47 seasons to new musicals and staging revivals. They host an annual NEO concert that "[recognizes] New, Emerging and Outstanding musical theater writers."<sup>180</sup> The concert seems to attract some media attention, but not as much as I expected. Probably because Google kept directing me to Ne-Yo concert tickets. But, as I weeded through Off Broadway news sites, I learned more about NEO. The concert is of course publicized and celebrated.

Ultimately, what I've learned about *Cops: The Musical* can be counted on one hand. I should have listened to Craig. "The Sensitive Song" is a funny song from a nonexistent musical. And maybe Larry O'Keefe will see it mounted one day. But in the years since the song was written, O'Keefe has done *Legally Blonde* and *Heathers*. He seems to have kept himself quite busy. Also, *Cops: The Musical* is an excellent joke, but

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<sup>178</sup> Wow. I wrote this paragraph three years ago? This document took a long time to grow into what it is now.

<sup>179</sup> Bryan Batt, "Intro 20," track number 19 on *NEO (Original Cast) [Live Recording from The York Theater, New York]* Disc 2, JAY Productions Ltd. May 10, 2005, MP3.

<sup>180</sup> "Mission," *York Theater Company*. 2017, <https://yorktheatre.org/about/mission-history>

it's unlikely a full production could ever rise to its level. Some things really are better in the imaginary and unrealized. Only to be pulled out and tinkered with for fun between projects. Most importantly, in my search for the origin of this song, I've found the shapes of communities and audiencing practices. O'Keefe came up through Harvard's Hasty Pudding Theatricals. He cut his teeth on satirical social and political performance work. He moved from there to Off Broadway, Broadway, and the West End. He's won several prestigious awards and his work has as well. The NEO concert recorded in 2005 featured a song from *Bat Boy*, which was already a smash hit. He was solidly in some part of the Broadway community. To see his one off from Cops appear at the 2017 Broadway Backwards only cements his place among his peers. It called to a group of those in on the joke. It's a stamp of acceptance and approval. It's a t-shirt proudly asking WWLOD?

#### **4.11 In Which I Made Contact**

In high school I asked my mother if I could go to a theater camp in New York City believing this wasn't really a possibility. Turns out it was. So come summer, I was on a plane to the Big White Way all by myself. I was going to spend ten days living in a dorm and attending lectures and Broadway shows and meeting theater kids and putting up short group performances. I couldn't wait. I found my suite and learned there were four of us, two in each room with a shared living room. As I unpacked, I set my Bible on the nightstand and mentioned to my roommate I'd be waking up early to do my devotions. A couple days later she moved into the room with the other two girls. Which, fine, I could handle that she wanted to room with people who had more similar life experiences than I could offer. A painful game of "Never Have I Ever" made it clear I had done nothing, didn't even know that some things were things.

All the campers were sorted into groups to stage short final performances, and we spent the first couple days playing improv games. I found this to be unnerving and the worst. I was shy, uncomfortable, and slow on my feet. After that, though, we began rehearsing the script we were given, and from what I remember, it was something Greek play-inspired and rather boring. I was part of the chorus, which suited me just fine. Not too many lines to learn, simply a background bit. My shaken confidence could handle being part of a group better than standing out on my own.

When we loaded on to the bus to see *Rent*, I quickly found the only person who had become something of a friend. Most of the other kids would only talk to me about our group performance, but she would tell me about all the things her school theater troupe was doing. I faked my way through the shows I didn't know because I didn't want to let on that I was new to theater. Everyone seemed to know so much more than I did which was a new experience for me. She let me borrow her iPod so I didn't have to use my bulky Walkman, and I was too embarrassed to say I didn't know how to use it. I fiddled with it for five minutes before I managed to play a song. As for turning it off when we arrived, I never did figure that out.

The theater for *Rent* took on the aesthetic of the show: it looked derelict, shabby, and like it was crumbling around us. Even from the upper mezzanine, the stage looked huge. The band was nestled under some scaffolding in one corner. I knew I shouldn't lean forward because the people behind me wouldn't be able to see over me, but I couldn't help it. I was enthralled. I'd never heard a "contemporary" musical before, so I was caught up in the rock infused overture. Despite seeing the ads for the movie version of *Rent*, I really had no idea what the show was about. I assumed there were some down on their luck characters struggling to get by? I became enmeshed in the world of the

show. I cried for Angel and cheered for Maureen and felt such overwhelming love from the show. When the elementary school gym class style white parachute enveloped the cast, I was shocked. I was so moved in that moment of “Contact” that I curled up, hugging my knees, and buried my face in my lap for the rest of the act. Everything about the show countered everything my church taught me. These characters were so real and important. I felt like my church must be missing something because these people were special and deserved so much better than I was taught. They deserved better than what the show wrote for them. By the time the lights came up I realized no one else seemed to have the same experience. They were dry-eyed and laughing. Perhaps they already knew what they were getting into before we even got on the bus. But I felt different. Like a small part of the world had cracked open.

This feeling didn’t last long as I was once again back in my room alone and part of a group that spent more time making sex jokes than anything else. On the last day our group leader challenged us to share what rules we broke, and I made everyone laugh by admitting I had taken some cookies out of the cafeteria. Comparatively, my offense was not even on the radar. Someone had flashed a group of passing college students. Another kid had sex in the showers. These kids, who were my age and who seemingly had the same interest as me, were so different than what I expected. At school, everyone knew I was conservative and religious. It became a joke to warn all the boys new to the theater group that I didn’t believe in dating in high school. I didn’t judge anyone or shame them for their language or experiences, and they didn’t treat me as if I shouldn’t be there. But these camp kids only saw my Bible and my lack of stories to compare to theirs, and I was excluded. I’m not a reliable judge of what they saw when they looked at me. Maybe they did try to befriend me, and I rebuffed them? I know looking back on

what I've described, I could have come off as cold and uninterested. But I can only remember one of them making an effort. She was generous, a little cranky, and, as I recently learned after some Facebook stalking, very queer. Maybe she felt as out of place as I did?

#### **4.12 In Which I Meet Sarah Schulman**

Coming out of the gate swinging in “Supremacy Ideology Masquerading as Reality: The Obstacle Facing Women Playwrights in America,” Sarah Schulman asserts that stories about cis, straight, white men are most likely to be produced and their frequency is about power not quality or relatability.<sup>181</sup> Rather, there is some comfort in repeating the same narrative. We like hearing something we've already heard before. Which might explain why I read the same three novels multiple times a year. Schulman shifts gears to compare the reception of plays to novels, which receive much more critical attention and consequently are more open to radical revisioning than plays. Books also are a “mass art form” unlike plays which have “small homogenous demographics” that are rather elitist in the sense that Broadway is still the primary testing ground.<sup>182</sup> Schulman then establishes the unexamined privilege and supremacy ideology of those running most theaters (in Schulman's experience and estimation). In an effort to bypass or destroy the Gatekeepers of Theater, Schulman suggests several things: women producers should “act like men;” playwrights should get over themselves; male producers should talk to those playwrights that scare them most; women playwrights should help each other; and theater lovers need to talk more

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<sup>181</sup> Schulman, Sarah. “Supremacy Ideology Masquerading as Reality: The Obstacle Facing Women Playwrights in America.” *Theatre Journal* 62 no. 4 (December 2010): 567-570.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*, 568.

critically about the shows they see. In short, Schulman wants mainstream theater to be more reflective of who comprises mainstream. Don't we all?

#### **4.13 In Which #RentIsOverParty**

A theater professor assigned sections from Sarah Schulman's *Stagestruck* and upended my very serious infatuation with *Rent*. I was equal parts crushed that a cherished musical could have such an unsavory production history and entranced with the arguments Sarah was making. Her righteous anger and relatively unfiltered distaste for her topic were powerful. When she came to campus a year later, I didn't care that I hadn't read her newest book. I brought my used copy of *Stagestruck* littered with someone else's notes for her to sign if I could work up my nerve. She was an original Lesbian Avenger. Instead of approaching her, I took several selfies with her hanging over my shoulder in the background. The room we were in was small and hot and full of people I didn't know. Eventually she made the first move and said hi. (Maybe I wasn't so stealthy with the selfies?) She graciously signed my book while I fawned over her. And because of the nature of books, it sits on my shelf between Sedgwick and Spolin, and no one knows how special that copy is. Or how trashy I am.

#### **4.14 In Which I Conclude the Chapter**

We've arrived here at the end of this chapter, our first experimental braid. One example of a mystory that is also part of a larger mystory. Is it holding together? Are you still thinking about Stacy Wolf's directive to pursue desire? To follow that which we enjoy? Perhaps you've forgotten about bootlegs and whether they can fully capture the experience of a live performance? This chapter covers a lot of ground, shifts from the personal to the popular, to the professional and back again many times over. Have I shown you something new about them by holding them together? Probably you've

mostly learned something new about me since you don't know me that well, but can you also see my obsession(s) and the world making that requires and inspires them? If not, you will. You are starting to. Don't let the stray strands of my braid distract you. Or do, but commit to that distraction. You can stan me. Or be trash for me. I'm not picky. But I am invested in the project of showing you what I see, hear, smell, taste, and touch when I audience. Hopefully in the expressive excesses of musicals and the thoughtfulness of certain theoretical frameworks, you've got a wide image is coming into focus.



## Chapter 5. Watching (Bad) TV with Good (Straight) People

When I was ten or eleven, I was home alone after school for as many as two hours a day. I don't remember being told that I couldn't watch TV, but I remember feeling like I wasn't supposed to. Probably I was told to do my homework before anything else. Nonetheless, I would come home and change out of my private Christian school uniform and sit in front of the living room TV. I was very careful about it. I would mark what the volume level was and what channel it was on. I even made sure to hit the recall button so I could reset the TV exactly as I had found it. But, here's why I'm telling you this story: I discovered *The Golden Girls* and *The Nanny* and *Living Single* and *Different World*, and I was pretty sure I should not be watching these shows. Well, I was sure I wasn't allowed to watch the channels the shows were on anyway. So, I would turn on whichever of the shows I wanted that day and then set the recall channel to Cartoon Network. I thought the cable bill included a record of what channels were being watched, and in an effort to trick the trackers, I would flip between Lifetime and cartoons. Admittedly this line of thinking doesn't make a lot of sense, but I was very seriously committed to this deceptive (fanatical?) practice of audiencing for months.

I was always very careful about the TV. I seemed to have figured out early that there were a lot of things I wasn't supposed to see. I mean, I had specifically been told I wasn't allowed to watch *Ed, Edd, and Eddy* or *Cow and Chicken* because my mom thought they were stupid. These new shows I discovered, though, I knew I probably shouldn't watch for different reasons. They were "grown-up," but more than that, they dealt with issues my conservative and religious family didn't talk about. So, I knew I couldn't talk about what I'd seen. This time with the TV had to be kept secret. As long as

I didn't talk about it, no one would ever know. I could enjoy my time with Nanny Fine and Rose Nylund and Whitley Gilbert and no one had to know. It was my secret. Making it so was not the passive act of a "viewer's" eyes but an active performance of full-bodied audiencing.

