

Imagined Queerness:
The Role of Affect and Emotion in Queer Spectating

by
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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to all the queers who want with an intensity that heteronormative society will never understand—especially those queer spectators who are told every day that they are unrealistic for wanting to be seen. Remember: so many good things in this world started out as flights of fancy.

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ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I seek to establish a theoretical framework for examining the reactions of queer-identifying spectators to fictional narratives that center queer characters and storylines. I take queer emotions as my main object of analysis, pulling together scholarly work in the fields of affect theory, queer theory, and performance studies to better understand how emotions commonly experienced by queer individuals create the conditions with which queer spectators encounter narratives. Too much of the discourse on queer representation in fiction either privileges the reactions of heterosexual spectators or simplifies and flattens the experience of queer audiences. Therefore, I argue that queer narratives have the power to energize and empower queer spectators by serving as a discursive space where individual relationships to heteronormative structures can be renegotiated. To make this argument, I look at feelings queer hunger in the fantasy TV series *Merlin*, queer rage in the stage musical *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, queer loneliness in Joshua Harmon's comedy-drama *Significant Other*, and queer displacement in Matthew Lopez's *The Inheritance* to see how these works both dramatize and engage with specific queer emotions. Each chapter draws on responses from actual queer audience members (myself included) to demonstrate how queer narratives may generate a sense of potentiality in the queer spectator that extends beyond the limits of heteronormativity. By amplifying this sense of potential, queer narratives may begin to enact large-scale orientational shifts that allow queer individuals to reconceptualize our place in society. What this reconceptualization ultimately does is introduce a precondition for political action—the affective perception that change is possible and that a better, more queer world is within reach.

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Introduction

Feeling Queer

While the popular creed “Representation Matters” has become oversimplified and even weaponized in recent years, I believe that its core message is valid. I maintain that the way we represent minorities in the stories we tell has a genuine impact on the shape of our society. However, this creed does not do nearly enough to examine *why* representation has such a powerful impact, nor do its proponents go far enough to center the individuals those stories represent. This thesis seeks to contribute to this conversation by examining how representations of queer characters and relationships in theatre and other entertainment mediums can emotionally and psychologically impact the queer individuals in the audience. I seek to shift the emphasis of queer representation toward what stories about queer individuals might do on an affective level and how they might energize the queer spectators who view them. As a queer individual myself, as well as a theatre practitioner, I have a vested interest in how stories about my community and experiences affect me and others like me. This project takes queer emotions as its primary object of analysis, exploring how the structures of feeling that characterize queer identity—emerging from the ways in which queer individuals are forced to interact with heteronormative society—guide how queer individuals encounter narratives about themselves. In doing so, I aim to establish queer feeling as a productive mode of queer dramaturgy and ultimately argue for how queer narratives can embolden queer spectators by making queerness feel more possible.

Methodology

To outline a theory of queer emotions, it is crucial to emphasize that I am not interested in queerness as an aesthetic or identity but as a modality, a way of relating to others and negotiating one's relationality. Thus, I would like to steer my analysis away from a model of "being queer" and towards an affective politics of "feeling queer." To feel queer is to understand that one's difference in sexual behavior or gender relations defines them as a minoritarian subject and to understand that their ability to relate to others is contoured, expanded, and potentially limited by that difference; it is to understand performance as not only a method of expression and self-iteration but a method of survival. Simply put, feeling queer is to feel that one's sexual and gendered history, being atypical within their social system, has a pervasive effect on how one relates to the world around them.

I understand queer feelings as intimately related to how heteronormativity prescribes individual behavior, and thus I argue that queer representation should always aim to increase the queer spectator's sense of what they are able to do. To that end, I introduce an analytic tool that I alternately refer to as *potential energy*, *bodily potential*, or simply *possibility*. I define potential energy as the feeling in one's body of multiple simultaneous possibilities. To feel one's potential as high is the ability to imagine different ways of being and relating as not just fantastical but imminently possible. This definition is consistent with Dutch philosopher Baruch de Spinoza's description of emotion as the "modifications of the body by which the power of action on the body is increased or

diminished.”¹ Therefore, I take it as axiomatic that challenging ingrained heteronormative conventions requires emotions that increase the body’s potential or its ability to act—to feel more queer is essentially to feel more possible. This thesis will focus on how queer narratives, being rooted in emotion and cognition, can make us feel more queer by generating this sense of possibility.

To understand how emotions that arise during queer spectating may amplify potential, I employ a reception-based approach that privileges the responses of queer individuals. Throughout, I will pull interviews, reviews, blog posts, and other first-hand accounts of queer spectators as supporting evidence for my case studies. I draw these accounts from various sources, including professionally published reviews, informal blogs, Broadway World message boards, social media posts, etc. To ensure that I am amplifying queer voices, comments that make up a more significant part of my analyses will be pulled exclusively from sources who self-identify as queer (i.e., those for whom there is some kind of biographical and/or demographic information available). Other comments for which this information cannot be verified will still be included, but only to paint a picture of the broader discussions surrounding a given work. I also rely on my own experiences with these narratives, thus positioning myself as a subject within this study. Because my focus is on the experiences of queer viewers, I will not be concerning myself with how queer narratives might impact heterosexual, cisgender audience members.

In studying these reactions, I utilize a theoretical framework that draws on scholarship at the intersection of affect theory, queer theory, and performance studies. I

1. Baruch Spinoza, *Spinoza's Ethics: And on the Correction of Understanding*, trans. Andrew Boyle (London: Everyman's Library, 1959), 85.

mobilize scholarship in affect theory and queer theory to establish the emotional frameworks that characterize queer epistemologies while relying on performance studies to examine how fictional narratives interact with those emotions. Each of these disciplines places a premium not only on subjective experience but also on the body's role in social configurations. Affect theory and performance studies, in particular, challenge the traditional hierarchy that separates the mind and body into distinct and incompatible systems, therefore arguing for a more integrated cognitive model. Many performance studies scholars have applied this argument to the act of spectating. These scholars refute the idea that spectators are passive observers in favor of a more dialectical model that shows how spectators can influence the performance through their responses.² A host of queer theory scholars have engaged with affect theory to explore how systems of power construct individual subjectivity, thus arguing for queer feeling as a potent political model.³ I pull on the work of many of these individual scholars to build my own model of how queer emotional frameworks impact queer spectating.

Each chapter of this thesis will focus on a particular feeling that I term “queer emotions,” exploring how each might be engaged to amplify the queer spectator’s bodily

2. For more, see Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1974); Eugenio Barba, “The Deep Order Called Turbulence: The Three Faces of Dramaturgy,” *TDR/The Drama Review* 44, no. 4 (2000): pp. 56-66; Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2003); Erika Fischer-Lichte, *Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual: Exploring Forms of Political Theatre* (London: Routledge, 2005); and Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator* (London: Verso, 2008).

3. For more, see Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1989) and *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1993); Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002); José Esteban Muñoz, “Feeling Brown, Feeling Down: Latina Affect, the Performativity of Race, and the Depressive Position,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 31, no. 3 (2006): pp. 675-688; Erin Hurley and Sara Warner, “Special Section: ‘Affect/Performance/Politics,’” *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 26, no. 2 (2012): pp. 99-107; and Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (New York, NY: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2015).

potential. However, I acknowledge that this project does not provide an exhaustive list of queer emotions. Rather, it seeks to provide a framework for how queer emotions function in the act of spectating. It is my hope that this framework could be taken up to study other queer emotions and other ways of enacting them in performance. I also acknowledge that I am working with a somewhat limited scope. The works that I have selected are chosen partially based on accessibility, as my project requires a sufficient amount of information on how audiences have reacted to each work. Therefore, all three of the plays that I have chosen were produced on Broadway within the last decade, while the one television series has been the subject of extensive internet discourse. I have also primarily selected works that I have personally read and/or seen and been subsequently affected by. For this latter reason, although I have attempted to pull in other voices, my chapters are still heavily geared toward white, cisgender queer men. Despite this narrower focus, I feel hopeful that the broader frameworks established in these chapters can be adapted to the study of trans, queer feminist, and queer POC narratives. I have also attempted in my third chapter to address how intersectional queer identities might cause queer narratives to elicit different reactions depending on the identity of the spectator.

Before proceeding, I offer a couple of notes on how I will be using the word “queer.” While the term has been used in several contexts throughout the 20th and 21st centuries, I use it primarily to refer to individuals who fall under the umbrella of sexual and/or gender difference. This umbrella includes defined identity categories such as homosexuals, bisexuals, transgender and non-binary individuals, and people on the aromantic/asexual spectrums but can extend to anyone who does not identify themselves as both cisgender and heterosexual. While I acknowledge the utility of using “queer” as a

metonym for “divergent” or “disruptive,” I am unwilling to sacrifice its usefulness as an alternative to the cumbersome and necessarily exclusionary “LGBTQ+.” Accordingly, phrases such as “queer narrative,” “queer play,” “queer storyline,” and “queer work” will refer specifically to works that feature one or more queer-identifying characters.

That said, I also acknowledge that identifying as a sexual minority does not necessarily ensure that someone will react to a narrative in a way that challenges heterocentric norms. Therefore, I employ the broad term “straight-aligned” to refer to those who are more inclined to view narratives through a heteronormative lens, whether or not they identify as heterosexual themselves. This term is not meant to demean or devalue such individuals, prioritize certain queer experiences over others, or advocate for a specific way of being queer. Rather it is intended to emphasize that some queer subjects may simply be more predisposed to read queerly than others.

Literature Review

Despite the overlap between queer, affect, and performance studies, the disciplines have seldom been brought together to analyze emotional responses to queer narratives. Queer theory scholars working within performance studies have typically focused on how performances can be used to generate queer “countercultures”⁴ that subvert heterosexual social norms. Other studies have approached performance in a broader sense, examining how political and social interactions function performatively to affirm or suppress queer identities. Performance studies scholars like Diana Taylor, Erika Fischer-Lichte, and E.

4. The term originated with Theodore Roszak in his 1969 book *The Making of a Counter Culture*.

Patrick Johnson⁵ have even explored how performance can transmit cultural knowledge and memory via the body. However, while all of these approaches are useful, they lack a focus on individual responses to mimetic narratives. Therefore, I begin with an understanding of emotions themselves that I draw from affect and queer theory.

In defining emotions more broadly, I owe a substantial debt to the extensive bibliography of cultural theorist Sara Ahmed, whose theoretical models have vastly influenced my view of emotions. This thesis is partially modeled after her work in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, in which she challenges the common perception of emotions as that which comes from *within* the individual, arguing that emotions are, in fact, “a form of social presence rather than self-presence.”⁶ Many of the emotional frameworks that I set up in my chapters draw on definitions that Ahmed provides across multiple works, all of which I have adapted to work with queer subjectivities. Much of the vocabulary that she employs when discussing emotions and orientations is also echoed here, including her focus on bodies and objects, her concept of lines, and her analysis of how contact with particular objects “presses”⁷ on the body to shape it in specific ways.

Lines and Orientations

To establish how emotional frameworks guide queer spectating, I draw on Ahmed’s theories of emotions as creating orientations by moving us towards or away from certain objects and others. In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Ahmed argues that the work of

5. For more, see Diana Taylor. *The Archive and the Repertoire: Cultural Memory and Performance in the Americas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003); E. Patrick Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004); and Erika Fischer-Lichte, *Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual: Exploring Forms of Political Theatre* (London: Routledge, 2005).

6. Ahmed, *Emotion*, 10.

7. Ahmed, *Emotion*, 6.

emotion relies primarily on attributions of causation.⁸ For example, if Person A performs an action, and Person B experiences pain as a result of that action, Person B might become angry at Person A, who is attributed as being the cause of Person B's pain. Not only has Person B taken on a specific orientation toward Person A, but this orientation is rooted in a type of narrative (in the sense that it involves a specific cause-and-effect sequence of events). Over time, Ahmed argues that these emotions can become "stuck" to specific objects, such that the emotion seems to become an inherent quality of that object.⁹ If Person A continues to perform actions that Person B perceives as causing them pain, then Person B may come to see Person A as a hateful person. Thus, character relationships begin to form. These interactions create impressions that, with repetition, come to shape our bodies and inform how we respond to future interactions. Applying this idea to queer spectating, we can begin to see how different emotions that queer individuals experience may influence our orientations and associated reactions to queer storytelling. Ahmed also provides us with a framework for how these orientations begin to affect the objects we are more likely to orient ourselves toward.

In a later work, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, Ahmed argues that as we orient ourselves toward objects, those objects can come together to form "lines."¹⁰ These lines orient us in specific directions along which we structure our lives and identities:

The lines that allow us to find our way, those that are "in front" of us, also make certain things, and not others, available. What is available is what might reside as a

8. Ahmed, *Emotion*, 6.

9. Ahmed, *Emotion*, 4.

10. Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 9.

point on this line. When we follow specific lines, some things become reachable and others remain or even become out of reach.¹¹

These lines help us orient ourselves by showing us which objects to invest our time and emotions in. We can also understand lines as organizing the body's potential around specific objects. If we are following heteronormative lines, then we may discount queer objects or be unable to see them at all. Using Ahmed's theory, I argue that narratives can work to challenge such lines and even offer us new lines to follow by activating emotions that orient us toward different objects. Queer narratives, in particular, have the power to challenge heteronormative orientations that discourage us from pursuing queer objects.

Queer Emotions Under Fire

We can understand how these lines and orientations are affected by the logics of heteronormativity by drawing on Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's work in *Epistemology of the Closet*, in which she argues that heterosexuality draws its primacy in contemporary culture from its privileged discursive position.¹² Sedgwick outlines how discursive power functions through the opposition of heterosexual orientations against homosexual orientations:

If M. Mitterrand knows English but Mr. Reagan lacks—as he did lack—French, it is the urbane M. Mitterrand who must negotiate in an acquired tongue, the ignorant Mr. Reagan who may dilate in his native one. Or in the interactive speech model by which, as Sally McConnell-Ginet puts it, “the standard ... meaning can be thought of as what is recognizable solely on the basis of interlocutors' mutual knowledge of established practices of interpretation,” it is the interlocutor who has or pretends to have the less broadly knowledgeable understanding of interpretive practice who will define the terms of the exchange.¹³

11. Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 14.

12. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990), 4.

13. Sedgwick, *Epistemology*, 4.

Sedgwick argues that heterosexuals frequently mobilize this ignorance to enforce their own sets of cultural standards. In addition, she stresses that while this difference in interpretive methods is constructed as a symmetrical binary, the priority given to heterosexuality causes homosexual orientations to be subordinated and viewed as less than heterosexual ones. I understand this subordination of the bodies of queer individuals as the affective force of heteronormativity, prescribing our potential by limiting our claim to discursive power. The tension inherent in this hetero/homo binary gives rise to many of the emotional frameworks I discuss throughout this thesis, as they contribute to the orientations that affect queer spectating.

This tension, arising from the constant push and pull that heterosexuality and homosexuality exert on one another, turns queer representation into a contest for discursive power—a contest that can be felt by queer audience members. Sedgwick lays out the inherent instability of the hierarchy detailed above by arguing that, far from aiming at eradicating homosexuality, heterosexuality secures its ontological authority by relying on the continued existence and oppression of homosexuality.¹⁴ Therefore, the imaginary borders separating queer identity from straight identity are felt by individuals on both sides as unstable and requiring constant reinforcement. This precariousness also leads queer individuals to feel that we are under a persistent onslaught of heteronormative affects that seek to suppress queer sensibilities to maintain the discursive supremacy of heterosexuality. Since narratives are fundamentally discursive, they serve as one of the many arenas in which queer individuals attempt to reclaim some degree of authoritative power by renegotiating the terms of sociocultural exchange. I examine how, by amplifying

14. Sedgwick, *Epistemology*, 10.

the queer spectator's sense of discursive authority, narratives can mitigate the limiting effects of heteronormativity and augment potential energy.

Potential Energy in Performance

Understanding these theories of orientation and discursive power as limiting potential energy, I turn to work in performance and queer theory to examine how narratives may expend potential energy. Two such methods are explored by queer theory scholar José Esteban Muñoz and feminist theatre scholar Jill Dolan, both of whom work with the idea of utopia. Muñoz constructs utopia as that which is not yet here, always “on the horizon,”¹⁵ compelling us to reach toward it. Muñoz connects this theory explicitly to queer theory with his now-famous claim that “we are not yet queer,”¹⁶ arguing that queerness is something for which we must always continue to strive. I connect this idea of queer utopia to my theory of potential energy by imagining them as mutually reinforcing; expanding bodily potential enables us to strive for a more queer future, while the perception of that future imbues us with a sense of possibility. I also utilize Muñoz's theory of “gestures,”¹⁷ or performative moments which contain traces of forgotten queer histories, thus alluding to a potentially reclaimable queer future. On the other hand, Dolan's idea of utopian performatives makes utopia more immediately present. Dolan describes utopian performatives as “live moments of performance that create, in their doing, a fleeting sense

15. José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2019), 39.

16. Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 1.

17. Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 65.

of what utopia might feel like.”¹⁸ In these moments, audience members can briefly experience utopia in its most affective sense. I make particular use of these utopian theories in Chapters 1 and 4 of this thesis to examine how fictional narratives can make queer futures feel more possible.

Additionally, I also follow a popular trend in queer theory of focusing not only on the activation of positive emotions (those that make us feel “good”) but negative ones (those that make us feel “bad”) as well. Many queer theory scholars, including Ahmed, Sedgwick, David Halperin, Valerie Traub, Lauren Berlant, and Ann Cvetkovich,¹⁹ have argued for the value of “bad feelings” like anger, shame, pain, and discontent in driving queer activism by expanding bodily potential. I explore how these emotions can also open up the body by orienting us against heteronormative logics. I also challenge the binary that separates positive and negative emotion, which I feel ignores how these two extremes can work in tandem.

Why Queer Emotion?

In focusing my thesis on queer emotions, I am entering into conversation with larger practices of queer representation. Many queer narratives have stopped with including queer-identifying characters while paying little attention to how their queerness impacts their characterization (whether in terms of personality traits or character arcs). Others have

18. Jill Dolan, *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2008), 215.

19. For more, see Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Shame, Theatricality, and Queer Performativity,” *Touching Feeling*, 2003, pp. 35-65; Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003); David M. Halperin and Valerie Traub, *Gay Shame* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2009); Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011); Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).

placed queer-identifying characters as the central focus of the narrative but used assimilationist tropes to make them more palatable to straight audiences (the ‘gay people are just like you’ approach). However, while not unwelcome, the mere presence of queer characters does not necessarily communicate the structures of feeling that underly queer identity labels. If the characters do not exhibit such feelings, they are less likely to influence queer spectators, for whom those structures of feeling permeate our everyday lives. This is not to say that such labels are ineffectual, as they are often powerful facilitators of queer emotion, merely that a practice of queer representation that relies solely on identity politics while neglecting the underlying emotions is always going to be incomplete.

To emphasize this point and give a brief example of how I will be conducting my case studies, I offer an account of my earliest experience with queer spectating. I have frequently traced my desire for queer representation to the American daytime soap opera *As the World Turns*—specifically the characters of Luke Snyder and Noah Mayer. Introduced in 1995, Luke was the son of legacy characters Holden Snyder and Lily Walsh and was a fixture on the show for many years before he met Noah. As soon as Noah was introduced in June 2007, fans noted a tension between the two characters (Luke had already come out as gay in 2005).²⁰ Two months later, Luke and Noah kissed for the first time (the first kiss between two men ever aired on daytime television) and became one of the show’s established supercouples.²¹ I first encountered the couple in 2012 as a high school freshman and became instantly enamored with them. At that time, however, I did not yet identify as

20. Any discrepancies in this timeline are due to SORAS (Soap Opera Rapid Aging Syndrome), a common practice in which soap opera characters are rapidly aged and replaced with an older actor in order to fast-track younger characters into more mature storylines. Luke was SORASed twice, in 2001 and 2005.

21. A common term used to describe couples who are exceptionally popular with fans and critics.

queer. The possibility of being anything but straight had not even occurred to me, so I did not imagine myself a part of a queer community. It was not until after watching Luke and Noah that I began actively seeking out queer storylines, hoping to recreate the same level of investment that I had with them.

This viewing experience generated sensations consistent with Ahmed's construction of pleasure as that which "open[s] bodies to worlds through an opening up of the body to others."²² I can remember this feeling of "opening up" clearly in my reactions to Luke and Noah. Every time they had a romantic scene, I felt my chest swell, as if my body could not contain the intensity of what I was feeling. I remember thinking to myself: "they just make me melt." The fact that *As the World Turns* is a soap opera is relevant to these reactions, as the genre is often designed to compel the viewer to invest in and root for specific couples. This goal is usually achieved by breaking the lovers up, creating tension and anxiety within the viewer before rewarding us with a pleasurable feeling of catharsis when the couple gets back together. This formula is familiar to most viewers and is one that they typically associate with pleasure. Because the formula has been repeated so many times in other narratives, with so many variations in content and structure, it comes to hold discursive power. However, by converting these expected pleasures into queer ones, Luke and Noah enacted a radical shift in my orientation toward popular media *and* same-sex relationships, which I describe as a charge of potential energy. It was at this point that I began to feel myself as a queer spectator.

I want to be very clear that I am not suggesting that Luke and Noah made me gay. This assertion would be impossible to prove and unhelpful to the discussion at hand.

22. Ahmed, *Emotion*, 164.

However, I feel quite confident that, had I not found them, my interpretation of my own sexuality would have developed in an entirely different way. The pleasure that I experienced by watching their story unfold opened me up to the possibility of queer storylines as something which might allow me to recapture said pleasure. By challenging the societal scripts that construct the queer subject as a failed heterosexual, Luke and Noah oriented me toward queer objects as potential objects of desire. I recount this experience because I find it to be a strong example of how potential energy can be endowed in queer viewers through the activation of specifically queer emotions—in this case, queer pleasure—and how that potential energy manifests in the form of profound orientational shifts. This experience is also exceedingly common with many queer spectators, many of whom similarly credit TV shows with awakening them to the possibility of queer pleasure or providing them with the tools to interpret their own desires. For many of us, these early experiences are how we become queer spectators and how we first learn to read ourselves as queer subjects.

I share this example also to emphasize the personal stake that I have in this discussion. I will not attempt to argue that a pedagogical approach to queer narratives does not have merit, nor that using theatre as a tool to eradicate prejudice is not worthy of time and study. However, as long as queer artists push for approval from a cishet audience, we continue to affirm their power to reject us. While there is an element of personal catharsis in this objective, I also cannot deny a feeling that I am acting on behalf of other queer spectators; arguing for their right to engage emotionally, to privilege their emotions as worthy objects of study, and to assert authority over their own representations.

