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**A Methodology of Paradoxes:  
Investigating Authenticity in the Representation of Queerness on the  
Contemporary Stage**

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts  
of Theatre Performance & Pedagogy at Virginia Commonwealth University.

By Kendall Chase Walker, BA University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (2020),

MFA Virginia Commonwealth University, (2023)

Thesis Chair: Dr. Jesse Njus, Assistant Professor of Theatre History at Virginia Commonwealth  
University; Richmond, Virginia

May, 2023

## **Acknowledgments**

I'd like to sincerely thank Adam Turck, Kasey Britt, and William Vaughn for providing their perspectives and experiences via interviews to include in this thesis. I'd also like to thank my thesis committee members, Dr. Keith Kirk, and Dr. Aaron Anderson, as well as my thesis chair, Dr. Jesse Njus, for their collective guidance and expertise throughout the writing process of this thesis.

A final thank you goes to my incredible parents, Barbra and Michael Walker, not only for always supporting my artistic and academic endeavors, but also for diligently being champions of LGBTQIA+ expression and teaching me to always walk through the world with kindness.

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**Abstract**

In my experience as a queer theatre practitioner, performer, and student, I have always had questions of ownership and authenticity when it comes to LGBTQIA+ narratives on the contemporary theatre stage. The question of: “Who is allowed to tell what story?” and the many complex ideas that this leads to, is what has inspired this thesis and my own pedagogy of intersectionality and inclusivity.

The purpose of this thesis is to investigate the relationship between authenticity and queerness on the contemporary stage in order to develop a methodology for how *all* theatre practitioners—no matter their identity—can effectively tell queer-identifying stories on stage genuinely and respectfully.

The methods of research utilized in this thesis include foundational expertise found in academic articles and journals by a variety of scholars across fields including theatre and performance studies, and testimonials from interviews conducted with cast members of a professional production of *The Inheritance*.

The key findings of this study supported my assertion of what I have chosen to call, “A Methodology of Paradoxes,” that advocates for inclusive access to queer narratives under the notion that the instability and intersectionality of queerness itself rejects the notion of a singularly correct way to express it. One primary conclusion made is that the radical and fluid nature of queerness justifies the embodiment for any identity to embrace and take part in contributing to the representation of LGBTQIA+ identities within contemporary theatre.



## **Vita**

Kendall Chase Walker was born on June 20<sup>th</sup>, 1998, in Leesburg, Virginia, and is an American citizen. She graduated from Hoggard High School in Wilmington, North Carolina in 2016. She received her Bachelor of Arts Degree in Dramatic Arts & Communications with a Concentration in Performance Studies at The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in Chapel Hill, North Carolina in 2020. She is a candidate to receive a Master of Fine Arts Degree in Theatre Performance & Pedagogy from Virginia Commonwealth University in May of 2023.

## Chapter 1

### Introduction

Theatre is, and has always been, a storytelling tool for social change. Theatre arguably exists both for the popular and for the masses, but it has also increasingly become a vehicle by and for those outside the mainstream—the marginalized, unheard, and unseen groups who oppose hegemonic and oppressive representations of themselves through their artistry. Whether it was the rising of the cabaret scene in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that challenged conventions of bourgeois society or drag and ballroom culture’s underground presence in New York City in the 1980’s that made space for those shunned by mainstream society—theatre and performance have always been a home for outsiders.

A definition of theatre that I find to be all-encompassing and very insightful for the purpose of this thesis is: *a space for living truthfully under imaginary circumstances*. This definition speaks to the ways in which an actor steps on a stage and wholeheartedly believes their circumstances and lives them out truthfully in front of an audience, because everyone who enters the theater signs the unspoken contract of existing in an imaginary world. A suspension of disbelief hangs over every head in the room, which is why theatre feels like an escape, both while watching it and performing it. For queer individuals, the theatrical sphere has developed and, as society has progressed, it has provided a safe space for authentic self-expression. Every year more and more plays, musicals, and cabarets are written, produced, and directed by and for queer people to see themselves on stage, to make their truths visible, and to tell diverse stories.