Even now, I don't talk that much to the people in my life about the TV I watch. I often find myself saying, "no, I haven't seen that. I've heard such good things, though." I find myself saying, "I have such bad taste." I find myself on the defensive because I do know what "good" TV looks like. I just don't watch it. It's not my fault that crappy TV shows are the shows with large queer followings. It might be my fault that I don't watch shows that don't have large queer followings, but I'm not sure that's actually a fault. There are worse reasons to watch a show. Perhaps my embarrassment has nothing to do with quality of the TV shows at all? Perhaps it stems from the fact that I don't audience TV like my friends do, especially my straight friends. Most of my friends profess to choosing shows based on genre and critical reception. I often chose shows for their queer subtext and the community that forms around it, which means there is very little in common across my most frequently watched shows. *Once Upon a Time* is not *Rizzoli and Isles* is not a soap opera. In this chapter, I'd like to suss out the ways my audiencing is rooted in the practice of queer worldmaking. Audiencing of TV begins before watching. What we chose to watch is a performance of self. What we chose to obsess over even more so. Furthermore, these performances—stanning, trashing, passing and more—shift TV viewing out of the realm of passive consumption into the co-creation and negotiation of identity.

## 5.1 In Which I Am Live! With Gramma and Papaw

I remember when *The Sound of Music Live!* started getting attention, especially for snagging Lady Gaga. I was skeptical of the hybrid genre and didn't get around to watching it. I refused to watch *The Rocky Horror Picture Show Live!* despite wanting to help ratings for Laverne Cox. I didn't tune in to *Grease Live!* because I'll never forget the cringiness I felt watching the movie for first time with Gramma. Knowing that she thought I didn't know anything about sex, I flung my drink's cap across the room and hunted it down while Rizzo and Kenickie sorted out a broken condom in the back seat. I didn't want to have a worse experience with the musical, and these Live! events have really only let viewers down. My roommate convinced me to watch *Hairspray Live!*, and Jennifer Hudson was tremendous, but she wasn't Queen Latifah or the actress I saw on Broadway since *Hairspray* is one of only two shows I've seen on Broadway. I enjoyed Twitter's reaction to *The Passion Live!*, and I'm not sure I can actually name the other Live! performances. Oh, I think *Peter Pan Live!* was playing on the bar TV at Hound Dogs when I was out getting drinks?

All this said, I was excited about *A Christmas Story Live!* because it's one of my favorite seasonal movies. The dad reminds me of Papaw to whom I introduced to the film only a couple years ago. *A Christmas Story Live!* aired during a church service, so my grandparents recorded it for me to watch later. And because they are very sweet and take an interest in what I'm interested in (remind me to tell you about Papaw's opinion of *The Cutting Edge*, which involves a lot of doubts about the physics of the Pamchenko twist), we ended up putting it on the next day. As the opening credits rolled, I accidentally blurted out how excited I was to learn Jane Krakowski was a part of this. While I was paranoid that I had somehow outed myself just by being excited, Gramma

simply insisted I point her out when her part came on. The musical lacks a lot of the charm of the movie, but I have fond memories of Matthew Broderick from *The Music Man* remake he was in, so I was feeling generous. The best moment of the whole show was Jane Krakowski's "You'll Shoot Your Eye Out" for multiple reasons: child dancers, catchy refrain, my celebri-crush on Krakowski, and Gramma and Papaw declaring her song and dance to be the most entertaining portion of the show. Even their abstract agreement that I had chosen a talented celebri-crush made me skittish to get too effusive about her. But their agreement was also a kind of vindication: she's fabulous and everyone can appreciate that.

## **5.2 In Which I Account for My Daily Habits**

When I was in my undergraduate public speaking class, I gave a commemorative speech on John Black and Dr. Marlena Evans. I made an elaborate PowerPoint show to celebrate their epic love story. Needless to say, no one in the class knew what I was talking about, but I honestly didn't care. The speech wasn't, for me, the main event. The significant performance of my fandom had already happened. The befuddled looks my classmates gave were a badge of honor. A mark of how my obsession was spared their gaze, much like the book in the previous chapter conceals what it pretends to reveal. *Days of Our Lives* (DOOL) was daily viewing for me. I remember being perhaps eight and staying with Angel for the summer. She only babysat me that one summer, and she watched a block of soaps every day while her son napped. I laid out on her black velvet sectional (at least it felt that soft in memory) under a blanket and fell in love with Marlena and John and Stefano and Kristen and Kate. Maybe not the best entertainment for a child, but it was my favorite time of day. For years I would relish sick days because that meant I could watch episodes while I was home. Once I faked sick a second day

with the hopes of seeing a pivotal future scene. Given the nature of soaps, I didn't get to see what I wanted even with the extra time. I would've had to fake mono for that.

By college, though, I was still interested. I used to carpool with Gramma because parking on campus sucked. She would drop me off at 730 and pick me up after 5. I never had class that whole time, so I would hunker down in the nicest building on campus near where she would pick me up and mess around on the Internet. I don't know what I did to fill most of the days since we did this for three years, but I vividly remember the day I decided to search YouTube for DOOL clips. I had never gotten into YouTube, so I wasn't sure what I would find, but I was curious. I recorded each *Days* episode on an old VHS tape so I could watch at home, but I knew there were years I'd never seen before. (And frankly at the time, John and Marlana were in a very weird place, what with John losing his memory (again!) and Marlana not swooning for his new robotic super solider persona.) So, I started with "john and marlena" because I didn't have any idea what I was doing. Reading the titles, most of the clips weren't applicable. But there was one that stood out. It had a fuzzy red-tinted thumbnail and was labeled something about hot springs. As the video loaded, I saw the sidebar fill with clips proclaiming "Jarlena" with various places and dates attached. As the video played, my face flushed. John and Marlana were in a hot spring (obviously in retrospect), and they were getting hotter and heavier. I looked around the area I was sitting in, which was always deserted, because I was sure someone would walk by just then and see me watching porn. It wasn't even close to soft-core porn, but I was pretty thoroughly shocked. It was hot. I wanted more even as I felt like I could never tell anyone what I had done and would certainly be doing again. I clicked through every option in the sidebar, disappointed to find many of them were just scenes in offices or with other people. Then it was time to go home. But as the

days passed, I learned better keywords. I found accounts who posted whole years of clips. One day I got ahead of myself and typed “dool jarlena 2006” (which is when they got married in Italy, and it’s beautiful) into the generic search bar, and the Google search led me to several Jarlena specific fanfiction sites. I was immediately all over that. But, if the hot springs felt risqué, I’m not sure how to describe how I felt when I read the first story. It was porn, actual porn, the first porn I had ever read. And I was reading it on a bench in the lobby of the biggest auditorium on campus. I backed into the nearest corner and hunched over my laptop. I couldn’t look at Gramma that day when I climbed in the car.

The Internet at Gramma’s was practically nonexistent 35 miles from town in the middle of soybean fields. And I had a new interest to pursue. Just to be clear I’m talking about the fanfiction not the porn, though they did still overlap at times. So, I would open a bunch of new tabs full of fic to read, praying I made good choices. I wanted to savor them so I wouldn’t read them before leaving school, and any bad choices would mean I had no new stories to enjoy that night. I installed something to download YouTube clips so I could watch them at home and also not lose them. I had a dozen folders full of each year of Jarlena. They had been on air since 1985, and obviously I hadn’t been privy to many of those years. I was so thrilled to get to see how they met, what really happened to Roman, and learn why Sami hated Marlena. It was incredible.

My NaNoWriMo novel for that year was thinly disguised real person fanfiction about the actors behind John and Marlena. This is one of my deepest secrets. But what the dissertation needs, I must give. Can you imagine playing the role of a person’s spouse for 30 years? I was so invested in imagining what that kind of relationship would be like and how it would affect other relationships. Like, soaps film practically every day

all year long. I never fully subscribed to the fan theories that Drake Hogestyn and Deidre Hall were in love with each other, but I certainly scrolled through those forum posts. And let me tell you, the amount of speculation about where exactly behind Ms. Hall, Mr. Hogestyn's hand was, was far too much. A trash heap. All of this is to say, I was fascinated by them.

I didn't know anyone else who watched soaps. Once I tried to get my friend to watch with me, but she quickly tired of my constant explanations of each character's backstory and was completely put off. I showed her my folders of clips, which she kindly smiled and nodded for, but I was alone. So, I chose to commemorate them in my speech class to say goodbye to old friends. I still scan the soap digests in line at the store, but I haven't watched an episode in years. John and Marlena are "too old" now to rate main storylines, and I was bored by the new characters. I was also beginning to realize the reason I liked watching them wasn't because of their love story or John's looks. Marlena, on the other hand. She was something to think about.

### **5.3 In Which I Learn Academic Words for My Lived Experience**

Adrienne Rich's "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Experience" begins with the impulse that "it is not enough for feminist thought that specifically lesbian texts exist."<sup>183</sup> She continues, "it is lesbian sexuality which (usually and incorrectly, 'included' under male homosexuality) is seen as requiring explanation. This assumption of female heterosexuality seems to me in itself remarkable: it is an enormous assumption to have glided so silently into the foundations of our thoughts."<sup>184</sup> If feminist theory, which is built on claims to care about women, can ignore lesbians for decades, I'm not sure why I

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<sup>183</sup> Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," *Signs* 5.4 (1980): 637.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*, 637.

hoped popular media, which we could argue still follows the male gaze, would be any better. I mean, the number of shows with at least two female characters who regularly interact is pretty small. Fewer still pass the Bechdel test outlined in “The Rule” from *Dykes to Watch Out For*: two women who talk to each other about something besides a man.<sup>185</sup> Almost none pass the Vito Russo Test: an LGBTQ+ character who is not solely/predominantly defined by their sexual orientation or gender identity and is meaningfully tied into the plot.<sup>186</sup> I know you’re probably thinking about your favorite shows and sizing them up with these measuring sticks. You don’t need to do that. These tests don’t mean anything really. They are a diagnosis of a failure of a particular kind of meaning making, an invitation to audience and world make differently, but they aren’t anything to get fanatical about.

Rich moves on to describe a lesbian continuum based heavily on female relationships, obviously, and asks us to “consider the possibility that all women...exist on a lesbian continuum, we can see ourselves as moving in and out of this continuum whether we identify ourselves as lesbian or not.”<sup>187</sup> This can help explain the subtext that queer fans pick up on. If all women fall on this spectrum, then all relationships between women, platonic or romantic, are inherently queer in a heterosexual system. Heterosexuality likes both to isolate women from each other, so they are more easily controlled, and to turn them against each other by having them compete for men’s attention. I hope you are thinking of your favorite shows this time. How many love

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<sup>185</sup> Oddment, “The Rule,” August 16, 2005, *Alison Bechdel*, <https://dykestowatchoutfor.com/the-rule> accessed January 7, 2020.

<sup>186</sup> “The Vito Russo Test,” GLADD, <https://www.glaad.org/sri/2014/vitorusso> accessed January 7, 2020.

<sup>187</sup> Adrienne Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” *Signs* 5.4 (1980): 648.



triangles have you sat through? How many women pass each other in the halls but never interact? It is an exhausting and (to me) boring system that somehow still runs things today. Why can't w(om)e(n) be friends?

While the continuum might capture the connections between women, Rich also offers analysis of the double life of many women: "this apparent acquiescence to an institution founded on male interests and prerogative."<sup>188</sup> "Apparent" being the key word here. What you see isn't always the truth.<sup>189</sup> Similarly, the canonical life of a character paired with their fanonical life can also represent a kind of double life. Of course, this is a double life constructed from the outside. Using subtext to queer popular characters does important work for underrepresented and misrepresented groups in mainstream media. Rizzoli and Isles might be very good friends according to Tess Gerittsen and those involved with the television show but try telling that to the thousands of fanworks that depict them as doting girlfriends. However, when Gramma calls to tell me she's catching up on their latest episodes, I retreat back to "watching the show for the cases" or "doesn't Isles have the best outerwear?"