Chapter Overview

The structure of this thesis draws inspiration from Ahmed's *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, using each chapter to cover a different queer emotion. In my first chapter, I explore the concept of *queer hunger*, which I define as the active desire to engage with queer narratives. I outline how this desire compels queer individuals to read queerness even where it is not explicitly present by analyzing the practice of slash shipping within fandom culture. I take the BBC fantasy drama *Merlin* as my object of analysis, examining how popular interpretations of the two protagonists as a couple indicate an overarching tendency within queer spectators to interpret narratives through a queer lens. This chapter also works to center my focus on queer emotions over identity politics by demonstrating how queer identity labels are not a prerequisite to queer spectating.

My second chapter shifts focus toward negative emotions, looking at the idea of *queer rage*. I argue that by turning away from an object that is read as a threat to one's queer identity, rage becomes a means of investing in oneself as a queer subject. Using John Cameron Mitchell's stage musical *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, I explore how performing rage increases potential energy in queer audience members by redirecting negative feelings towards an imaginary heterosexual audience. I also examine how depictions of queer suffering may awaken feelings of queer rage, thus disrupting heteronormative orientations.

Chapter 3 turns from larger cultural narratives to individual identifications, exploring how queer audiences may react to characters by examining *queer loneliness*. Drawing on theories of narrative identification, I consider my own responses to Joshua Harmon's *Significant Other* in order to investigate how narratives may put queer spectators in conversation with their own loneliness. I also take this opportunity to establish how

different intersections of queer identity may produce different results by analyzing how my status as a queer/autistic spectator colors these responses.

In my final chapter, I continue the previous chapter's focus on queer sociality by discussing feelings of *queer displacement*, defined as the feelings of isolation and disorientation that come from the inability of queer individuals to comfortably inhabit heterosexual spaces. This chapter analyzes Matthew Lopez's *The Inheritance* to show how representations of queer community may lessen feelings of displacement by bringing into view the possibility of a queer reclamation of space. This chapter also engages with ideas of queer kinship and history to examine how being with other queers can enhance our perception of our own futurity.

Conclusion

Emotions are undoubtedly a tricky object with which to work. To insist on a model of queer emotions can be even more slippery because it risks ontologizing the queer subject. I have tried to resist that impulse by anchoring my analysis in how these emotions arise from experiences to which many queer individuals are subjected. It should also be noted that this thesis does not comprise a 'How-To Guide' for queer representation. Instead, it provides a model for centering queer emotions over surface-level displays of queerness. While I acknowledge that these feelings are not universal and will not be activated the same way for every queer spectator, I think of this project as a first step in reorienting how we as practitioners approach the depiction of queer stories.

I ground this analysis by focusing on how queer emotions enhance the potentiality of the queer body. In addition to analyzing a different queer emotion, each chapter utilizes

specific performative concepts such as utopian performatives, dialectical performance, narrative identification, and queer phenomenology to explore how those emotions are elicited, augmented, mitigated, and/or transformed. It should also be noted that each of the emotions covered in these chapters directly relates to this repressing of potentiality and offers strategies for how queer representation might counter the restrictive forces of heteronormativity. By the end of this thesis, it is my hope for the reader to come away with a greater understanding of the importance of narratives that not only represent queerness but allow us to *feel* more queer.

Chapter 1

The Once and Future Queer: Possibilities of Queer Hunger

I begin by exploring the concept of queer hunger through an affective analysis of slash shipping. I define the first of these terms, queer hunger, as the desire felt by queer individuals for discursive freedom and the potential energy that comes with it. I have already established in my introduction that heteronormativity circumscribes what individual bodies (especially queer bodies) are able to do; queer hunger is the desire to be free from such circumscription. I choose the word ‘hunger’ over similar words for three reasons: 1) to emphasize the bodily quality of such longings, 2) to denote both a desire for something and a keenly felt lack of that thing, and 3) to imply a diminished capacity for action caused by such lack. ‘Slash shipping’ is a term used in fandom discourse to describe the popular act of imagining relationships between same-sex characters as romantic and/or sexual, regardless of their canonical sexual orientations. I argue that slash shipping as a tendency emerges from this hunger for discursive freedom, which leads queer viewers to imagine different versions of the story world in which queer imaginings are not only acceptable but possible. To that end, I examine the BBC fantasy television series *Merlin* (2008-2012) in order to analyze how slash shipping functions on an affective level. My intent is not to argue for or against slash shipping but to examine how this hunger for possibilities shapes and informs queer experiences of narrativity. As this hunger underlies all of the other emotions that I will discuss in this thesis, I choose to begin with this chapter to establish potentiality as the driving force behind queer spectating by exploring one way that it manifests.

An additional reason for positioning this chapter at the beginning of my thesis is to immediately dispel the notion that queer narrative reception requires that characters openly identify as queer. While queer identity labels can be valuable tools for engaging queer audiences (as I will demonstrate in later chapters), this thesis focuses on queer emotions. To conflate queer feelings with identity labels risks giving creators license to spotlight identity labels while ignoring the underlying emotions. Since slash shipping involves the reading of queerness where such identity labels are not present, focusing on it as a manifestation of the queer hunger for possibility allows me to divorce queer emotions from an overly simplistic logic of identity politics. I believe that the popularity of slash shipping in the *Merlin* fandom speaks to the importance of queer emotion.

A History of “Merthur”

BBC’s *Merlin* is a retelling of Arthurian legend that reimagines Merlin and Arthur as contemporaries and friends. The show adapts stories and poems from multiple Arthurian authors but focuses on the relationship between its two leads as they grow from begrudging acquaintances to trusted companions. My motivation for choosing this series as my object of analysis is three-fold. For one, the relationship between Arthur and Merlin (dubbed ‘Merthur’ by fans) is remarkably popular in the show’s fandom. Despite repeated claims by the writers and cast that the relationship is platonic, fans have speculated otherwise since the show’s premiere in 2008. Merthur’s popularity was such that in 2013, the year after *Merlin* ended, a user on prominent fanfiction website Archive of Our Own published a list

of the top 100 most written-about ships on the site, ranking Merlin/Arthur at number five.²³ This list has since been revised annually, and while Merthur's rank has steadily declined, it still sat at 20/100 on the 2021 list.²⁴ It is also the most popular ship under the Merlin (BBC) tag, meaning that more fans of the show have written about Merthur than any other pairing, including the canonical Arthur/Guinevere pairing (or 'Arwen').

However, despite this popularity, *Merlin* has been relatively underexplored in scholarly discourse on slash shipping. Scholarship has focused primarily on more popular slash ships—for example, Dean/Castiel of the CW series *Supernatural* (2005-2020), a pairing that has largely dominated conversations on slash fandom. Existing scholarship on *Merlin* has focused on the show's use of medieval romance tropes and homosocial relationships (which will be explored later in this chapter). This gap in the literature brings me to my second reason for choosing *Merlin*: it allows me to put slash shipping in conversation with utopian thinking. I define utopian thinking here as the act of using artifacts in the present to imagine a more stable, beneficial, or prosperous future. I argue that slash shipping is a fundamentally utopian act, as the practice uses the raw material of queer affects to imagine—and thus, in many ways, construct—entire queer worlds. Slash shipping can then be read as a manifestation of the queer hunger for possibilities. Not only does *Merlin* incorporate utopian thinking into its narrative structure but it imbricates Arthur and Merlin's relationship within that utopia. Therefore, I take *Merlin* as a strong example of how queer hunger, slash shipping, and utopia work in tandem to expand potential energy.

23. centreoftheselights. "AO3 Ship Stats 2013." *Archive of Our Own*, August 18, 2013. <https://archiveofourown.org/works/16911123/chapters/39730371>

24. centreoftheselights. "AO3 Ship Stats 2021." *Archive of Our Own*, July 31, 2021. <https://archiveofourown.org/works/32940190/chapters/81752386>

My final reason is not an academic one but a personal one; I am an avid Merthur shipper. Also, my personal experience with the show provides an excellent case study for how queer hunger develops over time. I first began watching the series in high school, and while I enjoyed it, my reading was a heterosexual one; I rooted for Arthur and Gwen to be together, rejoiced when they got married, and dismissed any readings of Merlin and Arthur as a couple. At the time, I was closeted and lived in a heteronormative environment. Thus, my orientation to heteronormative structures was very different than it is now. However, when I returned to the series years later, during the initial COVID-19 lockdown, my experience was quite different. This time, I was immediately invested in the queer possibilities that Merthur presented. This distinction between my initial viewing experience and my later one demonstrates the importance of lived experience in queer spectating; by age twenty-two, I identified myself as a queer subject in a way that I did not at sixteen. I had lived a queer life and was more disposed to reading queerly. Therefore, rather than queer hunger being a feeling that is naturally endowed in queer subjects, I argue that it is a feeling that grows over time as one's relationship to heteronormative power structures changes. I also demonstrate how this development is connected to the effects of queer pleasure that I outline in my introduction. However, before launching into this analysis, I offer an overview of existing scholarship on slash shipping.

Slash Shipping in Academia

The subject of slash shipping has received increasing scholarly attention in recent years. Many scholars examine the relationship between slash shipping and 'queerbaiting,' a practice in which creators hint at homoerotic subtext between two characters to attract

queer viewers while simultaneously disavowing the slash pairings that fans create. While many scholars have articulated the perceived harm of queerbaiting, media scholar Joseph Brennan has argued for a shift in focus from the “harm” of queerbaiting to the positive potential of queer reading, divorced from actuality within the narrative.²⁵ I find this position to be more productive for analyzing how queer individuals engage with fictional narratives and discarding questions of authorial intent in favor of privileging queer spectatorial agency.

Instrumental is queer media scholar Taylor Boulware’s analysis of the dialectical and rhetorical nature of slash fiction. In “Fascination/Frustration: Slash Fandom, Genre, and Queer Uptake,” Boulware theorizes queer reading as a form of uptake, or “dialectic responses to all manner of utterances, textual and otherwise.”²⁶ These uptakes are expected to affirm the authority of the text through a normative or “appropriate” reaction. A “queer uptake” is defined as a response to the text that is inappropriate or non-normative. To adopt a queer uptake in response to a non-queer text is “to craft one’s echoing speech in an unsanctioned genre that resists an appropriate, normative response.”²⁷ Boulware’s concept of queer uptake helps me establish slash shipping as a way for queer spectators to disrupt the discursive authority of heterosexuality through an unsanctioned appropriation of heterosexual narratives, especially if we understand such narratives as restricting queer potentiality by affirming the discursive priority of heterosexuality.

25. Joseph Brennan. “Queerbaiting: The ‘Playful’ Possibilities of Homoeroticism.” *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, no. 2 (2016): 189–206.

26. Taylor Boulware, “Fascination/Frustration: Slash Fandom, Genre, and Queer Uptake” PhD dissertation. (ProQuest Dissertation Publishing, 2017), pg. 30.

27. Boulware, “Fascination/Frustration,” pg. 31

However, slash shipping should not be read only as a disruption of something. To read it in conversation with queer hunger, we must also attend to that which slash shipping strives for. Therefore, I draw on Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's theory of "reparative reading"—an analytical mode that allows the reader to reshape the object of analysis into "a more satisfying object [that] is available to be both identified with and to offer one nourishment and comfort in turn."²⁸ Sedgwick characterizes reparative reading as a "seeking of pleasure"²⁹ that privileges a given object's potential for positive affect rather than the danger that it might somehow harm the reader. I think of this reparative position as the mechanism that facilitates queer uptakes (and separates them from accusations of queerbaiting) by privileging the potential for queer affects in a text rather than the potential for homophobia. Slash shipping then becomes an attempt to satisfy queer hunger by seeking out the potential for queer pleasure.

Vital to this analysis are José Esteban Muñoz's ideas of utopia and ephemera. Muñoz defines ephemera as "remains that are often embedded in queer acts, in both stories we tell one another and communicative physical gestures."³⁰ These gestures leave behind affective traces that linger on bodies and provide openings for imagining queer futures, thus allowing potentiality to be examined as a bodily affect. We can even imagine these queer futures as the "nourishment" that Sedgwick describes as the goal of reparative reading—the ability to imagine any future necessarily implies some level of potential

28. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You," in *Touching Feeling* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 128.

29. Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading," 137.

30. José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2019), 65.

energy that enables one to move toward that future. While some of the gestures I look at are linguistic, many are physical, so I also pull on Sara Ahmed's phenomenological theories of emotion to analyze how the movement of bodies often leaves behind the traces that lead to queer uptakes. I will also investigate how *Merlin* encourages queer utopian thinking by establishing utopianism as the show's core ethos.

Homoeroticism and Queer Hunger in *Merlin*

I begin my examination with a close reading of "The Dragon's Call," the pilot episode of *Merlin*. Although a fruitful queer reading could be done of almost any episode of the series, I focus on the pilot to examine how queer uptakes take root. Arthur and Merlin meet for the first time when Merlin objects to seeing Arthur and his men bullying a servant:

MERLIN: Hey. Come on, that's enough.

ARTHUR: What?

MERLIN: You've had your fun, my friend.

ARTHUR: Do I know you?

MERLIN: (*extending his hand*) I'm Merlin.

ARTHUR: (*does not shake his hand*) So I don't know you.

MERLIN: No.

ARTHUR: And yet you called me 'friend.'

MERLIN: That was my mistake.

ARTHUR: I think so.

MERLIN: Yeah. I'd never have a friend who could be such an ass. (*begins to walk away*)

ARTHUR: Or I one that could be so stupid. (*Merlin turns back to him*) Tell me, Merlin. Do you know how to walk on your knees?

MERLIN: No.

ARTHUR: Would you like me to help you?

MERLIN: I wouldn't if I were you.

ARTHUR: (*chuckling*) Why? What are you going to do to me?

MERLIN: You have no idea.

ARTHUR: Be my guest. (*opens his arms wide*) Come on. Come on! Come on... (*Merlin attempts to throw a punch. Arthur blocks his fist and twists his arm behind his back.*) They'll throw you in jail for that.

MERLIN: Who do you think you are? The king?

ARTHUR: No, I'm his son—Arthur. (*forces Merlin to his knees*)³¹

Many fans have noted the line “walking on your knees” as a euphemism for oral sex. Under a YouTube clip of this scene, user Sarah Kim comments, “There is no heterosexual explanation for ‘Can you walk on your knees?’”³² User Pample mousse adds that the line is spoken with aggression, adding to the reading of it as sexual.³³

Later in the episode, the two meet again at a market, with Arthur instigating the interaction. This scene comes after Merlin has spent a night in a cell and been put in the stocks:

(*Merlin walks through the market and passes by Arthur and his men. He ignores them, but Arthur notices him immediately.*)

ARTHUR: How's your knee-walking coming along? (*Merlin continues to walk, not looking at him*) Aw, don't run away!

MERLIN: (*stops, but doesn't turn back*) From you?

ARTHUR: Oh, thank god. I thought you were deaf as well as dumb.

MERLIN: Look, I've told you you're an ass. (*turns back toward him*) I just didn't realize you're a royal one. (*notes Arthur's men surrounding him*) Ooh...what are you going to do? You get your daddy's men to protect you?

ARTHUR: (*laughing*) I could take you apart with one blow.

MERLIN: I could take you apart with less than that.

ARTHUR: Are you sure? (*Merlin takes off his jacket. Arthur and his men laugh. One of the men hands Arthur a flail, which he tosses to Merlin.*) Here you go, big man. (*Merlin fumbles and drops it. They laugh as he picks it up.*)

31. *Merlin*. 2008. Season 1, Episode 1, “The Dragon’s Call.” Directed by James Hawes. Aired September 20, 2008, on BBC.

32. The Merlin Archives. “Merlin - Series 1 - Episode 1 - Merlin Meets Arthur Pendragon (2008).” YouTube, August 8, 2018. Video, 2:04. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5oba0PnwakQ>.

33. The Merlin Archives. “Merlin - Series 1 - Episode 1 - Merlin Meets Arthur Pendragon (2008).”

Come on then. (*Arthur swings his flail over his head.*) I warn you, I've been trained to kill since birth.

MERLIN: Wow. And how long have you been training to be a prat?

ARTHUR: You can't address me like that.

MERLIN: Sorry. (*looks down*) How long have you been training to be a prat... (*does a mocking bow while bringing his eyes to Arthur's*) my lord?³⁴

They begin to fight through the market area, ending with Merlin restrained by Camelot guards. Unlike the previous scene, Arthur declines to have him jailed: "Wait. Let him go. He may be an idiot, but he's a brave one." He then approaches Merlin and says, "There's something about you, Merlin... I can't quite put my finger on it."³⁵

The lines "I could take you apart with one blow" and "I could take you apart with less than that" are noted here as double entendre. Numerous fans have reposted these lines on websites like Twitter, Tumblr, and Wattpad, commenting on the homoerotic undertones of the scene. Under a YouTube clip of the scene, multiple commenters have singled out the exchange as "dirty" or "suggestive." User Winchesterfamilyforever even stated, "I wouldn't have been surprised to see it become porn."³⁶ Two distinct Tumblr accounts even use the former quote as the title of their blogs.

I take these two scenes (particularly the sexual tension perceived by fans) as the first part of my analysis. While there is an undeniable tension between Arthur and Merlin, I argue that reading that tension as sexual indicates the desire to feel one's queer imaginings as imminently possible. It is not at all uncommon in slash fandom for the kind of antagonism exhibited by Arthur and Merlin to result in queer readings (ex. Derek/Stiles in

34. *Merlin*. 2008.

35. *Merlin*. 2008.

36. Fatima De Souza. "Merlin S01E01 - Merlin and Arthur fights." YouTube, June 29, 2011. Video, 2:27. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2F6p-nR18NM>.

Teen Wolf, Harry/Draco in *Harry Potter*, Sam/Bucky from the Marvel Cinematic Universe, Tori/Jade in *Victorious*, Buffy/Faith in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, and countless others). Commonly termed “enemies-to-lovers,” these queer uptakes are particularly popular in male relationships. Queer fandom scholar Marja-Kristina Akinsha argues that a prerequisite for any male slash reading is simply an intense relationship between two men, whether it be a friendship or rivalry.³⁷ Feminist media scholar Lucy Neville also notes this trend, explaining that “(d)islike is recast as sexual tension, and the sex, when it happens, can be explosive.”³⁸

Both scholars focus on the idea of tension, which we may define as an abundance of affect. However, tension also implies contrasting or discordant affects. In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Ahmed describes tension as occurring when “shared feelings...seem to surround us, like a thickness in the air, or an atmosphere,”³⁹ particularly when the people involved are not feeling the same thing or have different relationships to a shared feeling. Within this atmosphere of tension, the future becomes destabilized and unpredictable—when we are unsure what another person is feeling, we cannot be sure what they will do or how we will be forced to respond. Thus, we become hyperaware of our situation as we attempt to reestablish control, leading to what Ahmed calls “intensification of feeling.”⁴⁰ This effect is crucial to creating queer uptakes, as it allows queer spectators to imagine possible causes for this tension. However, as I will demonstrate, a certain level of

37. Marja-Kristina Akinsha. “A Story of Man's Great Love for His Fellow Man: Slash Fan Fiction, A Literary Genre.” Master’s thesis. (ProQuest Dissertation Publishing, 2009).

38. Lucy Neville, *Girls Who Like Boys Who Like Boys: Women and Gay Male Pornography and Erotica* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 94.

39. Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (New York, NY: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2015), 10.

40. Ahmed, *Emotion*, 24.

ambiguity surrounding this tension is beneficial to slash shipping, as it creates a space for imagining that is not policed by heteronormative ideology.

Merlin and Arthur's initial scenes create this ambiguity by using the characters' bodies to complicate their orientations toward one another. It is valuable here to draw on Ahmed's concept of "moving" and "turning."⁴¹ Ahmed explores how the movement of bodies in relation to other bodies not only implies specific orientations but can actually create them. We turn away from objects and others that are unpleasant or harmful to us while we turn toward those that are beneficial or pleasurable. Our relationships with others are created by the repetition of moving toward or away from them. Furthermore, the intensity of that movement can determine the intensity of the relationship. While Merlin and Arthur's first two interactions are agonistic, they are also marked by a repeated act of turning toward. In both scenes, Arthur attempts to provoke Merlin, while Merlin initially tries to turn away. However, Arthur's taunts continually compel Merlin to turn back toward him. In addition, Merlin's attempts to ignore him seem to encourage Arthur to move toward Merlin. While it would be a leap to view these movements as definitive indications of erotic desire, they gesture toward a level of pleasure being derived by Arthur and Merlin from these confrontations, which becomes instructive to the audience. In addition, their movements are very intense, leading the audience to assume that the relationship between them (whether it be positive or negative) must mirror this intensity.

While Ahmed clarifies that pleasure and intensity can manifest in a number of ways, not all of them indicating desire, the possibilities afforded to queer viewers by this tension are rooted in its ambiguity. Despite multiple instances of turning inward, there are

41. Ahmed, *Emotion*, 26-27.

also numerous points during the second scene where Merlin and Arthur avert each other's gaze or break eye contact to look at the crowd surrounding them. Also, nearly the entire subsequent fight scene is marked by a necessary pulling-away as Merlin avoids Arthur's blows. Still, the scene ends on a moment of turning-in, as Arthur steps closer to Merlin and looks him up and down before saying, "There's something about you, Merlin... I can't quite put my finger on it."⁴² This line is particularly interesting when read through Ahmed's construction of emotional qualities. She argues that emotional responses to certain objects do not reflect any inherent qualities of those objects. Rather, we view objects as having certain qualities because of feelings that we experience and subsequently ascribe to them.⁴³ Therefore, the "something" that Arthur describes is not a quality that Merlin has but a feeling that Arthur has about him. However, that feeling is left unnamed, and we are left with the sense that something remains unresolved between them. This ambiguity then becomes vital to queer uptake as we are left to attribute the tension that we sense to some hidden emotion beneath the surface of the scene. Since this emotion remains unnamed, it is not saddled with a fixed meaning. Instead, it becomes a source of nearly limitless potential that is claimed by the potential-starved queer viewer. We can also connect this imagined emotion and subsequent queer uptake to the scene's use of male bodies.

Bodies are crucial to queer reading, not only because they clue us in to the characters' orientations toward one another, but because any ambiguity regarding the orientations of male bodies threatens to destabilize the hierarchies that define acceptable physical intimacy between men. As Sedgwick argues in her analysis of homosocial desire,

42. *Merlin*. 2008.