As a queer, female theatre artist and practitioner, I have had complicated questions and hesitations surrounding what narratives I can ethically take on as an actor or director. As co-

director of Matthew Lopez's landmark play *The Inheritance*, which centers entirely around the stories and experiences of gay men both contemporarily and historically via the HIV/AIDS epidemic, I was initially conflicted by the idea of attempting to spearhead the telling of the story. I was hesitant to forge an artistic hand in a story about gay men, including men who shared their stories of loss and pain to honor the legacy of the queer community that came before them. This led to my co-director, Lucian Restivo, and I to have conversations surrounding authenticity, ownership, and intention. We considered who this story was for and who needed to hear it. The conclusion we came to was that there was no group or individual that should be excluded from the thematic takeaways of the play which include intergenerational trauma, homophobia, ostracization, and contemporary queerness.

As a result of this, my own gender identification became a new voice in the room as opposed to an identity that was not welcomed at the table. I also served as the dramaturg for the production, where I provided an in-depth analysis of the themes of the play and the references made within the seven-hour play that entirely centered on the culture of New York City.

The experience of our production became about how we could invite those who exist outside the LGBTQIA+ identification to participate in this narrative and take stock in the thematic elements that Lopez writes about. In retrospect, if we had in fact placed ironclad barriers between who was allowed to contribute to telling this story and who wasn't based on their identity, the story itself would never have been told on our stage. This is what inspires my pedagogy of intersectional inclusivity and a rejection of traditional definitions of authenticity in regard to ownership of queer narratives, and what has inspired this thesis.

The purpose of this thesis is to investigate the relationship between authenticity and queerness on stage and develop a methodology for how all contemporary theatre practitioners—

no matter their identity—can effectively tell queer-identifying stories on stage genuinely and respectfully.

When I began my research, I had an initial fear that all of the questions I had would be difficult to answer because this topic of interest is so multifaceted, subjective, and unprecedented. The more questions I asked, the more questions I came up with. It seemed that falling down the rabbit hole of queerness, authenticity, ownership, visibility, reparations, and identity would never lead to discovery. Nonetheless, I keep coming back to what motivated this study, which is the urge to provide a framework for explorations of any identity (queer or not) to approach queer narratives with justifiable onus to embody them.

Theatre is predicated on the notion of actors and storytellers taking up the gauntlet of embodying another's story, often a story very different from their own, in order to share it with the world and bring people closer together. In its most ideal state storytelling helps us as a society to understand one another just a little bit more. Stories are the lifeline of sustaining culture, and queer stories must permeate the eyes and ears of as many people as possible if there is any hope for the notion of theatre for positive social change.

As the modern theatrical canon becomes more diverse and increasingly progressive, social issues surrounding identity-conscious casting come up in popular discourse. These conversations often evolve as points of contention around concepts of ownership of certain narratives. Contemporary conversations about who is allowed to tell what story are often riddled with subjective opinions on identity, making it a difficult discussion to take an objective stance on.

Authenticity, ownership, social awareness, and the ethics of storytelling swirl around the telling of queer stories on stage. Artists become activists and stories become rebellions either by choice of the artist or by evaluation of the audience. As we continue to develop theatre practices for telling stories on stage that exist outside of heteronormative ideologies, we must also develop methodologies for how to navigate the identities of the performers taking on the telling of those stories. We can no longer simply be thankful that queer actors and queer stories are on the stage or in the spotlight; we must no longer settle for a single queer character in a show to satisfy a demographic, or a queer couple as a kitschy subplot.

As theatre professionals push for more representation, we must navigate how social issues of storytellers' identities align or contrast with stories told on stage. The gap between opportunities for queer actors and opportunities for those that exist within the heteronormative binary still exists; therefore, in a day and age where identity *must* matter, and the stories of queer people *must* be told, how do we navigate who is allowed to tell what story onstage?

We must ask ourselves what it means to tell queer stories on stage *authentically* in contemporary theatre practices, and how we can develop a methodology for theatre practitioners who want to honor the stories of queer individuals but may not have the resources to cast queer actors. For example, in areas of the United States where there may not be a plethora of queer actors available for casting, should theaters in those areas be barred or shamed from putting on a show like *The Inheritance* or *Angels in America* with the actors they have available? If such barriers are placed on queer stories, exclusivity begins to enter the conversation where progress can never be made. With such a fluid and unstable identity as queerness, how are we to codify it onstage in order to dictate ownership?

As an investigation and ongoing development of methodology, this thesis is meant to expose the complex questions and contentions that have come up in modern theatrical discourse surrounding the topic of queer authenticity and ownership of narratives. From my perspective as a queer theatre artist and practitioner, I am including the objective research of scholars who analyze topics ranging from authenticity to identity politics to the queer canon, etc., so that, in combination with my own subjective experience, an intersectional approach is developed.