Cole and Cate set out to both critique and expand Rich's lesbian continuum. They note that "[Rich] suggests the contingency of heterosexuality's basic foundation: the male/female binary sex system."<sup>190</sup> "We might use her logic and her calls to challenge prescriptive sexuality," they continue, "to imagine a transgender continuum on which so called male-born men and female-born women can find themselves building political

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<sup>188</sup> Ibid., 424.

<sup>189</sup> Drag queen Tatianna says this as part of her spoken word poem, "Same Parts," *RuPaul's Drag Race*, "All Star Talent Show Extravaganza," Directed by Nick Murray, Logo, August 25, 2016.

<sup>190</sup> C. L. Cole and Shannon L. C. Cate, "Compulsory Gender and Transgender Existence: Adrienne Rich's Queer Possibility," *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 36, no. 3/4 (Fall/Winter 2008): 280.

connections with those whose gender is more obviously outside society's narrow frame of the normal, ultimately challenging heteronormative and homonormative investments in binary genders."<sup>191</sup> In moving away from the binary system they trouble stereotypes of queer individuals by asking "perhaps it is the femme, even more so than the butch, who is the best bridge across which political alliances can form as more people begin to recognize themselves and their interests as falling upon a transgender continuum."<sup>192</sup> This notion that the more transgressive representation is also the most stereotypical or even the most capable of passing as straight is an interesting idea that falls flat when something happens that I can't articulate at the moment. I wish I could offer a more definitive response to this. I like the transgender continuum. I like thinking the femme is the most transgressive (not that it's a contest but if it was, I'd be winning), but I also don't know. Is it more transgressive to imagine Isles as a lesbian than Rizzoli? Are we more surprised by Alexandra Cabot, lipstick lesbian, than Olivia Benson, soft butch lover of ladies? But, in terms of most TV, Benson is the closest to butch we get, which means that most queer pairings are made up of ultrafemmes. What kind of transgression are the fans enacting by taking the girly girls and making them lesbians? Is there any kind of transgression in that? What does it mean that I keep referring to Olivia Benson as soft butch when she's not even futch at all? (Also, can we stop trying to make futch happen? It's not great.)

#### **5.4 In Which I Am Gullible**

I remember the first time I logged into Tumblr. I was mystified. It was endless scrolling of tidy white boxes over a blue background. When I first started, I would scroll

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<sup>191</sup> Ibid., 282

<sup>192</sup> Ibid., 285.

until I reached the last post I saw on a previous visit, and the friend who introduced me to the site laughed at me for not following enough accounts. One day, I vaguely remember reading a text post that, unbeknownst to me, was joking about the divorced lesbian moms on *Once upon a Time*. That ticked several of my trope boxes, so I queued up Netflix and powered through half a season before I resigned myself to accepting that I had been duped. The show wasn't about lesbian moms, divorced or otherwise. By that time though, I was smitten with the characters and the possibilities they presented. I mean, Regina Mills? The Evil Queen? Madam Mayor? A high femme single mom with personal space issues and a tragic backstory? I definitely wanted to look like her, but for the very first conscious time in my life, I had the thought: I want her. I processed these feelings like everyone else: squeeing on Tumblr. Text posts, screen caps, head canons. The fandom was very active, so there were constantly new fics and vids and fanart. I plunged headfirst into it all, even if I found it supremely embarrassing to tell people in person that I loved the show. Mostly because I did not love "the show." I loved one thing about the show (and what she showed me about myself) fanatically. Like much (all?) desire, it began from the particular and grew exponentially until it became world-defining.

## **5.5 In Which I Vid**

Fanvids of popular TV shows like *Once upon a Time*, *Warehouse 13*, and *Rizzoli and Isles* often depict the lead female characters in romantic relationships. Rather than begin with the particular and expand, these acts of fanatical audiencing begin with a reimagined whole. They reorder scenes from the canon of the show and are most frequently set to popular songs that illustrate the deep connection between these characters. On occasion, these vids use snippets from porn or lesbian films to further

create the illusion of a romantic relationship. They rely heavily on not taking scenes out of context and drawing from several episodes across multiple seasons. These tactics seek to ground the queer reading by imagining the subtext of the show as a completed whole. This section examines the way femvids, or these fanvids that feature queer pairings of “straight” women, become sites of resistance for queer women. Femvids actively engage in the creation of a queer canon and allow for representation in the predominately heteronormative world of cable television.

In order to avoid confusion about what kinds of fanvids I’m interested in, I want to start with a brief discussion of definitions. Vidding has been part of fan culture since the advent of VCRs and home recording systems. With the creation of YouTube and similar video hosting websites, vidding has only become more popular. Francesca Coppa explains:

Vidding is a form of grassroots filmmaking in which clips from television shows and movies are set to music. The result is called a vid or a songvid. Unlike professional MTVstyle music videos, in which footage is created to promote and popularize a piece of music, fannish vidders use music in order to comment on or analyze a set of preexisting visuals, to stage a reading, or occasionally to use the footage to tell new stories. In vidding, the fans are fans of the visual source, and music is used as an interpretive lens to help the viewer to see the source text differently. A vid is a visual essay that stages an argument, and thus it is more akin to arts criticism than to traditional music video.<sup>193</sup>

I would like to supplement Coppa’s definition by insisting that a vid offers more than arts criticism. It is also inherently a reinterpretation. As Henry Jenkins explains in this germinal text on fan works, “most frequently, the song lyrics amplify, critique, or parody aspects of the original series, while the images become meaningful in relation both to the song’s contents and to the fan community’s collective understanding of the aired

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<sup>193</sup> Francesca Coppa, "Women, Star Trek, and the Early Development of Fannish Vidding," *Transformative Works and Cultures* 1.1 (2008). Web.

episodes.”<sup>194</sup> The element of criticism extends beyond simple commentary on the show and becomes a constitutive act. The critique produces not just a new lens to see the show through, but it also produces a new show itself. Jenkins goes on to say, “the experience of watching the video will nevertheless draw fans back to the original series and invite them to reconsider its narrative development. As such the videos are a kind of memory palace, encapsulating a complex narrative within a smaller number of highly iconographic shots.”<sup>195</sup> Vidding makes the subtext textual, arguing that it was there driving the narrative all along.

Missing from these definitions are the critiques offered through some vids (but not all). While most fandoms produce vids, not all fandoms produce vids that move beyond celebration. Coppa’s construction of vid as argument seems to play down the cultural criticism that vids produce. In a vid recounting a popular storyline or remembering a particular character, such as stylomatisch’s “American Horror Story: Asylum - Frances Conroy,” the only arguments being made are about how important a character is or what events from a storyline should be remembered over others. This is not the same as a vid that pushes against the canon like hollywoodgrl’s “American Horror Story: Coven - Misty/Cordelia.” The difference between these vids lie in how they ask us to remember the canon and in the construction of fanon. stylomatisch’s suggests that Frances Conroy as the Angel of Death Shachath is a noteworthy despite her limited role in the series. She was in only 3 of the 13 episodes, but in creating fanworks she is not merely remembered as an interesting subplot of canon. She is elevated in fanon. Whereas hollywoodgrl’s vid wants the viewer to reconsider Misty and

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<sup>194</sup> Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*, (New York: Routledge, 1992): 227.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid. 234.

Cordelia's relationship. The argument in this vid pushes outside of fanon/canon constructions and comments on the culture that produced it. In particular this vid rejects the women as only friends as a surface viewing of the show might support. It suggests that the queer reading of the canon offered by fanon is, in fact, a driving force of the canon itself. Misty and Cordelia are on the lesbian continuum for their friendship, but their closeness, the care they show for each other, slides them down the spectrum for many fans.

I do want to take a moment to distinguish between fans' desires for queer storylines and female friendship. Popular TV shows are by and large invested in male/female pairings of both platonic and romantic persuasions. This creates a deficit of same sex friendships and romances. *Rizzoli and Isles*, for example, fills this gap. However, the show doesn't stop there. The subtext of the show plays heavily with the possibility of more than friendship. A good example of the subtext can be seen in "Rizzoli and Isles [Story of My Life]" by Moonlight1012XFile, which retells Rizzoli's engagement to Casey by paying close attention to Isles' reaction. It uses the canon of the show in which there are an abundance of longing glances, hand-holdings and shoulders to cry on to establish there might be more to this relationship. Moonlight1012XFile's "Rizzoli & Isles [Story Of My Life]" is a typical songvid, and I could generate hundreds of examples of similar vids that queer the canon.

But, there are other kinds of vids that do the same work in different ways. As technology has moved beyond VCRs, vidders are able to alter images, even 3D images, to bring together all kinds of media. Vids are becoming more complex and integrating text, porn clips, original music, and even playing out fanfic narratives. The increased ability to be manipulated also increases the potential to queer the canon. Importantly,

though, what opens a show up for queering in this way is not merely the presence of two women. While I would agree that technically any show can be queered, not every show actually opens itself up for queer subtextual readings. *Desperate Housewives* has quite a lot of women (and still fails the Bechdel test somehow? I will not tell you how many episodes I watched before giving up and skipping to the a five-episode arc where Dana Delaney falls in love with a woman. It was 70 and a half.) but did not inspire these types of fanworks. No one is watching *Big Little Lies* and hoping Celeste and Renata sneak off to a motel together. (Or maybe they are, but they aren't writing about it.) I'm getting away from the point. Often fandoms that queer female friendships do so because those friendship are better developed than the actual romantic relationships the women are engaged in. And those shows are usually a little bit bad. There are holes, gaps, cracks where the fans can settle and remake the story to reflect the world they (want to) live in.

## **5.6 In Which I Must Chose Cute or Good**

"Do you like her because you think she's cute or because she's a good character?" my roommate asked me after I pointed out a doctor on the TV show she's currently binging. The question itself seems relatively harmless. I believe it's an attempt to see if I know any spoilers for the show. But, I'm struck by the fact that I'm asked to choose. Do I like her looks, or do I like her substance? Is there a reason both can't be an option? I suppose it's an unvoiced option that I could, and did, select. She is cute, but almost all TV characters are cute. It's in the job description. She's also a well-written character, from what I remember, who survives a lot of tragedies, which is also par for the course for a character on a fast-paced primetime drama. And as I responded that I liked her for several reasons, I couldn't help but realize an edge of defensiveness or at least explanation to my answer. As if I felt that saying she was cute was the wrong answer,

and I needed to justify having complex reasons for liking her. I mean, no one wants to be accused of objectification. I can't recall my roommate ever having to choose, though, whether she liked a male character for any particular reason over another (which might just be because I've never put the question to her). This whole exchange reminded me of seeing *Wonder Woman* with another friend who seemed to interpret my enthusiasm for Robin Wright as stemming solely from her appearance. I did react rather defensively to that. Robin Wright's Antiope is a badass, and I thought she was well-written and well-acted. Is she also aesthetically pleasing? Sure. But not every reaction I have to an actress is because of their appearance, which is something I didn't realize I needed to verbalize until these moments. In fact, being a being who is about more than appearances is one of the facets of my performance of fandom.

### **5.7 In Which I Took Advantage of the Perks**

I worked in a movie theater/bakery/bar through most of undergrad. It was a small art house theater that shared the building with the largest video rental store in the state. I was hired because there were no women working for the movie theater, and the owners felt they needed to rectify that. I had no experience, but I had taken two film studies classes. I remember bringing this up during the interview like it was all the qualifications I needed. Honestly, I didn't expect to get the job, so I was pleased when they called me back to set a start date. The job came with several perks: free movies, free food, free booze, and free rentals. I was slow to embrace these benefits. But, the longer I worked there, the more comfortable I felt taking advantage of what they were offering. I wish I could remember who told me about *The L Word*. (Probably my friend who took me to the gay bar every week to see the drag show. I suspect she had an interest in knowing if I was family or not.) This is all to say, one day I worked up the nerve to ask



for *The L Word* season one. The first two disks anyway. Free rentals within limits. I was living with two friends because my mom thought I shouldn't live with family for all of college. I remember curling up in my bed around my laptop. I waited until everyone was asleep, and I had my headphones plugged in just in case.