43. Ahmed, *Emotion*, 8.

“the exact amorphousness of the body of “the sexual” is where its political power resides, in a sexually repressive modern context.”⁴⁴ Sedgwick contends that there exist invisible barriers separating normal, heterosexual interactions between men from displays of homosexual desire. Any potential crossing of this barrier is met with stigma; for example, it is generally agreed that straight men tend to be less affectionate with each other than straight women. Sedgwick’s theory explains that the homosocial-homosexual continuum only allows for a limited amount of affection to be displayed between men before they breach the (stigmatized) zone of the homosexual. By keeping the physical/emotional tension between Arthur and Merlin ambiguous—meaning that it does not come down on either the side of the homosocial/homosexual binary—these scenes in *Merlin* violate the boundary between homosocial and homosexual. They exist in an unacceptable gray space, which is where media scholar Joseph Brennan argues we can locate the homoerotic.⁴⁵

This violation of boundaries is felt on the bodies of viewers who have been compelled by the affective force of heteronormativity to abide by certain social parameters. This line of thought also provides one reason why slash shipping is more popular with male characters than female (centreftheselights’s list shows that only four of the top 100 ships are female/female,⁴⁶ against 76 that are male/male); Sedgwick highlights how the continuum between homosocial and homosexual behavior is far more seamless for women

44. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1985), 38.

45. Brennan, “Queerbaiting,” 193.

46. centreftheselights. “AO3 Ship Stats 2021.” Furthermore, the highest ranked lesbian ship is only ranked at 31, while the top 12 consist entirely of male/male slash ships. Also, of the four lesbian ships listed, only two are actually queer uptakes; the other two are presented as canonically queer in their respective narratives and require no speculative queering from the audience.

than for men.⁴⁷ Therefore, it is harder to find such a forbidden liminal space, and harder to facilitate lesbian queer uptakes.

This tension lingers on the body in a similar way to the ephemera described by Muñoz, generated by the queer-inflected gestures repeated by Arthur and Merlin. The repeated acts of turning toward each other and the double entendres leave behind affective traces on the body of the viewer because they allude to a collapse, or at least a slippage, of the traditional boundaries between homosocial and homosexual. They reference physical sensations (being “on your knees,” coming “apart” as in climax, generally being affected by another’s body) which are then attributed to the scene itself, effectively becoming part of it. However, since these gestures are incomplete, they are also, as Muñoz puts it, “forward-dawning,”⁴⁸ pointing toward a not-yet-realized queer future—one that is fundamentally utopian. However, these gestures only create the openings for queer uptakes; the fact that so many viewers seize on these opportunities points toward an underlying hunger for the potential energy that is generated by acts of utopian imagining.

Slash Shipping as Queer Utopia

While all of the affects I have discussed thus far are important to queer uptakes, it would be myopic to look at them without an understanding of how they relate to the queer impulse toward utopian thinking. I define utopia as a vital queer affect (especially in relation to slash shipping); one that *Merlin* encourages through the very foundation of its narrative structure. While any slash ship may be defined as utopian, *Merlin* provides an

47. Sedgwick, *Between Men*, 3.

48. Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 7.

observable demonstration of how queer viewers are encouraged to invest in a queer utopia. The show does so by using utopia as the driving force of its narrative.

The pilot episode of *Merlin* engages and mobilizes the utopian impulse when Merlin first comes into contact with Kilgharrah, the last living dragon who lives chained in a cavern beneath the royal castle. Kilgharrah, who is over 1,000 years old, capable of human speech, and has expansive knowledge of ancient magic and prophecies, informs Merlin that he and Arthur are destined to work together to bring about the Golden Age of Camelot. When Merlin insists that Arthur cannot be the prophesied king because he is an “idiot,” Kilgharrah replies “Perhaps it’s your destiny to change that....”⁴⁹ This language is echoed, in even greater romantic fashion, at the end of the episode after Merlin has told Gaius (his caretaker and confidante) what Kilgharrah has told him (by this point, Merlin has been appointed Arthur’s official manservant, a position that fans have also pointed to as eliciting homoerotic undertones):

GUARD: Merlin, Prince Arthur wants you right away.

GAIUS: Your destiny’s calling. You’d better find out what he wants.⁵⁰

This prophecy becomes Merlin’s primary motivation throughout the series, driving him to devote his life to protecting Arthur. It also becomes a site of queer investment for viewers who support Merthur, as Kilgharrah’s promise of a utopian future is implicitly attached to a secondary promise that Arthur and Merlin’s relationship will grow to transcend its current antagonism, potentially becoming something both intimate and transformative. This prophecy becomes the queer utopian promise that drives Merthur shippers throughout the

49. *Merlin*. 2008.

50. *Merlin*. 2008.

series, introducing the possibilities, potentialities, and space for imagining that queer spectators so avidly crave.

There is also a dialectical relationship between this utopian promise and the previous scenes featuring Merlin and Arthur. By positioning Arthur and Merlin's relationship as central to the creation of a utopian Camelot, the series encourages queer utopian thinking by allowing queer viewers the space to reflect on the queer acts they have witnessed and imagine how this queerness will grow as the series progresses. The scene between Merlin and Kilgharrah prompts a recontextualization of Merlin's previous scenes with Arthur—namely the conflict that arises and the emotions left unresolved—as pointing forward to a not-yet-realized metamorphosis. At the same time, the way viewers respond to those earlier scenes will inform how easily the prophecy scene is able to affect them. If the gestures contained in those scenes are perceived by the viewer as pointing toward an unseen queer utopia, then the viewer will be better equipped to see Kilgharrah's promise of a utopian Camelot as a promise of queer possibilities to come. These affects turn the pilot episode of *Merlin* into a landscape ideally tailored for queer utopian thinking.

Granted, there are other ways of reading queerness in *Merlin*, but most (if not all) of them ultimately feed back into the utopian impulse that is at the core of the show's ethos. For example, many fans have speculated that the role of magic in the series serves as a metaphor for queerness; in this version of Camelot, the use of magic is outlawed and punishable by death, forcing Merlin to keep his own powers hidden. We see, on numerous occasions, the negative effect this has on Merlin's sense of self-worth. Thus, we might examine how the shared experience of concealing one's thoughts and desires from a repressive society facilitates an identification with Merlin and prompts the audience to

project their own queer feelings onto him. However, this reading also ties back to the central utopian promise; one of Merlin's objectives throughout the series, aside from keeping Arthur safe, is to open Arthur's mind to magic-users in the hopes that he will legalize magic once he ascends to the throne. If the audience reads magic as a metaphor for queerness, which identification with Merlin facilitates, then the hope for a more accepting Camelot can be read as the hope for queer liberation; for a utopia in which Merlin is free to both practice magic and love Arthur without fear.

While I will not go so far as to position queer uptakes and utopian thinking as the same act, they do exist on a continuum, with one feeding into the other. Queer viewers receive some form of ephemera that translates into the imagining of queer possibilities, which then become rhetorically enacted through queer uptakes. These queer uptakes cannot take shape unless the spectator is already, to some degree, disposed to utopian thinking, as to uptake queerly requires that certain gestures and acts be seen as indicative of the possibility for queer orientations. However, these uptakes can also translate into the perception of larger-scale utopias, like that seen with Merlin and Arthur. For Muñoz, the chief benefit of such a utopia is the feeling of hope for a future that is not mapped by the logic of normative heterosexual reproduction;⁵¹ for me, hope is the affective perception of such unmapped possibilities. Thus, as I determine queer uptake as a utopian impulse, then it follows that the queer hunger that underlies queer uptakes is, in fact, the hunger for queer potentialities, and the discursive freedom to imagine new possibilities. I then conclude that this hunger indicates an awareness of one's lack of potential energy.

51. Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 28.

How Queer Hunger Grows

Of course, all of these affects rely on the perception of ephemera, which itself relies on the inclination of the audience member to read things as queer. This issue brings me to the point of how queer hunger grows. In *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, Ahmed agrees that certain objects and values become both more reachable and more visible to individuals based on sociocultural “lines” by which we align ourselves.⁵² As Ahmed points out, these orientations are created through repetition: “they depend on the repetition of norms and conventions, of routes and paths taken, but they are also created as an effect of this repetition.”⁵³ Therefore, queer spectating requires a queer epistemological framework that arises from repeated experiences in which one has to negotiate thoughts and desires within a system of heteronormative values.

To give an example of how this framework occurs, I will outline the differences between my initial viewing experience and my second. I was a closeted high school student in suburban Georgia when I first watched *Merlin*. By the time I rewatched it, I was still living in that same town, but I had spent the last four years living in Atlanta on a liberal arts campus. I had lived a far queerer life; I had queer friends, I had engaged in queer discourse, had sexual encounters with men, and consumed a much greater volume of queer media. I had been outed against my will, bit my tongue during Thanksgiving dinners, and been barred from giving blood. I had made unsuccessful attempts at dating, becoming aware of the lack of relationship resources available to the queer community. These

52. Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Duke University Press, 2006), 14.

53. Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 16.

experiences, both painful and pleasurable, shifted my orientations. By twenty-two, I understood myself as a queer subject, with all of the prescribed potentialities and day-to-day negotiations entailed in that self-understanding. Self-identification and queer experiences (and by extent, a level of disidentification with heteronormative society) became vital not only for my perception of queer ephemera, but my desire to transform it into queer utopian thinking. This orientation toward heteronormative structures enabled *Merlin* to activate *my* queer hunger.

The impulse toward queer uptake can also arise from repeated investments in narratives that center queer pleasure. In my introduction, I described how my investment in Luke and Noah in *As the World Turns* translated into an orientation toward queer narratives as potential sources of pleasure. I did not, however, start to habitually seek out queer media until college when my new queer friends began introducing me to different shows and films. Through a combination of this repetition and the validation that came from sharing these experiences with others, I became invested in slash shipping as an expression of queer potentiality.

The Fall of Utopia

I would like to address one final aspect of slash shipping and queer hunger: how it may be used to punish queer spectators. To do so, I draw on a much-discussed trope in queer fiction: the queer tragedy. These are narratives in which queer characters are built up and put through traumatic events only to eventually be killed off, essentially cutting off any possibilities that may otherwise have manifested. I offer an analysis of how this foreclosing of possibilities affects audiences within the context of slash shipping by

examining my and others' reactions to the *Merlin* series finale, "The Diamond of the Day – Part 2." The episode, which originally aired on December 24, 2012, has polarized fans since its debut due to its depiction of Arthur's death at the Battle of Camlann.

The majority of the episode sees Merlin desperately trying to transport a mortally wounded Arthur to the Lake of Avalon, where he hopes that the Sidhe (an immortal race of fairy-like creatures) will be able to heal him. During the journey, Arthur attempts to understand Merlin's confession (made at the beginning of the episode) that he has magic. When it seems that they will succeed and that Arthur will forgive Merlin for lying to him, potentially opening up a new and unexplored avenue for their relationship (one which fans had waited many years for), a final confrontation with series antagonist Morgana leaves them without their horses. As a result, Merlin is unable to reach the Lake of Avalon in time, and Arthur dies in his arms.

While Arthur's death caused waves amongst fans, my reason for discussing it is also personal: this episode affected me as no other episode of television has. My distress was so palpable that I was not able to think about the finale for weeks afterward without feeling the urge to cry. I felt as though I had gone through a loss for which I could find no catharsis. Despite knowing what was going to happen ahead of time, a part of me even felt cheated. I am not the only one; many fans have accused the writers of queerbaiting them by killing Arthur rather than allowing him to be in a relationship with Merlin (playing into the notorious 'Bury Your Gays' trope).⁵⁴ Other fans felt more positively toward the finale. Blogger 'Literally, no' argues that Arthur and Merlin's relation was always queer, as it was

54. A trope in which gay characters are introduced only to be later killed off.

always transgressive, and that the actualization of a sexual/romantic relationship was not necessary to validate their love for one another.⁵⁵

However, the most frustrating (and instructive) feeling that I had following the finale was the sense that something had gone unrealized. I could not help but feel that for five seasons I had been waiting for something that finally never appeared; I had waited for the avalanche of possibilities that I expected would come when Arthur finally learned that Merlin has magic. That secret acts as an invisible barrier between them throughout the series (one that only Merlin is aware of), both limiting the relationship's potentiality and alluding to the possibility of a transformation should Arthur ever learn the truth. Kilgharrah's utopian promise in the pilot even sets us up to invest in this potential transformation, but in the end that promise is only half-realized. Arthur does learn Merlin's secret in the finale, they do talk about it, and Arthur does seem to come to a new understanding of Merlin. However, their time is severely limited by their circumstances. Their conversations are brief, they are interspersed with scenes focusing on other characters, and by the end of the episode there is a lingering feeling that much has been left unsaid. By lifting that invisible barrier between Arthur and Merlin in the same episode that Arthur is killed off, the show opens the door to a whole new world of possibilities for their relationship—to the transformation that we were promised in the very first episode—in the same breath that it slams that door shut.

It is perhaps most useful to examine these feelings in the context of one of the final scenes of the series. After Arthur's death, Merlin summons Kilgharrah to carry them to the

55. Literally, no. Tumblr, May 8, 2014. <https://no-literally.tumblr.com/post/85092281286/forgottendance-merlin-showrunner-shares-his>

Lake of Avalon. However, Kilgharrah tells Merlin that there is nothing that he can do; Arthur is now beyond saving:

KILGHARRAH: Merlin. There is nothing you can do.

MERLIN: I've failed?

KILGHARRAH: No, young warlock, for all that you have dreamt of building, has come to pass.

MERLIN: I can't lose him! He's my friend!

KILGHARRAH: Though no man, no matter how great, can know his destiny, some lives have been foretold, Merlin...Arthur is not just a King; he is the Once and Future King. Take heart, for when Albion's need is greatest, Arthur will rise again. It has been a privilege to have known you, young warlock—the story we have been a part of will live long in the minds of men.⁵⁶

This scene is followed by a sequence in which Merlin sobs as he lays Arthur to rest. The series ends in a flashforward to the modern day, in which we see a now-elderly Merlin walking by the Lake of Avalon, waiting for Arthur to return as Kilgharrah promised. This promise becomes the new driving force for fans who have taken to imagining Merlin and Arthur's eventual reunion.

Fanfiction enters here as a useful tool for gauging fan response to the finale. Out of 26,066 stories on Archive of Our Own currently carrying the relationship tag 'Merlin/Arthur Pendragon (Merlin),' 590 of them carry the additional tag 'Arthur Pendragon Returns' or some variation. These denote stories where Arthur returns to life, as Kilgharrah promises, and reunites with Merlin. Even more significantly, 11,073 of them (approximately 42%) carry some variant of the tag 'Alternate Universe,' meaning that the story does not take place within the official continuity of the *Merlin* series. Over half of

56. *Merlin*. 2008. Season 5, Episode 13, "The Diamond of the Day - Part 2." Directed by Justin Molotnikov. Aired on December 24, 2012.

these are specifically tagged ‘Alternate Universe - Modern Setting.’⁵⁷ This trend becomes significant when considered alongside popular discourse arguing that Arthur had to die because that is how the Arthurian legends typically end. By removing him from the confines of Arthurian legend, fanfiction writers may absolve themselves of fidelity to the source material, freeing them to write an ending that is preferable to them. I can attest that a vast majority of the fanfictions that I read post-finale were modern AUs (short for ‘Alternate Universe’) that divorced the characters from the canon. Doing so allowed me to engage the story world, characters, and, most importantly, Merthur, without any concern that I would have to repeat the pain and frustration of Arthur’s death. In effect, these stories restored the possibility of exploring new queer configurations.

This desire for expanded possibility is a direct reaction to the possibilities that are foreclosed in the *Merlin* finale. With Kilgharrah’s claim that “all that you have dreamt of building, has come to pass,” utopia collapses. All possibilities embedded in the utopian promise made in the pilot have now either materialized or vanished—there is nothing left to imagine. Since the queer potentialities that have driven Merthur shippers up to this point were explicitly tied to that promise, we have not just lost Arthur: we have lost the possibility of queerness. It is appropriate that Kilgharrah uses Arthur’s famous moniker, “the Once and Future King,” as to be “once and future” is fundamentally to be “not now.” Arthur and Merlin’s relationship is simultaneously confined to the “once” and deferred to the “future,” with no story left in the “now” to create spaces for queer imaginings. Without

57. Some stories with this tag do not actually separate themselves from the show’s continuity, but act as modern day continuations. Most, however, transplant the characters into contemporary fictional settings, treating them as more-or-less autonomous entities with little to no relation to Arthurian mythology.

the gestures and ephemera that facilitated the initial queer uptake, any potential that may be found in the “future” is rendered inaccessible.

Of course, Kilgharrah does extend a renewed promise: that one day Arthur will rise again. That promise leaves behind a tiny trace of ephemera; an “illumination of a horizon”⁵⁸ where queer possibilities might be reclaimed. However, many fans have expressed distrust towards this final promise. They have cited the dubiousness of Kilgharrah’s claim that the Golden Age of Camelot has been achieved, the fact that Merlin has waited for over 1,000 years and Arthur has still not returned, and the general unreliability that Kilgharrah has shown through the series. I would argue that the collapse of the original utopian promise makes us wary of trusting this new one, as our orientation to the first is now one of negation. Therefore, we are less likely to open ourselves to the potentiality of this new promise. We still crave that potential—we just no longer see *Merlin* as something that can satisfy that hunger. In one sense, it could be said that the finale does harm to the queer viewer by limiting the potentiality we are able to feel. In another sense, the finale prompts fans to take utopia into their own hands by producing their own stories via fanfiction, precisely because the canon has failed them.

Conclusion

This chapter, while serving to examine the emotion of queer hunger as enacted through slash shipping, also serves to establish the framework under which the rest of my thesis will operate. The themes of potential energy, phenomenology, and utopia will continue to recur throughout the rest of this work. Primarily, I will continue to return to the

58. Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 1.

idea of potentiality and the opening up of queer bodies. As narratives are both discursive and dialectical, they provide an opportunity for us to expand our bodily capacity through the act of speaking back to them. Before concluding, I must make one last point that slash shipping, while characterized here as a reparative practice, can easily slip back into the paranoid when fans begin to assert that their queer uptakes are the “correct” interpretations and disavow any others as acts of erasure, or interpret queer readings as “exposing” some level of queerness that is already in the text. Therefore, further examinations of slash shipping should attend to how queer potential energy can remain ambiguous, or remain “on the horizon,” to avoid such reification and instead privilege the productive rhetoricity of speaking back.

Chapter 2

Angry Cunts: The Performativity of Queer Rage

This chapter examines the performativity of queer rage, paying particular attention to how performances of queer pain, shame, and stigmas may engage with feelings of rage. I understand rage to be an active and motivating emotion that involves orienting oneself toward certain objects in a negative or negating way. I also understand this feeling of rage to be bound up with negative emotions such as pain, shame, and disappointment. In performances of queer rage, these emotions are harnessed and redirected to orient the queer spectator's body against heteronormative structures. To analyze how such performances work, I examine the musical *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, paying particular attention to how the show threatens to destabilize heteronormative structures that serve as sources of pain for queer individuals. I also outline two particular ways of performing rage—*fuck you! performatives* and *queer dystopian performatives*—which, I argue, have distinctly different effects on queer audiences. The goal of this chapter is to demonstrate how negative emotions, rather than being mitigated or assuaged, can be mobilized and put to use to produce positive feelings such as hope and community in queer spectators.

Hedwig and the Angry Inch was written by John Cameron Mitchell, with music and lyrics by Stephen Trask, and was first performed off-Broadway in 1998. The musical tells the story of Hedwig Robinson, a genderqueer East German glam rock star, as she performs a concert while sharing stories from her life with the audience. Hedwig was assigned male at birth and named Hansel Schmidt. Wanting to escape socialist East Berlin, she agrees to marry her boyfriend, an American soldier named Luther Robinson. To do so, she also

agrees to undergo a sex-change operation. However, the procedure is botched, and her surgically constructed vagina heals closed, leaving her with only a one-inch scar between her legs. Throughout the show, Hedwig directly addresses the audience to share her experiences, including her multiple romantic failures. Since its debut, *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* has been lauded by queer viewers for its transgressive portrayal of non-traditional gender performance. I will examine these reactions in order to highlight how *Hedwig* activates feelings of queer rage by mobilizing the negative feelings of its audience.

As previously stated, I will be focusing on two primary modes of engaging with queer rage in performance, looking specifically at how they function in *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*. I begin with the fuck you! performative, or performatives that energize queer audiences by redirecting the pain and negativity frequently imposed on queer individuals toward an imaginary heterosexual spectator, prompting a shift in affective power relations. I argue that *Hedwig* enacts a fuck you! performative through the title character's brazen rejection of traditional sexual and gender norms. The second performative mode is adapted from theatre scholar Scott Knowles's idea of dystopian performatives, or "embodied performative doings of negative affect/emotion" that work to critique societal structures by "[making] palpable the 'bad place' already within one's own culture."⁵⁹ I propose a modification of this theory that I call the queer dystopian performative, or performances that activate queer rage by overloading the theatrical space with negative affects. While *Hedwig* largely utilizes a fuck you! performance strategy, I argue that it does also produce a queer dystopian performative towards the end of the story. I focus on these two

59. Scott Knowles, "Dystopian Performatives: Negative Affect/Emotion in the Work of Sarah Kane." PhD dissertation. (ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2016), pp. 46-47.

performative strategies because, while they both utilize feelings of pain to affect queer audiences, they do so in distinctly different ways. While the fuck you! performative theatricalizes pain in order to redirect it elsewhere, the queer dystopian performative amplifies that pain until it overtakes the theatrical space. Additionally, while the fuck you! performative targets and engages with preexisting feelings of queer rage, the queer dystopian performative seeks to inspire such feelings by calling attention to heteronormativity as a source of pain for queer individuals. Both, however, allow me to demonstrate how *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* uses rage to transform pain into potential.

I draw this connection between pain and rage from Sara Ahmed's work on feminist anger, in which anger is theorized as a reading of one's pain as wrong, unjust, or undeserved. Ahmed positions this reading as a necessary component for feminist activism: "[t]he response to pain, as a call for action, also requires anger; an interpretation that this pain is wrong, that it is an outrage, and that something must be done about it."⁶⁰ Ahmed also explores how reading one's pain as unjust opens up the future to new possibilities: "Being against something is also being for something, but something that has yet to be articulated or is not yet."⁶¹ While Ahmed is writing specifically on the particularities of feminist anger, her arguments are applicable to queer anger as well. Queer individuals are often subject to violence, discrimination, and stigmatization as a result of our queerness. This pain is often internalized as queerness itself becomes attributed as the source of pain. I argue, however, that queer rage diverts this attribution toward heteronormative society, allowing queer individuals to read heteronormativity as the object that hurts us.

60. Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2015), 174.