The aforementioned research combined with my own experience of working on *The Inheritance* in Richmond, Virginia has produced a framework that I intend for artists and facilitators to utilize to better understand the issues of authenticity and ownership that are crucial to queer narratives on stage. I use the term “queer/queerness” as an umbrella term for those individuals and narratives that exist outside of the heterosexual, heteronormative cultural and societal binary. This includes the entire scope of individuals who identify as LGBTQIA+ or exist in unstable spaces where their gender and sexual identity is not fixed, but fluid.

This thesis begins with an analysis of authenticity in relation to queerness and how identity and ownership relate to the idea of authenticity. The sections to follow the introduction include an investigation on the instability of queerness, historical context of the queer theatrical canon and popular perspectives on the debate of ownership, first-account interviews with members of our 2022 production of *The Inheritance*, and a concluding chapter that assesses how the aforementioned research can develop a methodology for performers and theatre facilitators to approach the ownership of queer narratives on stage.

To frame the introductory chapter, I utilize E. Patrick Johnson’s book *Appropriating Blackness* as a foundation for my own theory of authenticity. Unpacking the issue of authenticity is vital to the purpose of this thesis. Understanding differing concepts of authenticity of stories

and storytelling is essential to the representation of queerness on stage. How authenticity is built and maintained within groups of society is highly dependent on the perspective from which value judgments are expressed, making it quite a subjective term. This is why I draw from Johnson as a comparative because, while race is an entirely different identity to gender/sexual orientation, the ways in which he analyzes the subjectivity of value judgments applies.

Chapter Two will focus on the instability and fluidity of queer identity and the ways in which its unfixed existence is either seen or unseen, and what this means for actors taking on certain roles and stories. The fluidity of gender and sexual identity of actors is a factor that has recently come up in contemporary theatrical discourse and is a component of the taboo conversations surrounding who is allowed to tell various stories onstage. Yet, the very fluid and malleable nature of queerness contributes to why individuals can feel so freed and liberated by it. I draw on the scholarship of Joshua Gamson, Jose Esteban Munoz, and Jen Jack Giesecking, as well as the career of performance artist Taylor Mac, to analyze how the instability of queerness impacts this topic of interest.

Chapter Three will provide context of the queer canon and a historical analysis of queerness in theatre which will put this thesis into context. This chapter will highlight major cultural and social landmarks that outline how queerness in popular theatre has evolved including important plays/playwrights and social/political landmarks. For the purpose of this thesis, the historical overview will condense hundreds of years of history into a brief chapter. This chapter concludes with widely known cases where the identity of an actor misaligned with the identity of a role and is supported by several notable actors' perspectives on the matter.

Chapter Four is comprised of interviews conducted with cast members of Richmond Triangle Players' production of *The Inheritance*, which I co-directed with Lucian Restivo in the

summer of 2022 in Richmond, Virginia. I am using the experiences of these cast members because they each have a unique relationship with the show, given the role/s they portrayed did not align with their personal gender/sexual identity. This production serves as a case study for this thesis related to the issue of consciousness of identity in casting in order to serve the story of the playwright, while *also* allowing for the inclusion of those who do not personally share the identities present in the play that nonetheless actively participated in telling the story.

In the conclusion of this thesis, I will use the available aforementioned research and analysis to develop a methodology for how artists and theatre practitioners can tell queer stories that assure all identities are respected, represented, and included. My goal is a more inclusive and mappable structure that allows a larger cross-section of artists to participate in telling queer stories onstage, whether or not they lack a personal identifiable connection to the queerness of the material.

### **Defining Authenticity**

Henry Louis Gates Jr. said, “No human culture is inaccessible to someone who makes the effort to understand, to learn, to inhabit another world.”<sup>1</sup> This statement—while holistically pure in its intention—has caveats that can steer problematic. Ownership of narratives and identities on stage have legitimate consequences regarding how they are translated and by whom; there is never a queer story told on stage that does not hold the weight of social impact. Until queer identities are equitably valued in society, this will always be the case. Every queer story told on stage contributes to an overall push for radical visibility that is vitally important in contemporary society. The consequences of inauthenticity on stage can be dire.

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<sup>1</sup> Henry Louis Gates Jr., “‘Authenticity,’ or the Lesson of Little Tree,” review of *Education of Little Tree*, *New York Times*, 1991.