I couldn't finish the first season for two reasons. One, Bette was going to cheat on Tina (I am not sorry about this spoiler. If you don't know this by now, I can't help you), and I could not watch that happen. I was devastated. Tina deserved better. Two, Jenny and Marina struck something inside me I had not felt before. Jenny, a writer. A seemingly straight girl who was dating a man because it's what she's supposed to do. Jenny who talked books with Marina who was smart and interesting and beautiful. I was not ready to have those feelings. I was not prepared to accept what that could mean for me. So, I added another TV secret to the pile. I put it right next to my feelings about *Exit to Eden* which were less about Paul Mercurio's ass and all about Dana Delany in those corsets.

## **5.8 In Which #DeadLesbianSyndrome Makes TV Hard**

The reality for queer characters, when there are queer characters, is rather depressing. #DeadLesbianSyndrome and #BuryYourGays have lengthy articles on TV Tropes detailing their history.<sup>196</sup> But, fan activities have been bridging the gap between canon, which is the world of the show which you have probably figured out by now since I've been using it for dozens of pages, and alternate possibilities since the 1970s at least. Slash fiction, a kind of fanfiction that romantically pairs "straight" male characters, is typically traced to Kirk and Spock from *Star Trek (TOS)*. At the same time, femslash, the

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<sup>196</sup> See <https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/BuryYourGays> for more information.

romantic pairing of “straight” female characters, often goes back to Uhura and Chapel from the same show. Fans started vocalizing the homoerotic subtext in the main text of the show through fanfiction, fanart, vidding and other fanworks. This tradition has remained strong especially because queer characters still occupy a minority position in most mainstream television. Even those canonically queer characters, as already stated, are treated poorly by the writers. There are no happy lesbians. And if it seems like there is one, just give it time.

Just let them be gay in the subtext is my solution though not the most satisfying. But they can’t kill them if they aren’t “real.” (Actually, I thought that was true before the final season of *Warehouse 13* where the writers did their best to ruin our goodwill toward the women we had loved for years.) Sally Wainwright absolutely ruined fans’ lives, if I’m allowed to be hyperbolic for effect here, in *Last Tango in Halifax*. But her subtextually queer gal pals in *Scott and Bailey* were a delight. (I do not mean the titular Scott and Bailey but their bosses Murray and Dodson.) And most importantly, not dead. I didn’t have to watch them die. And then watch their surviving partner mourn for seasons. I just get to click a couple buttons and read some delightful fic about these living cops.

In all my years as a soap watcher, I have only dabbled with the likes of *Holby City* and *Coronation Street*. The actual queer characters on those show did not compel me the way others did. And I didn’t trust the shows to be good to them. They are soaps after all. If I can’t trust primetime TV for all its claims to be “better,” why should I think these soap storylines would be satisfying? Last year, my skepticism was vindicated. *Coronation Street* has had a relatively nice lesbian couple on for the last few years. But, one of the actresses wanted to retire, so her character needed to be written off. Despite

claiming to have done her research and telling fans that she and the writers were so grateful for their support, it became clear none of them understood the fans at all. Her exit was like this: it's her wedding day. She and her bride-to-be are in their dresses, but she gets called away. She goes into a building that collapses on top of her. She doesn't die immediately. Her fiancé is frantically searching for her but doesn't know she was inside the building. Doesn't know where she is at all. Fans watched as she dies under a pile of rubble. Fans watched her fiancé, still in her dress, learn that her partner has died. So, maybe the actress did her research after all? A TV lesbian is not long for the screen.

### **5.9 In Which I Eat Fire, Too**

"Lesbians are the Hula-Hoops of the 90s," said one of the Lesbian Avengers, and basically I love them and just stopped writing this to see if I could buy a t-shirt with their logo.<sup>197</sup> (I can, but proceeds don't go to them, so I'm on the fence about it.) The Lesbian Avengers assembled in 1992 as a "direct action group focused on issues vital to lesbian survival and visibility."<sup>198</sup> They recruited members by passing around xeroxed flyers exclaiming: "LESBIANS! DYKES! GAY WOMEN! ...We're wasting our lives being careful. Imagine what your life could be. Aren't you ready to make it happen?"<sup>199</sup> The only requirement to join was that you are willing "to act-out publicly" and "put your body where your brain is—matter over mind!"<sup>200</sup> Perhaps the 1993 Dyke March is what lingers longest in popular memory? Their various public protests can be seen in the

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<sup>197</sup> Rand, Erin J., "An Appetite for Activism: The Lesbian Avengers and Queer Politics of Visibility." *Women Studies in Communication* 36. (2013): 121-141.

<sup>198</sup> "An Incomplete History..." *Lesbian Avengers*, <http://www.lesbianavengers.com/about/history.shtml> accessed January 8, 2020.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid.

<sup>200</sup> Lesbian Avengers, *Lesbian Avengers Dyke Manifesto*, Minneapolis: Lesbian Avengers, 1994, [http://archive.qzap.org/index.php/Detail/Object/Show/object\\_id/325](http://archive.qzap.org/index.php/Detail/Object/Show/object_id/325)

documentary *The Lesbian Avengers Can Eat Fire, Too*, available on YouTube.<sup>201</sup> Erin Rand in her analysis of the group makes a careful argument about the politics of visibility during a time when “lesbian chic” was a thing. It’s still a thing. But “Lesbian Chic” was a 1993 cover story in *New York Magazine* featuring k.d. Lang so we’re talking about it being a thing in the past. What’s important here is that Rand shows how the Lesbian Avengers walk the line of being what they’re fighting against (lesbian chic, for short) and exceeding it in ways that showcase the flaws and biases inherent in lesbian chic as a commodity. It’s Muñoz’s disidentification which is “meant to be descriptive of survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship.”<sup>202</sup> Which is to say, disidentification is a “point of departure, a process, a building... [that] takes place in the future and in the present, which is to say that disidentificatory performance offers a utopian blueprint for a possible future while, at the same time, staging a new political formation in the present.”<sup>203</sup> So, when the Lesbian Avengers wore “I was a Lesbian child” shirts to protest the exclusion of queer history from a school curriculum, they were doing the building of a future utopia by staging a political intervention in the present. Each balloon they passed out filled with normalizing potential.

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<sup>201</sup> Lesbian Avengers Documentary Project, “Lesbian Avengers Eat Fire Too,” Uploaded June 7, 2014, 55:23 min,  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o4ootZPETAc#action=share>

<sup>202</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999): 4.

<sup>203</sup> *Ibid.*, 200.

## 5.10 In Which I Slash

Writing for the Fan Symposium, ficcer Kadorienne asks “why in the heck isn't there more f/f fanfic out there?”<sup>204</sup> As a question, it's one people are still asking almost a decade later. Kadorienne sums up it up succinctly: “So that's the big problem: finding a fandom that has not only one, but two interesting, complex female characters. In most fandoms, we're lucky to get just one.”<sup>205</sup> She continues to write about the lack of femslash in favor of the abundance of slash:

But I think I've figured out the main reason that femslash is in the minority. One of the leading theories in the never-ending debate about Why Women Like Slash is that it's a chance to vicariously claim traditional male prerogatives; we can dream about having adventures and vanquishing bad guys and having the independence men have always taken for granted but that we've had to fight for very hard. But a few people have asked, couldn't we do that just as well, perhaps even better, by writing about powerful female characters? Cagney and Lacey? Scully? Captain Janeway? Why not more taking power by doing so via female characters? I understand wanting to do it through male characters, since I do it too, but why not more of the other way?<sup>206</sup>

She answers this question with an anecdote relating one of the fears female fickers face:

I don't watch TV at home, but when I visited a friend last year, I consented to sit through *The X-Files* with him. I hadn't seen it in a few years, so I was blown away by Scully: beautiful, smart, capable, assertive. I immediately thought, “I gotta slash her!” But with whom? She doesn't have an attractive sidekick or an archvillainess in canon. An original character would be suspected of being a Mary Sue, and probably with some justice, because I do want Scully for myself. (No, Spooky can't have her. She's mine.) I stewed for a long time, and finally ended up writing crossovers.<sup>207</sup>

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<sup>204</sup> F/f being the shorthand for female/female pairing, or femslash. See <http://web.archive.org/web/20070210004639/http://www.trickster.org/symposium/symp112.html> for more of her remarks.

<sup>205</sup> Kadorienne, “Some Thoughts on Femslash,” *The Fan Symposium*, December 28, 2006, <http://web.archive.org/web/20070210004639/http://www.trickster.org/symposium/symp112.html>

<sup>206</sup> Ibid.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid.

So, the double bind of femslash becomes finding ways to create romantic relationships for two women when there is little interaction between them, if there even are two of them in the first place. Ficcers rely on subtext, but that is only created when the characters have text together. Ficcer Janis Cortese, in her column “Why Subtext is Better than Text” for the same outlet, relates that “text is constraint. Subtext is freedom.”<sup>208</sup> She goes on to tell us upon seeing her OTP (one true pairing) potentially becoming canon “Sure, I would have gotten the thrill of seeing two celestially beautiful characters playing tonsil hockey on screen, but what about as a writer? Well, I wouldn't have been able to posit when they kissed, then.”<sup>209</sup> She concludes her argument beseeching the powers that be “don't turn subtext into text, for pete's sake! I'll do that. As a fanfiction writer, that's my damned job. ...Making the subtext into text takes it away.”<sup>210</sup> And while not speaking for all slash ficcers, she sums up the argument that slash is about control of the narrative.

This is why so much of fandom centers on noncanonical relationships and queering the text. Though femslash can be traced to at least the 70s, Julie Levin Russo tells us, “little scholarship is yet available on femslash fandom.”<sup>211</sup> Fan studies has devoted much attention to women who write slash fic and to fan works generally, but few scholars have spent much time looking at queer women queering fictional women.

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<sup>208</sup> Janis Cortese, “Why Subtext is Better than Main Text,” *The Fan Symposium*, February 3, 2004, <http://web.archive.org/web/20070210004852/http://www.trickster.org/symposium/symp141.html>

<sup>209</sup> Ibid.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid.

<sup>211</sup> Russo, Julie Levin. “Textual Orientation: Queer Female Fandom Online.” in *The Routledge Companion to Media and Gender*, eds. Cynthia Carter, Linda Steiner, and Lisa McLaughlin. (New York: Routledge, 2014): 453.

Julie Levin Russo, however, is not content with this lack of conclusion. Reflecting on our contemporary mainstream media, she asks

are we really...on a path of historical evolution, wherein lesbians become ever more visible? Or do same sex romances and same sex subtext --relationships that are only ever implied or perceived to be more than platonic-- serve different but simultaneously vital roles within our culture? Or might we wonder, rather, if the dichotomy this discussion posits between 'subtext' and 'maintext' is as transparent and unambiguous as it appears to be?<sup>212</sup>

And while her argument continues to unpack what she considers a false dichotomy, she can only conclude by reminding us that is it not “easy to verify the degree to which established claims about slash and related fan practices apply to femslash configurations and the degree to which that latter are historically subculturally and erotically distinct.”<sup>213</sup> In other words, while TV lesbians are dying, fanon lesbians are thriving, and scholars aren’t really writing about either. Which I suppose is my damned job?