61. This "not yet" echoes Munoz's theory of queer futurity (outlined in chapter 1) as that which is "not yet."

This reading of heteronormativity can generate positive feelings within the queer subject, as it releases us from restrictions that heteronormative society places on our capacity for self-expression. Cultural theorist Lauren Berlant calls this restriction “cruel optimism.”⁶² Berlant describes cruel optimism as a relational dynamic in which we form attachments to certain objects that we perceive as promising us some happiness, fulfillment, or stability, even when those attachments become sources of pain and disappointment: “optimism becomes cruel when it takes shape as an affectively stunning double bind: a binding to fantasies that block the satisfactions they offer.”⁶³ Such objects are elsewhere described by Ahmed as “happy objects,” or objects and ideals that promise happiness to individuals who are able to maintain proximity to them.⁶⁴ Heterosexuality is one such object, promising social mobility and ontological stability to those who are able to embody it. These heterosexual attachments compel queer individuals to silence our anger by deterring us from attributing heteronormativity as the cause for our pain. This compulsion is predicated on a fear of becoming what Ahmed describes as an “affect alien,”⁶⁵ or one who is alienated for their inability to orient themselves in appropriate ways toward appropriate objects. This silencing can be felt as a limiting of bodily potential; as Ahmed states, “anger is visionary and the fear of anger, or the transformation of anger into silence, is a turning away from the future.”⁶⁶ This chapter will explore how *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, as a performance of queer rage, works to release queer spectators from relationships of cruel optimism by orienting us against heteronormative objects and ideals.

62. Lauren Berlant. *Cruel Optimism*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 1.

63. Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 52.

64. Sara Ahmed, *Promise of Happiness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

65. Ahmed, *Promise of Happiness*.

66. Ahmed, *Emotion*, 175.

Fuck You! Performatives

The first way that *Hedwig* generates such an orientation is by enacting a rejection of the heterosexual spectator through a series of fuck you! performatives. The name of this performative draws inspiration from the song “Queer as in Fuck You” by Dog Park Dissidents, which reclaims the word ‘queer’ as a negation of heterosexuality: “Not gay as in happy, but queer as in fuck you.”⁶⁷ This phrasing allows ‘queer’ itself to be constructed as an orientation *against* something. A fuck you! performative operates in a similar way, using performances of queerness as a way to elicit discomfort in an imagined heterosexual audience and subsequently displace the queer audience’s negative feelings onto that imagined spectator. These performatives validate the queer spectator’s rage by turning stigmatized identities into sources of power rather than shame. To quote transgender studies scholar Susan Stryker: “Through the operation of rage, the stigma itself becomes the source of transformative power.”⁶⁸ To examine how this performative is enacted in *Hedwig*, I begin with the way in which the play frustrates traditional gender binaries.

This performative is visible right away in the aesthetic of *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*. In the original off-Broadway production, John Cameron Mitchell, drawing inspiration from glam rock artists such as David Bowie and Iggy Pop, dressed his eponymous performer in “gaudy, glittering makeup, a feathered white-blond wig, fringed cowboy boots, and a huge multicolored cape on which were scrawled the words “Yankee,

67. Zac Xeper, “Queer as in Fuck You,” *Genius*, accessed March 7, 2022, <https://genius.com/Dog-park-dissidents-queer-as-in-fuck-you-lyrics>.

68. Susan Stryker, “My Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage,” *Gay/Lesbian Quarterly* 25, no.1 (2019): pp. 39-44, 261.

Go Home” down one side and “With Me” down the other.”⁶⁹ Hedwig’s band, The Angry Inch, was similarly dressed in gender-bent attire. From the beginning of the show, this aesthetic aims to unsettle the heterosexual audience members by evoking a musical style that has historically clashed with traditional gender norms. Rock historian Philip Auslander describes how early glam rock artists “unquestionably used their performances of queer identities to provoke and rebel against the status quo,”⁷⁰ even suggesting that they “preyed on [the] insecurities”⁷¹ of traditional rock audiences. The glam aesthetic juxtaposes traditional masculine and feminine appearances in order reveal the constructed nature of gender identity. In doing so, the performer spurns ideas of authenticity in favor of voluntarily inhabiting the role of the “affect alien” that Ahmed describes. Like other glam rock artists, Hedwig turns the role of the affect alien into an aesthetic to weaponize it against heterosexual audiences. Upon entering the audience’s field of view, Hedwig immediately establishes that 1) this musical will be unapologetically queer and 2) her performance aims to destabilize gendered norms that restrict the potential of queer bodies. As we learn from Judith Butler, figures that threaten such destabilization often inspire defensive reactions from heterosexual individuals whose ontological security is bound up with these norms. Therefore, we might think of glam rock as a form of fuck you! performance that inflicts violence against the heterosexual spectator by imposing upon them the image of a gender-nonconforming body.

69. Elizabeth Wollman, *The Theater Will Rock: A History of the Rock Musical, from Hair to Hedwig* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2013), 183.

70. Philip Auslander, *Performing Glam Rock: Gender and Theatricality in Popular Music*. (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 227.

71. Auslander, *Performing Glam Rock*, 33.

Hedwig and the Angry Inch continues to threaten said destabilization through its description of Hedwig's body. We learn of her botched sex-change operation early in the show during the song "Angry Inch," in which Hedwig describes the aftermath of the surgery. The lyrics of the song seem specifically designed to elicit discomfort:

My first day as a woman
And already it's that time of the month
Two days later, the hole closed up, the wound healed
And I was left with a one inch mound of flesh
Where my penis used to be, where my vagina never was
It was a one inch mound of flesh
With a scar running down it like a sideways grimace
On an eyeless face
It was just a little bulge
It was an angry inch.⁷²

This song maintains the same glam aesthetic as the previous songs, but it attaches that aesthetic to a grotesque image. This aesthetic gives the performance an audacious tone that indicates Hedwig's disregard for any potential discomfort the audience may feel. She gleefully inhabits the role of the affect alien in order to transfer her pain onto the heterosexual spectator.

This pain is inflicted onto the heterosexual spectator through the song's frustration of traditional gender definitions. The lyrics repeatedly draw attention to the physicality of male and female anatomy; however, they also take snippets of Hedwig's suffering and transform them into an unpleasant experience for the straight viewer. The line "Where my penis used to be, where my vagina never was" creates a sense of ambiguity focused on Hedwig's genital area, simultaneously conjuring the ghost of her lost penis and the unrealized dream of her vagina. This effect is amplified by the visceral descriptors that

72. John Cameron Mitchell and Stephen Trask, *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (New York, NY: Overlook Duckworth, 2014).

Hedwig uses. For example, equating traumatic bleeding from a surgical wound to menstruation not only evokes a biological process that has been known to make cis-het males uncomfortable but connects it to the mutilation of her own body. Because heterosexual subjectivity is highly invested in traditional distinctions between male and female, the character of Hedwig elicits discomfort by threatening this investment. This imagined threat has the potential to generate a real sense of anxiety in the straight-aligned spectator. The threat is also rooted in a transformation of pain into action. The surgery is undeniably a moment of loss for Hedwig, but the fuck you! performance makes that loss generative by turning it into an attack on traditional constructions of gender.

The glee that Hedwig displays in this attack demonstrates an important element of the fuck you! performative; a brazen commitment to the stigma being performed. A fuck you! performative is not just a negation—it is a gleeful one. It finds joy in the act of rejection. In doing so, it energizes the queer audience by turning queer stigmas into a potential source of pleasure. In opening up space for this rage to be expressed, Hedwig enacts a shift in discursive power relations that typically forbid queer individuals from expressing rage against heterosexual others. The affective atmosphere of the theatre becomes one in which queer people can assert power over our oppressors without fearing for our safety. This shift in power is the work of the fuck you! performative: to redirect the pain and negativity that is so often imposed on queer individuals toward a heterosexual audience by temporarily rendering them the affect aliens. This affective shift is also rooted

in Hedwig's defiantly brash attitude. Words like "vulgar,"⁷³ "crude,"⁷⁴ and "profane"⁷⁵ have often been used in a positive light by queer reviewers when describing Hedwig's onstage presence, and many have highlighted the show's "crackling queer energy."⁷⁶ Here we see coarse, obscene expressions of self directly equated with "queer energy." The pleasure that queer viewers derive from this vulgarity stems from Hedwig's potential to elicit discomfort in our straight counterparts. To put it simply: Hedwig makes straight people uncomfortable, and queer people like it when straight people are uncomfortable.

An important thing to note about this discomfort, however, is that the heterosexual spectator need not actually express discomfort in order for a fuck you! performative to take effect. In fact, it is not even necessary for any heterosexual spectators to be present in the theatre during a performance of *Hedwig*—it is only necessary that the queer spectator be able to imagine a heterosexual spectator's potential reaction. This imagining is facilitated by what I call a paranoid theory of heteronormativity, which is an adaptation of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's theory of paranoid reading. Sedgwick proposes paranoid reading as "a monopolistic strategy of anticipating negative affect,"⁷⁷ which relies on pattern recognition to establish an all-consuming theoretical framework with which to explain all

73. Janelle Faignant, "Hedwig and the Angry Inch': Musical Confronts Today's Most Contentious Issues," Rutland Herald, June 29, 2019, https://www.rutlandherald.com/features/vermont_arts/hedwig-and-the-angry-inch-musical-confronts-today-s-most-contentious-issues/article_f9b9a0f1-0485-521e-9591-871ea92f5580.html.

74. Chris Jones. Special to the Tribune, "Hedwig' a Wild Ride across Tawdry Terrain," Chicago Tribune, August 20, 2021, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-2001-05-24-0105230424-story.html>.

75. Kerry Lengel, "Hedwig and the Angry Inch' in Concert," The Arizona Republic, September 4, 2014, <https://www.azcentral.com/story/entertainment/arts/2014/08/30/hedwig-angry-inch-concert/14815801/>.

76. Drew Gregory, "20 Years Later, 'Hedwig and the Angry Inch' Is Still Outside the Binary," Autostraddle, September 1, 2021, <https://www.autostraddle.com/hedwig-and-the-angry-inch-20th-anniversary/>.

77. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You," in *Touching Feeling* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 136.

possible phenomena. Sedgwick explicitly connects this mode of reading to queer subjectivity, stating that “What is illuminated by an understanding of paranoia is not how homosexuality works, but how homophobia and heterosexism work—in short, if one understands these oppressions to be systemic, how the world works.”⁷⁸ It follows then that a paranoid theory of heteronormativity, one in which heterosexual objects are perceived as threats rather than objects of happiness, disrupts the cruel optimism that Berlant describes by allowing the pain of queer individuals to be repeatedly attributed to some invisible source of homophobia. Additionally, since this theory also assumes that the world itself is homophobic, it assumes that performances of queerness will always be met with homophobic responses. Therefore, when queer spectators witness such performances, we may reflexively project that imagined response onto any heterosexuals around us. Because queer individuals are conditioned to feel that the watching eyes of heteronormativity are always on us, we imagine this response even when there are no heterosexuals visible in our vicinity. Thus, when Hedwig enacts a fuck you! performative, we imagine that her rage is targeted at some unseen homophobe in the audience. This imaginary spectator serves as a focal point for the queer audience’s rage by becoming a stand-in for heteronormative society as a whole.

Of course, to maximize the affectivity of the fuck you! performative, it is necessary that performances of rage are able to create a sense of intimacy between performer and spectator. Doing so allows the queer spectator to align themselves more closely with the discursive power that Hedwig holds while also heightening the perceived discomfort of the heterosexual audience by forcing the imagined spectator into closer proximity with

78. Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading,” 126.

Hedwig's stigmatized body. To this point, I draw on theatre scholar Erika Fischer-Lichte's theory of the "autopoietic feedback loop"⁷⁹ that occurs when energy is able to "emanate from [the performer(s)], pour into the space and spread and circulate among the spectators."⁸⁰ This feedback loop, or energy exchange, creates a "temporary community"⁸¹ between performer and spectator, in which the spectators are able to feel the body of the performer as uniquely and immediately present. Turning this idea to *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, we see that since the audience collectively directs its attention and energy toward Hedwig, she occupies a privileged position within this feedback loop, allowing her performance of rage to turn this temporary community into one that privileges queerness and punishes heteronormativity. In addition, Fischer-Lichte isolates bodily sensations as particularly vital to this feedback loop, as they create the affective atmosphere which "envelops all those present, even invades their bodies."⁸² Therefore, we can look at the use of music in *Hedwig* to see how this autopoietic feedback loop grants performances of rage a sense of immediacy.

The show's musical style can be seen as an example of this affectivity, opening up a connection with the audience while communicating a rejection of heteronormativity. Elizabeth Wollman, a scholar who focuses much of her work on rock musicals, points out that while the visual aesthetic of the musical draws on glam rock artists, the musical style of Stephen Trask's score is more inspired by traditional rock, punk, and grunge music. Speaking on the affectivity of rock music in theatre, Wollman argues, "rock musicals are

79. Erika Fischer-Lichte, *Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual: Exploring Forms of Political Theatre* (London: Routledge, 2005), 111.

80. Fischer-Lichte, *Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual*, 63.

81. Fischer-Lichte, *Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual*, 10.

82. Fischer-Lichte, *Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual*, 79.

designed to evoke the excitement and raw energy of live rock spectacles.”⁸³ Additionally, she highlights the perceived ability of rock music to “display “real” emotion”⁸⁴ and foster a closer emotional connection with the audience. Punk music, however, utilizes an “angry energy and ‘Do It Yourself (DIY) aesthetic,’”⁸⁵ that heighten the feeling of rage being communicated to the audience. Unlike the glam aesthetic described above, these musical elements do not create a fuck you! performative, so much as they amplify the performative by lending Hedwig’s rage a greater sense of immediacy.

Hedwig also heightens this sense of immediacy by using direct audience interaction to collapse the distance between the main character and the audience. For example, when John Cameron Mitchell replaced Neil Patrick Harris in the 2014 Broadway revival, *Guardian* theatre critic Alexis Soloski noted the darker edge that Mitchell lent to the character, highlighting his interactions with the audience as a particularly compelling character choice: “The crowd work is semi-threatening. During a pretty brilliant Grindr bit, a young man seemed genuinely scared of stepping on stage.”⁸⁶ This performative makes use of the lessened distance between Hedwig and the audience to threaten a more direct assault on heterosexual audience members. Of course, it is impossible for us to know the sexual orientation or gender identity of the young man that Soloski describes. However, his visible discomfort at approaching Mitchell-as-Hedwig betrays some degree of

83. Elizabeth Wollman, “Much Too Loud and Not Loud Enough: Issues Involving the Reception of Staged Rock Musicals,” *Bad Music*, January 11, 2013, pp. 311-330, 314.

84. Elizabeth Wollman, *The Theater Will Rock: A History of the Rock Musical, from Hair to Hedwig* (Ann Arbor, MI: Univ. of Michigan Press, 2013), 26.

85. Wollman, *Rock*, 185.

86. Alexis Soloski, “Hedwig and the Angry Inch Review – John Cameron Mitchell in the Raw,” *The Guardian* (Guardian News and Media, March 16, 2015), <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2015/mar/16/hedwig-and-the-angry-inch-review-john-cameron-mitchell>.

heteronormative alignment (it at least indicates a wariness of approaching a non-normative body). A paranoid theory of heteronormativity would likely read his discomfort as a sign of such an alignment, and thus read Hedwig's treatment of him as a negation of that alignment. The theatrical space becomes one in which individual heterosexuals are at risk of being targeted, allowing us to gleefully imagine the anxiety that this risk might cause the imaginary spectator.

(Queer) Dystopian Performatives

Unfortunately, the effectiveness of the fuck you! performative is directly related to the strength of the viewer's heteronormative attachments. In order for *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* to energize queer spectators, those spectators must already feel a certain level of investment in their own queerness. They must also be predisposed to read through a paranoid lens, which allows them to attribute heteronormativity as the cause of queer pain. In short, they must already, to some extent, be angry. A viewer who is still heavily invested in heterosexual objects, who still views such objects as containing a promise of happiness, may resist being affected by a fuck you! performative. Such viewers turn away from expressing rage toward heterosexual objects and others for fear of becoming an affect alien. In order to unsettle more powerful heteronormative attachments and free such viewers from relationships of cruel optimism toward heteronormativity, performances of rage would have to intensify feelings of queer pain almost to the point of excess, as well as explicitly tie those feelings to heteronormative objects.

Consequently, I turn to the queer dystopian performative to demonstrate how performances of rage may inspire queer rage by calling attention to heteronormativity as

the thing that hurts queer individuals. In establishing his theory of dystopian performatives, theatre scholar Scott Knowles argues that performatives that center negative emotions have the power to call attention to societal issues by disrupting the audience's ability to distance themselves from those issues.⁸⁷ Therefore, a queer dystopian performative works to destroy heteronormative attachments by amplifying feelings of queer pain to the point where they overwhelm the body of the spectator. Such a performative moment can compel queer audiences who have not already done so to acknowledge heteronormativity as the cause of their pain and/or shame, allowing performances of pain to become expressions of rage. A useful way to differentiate the fuck you! performative from the queer dystopian performative is to think of the differences between glam rock and traditional rock/punk; whereas the former is mediated, controlled, and highly aestheticized, the latter is raw, unrestrained, and chaotic. In addition, rather than claiming the role of the affect alien as a place of power, punk rock forces the audience to look at the ugliness of being alienated. While the majority of *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* favors a fuck you! performance strategy, the musical's climax serves as a strong example of a queer dystopian performative.

This climax consists of the two songs "Hedwig's Lament" and "Exquisite Corpse" which, when taken together, create a queer dystopian performative. These songs come just after Hedwig finishes telling the audience about her affair with the rock star Tommy Gnosis. We learn that she and Tommy met when he was a closeted teenager named Tommy Speck. Hedwig helped him refine his music and came up with his stage name. She even grew to believe that they were falling in love. However, her fantasy once more collapses when the two are about to make love, and Tommy expresses disgust at discovering her

87. Knowles, *Dystopian Performatives*, 47.

“angry inch.” At this point, we have already learned that Luther, Hedwig’s husband, also abandoned her after they married for the same reason. Once again, Hedwig is alienated due to the shape of her body. Prior to this moment, the songs in the show can largely be characterized as fuck you! performatives; they are gleeful, they are raucous, and they display a commitment to anti-normativity. However, after relaying the story of Tommy’s rejection, Hedwig’s demeanor changes, and the performance becomes one of unfiltered pain. Before, when the show enacted a fuck you! performative, this pain was aestheticized and redirected to empower the queer audience. Here, however, that pain is not directed anywhere; it simply overtakes the theatrical space. By imposing Hedwig’s pain on the audience, the show orients queer spectators against heteronormative objects by connecting those objects explicitly to the performance of pain.

The two songs work in tandem to generate this effect. While “Exquisite Corpse” actually enacts the queer dystopian performative, “Hedwig’s Lament” queers the performative by establishing certain straight-aligned others as the causes of Hedwig’s pain. Knowles breaks dystopian performatives into two stages, which I think of as the affective and the cognitive: “[dystopian] performatives begin in the viscera of a body’s interaction with the theatrical event and gains [sic] its full power as this experience interacts with culture and the thinking mind.”⁸⁸ The affective stage of a queer dystopian performative operates in the “viscera” that Knowles describes, using the negative affects generated by Hedwig’s performance of pain to overwhelm the spectator’s body and leave them open to being affected. The cognitive stage allows these negative emotions to be attributed to heteronormative objects, allowing the queer spectator to see these objects as sources of

88. Knowles, *Dystopian Performatives*, 3.

pain. Therefore, for a dystopian performative to be queer, it must provide a framework to facilitate such an attribution of pain.

“Hedwig’s Lament” provides this framework by listing the cruel attachments which have repeatedly harmed and disappointed Hedwig:

I gave a piece to my mother
I gave a piece to my man
I gave a piece to the rock star
He took the good stuff and ran.⁸⁹

These lyrics gather together the objects of Hedwig’s rage: her mother, who instilled in her a belief in cosmic love that would ultimately prove false; her husband, who promised her companionship only to leave her alienated and alone; and her lover, who promised her fulfillment and affirmation only to recoil from her in disgust. Each of them promised Hedwig a future, only to disappoint and abandon her. Granted, neither Luther nor Tommy is heterosexual, so it is not entirely accurate to say that her rage is directed at heterosexual others. However, since they both leave due to their discomfort with Hedwig’s “angry inch,” their rejection signals a fear of being contaminated by her inability to inhabit norms, allowing both of them to be seen as straight-aligned subjects. This song leads into “Exquisite Corpse,” and thus helps guide the audience in receiving the dystopian performative as a queer one.

As Hedwig transitions into “Exquisite Corpse,” the lyrics become less specific, no longer naming the individuals who have harmed Hedwig and instead simply giving voice to her sense of self-hatred. This lack of specificity is one feature that Knowles isolates as important to a dystopian performative: they are not logocentric and do not rely on

89. Mitchell and Trask, *Hedwig*.

signification.⁹⁰ The following lyrics are delivered in a far more chaotic fashion than the previous ones:

Inside, I'm hollowed out
Outside, a paper shroud
And all the rest's illusion
That there's a will and soul
That we can wrest control
From chaos and confusion.⁹¹

The lyrics of this song reintroduce the negativity that Hedwig has been hurling at the audience, now directed inward. Her fantasy of finding her cosmic other half has collapsed, forcing her to confront the hopelessness that she has tried to avoid. At this point, she has once again inhabited the role of the affect alien, but she is not doing so gleefully or defiantly. She is no longer embracing her own alienation but making palpable the pain that it causes her. Whereas before, her pain was channeled into a tightly controlled stage persona, here it explodes across the stage without any sense of direction. This lack of control is another feature that Knowles isolates as important to a dystopian performative, as it creates an atmosphere of threat for the audience that compels them not to turn away. By allowing the artifice that defines the fuck you! performative to fall away, Mitchell enacts a dynamic shift in which pain stops being something that can be redirected and aestheticized and becomes an overbearing force that cannot be ignored. Unlike the fuck you! performative—which constructs the affect alien as a figure that cannot be hurt by heteronormativity—the queer dystopian performative insists that the affect alien cannot *not* be hurt. This comparison highlights the different ways in which the two performatives

90. Knowles, *Dystopian Performatives*, 20.

91. Mitchell and Trask, *Hedwig*.

utilize pain, and also demonstrates how the two performatives can occasionally feed into and amplify one another.