For example, in contemporary theatre discourse it is a known concept that embodying or portraying specific racial identities cannot be synonymous with simply putting oneself into a role or character. Race is an identity that is not as fluid and unstable as queerness, so the implications of portraying another race different from one's own has legitimate dangers of being stereotypical or offensive. A White man cannot embody and play Othello in Shakespeare's *Othello* and deliver an authentic performance, and a White man and woman cannot have the racialized impetus to personify Troy and Rose Maxon in August Wilson's *Fences*—the meaning of these stories simply would not translate, and it would be inauthentic if not overtly offensive.

The notion of authenticity in theatre is known as something all artists are expected to strive for. The idea of being *believable* on stage is what compels audiences to feel moved in some way. Authentic performances feel natural and genuine, and they make us want to lean in and listen—they are the stories and performances that stick with us in the car ride home from the theater because we feel that we have been personally moved by someone on stage who has a real connection to the material. Conversely, inauthentic performances give audiences permission to tune out because they feel the story is fake or contrived. Beyond being simply unenjoyable to watch, inauthenticity can be loaded with damaging stereotypes that negatively affect the meaning of the piece overall.

An inauthentic performance of racial identity can hold the weight of an entire marginalized community being patronized before the very eyes of an audience, who then take those ideas out into the world with them. When it comes to queerness on stage, however, authenticity is a word thrown around that excludes non-queer people from taking ownership of a narrative enough to portray it onstage, ultimately leading to a convoluted question: “If an actor playing a queer role is not queer, who are they to get on stage and tell a queer story?”

In a field where audiences *know* they are watching actors say words that are (typically) not their own, there is still so much value placed on authenticity. In the moment of watching a performance, the average audience member knows little to nothing about the real life or identity of the actor they see before them, and they also likely don't care—the purpose of the theatrical experience, unless in a cabaret or solo act setting, is the suspension of disbelief that disregards the identity of the actor to highlight the identity of the character. In these cases, it likely wouldn't make a difference to find out that an actor portraying Prior in *Angels in America* isn't actually gay in his real life. However, instances in which audiences are watching a performance where they *do* know that the actor's identity aligns with the characters' identity, it enriches the performance altogether. It makes us feel like we're watching something “real.”

When Lin-Manuel Miranda starred in *In The Heights* or *Hamilton* on Broadway, the experience of watching him lead the show feels so authentic knowing that it was all his conception and his writing. Watching a group of Black women perform Ntozake Shange's work feels authentic because we know that they have a powerful connection to the piece which discusses matters of being a Black woman. With authentic queerness, where do we draw the line? If progressive ideology points to the concept that gender and sexuality exist *not* on a spectrum but in a galaxy that stretches infinitely in every direction, how can we codify authentic queerness on stage?

I look to E. Patrick Johnson's book *Appropriating Blackness* for his thoughts on how authenticity becomes political in the case of racial identity, and what this means for the issue of identity. In order to define how I am using the term “authenticity” in this thesis in relation to queerness, I am using Johnson's discourse on how value judgment placed on authenticity in Blackness is not only socially defined but also characterized through rhetoric and performance.

Johnson discusses how we construct identity through rhetoric, stating that how we construct Blackness in American culture is “contingent upon the historical moment in which we live and our ever-shifting subject positions.”<sup>2</sup> This speaks to how cultural and social delegations create the definition of Blackness and therefore dictate the value of the performance of it.

As society changes, so do the delegations that define it. The tension that exists between “stabilizing cultural forces (tradition), and the shifting, ever-evolving aspects of culture that provide sites for social reflection, transformation, and critique [of Black American culture]” can be illuminated by performance and rhetoric.<sup>3</sup> In this vein, do rhetoric and performance hold the same position in regard to the social construction and, therefore, performance of queerness?

One may argue that this tension also exists between how queer identities have been traditionally constructed and performed, and how they continue to evolve. This is where authenticity comes into question. As a fixed notion, it negates the idea of ever-changing definitions of identity; the idea of authenticity—*not* as a fixed concept, but a fluid evolution of social construction that varies from identity to identity—is what I argue should define authentic queerness. This connection between the construction of authenticity suggests that, through performance, society defines and therefore progresses thoughts and discourse surrounding traditionally “othered” identities (such as Blackness and queerness).