### **5.11 In Which I Consider the Merits of Face Touching**

I like a slow burn. (As the AO3 tag says “like trying to ignite a wet rope.”) I like angst and watching people fight to be together. There’s something very satisfying in seeing women actively work toward a relationship even as the world seems to conspire against them. Relationships take work, and maybe it’s entirely because of the couples I was raised around, but it’s so important to me to see people have to work at being together.

So, I thought I was going to love watching #Otalía on Guiding Light. Olivia and Natalia, #Otalía for short, have a rocky past of which I only have the vaguest idea about. But when Olivia has to have a heart transplant and Natalia’s husband is dying, Natalia begrudgingly agrees to save Olivia. They end up living together because Olivia needs a

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<sup>212</sup> Ibid., 450-451.

<sup>213</sup> Ibid., 453.

caretaker and Natalia needs a job. From there they settle into friends and eventually platonic co-parents if that's a thing. Olivia's daughter gives a school report on her two mommies, which clues the women into their unrecognized feelings. This storyline, the one I just described, takes over a year. I watched all of this full of hope. I was excited to see them build a solid foundation before transitioning into lovers. (Friends to lovers is a favorite trope of mine.) But as Olivia acknowledges her feelings, Natalia runs into the arms of the nearest man. (Love triangles are my least favorite trope, so I struggled.) Olivia befriends the closeted lesbian mayor of their town. Natalia's son gets out of prison. The nearest man, Frank, proposes, and Olivia plans the wedding for them. Finally, on her wedding day, of course, Natalia confronts Olivia, and they declare their feelings for each other. I am ready for this. Like, I know they won't just instantly be happy and together, but also, they could be if they wanted?

After almost 200 videos, which took me roughly 14 hours to watch, I was sure good times were ahead. #Otalía had declared their feelings and would be moving forward with their relationship. But actually, no, they wouldn't. Natalia's son complicates things. Natalia's religion complicates things. Natalia's pregnant, apparently, which complicates things, especially because she chooses to deal with it by leaving town. Olivia struggles. The angst loving part of me doesn't mind. Except there's no pay off. The women are reunited, and while initially resistant to Natalia's return and advances, Olivia decides to give her another chance. While I know that might sound like a payoff, I'm not sure it is because it's all just talk. The show is all talk. Olivia and Natalia only ever kiss twice? And while I know kissing isn't the most important part of a relationship, it is a part of it. Straight couples get to see a lot more action is the point I'm making. I shouldn't have to be disappointed by an unlicensed web series continuation of the



characters just to see them actually express their love like John and Marlana.<sup>214</sup> I'm not even asking for another hot springs scene. Just a chance to see what desire between women can look like on the screen. I know lesbian stereotypes tend to circle the drain of desire ("useless lesbian can't tell if their crush likes women or not so never says anything" and "lesbian bed death" that we're warned will happen after a couple months), but it would be nice to see ladies loving on ladies. That sounds like porn. I just want handholding and cheek kisses and actual kisses and the same kinds of desire straight couples show for each other.

### **5.12 In Which I Walk Home from Writing**

Walking home from a coffee shop where I'd wrought out a paragraph and a half, I was thinking about the number of hours since I'd last checked reddit. It had been five. I had been in a seminar before getting to the coffee shop, and I'd learned not to check reddit in situations where laughing out loud was not appropriate. So, priority number one upon getting home was checking the *RuPaul's Drag Race (RPDR)* subreddit for new memes and discussions. Season 10 is currently airing, but with the show on Thursdays, the rest of the week passes slowly.<sup>215</sup> It's ridiculous because off-season felt like a long, long time, but now that it's show time, time hasn't sped up at all. Shit-posting is at an all-time high. Perhaps that has more to do with the increase of new material to transform? Regardless, I needed to see the newest song/TV show/movie "Miss Vanjie" had been edited into.

It also occurred to me on my walk that I'd never been invested in a reality TV fandom quite like this before. I typically follow scripted TV. My first loves are still

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<sup>214</sup> Both actresses from *Guiding Light* participated in the web series *Venice Beach* which is technically a continuation of the soap but for copyright reasons is markedly different.

<sup>215</sup> Season 10 of *RuPaul's Drag Race* aired from March 22-June 28, 2018.

fictional and functionally straight except in fandom where they are exceptionally queer. For all its faults, *RPDR* is a gay show about gay people that used to be on a gay network.<sup>216</sup> I know this is what attracted me to it. There are few things I love more than drag. It's excessive and subversive and over the top and beautiful. But more than that it requires so much passion from its practitioners. What I do love the most is watching people do what they love. It's captivating and lovely and fulfilling. And *RPDR*, even at its cringiest, still offers a platform to see people do what they do best. I've gotten distracted. Reality TV fandom has never been appealing to me because its practices were a bit more mysterious. As an avid consumer of fic and fanvids, I was leery of real person fic (RPF) because that crosses some boundaries I'd rather not. And apart from attending live events and commenting, I couldn't really name what fans did for reality TV shows. But the further into this dissertation I sank, the more I wanted an outlet to forget all about it. So, I joined reddit and subscribed to *RPDR* and Makeup Addiction (MUA), and MUA Circle Jerk, and too many others to list. Quickly I realized I was not prepared for the sheer number of manips, memes, and supercuts of RuPaul laughing. This taught me two important lessons of scholarly use: one, I was minimizing fanworks like caps, manips, and vids, and two, nothing goes unmentioned. So, I guess I should unpack those things now. If I'm trying to be of scholarly use.

Capping, which is short for screen capping is exactly what it sounds like, compiling and sharing quality pictures of the episodes for future use. Manip is a manipulation of those caps or other images. For the purposes of *RPDR* fandom, this usually this involves inserting things from the episode into a popular meme. And supercuts are just snippets of whatever the focus of the super cut is. But that one is

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<sup>216</sup> *RPDR* moved from Logo TV to VH1 for Season 10.

perhaps the most self-explanatory. Sorry if these definitions are too basic. My point in spelling them out is that they take work that I often don't think about. I just Google the name of whoever I want a picture of. I don't make them. I do make my own manip of friends, and they take time. Admittedly not much or I probably wouldn't do it. But the point is, even for bad photoshopped pics, it takes time to download the images, upload them into the editing software, and outline the parts you want to utilize. Video editing takes even more time and knowledge of the show and any pop culture references being incorporated, not to mention the software that it's made on. So, for the 30 minutes I scroll through posts, I'm taking only a fraction of the time commitment that the producers of the fanwork invested. This amazes me. They do it for a laugh, for reddit!silver (which is nicer than an upvote which is basically a like in Facebook/Instagram parlance) because we're all too poor to give reddit!gold (which is basically a like you pay to give), and to provoke conversation.

That conversation leads us to other scholarly thought I wanted to include. Nothing goes unmentioned. This can be taken literally in that every part of every episode will garner some commentary. But abstracting from there, every side of every issue is explored. As many people like something, at least that many dislike it. As many have an idea for a future challenge, as many have improvements to that idea, other ideas, or simple naysaying. In short, I'm trying to make a leap: fandom is like academia in that they talk everything to pieces. Scholars like to think critically about the world, to take it apart to show what makes it work the way it does, and to offer new avenues of thought. This work is not merely the act of eyes and brains "watching" or "reading" texts. It is a set of full-bodied actions. Fans do the same work in a microcosm. I often say the best training I ever got to be a literature scholar (which I used to be) was from

Sunday School because that's literally what Sunday School is. Being a fan is often the same. It's celebrating the object of your fannish attention while also saying here's its problems and where it could be better and see how it exerts influence on pop culture.

*Drag Race* fans in particular are keenly aware of the way *RPDR* has simultaneously broadened and confined drag. RuPaul tells us he is a “motherfucking marketing genius” because he “marketed subversive drag to millions of people”<sup>217</sup> and Jasmine Masters argues, “*RuPaul’s Drag Race* done fucked up drag.”<sup>218</sup> Both are true. Nothing goes mainstream without losing something. And fans see that. For every fan who gets excited that a “nontraditional” drag queen makes it on the show, there are ten others listing even more experimental queens or noting how the “nontraditional” queens get critiqued differently than more fishy queens. Basically, fans function similarly to academics in several ways. I don’t mean to elide these categories or devalue either of them by the comparison. Joli Jenson offers a rather succinct critique of the fact that a negative value is attached to “fan” for being emotional and frivolous, whereas “academics” have an elitist and positive value attached even when they dress up in full costume to attend a Regency ball at a conference.<sup>219</sup> Jenson’s point is that academics should loosen up and embrace that they engage in fannish activities even if they insist on calling them by a different name. But, I’m losing my point. Fans and academics both occupy sideline positions. And by that, I mean that they have very little control over actual change in dominant discourse. They can theorize and opine as much as they want,

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<sup>217</sup> *RuPaul’s Drag Race All Stars Season 2*, “Drag Fish Tank,” directed by Nick Murray, September 29, 2016.

<sup>218</sup> “Jasmine Masters, “RuPauls Dragrace fucked up drag,” uploaded on January 28, 2016. YouTube video, 5:35 min, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gf25Xzhpz\\_k](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gf25Xzhpz_k)

<sup>219</sup> Joli Jenson, “Fandom as Pathology: The Consequences of Characterization,” *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media* (New York: Routledge 1992): 9-28.

but they aren't in charge of what's happening in the worlds they are given so they create sideline worlds in which they do have power. We dismiss this labor, and its effects, to our detriment.

### **5.13 In Which I Start a New Daily Habit**

Several years ago, one of the best ficcers I've ever read pulled all their stories from AO3 and their Tumblr. They were fed up with the fandom they had been writing for and chose to leave and take their work with them. I was quite upset. They were in the middle of a compelling political thriller, and I was kicking myself for not downloading it the last time I read it.

A couple months ago I started getting notifications from AO3 that this ficcer was posting new works but for a different fandom. I was so excited, but when I looked into what show it was, I learned it was a soap. A British soap. I did not have the time to figure out how to watch that even if my reward was more fic.

For the last few weeks it felt like there was an uptick in new wlw content across various media. Autostraddle replaced AfterEllen's March madness style "Favorite Femslash Pairing" bracket with a "Best First Kiss" bracket. Hayley Kiyoko dropped her debut album. It's been a very pleasant #20GayTeen so far.<sup>220</sup> But, I felt like I kept seeing all this chatter about #Vanity from Emmerdale. As I'd scroll through Twitter every morning, I saw caps and commentary about Charity and Vanessa, two blonde moms making a living in the 'dales. I felt like I was missing out on a big new thing even though I'd never really heard of Emmerdale before. Some quick Googling revealed why: it's a soap opera that airs in the UK. I'd dabbled with *Holby City* when Bernie and Serena first

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<sup>220</sup> I am choosing to leave this year despite the fact that it is now two years ago. I will update parts of this section as there is now two years of soap storyline to include.

came out, but that was pretty much the extent of my UK soap knowledge. And, *Holby City* is a lot like *General Hospital*, and frankly I don't care for medical dramas. Dana Scully is the only doctor I need. But I decided to give Emmerdale a shot. Worst-case scenario, I'd realize I didn't like it and move on. I pulled up YouTube to see what I could find. I stumbled into a, at the time, 152-video-long playlist of their scenes. I would like to pause here to thank YouTube users "sugarmag78" and "Vanessa & Charity" for being amazing.<sup>221</sup>

Over the course of three days, I mainlined over five months of Emmerdale episodes nicely pared down to only include Charity and Vanessa and plot lines relevant to them. What a wild ride. After a drunken fumble with Charity, Vanessa begins to question her sexuality. While they pursue a fwb thing, Charity's daughter Debbie dates a mysterious, rich man who turns out to be Charity's former stepson who's out for revenge against Charity for his father's death. To say I was shocked would be an understatement. I watched that scene at least three times because the reveal was so good. How did Charity not recognize him? Poor Debs. What would happen next? Soap operas are the best. From there the story shifts gears to focus more on the fledgling relationship as it blossoms into girlfriends. Over the last two years, Charity and Vanessa have: moved in together, been stabbed, had two different children abducted, reported historic sexual abuse, discovered a child they thought died is very much alive, gotten engaged, stolen a car, and dealt with the death of a parent. It's been a wild ride. I love them so much. Two middle-aged moms falling in love? That's pretty much my ideal plotline. Add in the fact

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<sup>221</sup> User "Vanessa & Charity" announced she would stop posting clips on December 31, 2019. She took the time to edit daily episodes down to just the relevant storylines and post them for over two years. Just because she wanted to share her favorite show and favorite couple with people. She's incredible.

that one is a late blooming queer woman and the other is hard on the outside but mush ball on the inside, and it's quite possibly the most perfect pairing I've ever encountered.