For example, just as I highlighted the show's musical style as supporting the fuck you! performative, we can pull again on descriptions of rock music as "raw" to analyze how the musical sensibilities in *Hedwig* create a queer dystopian performative. This performative relies on a keen sense of the body; on producing embodied performatives that viscerally arouse the viewer's senses to the point that they cannot be ignored. To this end, multiple reviewers have cited the explosiveness of "Exquisite Corpse." In *Sex, Drugs, Rock & Roll, and Musicals*, author and artistic director of New Line Theatre Scott Miller terms the song "a nervous breakdown" and states that it "literally explodes out of the more glam-inspired introspection of 'Hedwig's Lament.'"⁹² Writing for *Rolling Stone* after the musical's original off-Broadway premiere in 1998, critic David Fricke called the song "Hedwig's climactic rebellion against her physical and emotional mutilation," highlighting its "raw-power discontent."⁹³ Musical theatre scholar Elizabeth Wollman even positions the "squealing, distorted riffs [that] accompany the title character's breakdown" as part of a historical trend in which rock musicals reserve the electric guitar for "highly melodramatic, wordless scenes, especially those that feature particularly intense subject matter."⁹⁴ The reason for this trend is that the electric guitar is usually too loud and risks drowning out the singer onstage. Therefore, it is reserved for moments in which the intelligibility of the lyrics is of secondary importance (actor Michael Cerveris, who took

92. Scott Miller, *Sex, Drugs, Rock & Roll, and Musicals* (Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press, 2011), 162/167.

93. David Fricke, "Sex & Drag & Rock & Roll," *Rolling Stone*, December 10, 1998.

94. Wollman, *Rock*, 205-206.

over the role of Hedwig off-Broadway after Mitchell, has admitted to worrying more about the emotion than the intelligibility of the lyrics when playing Hedwig).⁹⁵ These assessments all seem to indicate the prioritization of the emotional/affective quality of “Exquisite Corpse” over its more narrative/symbolic value; describing the song as “raw” points to its lack of refinement, while the analogy of a “nervous breakdown” evokes the total collapse of cognitive reasoning in favor of overwhelming emotion. By utilizing deafeningly loud music to raise the energy onstage to a boiling point, the song briefly overwhelms the audience’s ability to process it in a logocentric way, leading to an affective undoing of their individual bodies and an experience of heightened communal feeling.

In this scene, we see once more how performances of pain are connected to performances of rage. Returning to Ahmed’s definition of anger as a reading of pain as undeserved, I argue that “Hedwig’s Lament” frames the queer dystopian performative in such a way that it compels the audience to read Hedwig’s pain as a result of Luther and Tommy’s undeserved rejection of her. Thus, the performance of pain becomes an expression of rage, but it is a rage that belongs to the audience rather than Hedwig. It is the immediacy of Hedwig’s pain that creates the feeling of rage in the audience. The intensity of the song contributes to what Knowles calls an “affective experience based in the boundaries between performer and audience being broken.”⁹⁶ Earlier in this chapter, I examined how the show collapses boundaries between the performer and the audience, making Hedwig’s rage more immediate. Here, that boundary is collapsed even further, making Hedwig’s pain so immediate that it imposes itself on the audience. If we think

95. Interview with Wollman, *Rock*, 202.

96. Knowles, *Dystopian Performatives*, 115.

about the “autopoietic feedback loop” that Fischer-Lichte discusses, then we can say that Hedwig’s pain overtakes that feedback loop, such that her pain momentarily becomes the queer spectators’ pain.

As Knowles explains, this affective moment becomes so powerful that it activates a need for the audience to “comprehend, change, avoid, or in some way act.”⁹⁷ It necessitates an orientational shift. A spectator who already views *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* through a paranoid lens may not be subject to such a drastic shift, given that they already understand heteronormativity as a source of pain. However, the affective power of “Exquisite Corpse” combined with the framing of “Hedwig’s Lament” has the potential to open up more restricted spectators to the possibilities of queer rage. Understood this way, the queer dystopian performative can be viewed as a form of affective pedagogy that teaches the queer spectator to read heterosexual objects and their promises as potential sources of pain. In doing so, it seeks to counter the cultural programming that drives us to form attachments to heteronormative objects.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I introduce two interconnected theories regarding the performativity of queer rage. I outline rage as a necessarily active emotion that involves investing in certain objects by repudiating their opposites. I also recognize it as intimately tied to pain, as rage involves a recognition that one’s pain is undeserved. Under these frameworks, I have argued that performances of queer rage have the potential to validate the rage of the spectators by enacting a rejection of the imagined heterosexual audience members.

97. Knowles, *Dystopian Performatives*, 203.

However, this rage can also be evoked by performances that center queer pain in a way that overwhelms the audience and shifts their orientations. While the former relies on a paranoid framework and preexisting distrust toward heterosexual objects, the latter opens spectators up to those frameworks by orienting them against such objects. In this sense, both performatives affirm an orientation against heteronormative ideologies and open up a space where queer individuals are given permission to feel our rage openly. I have argued that this space is essential to an ethics of feeling queer as it allows queer individuals to consciously draw attention to injustices that are committed against us while creating discursive shifts that challenge the hegemony of heteronormativity. However, in my next chapter, I examine how this hegemony may be more subtly challenged through an affective analysis of queer sociality. I continue to employ these ideas of cruel optimism and heteronormative attachments, but analyze how they are enforced relationally and how narratives might bring our awareness to them by in a more character-driven way.

Chapter 3

“You Just Have to Meet Your Bashert”: Identifications of Queer Loneliness

In this chapter, I undertake a close reading of Joshua Harmon’s *Significant Other* in order to examine how the play engages and dramatizes queer loneliness. The play depicts Jordan Berman, a gay man in his mid-twenties, struggling to find a partner as his heterosexual friends begin to marry off. I interpret the play as a commentary on the compulsory nature of heterosexual sociality and its destructive effects on those who do not fit into traditional relationship structures. Specifically, I look at the social premium placed on couple hood in contemporary society and how Harmon’s play highlights the attempts that queer individuals make to assimilate to heteronormative society by mimicking its relationship forms—a mimicry that is always predestined to fail. From the interplay of these compulsions and failures, I draw the idea of queer loneliness as a felt inability to meaningfully participate in the social sphere. Additionally, I compare this feeling of queer loneliness against loneliness felt by other identity groups (namely autistics) in order to examine how different intersections of identity influence how one defines their own worth within their social networks. I privilege my own reaction to *Significant Other*, more so than I have done in other chapters, partially to emphasize how my own intersecting identity markers influence my experience of loneliness, but also to focus my analysis in the mechanisms of narrative identification. I argue that by allowing the audience to identify with Jordan, *Significant Other* can produce affective engagement with queer audiences and put them into conversation with their own loneliness in a way that opens up space for the conversion of discomfort into possibilities.

Identifying with Lonely Characters

My argument relies on an analysis of narrative identification, or “the process of taking on a character’s identity and situational perspective.”⁹⁸ However, I understand this process not as an investment in the inner life of a character, but rather as a response to the discursive act that the character represents. I have selected *Significant Other* because I identify with the protagonist, and I believe that identification impacted my initial experience of the narrative. Similar to Jordan, I have never been in a meaningful romantic relationship despite being in my early twenties (that remains true as of this writing). While the cultural politics of modern coupledness by no means dictate that a person must be married by age twenty, there is an expectation that one should, at the very least, have had one or two romantic partners. The fact that I had not was a source of shame and embarrassment for me, especially as friends began entering into committed relationships, and while that shame is not as strong as it once was, I still remember it vividly. I remember telling a close friend: “I’m just so tired of feeling like I’m a step behind everyone else.” Jordan expresses a nearly identical sentiment after the last of his three friends gets engaged: “I know I’m still young, I know twenty-nine is not thirty-nine, but...when everyone you were young with grows up, you feel old. I feel old. And fucked. Really fucked.”⁹⁹

It is through these emotions that I identify Jordan most intimately, and it is there that I center my argument. In “Elaboration, Emotion, and Transportation: Implications for Textual Analysis and Textual Features,” psychonarratologists Peter Dixon and Marisa

98. Helena Bilandzic and Rick Busselle, “Beyond Metaphors and Traditions: Exploring the Conceptual Boundaries of Narrative Engagement,” in *Narrative Absorption*, ed. Frank Hakemulder. (Philadelphia, PA: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2017), 19.

99. Joshua Harmon, *Significant Other* (New York, NY: Samuel French, 2017), 82.

Bortollusi argue that shared experience with a character is the strongest facilitator of identification. They write, “if a reader has experienced a similar emotional event, he or she is more likely to have a comparable emotional reaction.”¹⁰⁰ I believe that the reason for this reaction is that the rhetorical nature of narrative enables the audience to speak back to it in a way that affirms their own emotional experiences, creating a temporary dialectic. Jordan is unable to meet social expectations the way that his friends do, and the emotional turmoil this causes him allows me to feel a kinship with him.

Before exploring how *Significant Other* engages the affective state of loneliness, I must give an explanation of how that state functions, particularly with queer individuals. I will begin by summarizing what I find to be the three principal components of loneliness: investment, relationality, and legitimation. The first of these denotes the societal narratives in which individual subjects become invested, thus influencing how we orient ourselves in the world. The second component, relationality, describes how social relationships serve to reify these societal narratives through repetition. These relationships become the barometer by which we judge our ability to follow social scripts (and therefore, our legitimacy as subjects). The third component, legitimation, deals with how we attempt to achieve recognition as a legitimate subject by performing for others the societal narratives with which we have aligned ourselves. When legitimation fails, and we are unable to be recognized as subjects, that is when we come to see ourselves as lonely.

Queer theory scholar Michael Cobb does much to highlight the societal narratives that contribute to queer loneliness. In his monograph, *Single: Arguments for the*

100. Peter Dixon and Marisa Bortollusi, “Elaboration, Emotion, and Transportation,” in *Narrative Absorption*, ed. Frank Hakemulder. (Philadelphia, PA: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2017), 213.

Uncoupled, Cobb interrogates contemporary society's reliance on the couple as the ideal for a fulfilling relationship. Cobb's argument that "the single [seems] like one of the most despised sexual minorities one can be"¹⁰¹ rests on the idea that society privileges the couple form to such an extreme extent that existing outside of that form is almost inconceivable. Finding a romantic partner and committing to them is deemed the only way to have a fulfilling life: "if you belong to a couple, on sliding scales of social and legal legitimacy, you occupy a not-so-frivolous status."¹⁰² To fail to find a partner is to fail to validate one's own existence.

Cobb goes on to explain the consequences of this failure, drawing on political philosopher Hannah Arendt's work on totalitarianism and terror to explore how loneliness makes bodies vulnerable to manipulation and oppression by totalitarian ideologies:

She distinguishes between the capacity to be in solitude, which does not necessarily imply one is lonely, and the condition of feeling deserted, abandoned. The feeling of loneliness produces sensations of desperation that open one up to the cruel ideologies of totalitarianism—ideologies that produce compelling ideas, full of persuasive power, whose logics are much too consistent, much too able to misread the circumstances of the world, providing instead a paranoid "sixth sense."¹⁰³

Thus, loneliness does not stem from objective solitude, but rather from the feeling that one has been "abandoned" by society. This abandonment itself stems from a failure to have one's social performance legitimated in accordance with societal narratives.

For queer individuals, there is always already an assumption of failure, as heteronormativity (which I believe impacts the supremacy of the couple in ways that Cobb does not explore) preemptively characterizes queer lives as "a sign of failed being or 'non-

101. Michael Cobb, *Single: Arguments for the Uncoupled* (New York, N.Y.: New York University Press, 2012), 6.

102. Cobb, *Single*, 18.

103. Cobb, *Single*, 19.

being.”¹⁰⁴ We do not fit into heterosexual spaces, nor do we fit comfortably into heteronormative relationship models. Therefore, one could argue that queer individuals are always lonely. Queer theory scholar Melissa Carroll outlines how much of the discourse around queer isolation and loneliness privileges “curative normality,”¹⁰⁵ or the mitigation of loneliness through acceptance by mainstream society, often by mimicking the ideals and relationship models that are designed to exclude and invalidate us. This phenomenon has been described as “homonormativity,” or “a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption.”¹⁰⁶ The idea is rooted in theories of compulsory heterosexuality, a similar ideology originally posited by lesbian scholar Adrienne Rich as the compulsion for women to identify with and enter into relationships strictly with men.¹⁰⁷ The theory has been redefined, however, by scholars such as Sara Ahmed, as a broader cultural script that “shapes bodies by the assumption that a body ‘must’ orient itself towards some objects and not others.”¹⁰⁸ I identify these behaviors as examples of the totalitarian ideologies that Arendt describes, capitalizing on queer feelings of loneliness to circumscribe the affective potential of queer bodies according to their own coercive logics.

104. Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (New York, NY: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2015), 146.

105. Melissa Carroll, “Lonely Affects and Queer Sexualities: A Politics of Loneliness in Contemporary Western Culture.” PhD dissertation. (ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2013), 31.

106. Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality? Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics and the Attack on Democracy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003), 50.

107. Adrienne Rich, *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence* (Denver CO: Antelope Publications, 1982).

108. Ahmed, *Emotion*, 145.

Always a GBF, Never a BF: An Examination of Jordan Berman

Playwright Joshua Harmon wastes no time establishing that *Significant Other* is concerned with the supremacy of the couple. In the first scene, Jordan is at a bachelorette party for his friend Kiki, where his conversation with another friend, Laura, reveals his preoccupation with relationship status:

JORDAN: I know. It's just... I know life is supposed to be this great mystery, but I actually think it's pretty simple: find someone to go through it with. That's it. That's the, whatever, the secret.

LAURA: You make it sound so easy.

JORDAN: No, that's the hardest part. Walking around knowing what the point is, but not being able to live it, and not knowing how to get it, or if I ever even will...¹⁰⁹

From the start, it is clear that Jordan believes that finding a partner is the key to his happiness; coupledness is the ultimate goal of the affective script through which he organizes his self-image. However, there is already a tension associated with this belief: Jordan is concerned that he will never find that necessary someone. He is already acutely aware of his singleness and reads it as a failure to accomplish life's most basic task.

At this point in my reading/viewing, I have already begun to identify with Jordan. His struggle is one that I know intimately, and I immediately begin associating his fear with my own. Furthermore, I immediately associate his loneliness with his queerness. It is more or less a given in queer circles that queer individuals typically have more difficulty finding compatible partners than our cis het counterparts do. The reasons are multiple, including a smaller dating pool, lack of relationship resources, the prevalence of hookup culture in queer spaces, internalized stigmas, etc. The play points to this fact when Kiki brings up Will, a coworker of her and Jordan's whom she thinks Jordan should bring to her

109. Harmon, *Significant Other*, 13.

wedding. Expectedly, Jordan's immediate question is "Is he even gay?"¹¹⁰ That queer individuals have to even inquire about the sexuality of potential partners (a requirement that cishet individuals do not have) reflects an additional barrier that queer individuals contend with when searching for a partner. This question, along with the fact that he is surrounded by straight women, serves to strengthen associations of his loneliness with his queerness.

My identification with Jordan is further strengthened as he begins to develop a crush on Will. While his attempts at courtship are entirely unsuccessful, I felt a constant sense of anxiety, and even dread, at the thought of the romance ending poorly. I attribute these feelings to Harmon's use of Jordan's insecurities and Will's masculinity to create an unequal dynamic between Jordan and Will. In one scene, Jordan recounts to Vanessa (the third of his friends, along with Kiki and Laura) his experience of watching Will get out of the pool during a company pool party. His vivid description of Will's body is contrasted against his own insecurity over his appearance, contributing to a perceived inequality between himself and Will. This impression is carried through the rest of their interactions, in which I remained aware of an anxious vulnerability each time they interacted. The more Jordan conceptualized Will as his superior, the more anxious I felt that he would be rejected. Thus, Will holds power over me because he holds power over Jordan.

The choice of Will as a romantic interest is, in and of itself, indicative of the role that heteronormativity plays in *Significant Other* in particular and queer loneliness in general. Will is essentially a homonormative fantasy; he is depicted as conventionally attractive, with traditionally masculine interests (he reads books about the Franco-Prussian

110. Harmon, *Significant Other*, 10.

war), and indicates a desire for a traditional family unit that would essentially replicate his masculinity: “I’m like, aren’t we supposed to be raising kids where they can hike and canoe and you know, do all that boy scout stuff?”¹¹¹ These qualities are played as highly attractive to Jordan, yet are representative of the heterosexual norms that necessarily exclude him. Will serves as a symbol for the acceptance and legitimation that Jordan can only receive by proxy. It is therefore significant that Will remains unattainable, as it keeps the audience in an insatiable state of anticipation.

It is also vital to this unattainability that the play gives just enough reason to speculate that Will *might* be gay, but never gives confirmation. Jordan concludes that he is gay after finding photos on his Facebook of him and several other men on Fire Island, but Will never directly confirms this assessment. Kiki also believes that Will is gay, but supports her assumption with only a vague “He seems gay.”¹¹² This ambiguity is significant because, as I can attest through personal experience, there is a difference between being rejected by a fellow queer subject and being rejected by a straight man whom one has mistaken for queer. The former is a romantic rejection that, while still painful, is contained within acceptable social bounds; a failure to be legitimated as a romantic partner. The latter, however, would be a rejection of Jordan himself; a failure to be legitimated as an acceptable queer subject. In such an interaction, queerness itself is spotlighted as harshly Other. The fact that Will is traditionally masculine only intensifies this fear, as he carries with him the symbolic weight of heteronormative society as a whole. Because he never declares his sexuality, Will remains in a kind of liminal state—like a queer Schrödinger’s cat—in which

111. Harmon, *Significant Other*, 42.

112. Harmon, *Significant Other*, 10.

he is just queer enough to be a possible romantic option, but straight enough to make pursuing him a risk. Each time Jordan approaches him romantically, that risk materializes as an affective reality. By keeping that fear of rejection and delegitimation in constant view, Harmon keeps the threat of loneliness on the horizon and sustains a sense of discomfort.

This is the work of compulsory heterosexuality—Jordan is so attached to the idea of securing a romantic partner that he cannot release that objective even as it actively hurts him. From their first interaction, Will shows little to no romantic interest in Jordan. However, because Will represents the validation of heterosexual society, Jordan pursues him avidly, going so far as to declare that he loves him after only speaking to him a few times. While Jordan seemingly cannot tell that the courtship is doomed, it is made immediately clear to the audience that Will is not interested, so we assume that Jordan's attempts to pursue him will fail. Still, we must watch Jordan go through with these attempts, highlighting the futility of seeking validation from heteronormative society. The effect is not dissimilar to the cruel attachments described by Lauren Berlant, which I referenced in Chapter 2.¹¹³ However, rather than violently disrupting the queer spectator's heteronormative attachments, as *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* does, *Significant Other* forces the audience to sit with the futility of such attachments. We can also see how these attachments form by examining how Harmon contrasts Jordan's loneliness against his relationships with his friends and family.

While Jordan's romantic endeavors demonstrate his attachment to securing a relationship, it is his other social relationships that serve to punctuate it. Early in the play, we are introduced to Helene, Jordan's grandmother with whom he visits regularly and

113. Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*.

shares a close relationship. Through this relationship, we learn much about how Jordan has acquired the narratives that he has invested in. At each visit, Helene tells Jordan stories of her marriage to his grandfather (at age twenty-one, six years younger than Jordan is at the start of the play), and repeatedly asks him the same question: “How’s your social life?”¹¹⁴ (a thinly veiled version of “Are you dating anyone?”) These scenes introduce a level of familial pressure for Jordan and set the standard against which he judges himself. Of course, the audience is under no obligation to adopt these standards, but the scene does clue us in to the heteronormative objects that Jordan has formed attachments to. Helene’s repeatedly asking him “How’s your social life?” also begins to generate a sense of external pressure that is definitively tied to the topic of dating.

In addition, Jordan’s feelings of loneliness have just as much to do with the inability to keep up with his friends as it does with his inability to find a partner. Throughout the play, we see how Jordan’s anxiety over his love life increases each time another of his friends gets engaged. His friend Kiki’s engagement prior to the start of the play serves as the catalyst for his conversation with Laura,¹¹⁵ while Vanessa’s engagement towards the end of the first act amplifies his fears (Harmon positions this scene directly after Jordan’s unsuccessful “date” with Will, further contrasting his failures against his friends’ successes). After learning of the engagement, he confesses to Helene, “It feels like all my friends are dying.”¹¹⁶ While his friends are not literally dying, this line reinforces his fear that his friends (symbolically, his ties to the legitimation that he needs to be recognized as a subject) are being rendered inaccessible to him.

114. Harmon, *Significant Other*, 21, 45, 72.

115. The conversation is referenced earlier on page 70.

116. Harmon, *Significant Other*, 45.

This comment to Helene comes just after Jordan has expressed discontent that he is not one of Vanessa's bridesmaids (the reason given being that her fiancé has only male groomsmen, so Jordan would "mess up the balance in the photos"¹¹⁷). I find this comment helpful in understanding not only how Jordan's romantic failures put him behind his friends, but how his loneliness continues to be linked to his queerness. The placement of the comment suggests that Jordan's loneliness stems from his inability to participate in his friends' lives in a way that affirms his closeness with them. However, he is specifically excluded from that closeness by virtue of his non-normative position within his friend group. This tension builds throughout the first act to create a feeling of displacement, as Jordan tries to maintain his internal stability despite feeling that his external environment is shifting to exclude him.

Jordan's anxieties start to overwhelm him at the end of Act I, when he learns at Vanessa's bachelorette party that Laura, the closest of his three friends, has been dating someone, and may be getting married soon. As the three women begin to talk excitedly about their weddings, their voices begin to overlap and crescendo until they are screaming the words, "HUSBAND," "FIANCÉ," and "BOYFRIEND" respectively.¹¹⁸ This scene is marked not by the emotional closeness that the three women enjoy with their partners, but by the material and social features of matrimony: Kiki talks about wedding colors, Vanessa about desserts, and Laura about flowers. Their final crescendo even strips their partners of any personal specificity, referring to them only by their socially appropriate labels. Nothing about the scene suggests that it is the emotional nourishment of a romantic relationship that

117. Harmon, *Significant Other*, 44.

118. Harmon, *Significant Other*, 54.

Jordan is missing, but rather the ability to participate in the social dimensions of marriage; wedding planning, gossiping about his sex life, and the ability to talk about his partner to his similarly coupled off friends. I found myself thinking of the moments when I would listen to my friends in college talk about going to fraternity formals: their dresses, their dates, how they would do their hair, and other things that I could not participate in. We see this exclusion here with Jordan. It is not that he is alone; it is that he feels he is being left behind.

Having all three women celebrating the things that Jordan cannot have brings his loneliness into sharp focus. A space which was previously established as comfortable and loving has become unwelcoming and nigh-hostile. If the feeling of comfort is, as Ahmed states, “to be so at ease with one’s environment that it is hard to distinguish where one’s body ends and the world begins,”¹¹⁹ then the discomfort felt in these scenes brings one’s awareness sharply back to the body, as Jordan realizes that he no longer fits into the space he shared with his friends. With no romantic prospects to compensate for his solitude or affirm his validity as a subject, the play takes on a feeling of desperation and helplessness.