Johnson cites Patricia Williams’ essay titled “The Pantomime of Race” where her thoughts on performance as a vehicle through which the Other can either be seen (or not seen), “depend upon a dynamic of display that ricochets between hypervisibility and oblivion.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> E. Patrick Johnson, “Appropriating Blackness” (Duke University Press, 2003) Pg. 3.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid Pg. 7.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid Pg. 8

Hypervisibility and voyeurism relate here as a maintenance of the status quo of the fetishization of Black culture, yet on the other hand, is the oblivion that Williams speaks of the only other answer in thinking about queerness in this way? This relationship is not as linear, because queerness has always been able to hide behind Whiteness or cisgendered presentations in order for it to be socially acceptable on stage or screen. Blackness has never had this luxury.

This begs the consideration of how authenticity and identity *within* identities becomes a site of contention—one identity does not take precedence over the other whether it is seen or unseen. Johnson postulates this concept via James Baldwin’s own homosexuality as contested by Eldridge Cleaver as “anti-Black” and “anti-male,”<sup>5</sup> suggesting that the authenticity of his own Blackness was not valid due to the queer aspect of his identity. This means that authenticity is then subjective to the one doing the evaluating, meaning that there is no standard of authentic identity—there is merely intention. It is impossible for one identity to take a back seat to another, therefore, what Williams describes as a sense of split identity assumes the impossible burden of placing value judgment on authenticity.

Appropriation within cultural identity is a notion that Johnson describes as holding rhetoric that limits the parameters of authenticity—“when blackness is appropriated to the exclusion of others, identity becomes political.”<sup>6</sup> This politicization of identity is as applicable to Blackness as it is to queerness, particularly in forms of visibility and representation on stage. Where authenticity ends and appropriation begins can be a considerably thin margin, and in regard to queerness as a less fixed identity than race, this margin becomes impossibly thin.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid Pg. 4.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid Pg. 3.

In his discussion of how White Americans also construct Blackness, he cites German anthropologist Regina Bendix, who states, “The notion of [Black] authenticity implies the existence of its opposite, the fake, and this dichotomous construct is at the heart of what makes authenticity problematic.”<sup>7</sup> He notes a key difference here between how White Americans *appropriate* Blackness versus how they *construct* it. The former has problematic implications that suggest a social usurpation of ethnicity and art that fetishizes Black culture, while the latter indicates a social construction of Blackness that from both White and Black Americans is defined.

Johnson also exemplifies the dichotomous difference between the two through the use of colloquial language—particularly among youth who adopt certain vernacular that defines Whiteness and Blackness. The commodification of Blackness through language use in cases of either “the ‘white-talking’ black and the ‘black-talking’ white” calls into question the individual’s own authenticity based on the “symbolic relationship between skin color and the performance of culturally inscribed language that refers to ‘essential’ whiteness or blackness.”<sup>8</sup>

Johnson also notes that while the co-mingling of humans is a necessary aspect of syncretism, and there are legitimacies of the colonized using the colonizer’s culture as an act of resistance, this does not exclude the way that Black Americans have been and to certain degrees still exist on the colonized side of subjugation. He suggests ultimately that this “cross-cultural appropriation” can be the grounds on which to articulate new theories of knowledge regarding the Other and the dominant culture.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid Pg. 3.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid Pg. 5.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid Pg. 6

If, as Johnson suggests, White Americans also construct Blackness to a certain degree, can this be applied to queerness wherein heteronormative individuals also construct queerness? Do non-LGBTQIA+ identifying people also construct the social ideology of queerness, and therefore the value of it? This is where the definitive lines of identity become murky—because queerness as an identity is far more fluid and unstable than that of Blackness. When straight people essentialize queerness for either personal gain or performative public appeal, they are still able to maintain their straightness as the master trope of identity.

Regarding the aforementioned analysis of authenticity through Johnson's definitions, the way that I will be using this term refers not to the actors themselves, but to the quality of the facilitation of the content being expressed. My understanding of authenticity regards the relationship of ownership and identity as contestable, because when the latter become entangled narratives get lost in identity politics. Instead, I assert a definition of authenticity that characterizes the *intention* of making the identities in question accessible to *all* who actively and respectfully want to engage with it. The question then becomes how to codify intention, which is such an unfixed and subjective concept.