After watching their chronology, I remembered my beloved ficcer had moved to this fandom. There were less than 200 fics for #Vanity at the time I first wrote this sentence, and I can proudly say I'd read them all. There are now over 700 which isn't too bad for a soap. Although, my beloved ficcer got annoyed with this fandom and pulled all of her fic. Again. I probably should have seen it coming. I did not learn my lesson though. I forgot to download her fics. But I do think of them often.

### **5.14 In Which I Met a Girl**

We met online. I was nervous and excited to be going on my first date with a woman. We had been corresponding for a couple weeks before we decided on drinks.

I signed up for OKCupid into order to begin the practical phase of research to determine if I liked women like *that*. I spent ages on my profile, mostly the section about my interests. I carefully crafted a list of my favorite movies, TV shows, and music. I wanted to be clear about the kind of person I was: someone with horrible taste. Case in point, my music section said: Reba, Cher, Queen Latifah, Madonna. (I know these artists are not horrible, but I also know they are not all critical darlings. They are also not like each other except perhaps in their sheer number of works.) I was hopeful someone would message me, and we could talk TV or something. That seemed easy and made the prospect of talking to women in a way that could lead to dating less overwhelming. I mean, I was pretty sure I could talk about my favorite episodes of *The X Files*. I could hate on Jenny Schecter if I needed to. I would just sit back and wait for someone to make the first move.

I was delighted to see how many accounts I had high compatibility with. It was so exciting to think some of these women might like to meet me. It was also very exciting to realize there were so many women who liked women like *that*, like me. I was living in a small city at the time and discovering so many women made me feel less anomalous. Less like I needed to hide.

Scrolling through profiles, I found one asking why the cake was left out in the rain. I knew what that meant. “MacArthur Park.” I mean, what else could that be referring to? The song was top of mind for me because I had just watched season three of *RuPaul’s Drag Race* with my friend. Manila Luzon sent my favorite queen that season home. It was heartbreaking to watch, especially because the song is so ridiculous. But, I sat there and looked at this profile. No, I sat there and starred at that question. It had to be a “MacArthur Park” reference. And it had to be some kind of shibboleth. Like, how many people could possibly get the reference? I had to know if I was right about it, so I quickly typed up a response before I could second guess myself. She responded that I was right, and then we disagreed about the outcome of that lipsync on *Drag Race*. We started talking multiple times a day, lengthy messages about TV and movies and our families.

It was the last weekend of the semester, and I was scheduled to fly to Germany in a couple days. I had a date with a woman, and I couldn’t tell anyone. Well, I could’ve told someone. My best friend at the time was gay and very supportive. Also, all my other friends were kind and open. I could’ve. But, I also wasn’t sure if this was actually something I should be doing. Was it right? I didn’t know. I really liked talking to this woman. She was funny and liked some of the things I liked. I was so far from home, and



no one would find out unless I told them, but it still felt very risky. Like this one night could change everything.

My dear dissertation reader, it did. We ended up spending six hours together. We started at the bar, walked around campus, drove to Starbucks, and then she walked me back to my apartment. I was so nervous I gave her a tour of my flat by picking up half the knick-knacks I own and explained where they came from. This is my Princess Leia cut out. This is my record player and my favorite album, “Get Yourself a College Girl.” This is my desk. This is the teddy bear ornament Gramma gave me for Christmas when I was five. Anytime we made eye contact, I found another object to show her. This is my favorite high school teacher in a frame my old roommate gave me. This is closet TV (which is exactly what it sounds like. My apartment was very small). She followed me around, hovering just over my shoulder. This is my Rhett and Scarlett cardboard cutout. I felt like if I didn’t keep talking, something else might happen. This is my second bookshelf. Her lips quirked to the left like she was holding back a grin. This is my key hook. We’d made it back to the door, and there was nothing left to show unless I started opening drawers. But, it was a first date, and I didn’t think I was that kind of girl. (Get it? Drawers and drawers?)

Eventually she left with a hug and a promise to message.

We talked every day for the three weeks I was in Germany. I watched her favorite show, so I could talk to her about it. I hated it so much, but I could see why she liked it. Well-dressed middle-aged actresses who wore the most gorgeous outerwear nearly every episode? It wasn’t much of a hardship, even if it was one of my least favorite genres. This dissertation grew out of our relationship in so many ways. She was a huge fangirl. She was a stan. She flew around the country to see her favorite bands and Broadway

musicals. I finally had someone who understood how much media meant to me. And someone who saw it the way I did. It was revelatory. We could talk about soaps because she watched them. We could talk about femslash because she read it. For the first time, I found someone who I could tell my TV secrets to. She got it. She got me.

### **5.15 In Which I Conclude the Chapter**

It pains me to ruin the end of this chapter with this summary. The format of this document chafes at times. Wouldn't it be nice to end it there? Two people connecting. Happy and excited. Instead I've got to ask if you've remembered the ways disidentification is a survival strategy we can see exemplified in the co-opting of lesbian chic. Did you think about Burke's equipment for living when I told you how important these fictional queer women are to my ability to navigate this world? What about that wide image I asked you to figure out on your own? Did these braids of me and us and them create an image for you at all? Do you have any TV secrets of your own? A practice you've developed over years so that you can see yourself in popular media? Are you satisfied with the text? Are you hungry for a sub(text)? I think I've demonstrated some of how audiencing TV rather than a passive consumption, is an engaged practice, an active process, a way of making yourself and your world. Do you agree? What is on your mousepad? Are you tired of all these mixed metaphors where I shoehorn in structure on a fragmented exploration of personal narrative and the TV that made me? You're in luck, just one chapter left.

## Chapter 6. Conclusions, or Thank You for Being an Aca-Friend

I've written parts of this dissertation in dozens of places. This project has crossed state lines and seen the insides of too many coffee shops to name. Today I am sitting in a coffee shop playing *The Waltons* with two soft butch baristas.<sup>222</sup> Their stereotypical faux hawks and baggy gym shorts are why I keep coming back. One of them wears a flat billed cap some days, but *The Waltons* has remained a somewhat baffling constant. The first time I walked in and saw them, I smiled. I cracked open my laptop with its lesbian flag patterned Saturn sticker, hoping they would see that I was family. Just imagining that we are queer together in this town was enough for me to feel welcomed and safe there. They might not be queer though. It's foolish of me to assume based on appearance, especially since I'm not visibly very queer. But, the simple suggestion that they are brings me such comfort.

In this chapter I explore how I audience performance studies as a kind of long performance so that I might better understand what it means to be an academic and clarify the contributions I hope I've made to that performance. Can academia support queer intimacies? Is there room for hope and utopia in the Ivory Tower? I extend Joli Jenson's charge that fans and academics are two sides of the same coin, differentiated primarily because of elitism and the politics of taste. If we consider that academics have similar attachments to their objects of study that media fans have to theirs, can we use the tools for studying fandom to study academia itself? Can I Mary Sue my way in? Is simple self-projection the secret to it all? How much of Imposter Syndrome is just

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<sup>222</sup> "Today" in this sentence was sometime in the fall of 2018. Amazing how over a year ago I thought I might be done writing this soon, and yet I really, truly wasn't anywhere close to that.

imagining the fanboys decrying “Mary Sue”? In these concluding paragraphs, I want most to find the ways I can make academia work for me. What is the use of this document, of the degree that will come after this, if I cannot live in the academy as it is currently configured? To what degree have I survived this?

### **6.1 In Which I Saw God or Dog or Both or Neither**

As part of the playwrighting classes I took during my undergraduate years, I was required to attend every show the Theater Department mounted. This was no hardship. Occasionally the shows would push against the conservative boundaries I held, but I was so in love with the idea of going to the theater and the production behind the production that I had plenty to focus on that wasn't my discomfort. I'll never forget seeing *How I Learned to Drive* and *Fences* for the first time or Dr. M. Heather Carver's *Booby Prize*, which culminated in half the audience rushing the stage to belt out and dance out “Beat It.” I remember knowing very little about *Dog Sees God* before taking my seat. I had the vague idea it was a musical (it isn't) and that it was teenage Peanuts (it is). It was the night of the talk back, because whenever possible, I would attend the shows that had one.

Only flashes of the show have stayed with me, but the talk back, it turned out, would lead me to discover things I hadn't known I longed for. Dr. Elise Glick was on the panel of professors who researched topics related to the themes in the show because of her work on gender and sexuality. She is high femme, and I noticed before she took her place on stage that she was seated next to a soft butch woman. My religious brain felt bad that these women couldn't understand that even their butch/femme pairing only reinforced the primacy of male/female pairings that God created. My current brain is so in love with their love and support for each other. *Dog Sees God* deals with teens

discovering their sexuality in often destructive and harmful ways. Dr. Glick tactfully responded to questions about “when do you know you’re gay” and “how young is too young.” I was so impressed with her discussion of how teens are so young and going through so many changes. Whether she actually said what I remember or not, I felt such a connection to her and a respect for how she carried herself that I searched the course catalogue every semester to see if I could take one of her classes.

A year later I was there as she walked into “The Art of the Masquerade” in bright red stilettos and a muted skirt suit. The class had absolutely nothing to do with masquerade as I configured it. (I had developed an interest in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century and imagined we’d spend 16 weeks talking about masques and masked balls.) The class began with Oscar Wilde and Virginia Woolf and ended with Lady Gaga and Nicki Minaj, but in the in-between we covered Butler, Halberstam, and *Paris is Burning*. Around week 12, I took Gramma to lunch at a retro dinner and told her I was a feminist who believed gender was constructed rather than essential. That class changed the way I saw the world, changed how I saw myself. But it all began at the talk back. It all began in the space *Dog Sees God* opened up. It began when the production decided first to have a talk back, and second to invite the community to be on the panel. It began when someone realized this show was bigger than its run time.

Fun fact: *Dog Sees God* has a TV Tropes page that labels the show as fanfiction, which is probably true, but I hadn’t really spent any time thinking about that.