However, it was not until the second act that I felt my own discomfort hit its peak. Shortly after Laura gets engaged (which officially makes Jordan the only one of his friends to not be married or engaged), Jordan confesses to Helene that he is beginning to lose hope that he will ever find a partner. Helene responds by issuing the imperative: “It’s the most important thing, Jordan, to find someone...Nothing is more important than that.” When

119. Ahmed, *Emotion*, 148.

Jordan seems unassured, she tells him, “You just have to meet your bashert” (a common Yiddish term for one’s soulmate).¹²⁰

At this point, I wanted to scream on Jordan’s behalf. I wanted to reply to the simplicity of Helene’s statement with: “It’s not that simple!” Then I began to realize that I was not reacting merely to Helene’s statement, but to the voices of close friends and family that had given me similarly well-intentioned but unhelpful platitudes. The word “just” implies that a solution is simple, and that the addressee is “just” not trying hard enough. It is a reinforcement of social standards which I am continually reminded that I do not meet. There is no suggestion that Jordan could be happy without a partner: only an affirmation that his worldview is correct—that he is incomplete as long as he remains uncoupled—and that the secret to alleviating his loneliness is essentially to leave it up to fate. His life and happiness are completely out of his control. The familiar weight of expectations, which I feel totally impotent to meet, are once more impressed onto my skin. I feel these points of pressure more intensely than ever, and yet the scene ends with Jordan simply saying, “I’m pretty scared, Grandma,”¹²¹ unable to do anything other than voice his fears and hope for comfort that doesn’t come. In the absence of any legitimating relationships, Jordan is left feeling isolated, invalidated, and completely incapable of helping himself. However, his feelings of helplessness can become generative, as the indignation that I felt on his behalf began to unsettle the heteronormative attachments responsible for my loneliness.

These affective moments sparked identification with Jordan because they so closely mirrored experiences that I have had. Jordan’s inability to approximate the heterosexual

120. Harmon, *Significant Other*, 72.

121. Harmon, *Significant Other*, 73

relationship models that have been given to him as conditions for his happiness, combined with his inability to hit prescribed social milestones at the same time as his friends, generates feelings of loneliness and insufficiency that diminish his potentiality and leave him feeling helpless. By this point in the play, I was aware of a sense that my own feelings were being reflected back to me. The result was a blurring of the lines between Jordan and myself in which I felt nearly as though the discursive act that Jordan represents was being directed specifically at me. However, not all queer spectators responded as strongly to Jordan as I did, as many felt that he did not accurately reflect their experiences. In particular, many spectators were annoyed with Jordan's lack of action and reliance on others to affirm his self-worth. For example, Broadway World user Skip23 comments on a message board regarding the 2020 livestream of *Significant Other*: "Babe [Jordan], not everyone exists to feed your needs. You gotta put yourself out there and create your own life."¹²² Some claimed that his perceived helplessness actually impeded their ability to identify with him. We might understand this disparity by looking at the differences between my experience of queerness and those of other commentators. While I cannot fully know how they have experienced queerness in their lives, I can look at what is unique about my own experiences.

Autistic/Neuroqueer Loneliness

These critiques of *Significant Other* represent a particularly meaningful gap between my experience of the play and the experiences of other queer spectators; a gap

122. Skip23. "Significant Other - OBC Livestream - 5/14/20." Broadway World. May 15, 2020. <https://www.broadwayworld.com/board/readmessage.php?thread=1122453&page=3>

which I believe can be explained by my status as an autistic, or neuroqueer subject. The term neuroqueer derives from a recent movement in neurodiversity studies that explores the ways in which neurodiversity functions similarly to queerness. Both involve atypical epistemologies and ways of relating to others, and I argue that both involve a degree of loneliness. In fact, this sense of autistic loneliness compounded with my queer loneliness during my viewing experience of *Significant Other*, allowing me to identify with Jordan in a way that other queer spectators did not. I also argue that this identification is not impeded by Jordan's helplessness but is actually rooted in it.

I introduce this idea of autistic loneliness in order to argue for the importance of intersectionality in queer spectating. By highlighting how my responses to *Significant Other* are informed not just by my queerness or my autism, but by the ways in which those two identities interact, I hope to reinforce the idea that queer spectators are never only queer. To affect individual spectators and expand their sense of potential, we must be aware of the multiplicity that those spectators bring. I have three reasons for choosing this chapter to make this point: 1) this chapter discusses narrative identification in queer audiences, and I believe that narrative identification, more so than the other analytical models that I use in this thesis, is intricately affected by the sociocultural identity of the spectator, 2) I have frequently felt my queerness and my autism to be intimately connected, and loneliness is an emotion that I associate with both of them, and 3) co-occurring identity markers can create conflict between the communities that one identifies themselves as a part of, contributing to feelings of loneliness within both communities.

I want to clarify that I am not suggesting that Jordan is autistic or otherwise neurodivergent (although he does at one point mention taking antidepressants). I am

contending that his behaviors evoke certain emotions that I associate with being autistic, and that these emotions make it easier for me, as a queer/autistic person, to identify with his experience of queer loneliness. To elaborate this point, I will outline how autistic loneliness works differently than queer loneliness, before highlighting how my experience as an autistic spectator alters my perception of Jordan as a lonely queer subject. I also emphasize how my autistic loneliness actually amplifies my queer loneliness by setting me apart from other queer spectators.

While autistic loneliness shares similarities to queer loneliness, there are also many differences. For instance, while it is quite common for queer subjects to feel lonely, loneliness may very well be the single most paradigmatic autistic emotion. As neurodiversity studies scholar M. Remi Yergeau points out, autistic subjects are often assumed to be incapable of rhetoricity and intentionality—our behaviors are frequently reduced to simple presentations of symptoms.¹²³ This privileging of symptomatology over interiority contributes to the popular belief within clinical psychology that autism spectrum disorder is characterizable as lacking a “Theory of Mind.” A Theory of Mind, in psychology, is defined as the ability to understand that others have thoughts and feelings that do not match one’s own—that one’s own mental processes are not universal and do not reflect absolute reality. This pathologizing contributes to the subordination of neurodiversity and the sense that neurodivergent individuals can only be happy or fulfilled by approximating the qualities of neurotypicality. However, just like queer individuals mimicking heterosexual relationship forms, this approximation has always already failed.

123. M. Remi Yergeau. *Authoring Autism: On Rhetoric and Neurological Queerness*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018.)

The result is a similarly diminished sense of one's own potentiality and an openness to the same authoritarian ideologies that affect lonely queer individuals.

We may understand this subordination as similar to that which queer individuals cope with by borrowing from autism advocate Jared Blackburn's idea of the "availability heuristic" in neurodivergent interactions.¹²⁴ Essentially, this heuristic allows for objects and ideas that are immediately available to the subject to be read as typical, or universal. Because the ways in which neurotypical people perceive the world are considered normal within our culture, this heuristic returns positive results often enough that it becomes an automatic assumption for neurotypicals that others will think similarly to themselves. However, because autistic individuals are less likely to perceive things in a way that is considered common, this heuristic is less likely to be useful for us. Therefore, we are less likely to assume that our thoughts and feelings will be reflected by others. What Blackburn's article only briefly touches on is the feeling of subordination and helplessness that autistic individuals are left with. These feelings constitute a discursive inequality that is not dissimilar to the one between heterosexuality and homosexuality.

This feeling of helplessness proliferates throughout *Significant Other*, and heavily inflects the loneliness that Jordan experiences. While many other viewers expressed annoyance or dissatisfaction with this aspect of his characterization, arguing that it made him harder to root for, this sense of helplessness was beneficial to my identification with him as a neuroqueer viewer. Jordan is depicted as not only helpless to improve his situation but also heavily reliant on his more socially adept friends. He is reliant on them for his

124. Jared Blackburn et al., "A Discussion about Theory of Mind: From an Autistic Perspective," in *Proceedings of Autism Europe's 6th International Congress*, Glasgow, May 19 – 21, 2000 (www.autistics.org/library/AE2000-ToM.html.)

sense of self-worth, certainly, but he also relies on them when trying to navigate romantic and social situations. We see an example of this in Act One, when Jordan is still attempting to pursue a relationship with Will. Initially, Jordan asks his friends for advice on how to ask Will out, how to talk to him, how to behave in front of him, etc. After Will agrees to go to a movie with him, however, his friends begin offering extensive input:

KIKI: Are you gonna sleep with him?

JORDAN: I don't know.

LAURA: Don't sleep with him on a first date.

JORDAN: I would never.

VANESSA: Why not? We did.

JORDAN: I might.

KIKI: You should fuck his brains out.

JORDAN: You think?

LAURA: Don't listen to Kiki!

JORDAN: I would never.

VANESSA: When was the last time you had sex?

JORDAN: I don't know, like, the Pleistocene era?

KIKI: Wear something slutty.

LAURA: What are you gonna wear?

VANESSA: Dress like you don't even care.

KIKI: Do you own a thong?

LAURA: You can't wear this.

VANESSA: Care just enough but not too much.

KIKI: Dance like no one is watching.

LAURA: You have the saddest clothes.

VANESSA: When you laugh, just be like, "Ha."

KIKI: Shoot for the moon.

LAURA: This one screams: don't touch me!

VANESSA: "Heh."

KIKI: Even if you miss you'll land among the stars.

LAURA: Were you ever molested?

VANESSA: Work on your laugh before the date.

KIKI: Be obsessed with yourself. I am.

LAURA: Just be yourself. Ish.¹²⁵

As the scene is staged, these interactions happen separately, though they are presented to the audience simultaneously. This scene communicates Jordan's confusion over how to handle the situation while also conveying his reliance on the opinions of his friends, who have already been characterized as more socially successful than him. The implication is clear: Jordan does not trust his own instincts. His judgment about his own love life cannot be trusted and so he must rely on the assessments of those around him.

This absence of rhetorical agency may be common in queer individuals, but it is a markedly persistent experience for autistic individuals, who are usually taught from a young age that our ability to survey and assess social situations is deficient. As a person who is both queer and autistic, this diminishing of my rhetorical agency has often conflicted with the compulsion to couple off, since my perceived lack of social skills hinders my ability to pursue the romantic relationships that I am programmed to pursue. We see this social insufficiency depicted throughout *Significant Other* through Jordan's social awkwardness and inability to rely on his own social acuity. His frustration with his inability to couple off, compounded with his lack of the social skills necessary to ameliorate his situation, activated feelings of autistic loneliness in me that aided my identification with him. Consequently, I felt a degree of sympathy for him—a desire to reassure him that his experiences are valid, and by extent, that mine are valid. That other queer spectators did

125. Harmon, *Significant Other*, 35-36.

not feel such sympathy is not necessarily evidence of their neurotypicality, but is at least indicative of a level of investment in the ideals of neurotypicality.

These ideals create assumptions that guide such spectators' reactions to Jordan's character. For example, multiple commentators echoed Skip23's assertion that Jordan simply needs to "put himself out there," a statement that betrays a wealth of neurotypical assumptions. One such assumption is that neurotypical and neurodivergent individuals incur an equal amount of risk when approaching others socially. While not a recognized symptom of autism spectrum disorder, I have observed a notable sensitivity to failure in myself and other autistics, particularly in social contexts. The discursive subordination faced by autistic individuals is attached to our ability to interact with others in socially acceptable ways. Therefore, when we fail to approximate neurotypical social behavior, that failure becomes a reaffirmation of our insufficiency. Social interaction, especially of a romantic nature, is then read as a potential source of pain and subsequently avoided.

This particular type of loneliness amplifies the discomfort that I feel watching Jordan attempt to flirt with Will. As I mentioned previously, these scenes introduce and maintain a constant threat that Jordan will be rejected and delegitimated due to his inability to secure a romantic relationship with Will. While the ambiguity surrounding Will's sexuality certainly amplifies this anxiety, I can recontextualize my entire reaction to this scene by examining it through a lens of neurodiversity. I have intentionally waited to apply a neurodivergent lens to this scene until after I had completed my analysis of queer loneliness in order to reinforce how neurodivergent queers encounter such scenes differently than neurotypical queers. Jordan's interactions with Will are marked by a repeated failure on Jordan's part to arouse Will's interest in him as a romantic partner.

However, my anxiety preexists these failures; I felt anxious about Jordan's chances before he even talked to Will for the first time. This is because even before the initial failure, I was already hyperaware of the very possibility of failure. As I also outlined earlier in this chapter, Jordan's initial descriptions of Will create a perceived inequality between them, which in turn creates an assumption that the onus is on Jordan to impress Will. Therefore, each interaction that Jordan has with Will becomes an opportunity to fail. Since failure can be especially psychologically distressing to neurodivergent people, this potential for failure is privileged over the potential for success. Jordan's failed attempts to establish a romantic connection with Will become early facilitators of my identification with him not only as a lonely queer individual but a lonely neurodivergent queer individual.

In this context, statements from other queer spectators that Jordan needs to "put himself out there" inspire the same anger as Helene's insistence that he "just [has] to find [his] bashert." These statements invalidate the loneliness that accompanies being autistic in a culture that privileges neurotypical communication. They also reintroduce the neurotypical assumptions that impress upon neurodivergent bodies the same way that heteronormativity impresses upon queer bodies. In such moments, I feel my loneliness as both a queer and autistic subject, simultaneously. This particular loneliness, however, affects me in a way that it does not affect other queer subjects—in a way that uniquely emerges from the place where my queerness meets and conflicts with my neurodivergence. Seeing these experience returned through Jordan, regardless of whether or not he is depicted as autistic, allows me to more closely identify with him, in turn opening a door for the play to transform that loneliness into potential.

Look at Me, Looking at You: Recognizing Queer Loneliness

While *Significant Other* does not resolve these lonely feelings, it does attempt to potentialize them by offering the lonely queer spectator a moment of recognition. Shortly after the above scene with Helene, Jordan walks out of Laura's bachelorette party after becoming overwhelmed listening to his friends converse about their married lives. Laura follows him outside and the two get into an argument in which Jordan explicitly links his loneliness to Laura's wedding ("Your wedding is my funeral"), implying once again that his loneliness is exacerbated by his tendency to compare his social milestones with those of his friends. However, when Laura tells him not to come to the wedding, he spurns the suggestion, and admits that fears he will never find the kind of relationship that his friends now all have:

LAURA: You can be my friend and support me, the same way that I will be your friend and support you when you get married, or you can not come.

JORDAN: Don't say "when you get married," it's an if, not a when, an if. 'Cause there are actually a lot of really good people in this world who never find someone, and I could be one of those people. So then what? Then what happens to me?

LAURA: Presumably you haven't been an asshole to all of your friends and so you have friends.

JORDAN: Friends with kids and husbands and mortgages and a million other priorities, who I go to visit by myself once every three months when they can squeeze me in. "Uncle Jordy?" That's not gonna be a happy life for me.¹²⁶

In this scene, Jordan's anxieties are laid bare: it is not so much that he fears being alone, but that he fears being deserted, or being deemed unworthy of recognition as a result of his failure to couple off. This scene is impactful for me because Jordan expresses anxieties that almost perfectly matched my own. The experience was so jarring that it took all of the

126. Harmon, *Significant Other*, 81

investment that I had built up in Jordan and turned it inward, bringing my attention acutely back to my own body. This turning inward created a momentary dialectic between myself and my own loneliness, which manifested as the feeling of ‘being seen,’ so often cited as the chief benefit of representation (also articulated by Ahmed as the “hey you too”¹²⁷ that is enjoyed by heterosexuals). In speaking back to the narrative, I felt my discomfort being recognized, and thus legitimated.

To reiterate, this recognition does not resolve my loneliness. What it does do, however, is allow me to feel less alone in my loneliness. It introduces the possibility of a world full of lonely subjects, whose inability to secure validate from others through social performance makes me feel like less of an anomaly. Furthermore, this moment challenges us to look at what a “failed” or lonely existence may comprise. In doing so, it recontextualizes loneliness as something that may be experienced without an implication that the individual has failed to secure a good life. One might still feel lonely, but recognizing that loneliness strips it of its power to make us vulnerable to totalitarian logics. As a result, loneliness may become a site for potential rather than alienation.

The play’s resolution continues to disempower queer loneliness without eliminating it by refusing to fully resolve Jordan’s loneliness. Just before Laura’s wedding, Jordan tells Helene that he does not know if he will be able to handle watching all of his friends dancing with their spouses while he stands by himself. Helene’s advice is considerably less dismissive than the previous scene: “It’s a long book, Jordan. You’re in a tough chapter. And you don’t know when this chapter will end and the next one will start.

127. Ahmed, *Emotion*, 147.

But the book is long. It's a long book."¹²⁸ At the wedding, Jordan reconciles with Laura before talking with Kiki and Vanessa, who insist that he is "on deck"¹²⁹ to be the next one married. However, when they offer to start planning his wedding with him, he declines. The play ends with all of Jordan's now-married friends taking to the dance floor while he stands to the side. According to the stage directions, "he's getting through it."¹³⁰

By having the play end on the moment that Jordan has feared since it began, the play brings queer audiences face-to-face with their own anxieties surrounding their relationship status. We are asked to sit with that discomfort instead of pulling away from it, while being expressly told that there is more to come that we will not see, leaving the play open to any possible imaginings that the audience may come up with. Jordan's friends clearly still have faith that he will join them in wedded bliss, yet his refusal to participate in preemptive wedding planning points to a possible future where he does not couple off.

It is difficult to say that the play totally challenges the primacy of the couple, as very few characters are able to imagine a future for Jordan in which he is both single and happy (the only notable attempt is from Laura, whose imagined future for him involves him finding joy in his friends' successes without enjoying any of his own). There is little suggestion that life beyond coupledness is possible, but the play nonetheless succeeds in avoiding the 'happily ever after' trappings of the traditional romantic comedy. By emphasizing that Jordan's story is not at an end without specifying what his next chapter will look like, Harmon leaves hope that he will find contentment—though what kind depends on the spectator's imagination. Upon my initial viewing, I believed that Jordan

128. Harmon, *Significant Other*, 85

129. Harmon, *Significant Other*, 87

130. Harmon, *Significant Other*, 88

would eventually enter a relationship, if later than he had wished. After all, if Jordan is my avatar, then I want him to end up the way that I want to end up. Several other spectators echoed this belief. Perhaps, however the specifics of what Jordan's life and ultimate contentment will look like are less important than the felt potential for them to manifest. If Laura's wedding really is Jordan's funeral, then perhaps what follows is his rebirth.

As an adult, I am more open to the idea that Jordan may never find his romantic match. There are a few possible reasons for this, including one that brings me back to the particularities of neuroqueer spectating: as an autistic person, I am more used to being alone. I spent most of my childhood and adolescence without socializing beyond what was necessary because I was afraid of failing and reinforcing the view that I had of myself as socially insufficient. From a young age, even before I realized that I was queer, I believed that I likely would not get married until after most of my peers. In addition, imagining that Jordan will eventually couple off is essentially to imagine that he will succeed in mimicking heterosexual relationship models, or at least in approximating them. However, doing so would still require an ability to mimic neurotypical social behaviors, which is an ability that most autistics do not have. Neurotypical queers may fantasize about Jordan meeting his soulmate by activating the availability heuristic that allows them to take neurotypical communication as a given. Neurodivergent queers do not have this benefit. We are also more aware of our inability to inhabit norms (by virtue of the constant, pathologizing reminders that we endure), so we are more likely to view that inability as an impediment to such imaginings. At the end of the day, accepting indefinite singleness as a permissible outcome for Jordan simply emerges as the easier (or at least more straightforward) alternative.

Conclusion

I have included an examination of neurodivergent queerness in this chapter to emphasize how queer sociality and queer spectating can operate differently depending on co-occurring identity markers. I admit that it is not outside the realm of possibility that my reactions to *Significant Other* were guided more by my experience of being neurodivergent than my experience of queerness. I do not believe, however, that the two are so easily separable. Queer individuals and autistic individuals are both subject to social programming that privileges neurotypical and heterosexual relationship models. While queer individuals must fear that our desired partners may reveal themselves to be heterosexual, autistic individuals are conditioned to view social interaction as a potential danger to our ontological security. Both groups are taught to pursue ideals that actively harm them. Both are taught to attribute their failures to inhabit such ideals to some fault within themselves, leading to feelings of loneliness and insufficiency. The fact that I simultaneously occupy a queer subjectivity and an autistic one means that I feel this compulsion to conform to normative behaviors on multiple sides. An understanding of this multiplicity is essential when constructing queer narratives, and particularly narratives about queer sociality, as it informs the emotional framework with which queer spectators encounter narratives. While this multiplicity may be impossible to completely account for, it cannot be glossed over. To do so would risk assuming that queer spectators are reducible to our queerness, which I hope I have succeeded in demonstrating that we are not.

Regardless of these intersections of identity, it can nonetheless be understood that normative expectations imposed by majority groups contribute to a pervasive sense of loneliness in minority subjects, especially when those expectations relate to romantic

relationships. However, representations of queer loneliness have the potential to recuperate loneliness as a valid emotional state, rather than the sign of a failed subject. Michael Cobb makes the argument that by “potentializing”¹³¹ romantic relationships, we give each other the freedom to organize and reorganize ourselves to meet the needs of our circumstances. In this sense, the open-ended nature of *Significant Other* is entirely necessary for producing the kind of potential energy that queer bodies thrive on, precisely by asking us not to transcend our discomfort, but to sit with it. By putting anxieties about queer loneliness onstage and inviting us to identify with some of our least appealing traits, *Significant Other* creates a reflexivity through which queer viewers may legitimate their own discomfort and begin the process of potentializing it, opening up possibilities for different ways of relating to the social order.

131. Cobb, *Single*, 27.

Chapter 4

What's My Line?: Phenomenology of Queer Displacement

In my final chapter, I continue the theme of queer sociality from the previous chapter by examining how representations of queer community engage with feelings of queer displacement. I define this displacement as the feeling of unsettlement brought on by inhabiting a space where one does not belong. This feeling is similar to but distinct from the loneliness described in the previous chapter. Whereas loneliness involves a sense that one is inhabiting space incorrectly or failing to inhabit space, displacement is the feeling that one is inhabiting the wrong space. One might also understand this feeling as the sensation of not having a home, or being away from one's home, with home representing a space in which one can move about without restrictions. Queer individuals frequently feel displaced whenever we try to inhabit heteronormative spaces, as these are felt as spaces where we do not belong. However, we still may feel some degree of displacement in queer spaces, as they are incompatible with the heterosexual spaces that we grew up in. The result is a persistent feeling of being out of place and an accompanying desire for a space that we may inhabit as a home. I analyze how this feeling works and how it is combated through a phenomenological examination of *The Inheritance* by Matthew Lopez, paying particular attention to how the play brings queer spectators together in the shared act of reaching for that feeling of being at home.