## **6.2 In Which I Lose by Winning**

I won the English award my senior year of high school. My least favorite English teacher was the department chair, and when she handed me the certificate, she whispered in my ear, “it wasn’t unanimous.” Apparently, I was the first student to ever

win the award and not have straight A's in the subject. I know exactly who the other student up for the award was. Brittany. She and I were co-editors for the newspaper. She won the journalism award. I didn't want the journalism award even though I had declared my college major was going to be journalism. I was in the early acceptance program for the J school at Mizzou. (This just meant I could take some classes in the program before actually being in the program. It was not as special as I thought at the time.) The English award, though, meant something to me. I loved "English." I loved writing. I loved reading. I spent hours after school talking about poems with my creative writing teacher. I TA'd the creative writing class. I helped the dual credit teacher move out of her classroom when she retired. I reorganized the book closet to make it easier to find what classes were reading. I felt like I had earned the award because I had done the work. So, I have the award somewhere in a filing cabinet. I have the signed *Collected Works of William Shakespeare* they gifted me. But, I also have that voice reminding me not everyone wanted that.

### **6.3 In Which I Coin Acafriends, a Joke**

I hadn't seen my mentor/director figure from my Master's program in three years when I noticed her name on the #NCA2017 program. I immediately Facebooked her to ask if she had time for coffee or tea with me. As many a conference story begins, we met up after her panel and settled into the crowded hotel coffee shop. Quickly I realized a number of things: we never knew each other very well; I had so many imagined conversations with her after I moved that I didn't realize how much she didn't know about me; and she is even more incredible than I remembered. We sped through catching up (her theater company, which I used to be a part of, what my dissertation

topic was, general life developments) until she needed to meet her friend for drinks. I walked her down the hallway, and we took a bench.

When her friend arrived, I tried to be the good, networking young scholar I was told I should be. I talked to them about their panel I had attended earlier, their joint performance work, and the articles they published about it. But that didn't last long as I felt like I was intruding on their time together, and also, I don't like being that "good networking young scholar." It's boring and hard and I never know how to make it not sound like sucking up? So, I started to excuse myself, but they were already engaged in conversation with each other. I just sat there and watched. They have decades of friendship between them. It was lovely to watch them laugh together. I was invited to drinks with them, but I felt out of place and said I didn't want to intrude. I said it was so nice to see their friendship like this. I said they were delightful "acafriends," and they cackled. Thus, the joke was born. One-part Pitch Perfect reference, one-part portmanteau, one-part not thinking before speaking, and one-part desire to name what I was witnessing. From there I spun out that acafriends was a special bond born out of scholastic inquiry and coping with the rigors of the academy, a form of co-audiencing and fandom, a mode of queer worldmaking.

#### **6.4 In Which I Fangirl about Scholar**

"Today I met Jack Halberstam." What a classic "dear diary" sentence. I first read Halberstam in my "Art of Masquerade" class. I remember mostly being confused about the difference between the name my teacher kept using and the name on the article. I'm not especially known for paying attention, though, so I'm sure there was an explanation that covered dead naming I just missed it. But, today Jack was talking about his new book *Trans\**. The "\*" is pronounced, except almost everyone who named it said

“asterisks” which cracked me up. There’s only one asterisk. I kept imagining they were saying asterix with an “x” like “Lantinx” or “folx” to be more gender inclusive and that made it sound like it was being pluralized. In the lecture, Jack offered an alternative history of Trans\* Feminisms in order to better explain why trans-exclusionary radical feminists (TERFs) exist when these two marginalized communities should get along.

After the talk, I wanted Jack to sign my copy of his book *The Queer Art of Failure*. His book that had his deadname on it. I was nervous about this, but surely it happened often. It’s not like they could reprint all of his previously printed work. I was also nervous about asking because we were at a lecture, not a book signing. It felt like the wrong time. But the friend I was with encouraged me to go for it. This was my shot. I decided to inch closer to the crowd forming around Jack and see if there was an opening.

Closer to the crowd were two professors I knew. We all smiled at each other, and I pointed at my book. “I want to ask him to sign it, but this doesn’t feel like the right time?” I said/asked. They laughed, and one told me to go for it. The other asked me if I was going to kiss him. I did a double take. Maybe you also did a double take just now? It was a weird moment. I looked over at the professor. “What?” I said/asked, again. “You should kiss him.” I sputtered internally no, probably not, I can’t even ask him to sign my book, kiss him? What does that even mean? Why would I kiss a stranger who talked about his family in a way that melted my domestic-queer loving heart? My friend nicely guided me closer to Jack and away from the baffling directive. And I’m going to let this story conclude now so that you, my dear dissertation reader, can speculate wildly on why that happened at all. You can tell me your best guess in the defense. Or at drinks after the defense.



## 6.5 In Which I Have Thoughts about Relations

Explaining the utility of mystory to their students, Bowman and Bowman remark, “meaning is relational— i.e., the meaning of something only develops in relation to other things.”<sup>223</sup> You can only know hot because you know cold, perhaps. This relational construction of meaning is exemplified in the mystory as the mystorian is triangulating three discourses, braiding if you recall, in order to create a new meaning, a revelation only knowable when all three things are held together. This dissertation in particular, but all dissertations in general, attempt to create meaning by placing theory and sites in specific relation to each other. I want to understand audiencing so I have looked at it through various lenses, as some scholars might say. It reminds me of a Louise Glück poem which I will quote in its entirety below:

Telescope

There is a moment after you move your eye away  
when you forget where you are  
because you’ve been living, it seems,  
somewhere else, in the silence of the night sky.

You’ve stopped being here in the world.  
You’re in a different place,  
a place where human life has no meaning.

You’re not a creature in a body.  
You exist as the stars exist,  
participating in their stillness, their immensity.

Then you’re in the world again.  
At night, on the cold hill,  
taking the telescope apart.

You realize afterward

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<sup>223</sup> Michael S. Bowman and Ruth Laurion Bowman, *Handbook for CMST 3040 Performance Composition Part 3*. Louisiana State University, 2003, 2.

not that the image is false  
but the relation is false.

You see again how far away  
every thing is from every other thing.<sup>224</sup>

When I am working on this dissertation, my eye to the telescope, I am a star, just hot gas filling up space around other stars. When I step away from these pages, it is disorienting. My world is not as easy or as fun or as hard as this document suggests. Rather, the relational meaning I am able to construct here follows a particular narrative order, a sense-making pattern that life does not produce organically. I get up from my computer and feel how far apart every thing is from every other thing. I wonder how we should bridge the gaps, both from thing to thing and page to person. Have I given you a telescope only for you to set it down and feel further away than before? I want to get lost in the idea, this conception of scholarship as telescopes separating us from our reality, but I also want to finish this document before I nova. Maybe this will be a supernova, collapsing into itself? I guess we can peer through the lenses long enough to see?

## **6.6 The Last Place You Look Through the Window**

In 1999 a group of scholars or perhaps friends or perhaps both at the same time talked after a panel at NCA. They decided they wanted to spend more time on the topic at hand: performative writing. They met in Giant City and I refuse to look up what that means. They convened in a room with a green window in front of which apparently, they delivered their essays. After delivering these essays to each other they decided to preserve them. For reasons I'm sure I could find out if I emailed the right person, they chose to publish the conference proceedings as a book. Perhaps it was tenure packet

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<sup>224</sup> Sineokov, "Telescope :: Louise Glück," The Floating Library, July 30, 2009, <https://thefloatinglibrary.com/2009/07/30/telescope-louise-gluck/>

motivated? Perhaps the funding was there? Perhaps no one was the editor of a journal in the field, so a special topics issue was not an option? Regardless of reasons why, they created a tantalizing selection of essays I discovered six years ago but could find no way to access. The library could not get it for me. My bank account could not afford the copy I found on Amazon. So, I left it alone. Not all things are accessible, I reminded myself. And, then, today 20 years after its inception, I walk into my advisor's office to talk about this dissertation and for some reason the book is on his coffee table.<sup>225</sup> I don't notice it at first because I am talking about this dissertation which does quite often feel all-encompassing. But then I looked down and saw it: a green window or what I imagine is supposed to be a green window. It looks like a brown window with a green tree through the panes of glass. It never occurred to me my advisor would have it because the obvious things rarely occur to me.

“What is ‘preface’ to your reading of these essays?” Linda Park-Fuller asks in her preface to *The Green Window*. She explains she prefers to read the printed prefaces afterward. She explains her preface is her lived experiences prior to and during the reading of these essays. She explains, “that's not a preface. That's archaeology.”<sup>226</sup> You, dear reader, are probably sifting through your previous knowledge and experiences while you read these pages. At least, I hope so. Have you read some of this scholarship before? Do you listen to musicals, too? Are you remembering from dozens of pages ago that Linda Park-Fuller's definition of audiencing is the launching point of this dissertation? In 2001, Park-Fuller insists that “So, I think you should write the

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<sup>225</sup> Today is actually a day in January 2020 which makes this some of the newest writing in the document.

<sup>226</sup> Linda Park-Fuller, “Preface,” in *The Green Window: Proceedings of the Giant City Conference on Performative Writing*, eds. Lynn C. Miller and Ronald J. Pelias, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University, 2001), viii.

preface.”<sup>227</sup> In 2003, Park-Fuller concludes “audiencing [is] a process that occurs over time— that can begin before the curtain rises.”<sup>228</sup> Audiening is a kind of preface, a kind of archaeology, a kind of ground truthing where the performance serves as the mechanism from which we can achieve a wide-angle. Our lived experiences are outlined and given shape for us to excavate.

## **6.7 In Which I Encounter TPQ33**

*TPQ* issue 33 number 3 is themed “Reflections on the Ethics and Economies of Performance.” It is a veritable who’s who of performance studies, especially for communication studies. There are 27 scholars, many “well-established,” discussing what Frederick Corey calls “the irony of labor.”<sup>229</sup> The issue is in part a response to Villanova hosting a gathering of performance folks after they had uninvited a Tim Miller workshop a few months prior. Different people are responsible for each of those things. But, the question became, should folks have agreed to attend an event at a location their dear colleague was rejected by? This spun out into broader questions about ethics and labor for performance studies, and now we have this issue. I like a lot of things about it. I like that it’s got a lot of names I recognize as important. I like that it covers topics I am interested in. I like that it has people I respect and want to emulate, but I also feel like don’t get as much attention as they deserve.

In the latter half of the issue, in the “Performance Space,” Stacy L. Holman Jones “invites us to consider our connections to one another through our relations to presence

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<sup>227</sup> Ibid., viii.

<sup>228</sup> Linda M. Park-Fuller, “Audiencing the Audience: Playback Theatre, Performative Writing, and Social Activism,” *Text and Performance Quarterly* 23, no. 3 (2003): 305.

<sup>229</sup> Frederick Correy, “The Irony of Labor,” *Text and Performance Quarterly* 33, no. 3, (July 2013): 197-199.

and absence, not only in the moment but also as memory.”<sup>230</sup> I already did this. I read the table of contents through my relationship to each name. I just told you all about that, albeit with fewer details because you’re not exactly supposed to name names that way in a dissertation. What I like about this charge from Jones is that it turns the mundane scholarly. Conference gossip about where someone is can now be considered a serious inquiry as we are theorizing how absence in the moment allows for the presence of memory. We are simply questioning the reliability of memory as we try to recall who did what when and isn’t it very similar to this here now? Perhaps what I really mean by all of this is that academia runs on several tracks. We have publishing records and quantifiable CV-approved work, and we have intangible, personalized social interactions. We create meaning both ways. To know in academe is to audience academics, to fan girl out, to re-make a small part of the world with our obsessions.

## **6.8 Just Gals Being Pals**

Jill Dolan and Stacy Wolf came to campus. Together. The same weekend. I had just read both of them for the first time, and I was so excited. I could be a feminist spectator? I could talk about musicals, seriously? Pop culture was worth examining? What a series of revelations! Also, these two great scholars got to travel together? Like, they just decided as friends to venture across the country to give talks? That sounded like a dream. I imagined my best friend Cody and I doing the same.

Do you know how long it took me to realize they were partners? I will not tell you. (It was years.) I mean, I thought they were gal pals. But, Harold, they’re lesbians. (One, that is a meme in reference to the movie *Carol*. Two, I am not one hundred percent sure how they identify, so let’s just say they are in lesbians with each other. That covers more

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<sup>230</sup> Ibid., 198.

territory and is still a meme.) I am still amazed at my inability to even fathom that was a possibility. What made it impossible to see? I ask myself this a lot. I was newly out to myself and friends. I was desperately seeking representation. But I think, I hadn't yet made the leap from fictionalized representation to real life. Just a couple years later I approached Terry Galloway (and got one of the best laughs of my life honestly) to tell her how important it was to me to see her and her wife together. I was but a baby lesbian. (That's the line that made her guffaw. I didn't realize it was as funny as it is when I said it.) I didn't see lesbians around me. I saw women doing important jobs. Yay feminism? But, where were the wlw in my life? Was I missing the secret signal? Had my handbook been lost in the mail?

## **6.9 In Which I Make a Joke**

Nice.

## **6.10 In Which Snake Eats Tail**

If I finish this dissertation, which I probably have somewhat at least if you are reading this sentence, it will be because I want to maintain a connection to the people I met when I began this project. I know that I should want to finish it for me, to prove that I can. That I am able to do this. But I don't actually care enough about that right now. I know not finishing this doesn't define me. Sure, I might be disappointed, but this is hard. This doesn't make me happy. I don't think a career of having to produce other projects like this one will make me happy. And more than just happy, if my well-being isn't enough of a reason, I don't think I could sustain a career making things like this. Who will read this? My committee? (Thank you for reading this.) My family if I let them which I probably won't unless I redact certain parts (mostly the porn parts). A handful of people doing a quick ProQuest search for "audiencing" or "fandom"? If I finish this

project it is because in finishing it, I can continue to be a part of the community I joined when I started. I say this not to devalue my labor but to point to how it shares a certain ebullient pointlessness with fanfic. There is enormous world-making value in writing not for everyone but for a few someones who just might geek out on the same things we do.

Academia is an exclusive club I mostly find outside the realm of my interest. But because I am in academia I found a group of people who care about things that I care about. I've never really had that before. Maybe I shouldn't settle for the first group of friends I find, but then again, maybe they're worth it? The only way to stay in the same orbit as these people is to finish this dissertation. This document gives me an opportunity to stay present with them. Then again, it doesn't really though. This doesn't give me a job. It doesn't get me in at conferences. It's a hoop to jump, not the ring we stand in.

By the time I started this dissertation, I had stopped participating in most of the other fandoms I held most dear. Partially this was because the shows ended or took turns that were somewhat unforgiveable. But primarily, I stopped because I was floundering. Getting a PhD has proven to be a depressing, anxiety-inducing, draining experience. I struggle. A lot. And while I was surrounded by some of the best people I've ever met, it was hard to care about much beyond getting through another semester. Another week, really. I felt rather isolated when I got here. No one watched what I did. No one listened to what I did. No one was a queer woman like I was. (This is not to say there were no queer women when I got here, but none that were like me.) So, while I went to school and made performances with everyone, I went home alone.

What I'm trying to say is that getting to this point of dissertating, I lost the joy of fandom. I lost the joy of researching. So, while I was struggling to get through each semester, fannishly I was equally frustrated. I didn't want to expend the energy to get involved with a new fandom even though I deeply wanted to be a part of a community like that. So, I struggled through until last summer when I watched a roomful of tweens squee over *Hamilton*.<sup>231</sup> They had such deep commitments to the show, and I was enamored with them. It was beautiful to watch. They gatekept and tested each other and weren't always nice about flaunting their knowledge of what they loved. But it was so real and so important.

This semester in another theater class, there're four girls who seem to be close friends.<sup>232</sup> Three of them know all the songs in *Hamilton*, but the fourth is waiting to listen to the cast album until after she sees the show in June. I am so impressed with this girl's dedication to the production that she refuses to create an impression of it before being in the audience. However, I am equally impressed by the other three who dutifully sing "potato" instead of the swear words. They know every word of "The Schuyler Sisters," which they demonstrated loudly in the hallway last week. What a treat.

### **6.11 In Which I Remind Myself of a Very Important Fact**

I spend a lot of time on Twitter. I am very Online™ and have finally accepted that. My twitter feed is a perfect mixture of poetry, queer culture, movie and tv news, and memes. I have worked hard to curate my experience on Twitter so as to not see the things that make me sad or angry or hopeless. This is not to say I avoid the world or

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<sup>231</sup> Again, I am choosing to leave in the time marker even though the summer I am talking about was in 2017.

<sup>232</sup> This time marker refers to spring 2018.



ignore that there are things that must be changed. (I have several news apps for that.) But, shouldn't I enjoy the internet? Should I use my time making myself despair because there are some people who operate out of cruelty? Or should I marvel at the generosity and goodness people are capable of? Just call me Captain Marvel. I want to relish the beautiful and kind. I want to laugh. I want 30-50 feral hogs. A large boulder the size of a small boulder. Which brings me to my point: my internet is not yours, probably, and definitely not my students. When I ask my classes to tell me their favorite meme, we learn a lot about the vastness of online. There's no way to know it all. And often we inhabit separate spaces based on our disparate interests. Our feeds are silos filled with content only for us. (There is a lot to be said about this in regard to Facebook, the 2016 election, and the circulation of fake news, but that's not the story I'm trying to tell.) We get to fill our time up with whatever we like. We follow and we favorite and we retweet. The algorithm tries to learn us, so it can show us new, similar things. We pick and we choose. We are picked and chosen. And there's always more just out there (and just in here) that just won't fit. This dissertation is my silo, but it's also me, in the silo, making morse code with a flashlight, hoping, however futilely, for some sign of contact from beyond.

### **6.12 In Which I Cosplay as Faculty**

I do not like dressing up for Halloween. I own a Pink Ladies jacket and a lot of black clothing, so I can dress up if I absolutely must. For my first department Halloween, though, I got excited. The theme was of so little interest to me I've forgotten. But, I'd heard two faculty members were going as each other, and I knew the perfect joke: I would go as both of them. I went to Goodwill and bought an outfit that represented each one. At home I cut the shirt and pants and dress right down the center.

Then, I hand stitched them together. Dress on the left. Shirt and pants on the right. I had a half face of pin up girl and the other half drag king. My hair was slicked to the side and hung over my shoulder. I was impressed with myself. I had pulled it off.

When I arrived, I discovered one of the faculty decided not to dress up like the other. Which, fair. But, also, now my joke wasn't quite as good. I couldn't stand between them and be both of them. Their pivot away from my expectations changed the outcome. I don't want to overintellectualize this moment of fun. But, like, isn't that just how research and writing and academia work? You plan and make and show up just for things to be different than advertised. This is not the dissertation I sold you almost three years ago. My plans changed. The costume didn't fit. But the joke still works. At least a little. Thankfully. Dot dot dash seeking dash dash dot.

### **6.13 Conversation with a Friend**

We're working in a coffee shop she doesn't particularly like which is ideal for maximum work output. I've been wearing my headphones, so I don't distract us both from working. But, it's time for a break. She said we could talk at 10, and it's 10:05 now. I lean over, "Can I ask you a work question?" She knows to laugh. There's a good chance this isn't work related at all, but she nods along. "So, I was reading this book," I hold up *The Green Window*, "and this Ron Pelias essay just took me by surprise. I mean, look at this passage:

"Breasts

Flipping through the channels, a breast might appear. To linger is always an ethical choice."<sup>233</sup>

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<sup>233</sup> "Judging (Everyday) Art," in *The Green Window: Proceedings of the Giant City Conference on Performative Writing*, eds. Lynn C. Miller and Ronald J. Pelias, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University, 2001), 82.

My hands slowly cover the parts of the page that aren't this fragment. She grins, "This isn't a question. You just wanted to show me this." Which, yes, she has a point. I've wanted someone else to see this for the last three days. It's amazing. I can't stop remembering it and laughing. The whole essay is these delightful observations. These serious concerns. These family memories. These shared texts. But I do have a work question. How do I convey the experience of these fragments without quashing them all together? How do I show:

*"Titanic*

I was ready for the damn thing to sink"<sup>234</sup>

and

*"Venus di Milo and Me*

Holding my arms behind my back, I stand in the Louvre studying the *Venus di Milo*, the goddess of love and beauty. I realize that from a certain angle, my arms appear as if they are missing, one just above the elbow and the other right at the shoulder. Her weight rests on one foot; my weight rests on one foot. Her shoulders are slightly rounded; my shoulders are slightly rounded. Her robe hangs on her hips; my jeans hang on my hips. She stares; I stare. Form is everything. We are nothing alike."<sup>235</sup>

and

*"This Essay*

This essay argues that art seeps into our lives, that it is with us every day, that we are always evaluating it, sometimes with the full force of moral obligation and sometimes with the ease of a passing eye. Nothing escapes. Having come to the end, this essay, like all art, awaits its critics."<sup>236</sup>

Just imagine those spread out. Multiple them by 12. Apply them to different categories.

Also remember, I am arguing that audiencing is a process that happens over time. Great

Scott! What do I do with Pelias making my argument before I even get there? Can I just say, here's a senior scholar using fragments and saying what I want to, so ditto? Ditto.

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<sup>234</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>235</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>236</sup> Ibid., 89.

I'll have what he's having. I'll write what he's writing. I'll extend what he's started?  
That's what she said. I mean, I said. Am saying.

#### **6.14 & Is**

In Stacy Wolf, I find another senior scholar whose fragments give me hope that I might one day be more coherent: "I did not expect to desire Mary Martin," she begins her "textual performance of research."<sup>237</sup> Walking the line between rumor and fact, Wolf begins to explore Martin's biography with no intention of proving her lesbian tendencies but also with an admitted interest in finding them. As I read Wolf's history, I find myself YouTube-ing (née Fan Girling?) the many numbers referenced and Wikipedia-ing Martin to get a more thorough grasp of Martin's timeline and exploits. Wolf mentions several "known lesbians" contemporary with Martin and ponders whether she was the only one who didn't know that Martin was gay (or if she'd be arrested for slandering Martin by suggesting so). Wolf attempts thinking historically about the language used to describe Martin, embodies Martin's dance steps to glean some understanding of how she comported herself, and in short "started living with Mary Martin."<sup>238</sup> Wolf concludes, "I learned that research requires and is a performance."<sup>239</sup> Additionally, research is often driven and colored by the researcher's own desires. While Wolf uncovered some "facts" that could "prove" that Martin was a "lesbian," she did so because of her own desire, orientation, and critical curiosity.

The point here is that writing = performance = research, and all three are fueled by desire. In sum, mystory (punccept+comedy+if you have to ask you'll never get it but

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<sup>237</sup> Wolf, Stacy. "Desire in Evidence." *Text and Performance Quarterly* 17 no. 4 (1997): 343.

<sup>238</sup> Ibid. 347.

<sup>239</sup> Ibid. 349.

it's still very sweet of you to ask)+performative writing (evoking through fragments what the hegemonic "whole" would erase) X (times, multiplied, compounded by) desire = method. Frayed braid of audiencing, fandom, queer world making. Q. E. effing D. Fit that on a mousepad if you can.

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## **Vita**

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