It will be helpful to give a brief synopsis of the plot of *The Inheritance* before beginning. *The Inheritance*, which debuted in London in 2018 and on Broadway in 2019, is an adaptation of E.M. Forster's 1910 novel *Howards End* that reconstructs the story as

a gay epic set in contemporary Manhattan. The main protagonist, Eric Glass, is a gay man in his mid-30s living in his family-owned rent-controlled apartment with his boyfriend (later fiancé), aspiring writer Toby Darling. Eric strikes up a friendship with Walter, an older gay man who lives with his husband of thirty years, which leads to Eric inheriting Walter's house in upstate New York when Walter dies. Eric had previously learned that during the AIDS crisis, Walter used the house to give gay men dying of AIDS a place to live out their final days in peace. Eric also later marries Walter's husband, Henry Wilcox, who struggles with emotional intimacy due to the trauma caused by the epidemic.

Meanwhile, Toby becomes beguiled by a young gay actor named Adam. After breaking off his engagement with Eric in an unsuccessful bid to be with him, Toby connects with a young street hustler named Leo (who is played by the same actor as Adam). He takes Leo on a Fire Island bender where he ultimately abandons him and goes on a shame-fueled spiral. Toby's storyline eventually leads to self-destruction as he begins to reveal the trauma that he suffered in his childhood, which he is unable to integrate or reconcile with his present-day identity. He commits suicide just before the end of the play. Leo is taken in by Eric and brought to Walter's house, where both are able to connect with the history of the house and begin to heal. The play is also narrated throughout by Morgan, a characterized version of E.M. Forster, along with a Greek chorus of nameless gay writers that he mentors, referred to as the "Young Men."

Audience reactions to *The Inheritance* have largely privileged the heightened sense of community that arises from these storylines. Upon my first interaction with the play, I gravitated most heavily toward scenes in which the characters sat and communicated their experiences and needs with one another. For me, these scenes mimicked the healing effects

of having those kinds of communications with other queer people; of connecting with other queers in a way that bonds and validates us as queer subjects. I argue that the affects that are communicated by such moments of queer connection work to mitigate feelings of queer displacement. Therefore, it is helpful to understand how and from where we are displaced.

Queer Homes and Hetero Spaces

Sara Ahmed's theories of orientation and disorientation help to establish how queer spectators are displaced. In *Queer Phenomenology: Objects, Orientations, Others*, Ahmed defines orientation as the ways in which we relate to our surroundings: "orientations involve different ways of registering the proximity of objects and others. Orientations shape not only how we inhabit space, but how we apprehend this world of shared inhabitation, as well as "who" or "what" we direct our energy and attention toward."¹³² To be oriented within a given space is to be familiar with the objects and others within that space, and to be accepted by those objects and others. For the purposes of this chapter, I liken being oriented to the feeling of being at home. By contrast, to be disoriented is to have one's relation to their surroundings unsettled, such that one is unable to find their way through a given space. Ahmed also outlines how spaces are shaped and contoured by the different bodies that inhabit them, allowing certain bodies to navigate them more easily than other bodies. Theatrical spaces are one example of a space that I would argue can be more welcoming to some bodies than others. *The Inheritance* provides an example of how this space can be reshaped to extend the body of the queer spectator, lessening the feeling

132. Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 3.

of displacement. Where displacement differs from disorientation, is that it implies a location or condition from which one is displaced, as well as a desire to return there. To understand where or what queer subjects are displaced from, we must understand what it means to feel at home.

To that end, I draw on scholarship in the field of queer diaspora studies to establish how displaced individuals long for a feeling of being oriented, or being at home. Postcolonialism scholar Adriana Margareta Dancus theorizes this “desire to be at home” as the most central feeling to diasporic consciousness.¹³³ However, she is clear to delineate the concept of home as a physical space from home as a “sense of intimacy with the world that [is associated] with being at home: smells, sounds, sensual perceptions, and social contexts.”¹³⁴ For Dancus, displacement is less about distance from a physical point of origin and more about the ways in which displaced individuals “perform their difference, not primarily in relation to their lost homeland but in response to the host country’s institutions, discourses, practices, and the official national affect that supports them.”¹³⁵ Putting Dancus’s theory in conversation with Ahmed’s analysis of space, I argue that heteronormative spaces do not support the performance of queer difference, and thus we feel displaced within the heterosexual “host country.” In this sense, we may think of home as a sense of familiarity with one’s surroundings, which enables the body to move through space by virtue of this familiarity. However, the idea of home is complicated for queer

133. Adriana Margareta Dancus, “Diasporic Feeling and Displaced Nostalgia: A Case Study: Import-Eksport and Blodsåxnd,” *Scandinavian Studies* 83, no. 2 (2011): pp. 247-266, 249.

134. Dancus, “Diasporic Feeling,” 249.

135. Dancus, “Diasporic Feeling,” 250.

individuals due to the tense relationship that many of us have with our own homes, which are often read as spaces of discomfort and pain.

Queer displacement often makes fraught the idea of home because home is often constructed as a heterosexual space. We may understand this idea by using Ahmed's theory of lines of inheritance, or "the lines that we are given as our point of arrival into familial and social space."¹³⁶ These inheritances determine the configurations of the spaces we are born into and the initial objects that it is possible for us to orient ourselves to. Physical homes then become the spaces where the objects of our inheritance are gathered. These object histories can prescribe the potential of the body, as we are often expected to continue our lines by reproducing the objects or ideals that we inherit. However, queer individuals are heirs to two separate—and frequently incompatible—inheritances. We are often born into straight families, where we inherit a history of heterosexual marriage and procreation. Since we are unable or unwilling to reproduce these ideals, we cannot inhabit the heterosexual space as home, so we are cut off from the familiarity that it offers. To long for this familiarity is to feel displaced.

We also inherit a history of queer resistance and community, but this inheritance starts off invisible to us. Queerness is not found in the home that we are born into, so it is not among the objects that are initially available to orient ourselves toward. Nonetheless, it is an inheritance, but one that must be actively claimed, and one that lacks a home for its objects to gather in. Its objects do not embody "lost homes,"¹³⁷ as Ahmed puts it, but homes that never were. Challenging feelings of displacement then requires wrestling with how we

136. Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 17.

137. Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 150.

might come to inhabit a space as home, even if that space lacks the familiarity of the heterosexual home. *The Inheritance* dramatizes such attempts by queer individuals to negotiate the heterosexual homes that they cannot fully inhabit and the queer homes that do not yet exist, and in doing so, strives to bring a queer home into existence.

Such queer homes are predicated on two key components, both of which play major roles in *The Inheritance*: kinship and shared history. The first of these components describes the desire for close social bonds that affirm one's place in a larger group. The second coheres that group through some form of shared lineage. Both work to secure a sense of futurity by granting the subject a degree of ontological security, which is translated into a feeling of potentiality. These ideas will serve to ground my analysis of how *The Inheritance* generates potential energy by combating feelings of queer displacement.

‘I Will Be With You Always’: Queer Kinship in *The Inheritance*

One way in which *The Inheritance* works to alleviate feelings of queer displacement is through the representation of queer kinship bonds. I define these bonds as a particular form of social relationship that eases feelings of displacement by reshaping spaces that are restrictive to individual bodies. When we are able to connect with other queer subjects based on shared queer emotions, we generate the possibility of a queer home. What is more, these acts of connection orient our bodies to face a common direction, which allows us to feel that home may be found if we continue to follow that direction. In that sense, kinship connections do not necessarily create queer homes, but they inspire us to reach for such homes by directing us toward where home might be found. I find that the scenes that had the greatest effect on me during my initial encounter with *The Inheritance*

were the ones that generated this potential for home by having queer individuals talk with one another about what it means to be queer. These scenes represent moments in which kinship networks are activated not in service of reifying a certain social architecture, but to provide aid and security. These scenes also demonstrate the role of kinship and connection in sustaining queer identity.

In particular, I would like to focus on two scenes during which I felt the most stimulated. As I will highlight later, both of these scenes center on the character of Leo. The following scene occurs while Toby and Leo are on Fire Island. Just before waking up to find that Toby has left him, Leo has a conversation with Morgan:

LEO: I never want to leave here. I love this beach, I love our cottage, I love Toby. I don't know if he loves me? Were you ever in love?

MORGAN: I was. More than once. It was not love in the way you might recognize. But it was love to me.

LEO: I learned how to fuck when I was fourteen, but no one ever taught me how to love.

MORGAN: So many of us were never given a healthy example of what it means to be homosexual. Which means, of course, no one ever taught us how to be. How to love, how to accept love. We couldn't find it in our cultures and so we had to find it in each other, didn't we? Clandestinely, fearfully. Sometimes joyfully. Our educations occurred in parks, in public toilets, on these very dunes of Fire Island. Or Hampstead Heath, busier than Oxford Street on some summer nights. It was all dangerous and forbidden and furtive and wonderful. And along the way we hurt each other. Sometimes we caused each other great pain.¹³⁸

Here, we see the importance of kinship to the formation of subjectivity. Up to this point, Leo has been enjoying himself with Toby, living what we might consider a stereotypical gay male lifestyle (taking drugs, going to raves, participating in orgies, etc.), while also being used by Toby as currency to get them into parties. This scene, however, is calm and

138. Matthew Lopez, *The Inheritance*, (London: Faber and Faber, 2020), 219-220.

intimate. Leo and Morgan are able to have an honest exchange about the beneficial relationships that they have been denied, and the damaging effect that this denial has had on them both. Morgan is not seeking to use, manipulate, or seduce Leo, but simply offers him a moment of recognition.

This recognition can be restorative for queer individuals—in the same way that I describe in Chapter 3—as it undermines the dehumanizing effects of displacement. Ahmed outlines how disorientation may occur when our ways of inhabiting space are not reflected by others. In such moments, the gazes of others tend to be drawn towards us, because we are seen as objects that do not belong. Since, as I have demonstrated, heterosexuality is able to assert discursive power over queerness, we are compelled to follow the gaze of the heterosexual other, which leads us to look at our own bodies as objects; we become failed others in such moments, severely diminishing the body's potential for action. However, when our personal experiences (otherwise understood as an accumulated history of the spaces we have inhabited) are returned to us as a form of recognition, there is a chance of reforming space, even momentarily, into a shape more comfortable for our bodies. If the gaze of the oppressor returns our gaze to our bodies as objects, then the recognizing gaze of a fellow queer subject allows us to restore our position as individuals. This scene allows us to imagine a home in which we would always be met with such recognition, while attaching the image of that home to the activation of queer kinship bonds.

The second scene I have chosen takes place after Toby has abandoned Leo, leaving him heartbroken and homeless. Leo also learns that he has contracted HIV (this is implied to have occurred during an orgy that Toby pushed him to participate in). Deathly ill and on

the verge of suicide, Leo happens upon Adam outside the theatre where he is performing in Toby's play:

ADAM: Are you okay? Do you need help? Hey. What's your name?

LEO: I'm Leo.

ADAM: Hi Leo. I'm Adam.

LEO: I know. Your name is Adam McDowell. And everybody loves you.

ADAM: Do you need help, Leo?

LEO: Yeah. I need help.

ADAM: What do you need? Is there someone I can call for you?

LEO: Eric.

ADAM: Eric? Eric who, Leo?

LEO: Eric...Glass.

ADAM: Did you say 'Eric Glass'? How do you know Eric?

LEO: Eric was kind to me.

ADAM: He was kind to me, too. Do you want me to call Eric for you, Leo?

LEO: Yes.

ADAM: Okay, Leo. I'll call him right away.

Leo starts to cry. His knees buckle and he wobbles to the ground. Adam catches him and eases him down.

LEO: Please help me. I'm sorry. I'm sorry.

ADAM: It's okay, Leo. It's okay.¹³⁹

Here we see another way that kinship bonds can be mobilized in order to gesture towards a potential queer home: by offering comfort in times of need. On a neurocognitive level, kinship bonds acknowledge the inherent vulnerability of the human body and seek to provide a sense of temporal security by promising that, should one find themselves in danger or disoriented, these relationships can be activated in order to reorient or stabilize oneself. Understanding displacement as a particularly vulnerable feeling, we can see how

139. Lopez, *The Inheritance*, 255-256.

queer kinship helps to mitigate this vulnerability by generating a space where one can safely pause and orient themselves.

Adam offers Leo this comfort by addressing him and extending an offer of aid. Adam also finds Leo at his most disoriented. Before he arrives, there is an exchange in which Leo tries to go to the George Washington Bridge (referred to as “the final resort for so many negations like himself”)¹⁴⁰ but is directed toward the theatre by the Young Men, despite his protests; Leo literally does not know which way to turn. Referring to himself as a “negation” even echoes Ahmed’s description of what happens when the body becomes viewed as an object, rather than as an extension of oneself: “[t]o feel negated is to feel pressure upon one’s bodily surface, where the body feels the pressure point as a restriction in what it can do.”¹⁴¹ Functionally, it is to be a not-human. It is also significant that Adam calls out just as Leo turns back toward the bridge; Ahmed outlines how the act of hailing another person temporarily orients them towards oneself by providing them a direction in which to turn.¹⁴² In simply calling out to him while his back is turned, Adam literally gives Leo a line to follow by turning around to face him.

While there are many more displays of kinship within *The Inheritance*, I consider these two of the most important in understanding the role of queer kinship in assuaging feelings of queer displacement. One reason for this assertion is that among the entire cast of characters, Leo is the most persistently disoriented (perhaps only rivaled by Toby). Whereas the other characters have some connection to their queer past, some idea of the

140. Lopez, *The Inheritance*, 254.

141. Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 139.

142. Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 133.

objects that they are oriented toward, and/or some level of support system, Leo is introduced as a character with no connections and no community. In this sense, Leo may be seen as the most displaced character. Thus, he became my access point into the orienting power of *The Inheritance*. However, other audience reactions indicate that not every queer viewer identified with Leo above other characters; in fact, accounts from different spectators reveal a variety of access points into the narrative.

Different Lines of Spectating

I would like to take this idea of differing points of access and use it to explore how *The Inheritance* might encourage kinship bonds amongst queer spectators. In Chapter 3, I outlined how different spectators may bring different experiences of queerness with them into the theatrical space. In this section, I explore how different experiences of queer displacement may influence which character a spectator identifies with. By providing multiple points of entry for queer spectators to engage with the narrative, *The Inheritance* works to illuminate real-life queer kinship bonds. This idea is in conversation with Benedict Anderson's theory of imagined communities, or collectives that are shaped by shared acts of imagining.¹⁴³ Ahmed similarly draws on this idea to establish how shared orientations create group cohesion: "It might be the very act of attention—of attending to or facing this or that direction, or toward this or that object—that produces 'a sense' of a collective or social group."¹⁴⁴ If performances of kinship in *The Inheritance* serve to generate the possibility for a queer home, then the collective act of reaching for such a

143. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

144. Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 119.

home has the potential to pull disparate queer spectators together under a shared banner of queerness. To this point, I examine different responses to *The Inheritance*, paying particular attention to which characters other spectators most identified or connected with.

One account I wish to look at is that of Chad Armstrong, a journalist for *The Queer Review* who published his reactions to the play in an article titled: “Some personal thoughts on *The Inheritance*.” Armstrong details the emotional impact the play had on him, describing the groups of people who gathered between acts to discuss it and claiming that “a community was forming, if only for a moment.” At one point, he recounts insisting that many of his queer friends see it with him: “It’s a play about community and I wanted my community to experience it with me.”¹⁴⁵ Armstrong’s article highlights an important and necessary part of queer kinship building—the naming of social roles:

Eric is my idealised self.

Toby is every beautiful boy I’ve had an unrequited/destructive crush on.

Henry is the man I wish I knew.

Morgan is the mentor I wish I had.

I have been Jasper, Tristan and the Jasons to other people.

I’ve been to parties with Tucker.

I’ve been comforted by Margaret.¹⁴⁶

Here, Armstrong places a clear emphasis on social archetypes, specifically relating each character to individuals in his own life and/or relationships that he has lacked. His reactions to the characters highlight the effects of kinship bonds, allowing him to orient himself around the object of queerness by aligning himself with other bodies that do the same.

145. Chad Armstrong, “Some Personal Thoughts on the Inheritance,” *The Queer Review*, November 16, 2019, <https://thequeerreview.com/2019/11/16/some-personal-thoughts-on-the-inheritance/>.

146. Armstrong, “Some Personal Thoughts on the Inheritance.”

Here we can begin to see the effects of differing points of entry into a common narrative. Whereas I felt most affected by the scenes with Leo, Armstrong seemed to connect more with Eric and his contemporaries. This distinction makes perfect sense; Armstrong belongs to the generation of gay men represented by Eric, while I am more aligned with the younger generation represented by Leo. This effect touches on the idea of narrative identification covered in Chapter 3, highlighting the ways in which our experiences were shaded differently by the characters we identified with. The emotional effect for Armstrong was one of connecting and strengthening ties with an existing community; mine was one of connecting with one for what felt like the first time. Yet despite our differing reactions, our shared orientation toward the play opens up the possibility for a kinship relationship between us by virtue of a shared alignment.

Queer theory scholar Dustin Bradley Goltz shows another point of entry in his essay, “Framing Our Story: Youthist and Queer Temporalities in Lopez’s *The Inheritance*.” Goltz highlights a scene in which Toby, after being told by Morgan that he will die by the end of the play, breaks the spatiotemporal barriers of the narrative to rail at the narrator for not doing enough to advance gay rights during his lifetime. Goltz critiques the lack of historicity in Toby’s comments, expressing an understanding of and identification with Morgan:

I was furious at the moment where Morgan shrinks and exits in shame, while vocally agreeing with Toby. It seemed to endorse the idea that gay men in contemporary culture face even greater struggles ... I would hope that the audacity of the moment, in its cruel shame, called upon all ages in the audience to feel the same rage I felt—some connection forged with Morgan across generations.¹⁴⁷

147. Dustin Bradley Goltz, “Framing Our Story: Youthist and Queer Temporalities in Lopez’s the *Inheritance*,” *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking* 8, no. 1 (January 2021): pp. 1-24, 12.

Goltz's reaction to this scene is partially reflective of his position as a scholar of queer theory who has actively studied the historical conditions under which E.M. Forster (Morgan) lived. Thus, he has a greater understanding of the societal challenges that Toby glosses over. His entry point into this scene is one of sympathy for Morgan and judgment of Toby, thus allowing him to orient himself toward the scene in a different way than someone of a different positionality who might feel empowered by Toby's accusations.

However, Goltz later goes on to express kinship with Toby that would seem to run counter to his repudiation of Toby's behavior in the previous scene. Here, Goltz's sympathy for Toby is expressed in opposition to his repudiation of Eric, whom Goltz sees as too conformist; a model of the "good gay" who secures the goodwill of straight society by aligning with their normative expectations: "So, yes, I reject Eric. I find more identification with Toby. Just like in a long legacy of queers finding identification with monsters, [Toby] does not discipline me by hiding his pain, his sadness, his lust, his torment, nor shame me with his righteousness."¹⁴⁸ This identification expresses a feeling of marginalization yet argues for Toby's right to be acknowledged within the narrative: "I am a different part of this story."¹⁴⁹ While Toby may not orient himself the same way that Eric does, nor does his experience of queerness match Eric's, he is still as much a part of the larger queer community as Eric. He is no less queer, nor any less driven by a deep-seated sense of displacement. Goltz's identification with Toby honors this inclusion and implies a desire to acknowledge the disparity of different queer experiences; to connect with others who are marginalized by the queer majority.

148. Goltz, "Framing Our Story," 16.

149. Goltz, "Framing Our Story," 17.

It is precisely this kind of kinship connection that *The Inheritance* makes to feel possible; a connection not based on genetic relationality or reproductive continuity, but rather on a shared experience of having been marginalized. This marginalization makes us feel displaced, an emotion that we seek to mitigate by reaching out to one another for connection. *The Inheritance* dramatizes this reaching through its characters, but it also inspires the audience to reach out for such connections by acting as a queer object around which queer spectators may gather and orient ourselves. In this way, theatrical space becomes a kind of imaginary commons where the potential for new queer kinship relations is felt as an affective potentiality.

Although Armstrong, Goltz, and I are not following the exact same lines, we are facing the same object, and we inhabit space in similar (though not identical) ways, orienting ourselves around the ideal of queerness. Furthermore, although each of us identified with different characters (I connected most strongly with Leo, Armstrong with Eric, and Goltz with Morgan and Toby), each of us described experiencing a renewed sense of community. I take this shared experience as evidence that even though the three of us feel displaced in different ways, this feeling may still be mitigated by having a common object to direct ourselves toward.

Lopez's characters are constantly reaching for a sense of home (physically represented by the house that Walter leaves to Eric), something displaced subjects are characterized as lacking. In reaching for connection with one another, we extend ourselves toward the possibility of reclaiming home as a queer space, one that leans into the instability of a queer inheritance by allowing itself to be reshaped by the bodies moving in and out of it. A particular recurring feeling in my, Armstrong's, and Goltz's reactions, as

well as many others, is a renewed desire to reach out to one's queer connections. Such impulses, felt as a desire to connect, make us aware not only of what we want, but what we lack. After all, to reach for something is to acknowledge that we do not have it. Ahmed's posits the act of reaching for objects as only possible when objects are already within sight. Therefore, I determine that performatives like the ones enacted in *The Inheritance* renew the visibility (and therefore, reachability) of queer kinship bonds.

The Plague Years: Displacement and Queer History

What is also helpful in renewing the visibility of queer kinship bonds is establishing a shared sense of queer history, which *The Inheritance* does through its examination of how the AIDS crisis continues to impact modern queer subjects. This shared history works to orient queer bodies towards one another by providing us with a common past that we can gather around. Postcolonialism and queer theory scholar Jarrod Hayes suggests in his monograph *Queer Roots for the Diaspora: Ghosts in the Family Tree* that it is actually the act of reaching for this shared history, rather than the preexistence of that history, that binds diasporic communities.¹⁵⁰ Therefore, I read *The Inheritance* as an attempt to bond queer bodies together by enacting a search for our shared history. Furthermore, by putting this idea into conversation with my previous arguments about queer kinship, I suggest that kinship and history may come together to bridge the gaps between disparate queer bodies created by queer displacement. To do so, I examine how *The Inheritance* employs themes of queer history, generationalism, and group knowledge.

150. Jarrod Hayes, *Queer Roots for the Diaspora: Ghosts in the Family Tree* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2016).

The Inheritance is a play that is very concerned with queer history, looking at the emotional and societal scars left by the AIDS crisis. This history is particularly complex for younger gay men, like myself, for whom many of our predecessors died in the 80s and 90s. This lack of visible ancestors often leads to the misconception that today's gay youth are the founders of modern queer history, and that there was no meaningful queer culture or visibility before the twenty-first century. This presumed absence of history is a prominent feature of queer communities in general, in which the inability to access a common relationship to the past creates divisions between different generations.

The Inheritance depicts four distinct generations of gay men, each of which can be mapped by their relationship to the initial AIDS outbreak. Morgan, a generation of one within the context of the play, died in 1970, a year after the events of Stonewall, and had to find quieter ways of expressing his queer desires—thus, he does not take queer freedoms for granted. Henry and Walter, the older generation who lived through the height of the epidemic, are characterized by the lingering psychological scars that they carry from watching their friends die. Eric, Toby, and their friends represent the following generation who witnessed the aftershocks of the epidemic but came out of the closet after the advent of drugs that made HIV/AIDS a livable condition. Adam and Leo, the youngest generation, lack an expansive knowledge of the history of AIDS and therefore do not feel much of a connection to it. Lopez repeatedly shows us how disparities in AIDS knowledge function to create divisions between these generations, influencing how each character positions themselves within mainstream gay culture.

It is the third generation that Matthew Lopez seems to identify the most closely with, outlining his own relationship to the AIDS crisis as one of an absence that makes

itself present: “For my generation, it is as if a sibling had died before we were born—you are never quite sure why Mom and Dad are so sad. That person isn't real to you—they are only real as a figment and a spectre. You only know the negative space. You don't know what once filled it.”¹⁵¹ Lopez’s statements make clear that he views the AIDS epidemic as part of his queer inheritance, but an inheritance that he has no tangible way to access. It becomes a kind of ghost that is ever present. Looking at this ghost as a form of object, we see that the ghost left behind by the AIDS crisis unsettles queer individuals by promising a level of cultural knowledge that will enable one to connect with one’s community, while prohibiting us from fully accessing this knowledge. We might want to orient ourselves toward this history, but find that it is opaque and does not immediately open itself to us. Without that cultural knowledge, we are unable to fully orient ourselves within the modern queer cultural landscape, so we cannot feel fully at home.

We see how this lack of knowledge functions for Eric in Act One, Scene Five of Part 1 of *The Inheritance*, when Eric has a conversation with Walter about the impact of the epidemic. Eric expresses a similar distance, a similar inability to fully access the knowledge embedded in that history: “I can’t imagine what those years were like. I don’t even know how to... I can *understand* what it was. But I cannot possibly *feel* what it was.”¹⁵² This line is followed by what Goltz describes as “[o]ne of the most thrilling, devastating, and affecting scenes of the play,”¹⁵³ in which Walter attempts to convey to Eric the enormity of living through the AIDS Crisis:

WALTER: Tell me the name of one of your closest friends.

151. Mead, Rebecca. “The Gay Genealogist.” *The New Yorker*, 95, no. 26 (2019): 36–36.

152. Lopez, *The Inheritance*, 63. Italics are in the original.

153. Goltz, “Framing Our Story”, 12.

ERIC: Tristin.

WALTER: Imagine that Tristin is dead. Name another.

ERIC: Jasper.

WALTER: Jasper is also dead.

ERIC: Jason.

WALTER: Jason has been at St. Vincent's for two weeks. The toxoplasmosis has left him with dementia.

ERIC: Jason, his husband.¹⁵⁴

WALTER: Because they cannot legally be married, abandonment is simpler. Jason has left him.¹⁵⁵

The scene continues as the Young Men chime in listing the fates of various gay men:

Patrick is dead.

Alex is dead.

Colin is dead.

Lucas is infected.

Zach is dying from pneumocystis carinii.

Chris is healthy.

His partner has just been diagnosed.

You just visited Mark in the hospital. Tonight you will visit Will.

Eddie's funeral is tomorrow.¹⁵⁶

This goes on for an extended time as the Young Men and Walter layer in news reports from the period involving potential quarantines and/or incarcerations of gay men. The moment builds until Walter conclusively declares, "That is what it was."¹⁵⁷ This performative moment passes onto Eric some degree of affective knowledge of the plague years.

In dramatizing an attempt to pass traumatic knowledge from one generation to another, Lopez establishes a measure of the shared history that binds the gay community.

154. Both men are named Jason. It is a running joke throughout the play.

155. Lopez, *The Inheritance*, 64-65.

156. Lopez, *The Inheritance*, 64.

157. Lopez, *The Inheritance*, 66.

This attempt is also highly performative, in that it collapses spatiotemporal boundaries and asks both performer and witness to temporarily adopt a specific role. This performative uses the witness's imagination to involve them in the retelling of events and utilizes repetition to enhance the performance's affective power. Performance studies scholar Diana Taylor explores how such performative witnessing may work to create a sense of group continuity by instilling in the spectator a bodily understanding of the traumatic event. In such moments, a lost or forgotten history is made new by its repetition in the present.¹⁵⁸ Walter utilizes this mode of performative historiography to briefly reconstruct the emotions of the AIDS crisis and pull Eric's body into that reconstruction. The rhythm of the scene also utilizes repetition by repeatedly naming AIDS victims, amplifying the effect of Walter's testimony. In retelling his experience, Walter allows Eric to share in this act of remembering, creating an affinity between the two of them through the act of turning in a shared direction toward a common object. This same effect is extended to the audience, for whom the horrors that Walter describes become part of our shared history. However, the effect is different for queer audience members. Just as the moments of queer kinship explored above offer themselves only to queer spectators, this historical performative extends itself unevenly through the audience, privileging those with queer inheritances. In doing so, it begins to transform the theatrical space into a queer home in which comfort and renewal are offered through the workings of kinship and history.

It is important to note, however, that rather than something that is given and comes to be in our possession, this shared history actually orients the audience by virtue of its

158. Diana Taylor. *The Archive and the Repertoire: Cultural Memory and Performance in the Americas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).

inability to be fully possessed. Through Walter's testimony we are given a glimpse into the affective world of living through a plague, but those of us who were not present during that time can never completely own that experience; we are only given a portion of it, like a transfer that is and will always be incomplete. All we have are the testimonies that accumulate behind us, becoming stand-ins for the history that we cannot truly inhabit. This incompleteness may drive queer audiences to seek out more of their history or to learn more about the AIDS outbreak. For my part, after reading this scene I sought out my cousin (who is also queer) to share with her what I had just read. Just as displays of kinship compel us to reach out by bringing certain possibilities for connection into view, this performative witnessing urges us to reach toward the past by bringing into view our own imperfect connection to it. This moment thus creates community in the shared act of reaching, while bringing new queer worlds into view in the process. This shared history is a key aspect of how queer individuals may come to inhabit a space as home even if we lack the familiarity of having inhabited that space before. The cultural knowledge that is embedded in our histories is shared and circulated, continuing to bind us together through shared acts of remembering, until, by the time we come to physically inhabit queer space, we perceive that space to be full of objects that are already partially familiar to us.

The Inheritance gives us such an instance of queer inhabitation at the end of Part 1, when Eric visits Walter's house for the first time and is astonished by the sense of connectedness he experiences within that space. Multiple actors swarm the stage as Eric is greeted by the ghosts of the gay men who died in the house. These actors envelop the audience by entering through the aisles and appearing in the balcony, all expressing warmth and openness toward Eric's presence. This moment has been described by critics as "the

emotional apex of the play,”¹⁵⁹ “a vibrant and essential reminder of the terrifying years when a diagnosis of HIV was a death sentence,”¹⁶⁰ and “an emotional reckoning that induces audible sobs throughout the theater.”¹⁶¹ The energy of this moment overflows, conveying to the audience such an intensity of affect that it overwhelms the rest of the play. Goltz describes it as the scene in which he felt the most affected:

It said more about the love of community, of men, of queer possibility of who we are and what we might mean to one another than all the words that came before or after it. For me, this moment was queer family, in queer time, enacting queer care and healing ... It performed a bridging of history, of Walter’s history and the history of all these men. It was a bridge for Eric, meeting ghost after ghost, standing at the center of the stage. And through Eric, it bridged to everyone in that room.¹⁶²

Here, we see how kinship and history come together to bridge the gaps created by queer displacement. Eric is able to inhabit Walter’s house as a home, despite having never been there, because of the kinship connections he has made and the history he has partially acquired. Yet we must acknowledge that a bridge does not collapse one location onto another such that they become one; it creates a path in which those spaces can be traversed. This moment does not deny the differences or the distance between Eric and the ghosts that surround him but opens up a unique space where they are simultaneously proximate and distant. Their bodies are right in front of him, literally surrounding him, yet they are also inhabiting different points in time. Space and time collapse in on one another to allow Eric, and by extension the audience, to feel the impressions of the past as marks on the present.

159. Alexandra Starr, “A Literary and Theatrical Legacy on Display in ‘The Inheritance,’” *NPR* (NPR, November 23, 2019), <https://www.npr.org/2019/11/23/781697884/a-literary-and-theatrical-legacy-on-display-in-the-inheritance>.

160. Ben Brantley, “‘The Inheritance’ Review: So Many Men, So Much Time,” *The New York Times*, November 17, 2019.

161. David Rooney, “‘The Inheritance’: Theater Review,” *The Hollywood Reporter* (The Hollywood Reporter, September 27, 2021), <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/lifestyle/arts/inheritance-theater-review-1255493/>.

162. Goltz, “Framing Our Story,” 18.

The affects generated alter Eric's path by shifting how he is able to inhabit space, not by redirecting him in a backward march toward the past. Walter's house becomes a queer home, complete with a hailing from one of the ghosts: "Welcome home, Eric."¹⁶³

Reaching Toward the Future and the Past

Before concluding, I would like to analyze the character of Morgan in order to demonstrate how *The Inheritance* keeps this home queer. Just like heterosexual lines of inheritance, queer inheritances can also fall into the trap of demanding the reproduction of certain ideals. Therefore, a queer home must provide a sense of futurity without predetermining what that future must look like—it must remain a space of potentiality. To make this point, I look at the ways in which the ideas of kinship and history are combined in the character of Morgan to represent the vast nature of queer temporality. Compared to the other characters, Morgan occupies a unique temporal position within the narrative of *The Inheritance*. His life entirely predates the events of the play, the AIDS crisis, and the modern gay liberation movement. However, despite occupying a distinct position as 'that which came before,' he also displays an intimate knowledge of the characters' lives. He even tells Toby that he is going to die, suggesting that he knows the characters' futures. It is also his novel (or rather, the real E.M. Forster's novel) that *The Inheritance* is based on. In that sense, he creates that which the narrative is founded upon; he is the origin point from which the story emerges. Yet he is able to influence how the story unfolds, implying that not every aspect of the story has been predetermined. He exists outside the normative flow of time, representing the past, but also, as the narrator, giving the characters their

163. Lopez, *The Inheritance*, 152.

future. *The Inheritance*, by allowing Morgan to occupy this complex temporal position, turns him into a physical manifestation of the futurity and temporal security that is offered by the inhabiting of a space as a home.

In examining how Morgan offers this futurity to the character in the play, one may as well turn back to where this chapter began: Morgan and Leo.¹⁶⁴ Before their scene on the beach, which I will return to in a moment, there is a line in which Leo voices his joy at reading all of the books that Toby has provided him, expressing a particular fondness for E.M. Forster (specifically *Maurice*, Forster's posthumously published novel about a gay love story). The language in this scene does much to highlight the power that Morgan holds to lessen feelings of queer displacement:

LEO: While the world Forster wrote about was foreign to Leo, he understood his characters intensely. They hummed with a human truth—Leo felt their vibrations.

YOUNG MAN 8: It was when he opened *Maurice* that Leo understood the reason for his bond with Forster.

LEO: Like the character of Maurice Hall, Leo had spent his life feeling lonely and unloved—

YOUNG MAN 3: —damaged beyond redemption.

YOUNG MAN 2: Leo understood the simple yet powerful connection of a gay man in the early twentieth century speaking directly to a young gay man at the start of the twenty-first.

LEO: It was as if Forster was reaching a hand out to Leo to say:

YOUNG MAN 3: 'I have felt as you feel. You are not alone. I will be with you always.'¹⁶⁵

This last line suggests that Morgan represents both the queerness that has come before and the queerness that has yet to come. The comfort that he offers to Leo is not bound to the

164. I use the phrase "one may as well" as a reference to the first sentence of *Howards End*, which is also referenced in the prologue of *The Inheritance*.

165. Lopez, *The Inheritance*, 201.

past, present, or future. Therefore, connecting with Morgan becomes an attempt for Leo to extend himself across time. Morgan simultaneously offers him the cultural knowledge and familiarity that I have equated with shared history, as well as the affirmation and promise of futurity that I relate to kinship bonds.

These interactions represent the ultimate value in queer community, particularly as it relates to both kinship and history: affirmation without prescription. Borrowing a term from queer theory scholar Elizabeth Freeman, this affirmation may be described as “renewal.” Unlike recognition, which Freeman defines as being predicated on bodies being recognizable under a preestablished set of criteria (such as bodies being recognizable as queer), renewal is described as a process which “in responding to needs, [makes] no claims about their bearer. It is bodily and temporal, insofar as it simply makes people more possible; renewal grants a future, but one with an uninevitable form.”¹⁶⁶ Renewal is given freely, without expectations, and makes no demands that the recipient reproduce certain ideals. It is open-ended, unrestricted, and full of potential.

Renewal and recognition work hand-in-hand in this scene. Just as recognition relies on the past as a history of accumulated signs, renewal opens up the future to new possibilities emerging from that past. Morgan makes visible the objects that are behind us, the conditions for our arrivals, the history that we have inherited, without dictating how that inheritance must be taken up. After all, we may inherit a shared queer past, but that is not our only inheritance. Nor is the inheritance of our heterosexual families the only line that may push against our queer history. Each of us comes into the world under different

166. Elizabeth Freeman, “Queer Belongings: Kinship Theory and Queer Theory,” in *A Companion to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Studies*, eds. George E. Haggerty and Molly McGarry. (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2008), pp. 295–314, 299.

circumstances, orienting ourselves within different spaces, and therefore are heirs to multiple histories. Before walking away from Leo on the beach, Morgan brings all of these elements into focus by gifting a portion of his own past to Leo, while honoring the history that is unique to him, positioning both as equal parts of Leo's story:

LEO: Will my story have a happy ending?

MORGAN: It is only in telling our stories, in living our lives, that we can answer that question. You have already lived quite a lifetime in your nineteen years. Far more than I had when I was your age. I think you are a remarkable person. And I suspect there is the smallest part of you that thinks so too. Perhaps you have more to say than you know.

Silence for a moment.

Time for you to continue your story.¹⁶⁷

Morgan acts as an embodiment of the shared history that the play galvanizes us to reach for, and yet he honors the individual histories that are only ours. He affirms Leo's experience as similar to his own, while preserving Leo's autonomy over his own future. This flexibility is essential to the breaking of the heterosexual construction of time that demands that inherited objects and lines be continued in a straight-forward lineage. Therefore, a queer home combines these accumulated, hybrid histories with the potentiality to create new lines that do not perfectly reproduce the past.

While it is clear from reviews and reactions of other queer audience members that few reacted to this scene as strongly as I did or felt its utopian energies on their bodies, the multiple other scenes to which audiences did respond with similar intensity speaks to the utopian affects that permeate *The Inheritance*. The community discussion and renewed sense of kinship that it has inspired speaks to the intense acts of reaching that it performs.

167. Lopez, *The Inheritance*, 222.

Theatre critic Ben Brantley puts it well in his review for *The New York Times*: “It yearns, with an almost physical intensity, to realize the much-quoted dictum from “Howards End”:
“Only connect.””¹⁶⁸ The play’s overt concern with connection and community charge the audience with a sense of potential energy. This energy is innately active because it imbricates the viewer’s body in the collective act of reaching for a queer world that is more hopeful, more connected, and less scattered than the one in which we live.

The Inheritance enacts a large scale communal remembering, bringing queer worlds and queer forms of kinship and connection into the audience’s view. In doing so, it brings our attention to what we lack, shining a light on feelings of displacement and empowering us to reach beyond them and establish a queer home. It also queers the very concept of a home, opening up possibilities for a multitude of relations oriented around a common history and struggle. The play is certainly not a bridge for all displaced queer subjects; it has been critiqued for privileging mainly white, middle-class, conventionally attractive, cisgender queer men. However, its strategies of employing multiple models of queer kinship, historicizing queer experiences, queering concepts of time and home, and using performative techniques such as repetition, testimony, and accumulations of bodies to intensify queer affects all provide constructive examples of how queer narratives may interact with feelings of queer displacement and enact new possibilities for connection.

Conclusion

I end with this chapter on queer displacement because I feel that this concept and this play best encapsulate what is most sought after by queer audiences seeking

168. Brantley, *The New York Times*.

representation. To “yearn,” as Brantley puts it, is to reach; to reach is to acknowledge lack; to lack connection is a core aspect of queer displacement. *The Inheritance* then begs the question of what we seek to gain from connecting. To want to be close to specific bodies is both to crave the reproduction of a quality that you perceive as having in common with them and to crave a characteristic that they have which you do not. That shared quality may be something that is incomplete in you or something that is threatened that the other will help to stabilize. For queer viewers, this quality might be the sense that we are not alone, that there are others like us sharing similar stories to ours, that when we lose our way there will be a line to follow that will lead us back to safety.

Conclusion

This thesis works to offer only a broad framework for how emotion and affect studies may be applied to the study of queer representation. I acknowledge that to provide a comprehensive archive of queer feelings, if such a thing would even be possible, would require multiple volumes of extensive study. However, it is my hope that by beginning this work with examinations of hunger, rage, loneliness, and displacement, this thesis may encourage a shift towards analyzing queer representation in narratives through a lens of queer emotion. Furthermore, it has been my intention to ground this work in a theory that privileges the feeling of queer potential.

The potential of queer bodies is constantly being circumscribed and limited by the often overwhelming affective force of heteronormativity. We are taught that our way of interacting with other bodies is a source of shame. We are coerced into forming attachments to the objects and ideals that oppress us. We are made to feel lonely, desperate, and lost. When we watch stories about ourselves, however, we enter a space where we can imagine possibilities for how we might feel differently. In imagining such possibilities, we may even begin to feel differently. This work should be the objective of queer representation: to make queerness and queer people feel more possible by opening up space for us to feel more than what heteronormativity allows.

Each of the emotions that I have covered in these chapters deals with what happens when this potential is limited, and how queer narratives can work to release it. I hold that this feeling of potentiality is something that many of us already want, and perhaps even something that we are already aware that we lack. We can see this awareness and desire in

the operations of slash shipping, in which feelings of queer hunger give way to utopian imaginings. BBC's *Merlin* is a strong example of these imaginings, demonstrating how tension, ambiguity, and futurity may energize queer spectators by offering us the feeling of potentiality that heteronormative society attempts to deny us. However, *Merlin* also shows us how painful it can feel for queer individuals when that feeling of potentiality goes away.

Both John Cameron Mitchell and Stephen Trask's *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* and Joshua Harmon's *Significant Other* show us how this potential may be evoked through the activation of negative emotions, namely rage and loneliness. Performances of rage utilize the painful and negative feelings of the spectator to produce drastic orientational shifts that challenge heteronormative attachments. Performances of loneliness, on the other hand, are capable of undoing potentially damaging assumptions about what it means to be lonely by putting queer audiences in conversation with our own loneliness. Both rage and loneliness, however, have the ability to challenge heteronormative orientations that restrict our potentiality and compel us to invest in heterosexuality, if not as a practice, then as an ideal.

Finally, I argue that representations of queer collectivities can work to challenge feelings of queer displacement by creating space for the possibility of new queer connections. Matthew Lopez's *The Inheritance*, a play that is particularly concerned with both queer community and queer history, works to make these connections possible by dramatizing moments of queer connection that inspire queer audience members to connect with the queers in our own lives. Therefore, the play establishes the possibility for a queer sense of home that is rooted in shared emotional experiences and a mutual commitment to queerness as an ideal.

Before concluding, I wish to address how this work may apply to queer spectators who inhabit different subject positions than I do. This work admittedly does not explore how racial, economic, or gender-specific axes of oppression intersect with and alter the experience of queer spectating. My hope instead is to provide a basis for where that work might begin. The concept of lines of inheritance would likely play a major role in further analysis; the more conflicting inheritances one has, the more one must negotiate their identity when inhabiting any space. For example, racialized queer epistemologies, more so than white queer epistemologies like the one that I utilize, involve a level of materiality, as the outward appearance of the body becomes one of the characteristics that is targeted in attempts to limit the potentiality of racialized queer bodies. Therefore, performances that center queer identities of color would need to address this materiality. I suspect that such performances would also rely more heavily on a sense of shared history and cultural knowledge, given that racial communities are inherently diasporic and bound together by the same acts of shared remembering that I describe in Chapter 4. Queer performances of color may then rely on bringing this shared history into conversation with the shared history and kinship relationships of queer individuals. To bring this idea back to the arguments made in my chapters, this intermingling of histories may be done in service of creating utopian imaginings forged from these ephemeral traces of the past, activating a sense of racialized queer rage that is specific to experiences of inter- and intragroup exclusion, mitigating the loneliness felt by isolated individuals who do not fit into either group, or cohering the larger community.

To take a broader view on the possible implications of this work, however, it is my belief that the theories I have suggested regarding queer spectatorship may be adapted for

use by any marginalized groups by zeroing in on the idea of potential energy and the ways in which it is limited. The purpose of queer spectating, as I have articulated it, is to release potentiality through the activation of subversive emotions. Therefore, the activation of emotions that either generate utopian imaginings, repudiate systems of power, diminish harmful ideologies, or encourage individual connection may become politically activating for any identity group seeking to explore the productive potential of narratives. Importantly, however, I also emphasize the importance of queer connections that are non-prescriptive, that make no demands or assumptions about the individual.

This openness, this lack of prescription, is a chief axiom that I maintain throughout this work. For queer emotions to truly open up the potential of queer bodies, they must allow for the perception of a queer future, but one that has not yet taken shape. Queer emotions and queer narratives must not create a map of the future, but generate, on the level of the body, an affective understanding that there will be a future. As José Esteban Muñoz states, queerness is not yet here, nor can it ever be. In order for queerness to have any affective force at all, it must always remain “on the horizon,”¹⁶⁹ constantly reached for but never fully actualized. It must always be found in the potential, the contingent, the imagined, and the “not yet.”¹⁷⁰ The work of queer representation, then, is to make this “not yet” feel just close enough that we might begin to reach for it.

169. José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2019), 39.

170. Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 1.

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