Codifying intention can and should possess a case-by-case subjectivity—given the vast diversity of queer stories—because mainstream queer stories are still so widely inimitable across the board. Each distinct story must be looked at through a lens that is entirely unique to the project itself and the ways in which it is displaying, supporting, or analyzing queerness.

Returning to the quote of Henry Louis Gates Jr., when it comes to queerness on stage and queer narratives that now more than ever must become part of the mainstream, a progressive society cannot afford to exclude those who want to participate in meaningful social change from the world that queerness encapsulates. We cannot expect different groups of collective identities

to see common ground and share meaning that will incite inclusivity and collaboration if we stamp our stories as inaccessible to them or shame them out of participation.

My understanding of authenticity for the purpose of this thesis draws from Johnson's analysis of how authenticity links to ownership. It is my assertion that the question of authenticity within queerness on stage is not and cannot be a stable relationship, and therefore cannot be predicated as a reasonable exclusionary practice that justifies who is allowed to take ownership of certain queer narratives. If the concept of authenticity operates on an understanding of its foil, the fake, then in relation to queerness the definition of authenticity simply does not hold up. As an unstable, fluid, and intersectional identity, queerness cannot operate on the understanding of a fixed definition of itself that incites the existence of its opposite; therefore, the notion of a required authentic relationship between actor and queer material is an unjust and somewhat deceptive practice of ownership.

The next chapter will expand on this idea through an exploration of queerness as a fluid yet unstable identity.

## Chapter 2

### The Instability of Queerness: Visibility and Fluidity

As detailed in the previous chapter, contemporary discourse surrounding who should be allowed to tell what story has shifted from an issue of visibility to an issue of authenticity. Visibility has always been crucial for any oppressed or marginalized group—seeing the stories of those who have been othered from heteronormative mainstream culture onstage has progressed society in ways that no other field can. From Shakespeare’s queer coded works such as *As You Like It* or *Merry Wives of Windsor* to Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America*, queer visibility in theatre has come a long way and still has a long way to go. The shift from visibility to authenticity may be noted to coincide with a boom of queer stories in theatre that emerged in the 1980’s-2000’s following social responses to the HIV/AIDS crisis.

Queer playwrights and activists took to the stage as a form of activism and radical visibility after being unseen and unheard by American society. Stories like Larry Kramer’s *The Normal Heart* (1985), Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America* (1991), Jonathon Larson’s, *Rent* (1994), Moises Kaufman’s *The Laramie Project* (2000), and many others emerged during a time when queer stories needed to be and demanded to be seen and heard.

In the 1980’s-1990’s in America, what mattered more than who was saying the lines or singing the songs was that these stories were seen by as many people as possible in order to break widely associated stigmas against the queer community. Mainstream society and the systems of government in charge for the most part refused to acknowledge HIV/AIDS, so putting true stories or stories inspired by real events such as those in the aforementioned plays were more than acts of protest, they were refusals to being ignored. As time went on and these stories were accepted and championed by the masses, in conjunction with radical activism that led to the



start of political representation of the LGBTQIA+ community, ideologies began to shift and real progress, however late and minute it was, was made.

This chapter focuses on how the instability of queerness creates challenges in the ownership of narratives. There are as many definitions of queerness as there are queer people in the world. The notion of the “gender galaxy” in which identity expands three-dimensionally in all directions, in opposition to the two-dimensional idea of the spectrum of the gender binary, emerged from Patricia Hill Collins’ coining of the concept “matrix of domination,” in her book *Black Feminist Thought*.<sup>10</sup> Her approach offers an analysis of power that shapes human action, in which she breaks down different domains of power that serve the purpose of maintaining the status quo. Her intersectional ideology of power in relation to identity has led to an overarching idea that gender and sexuality are such fluid identities that they do not align to one side or another, but rather branch out in all directions.

One’s own identity makeup—race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, etc.—all impact one another in an intersectional way in terms of power relations and oppression. For example, a queer, black, transgender woman’s identity does not and cannot exist in a vacuum because one aspect does not outweigh another, and each holds its own implications for how she will be treated in society and what advantages or disadvantages she therefore has in the world. The average cisgender White male’s legitimate societal privilege exists because of that specific amalgamation of identities, not simply because he is *just* White or *just* male.

In a society where allowances and barriers have been largely built upon human categorization, queerness poses a unique challenge in collective identity and social mobility. Thus, popular discourse surrounding proper pronoun use and gender identification has become a

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<sup>10</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, “Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment,” (Routledge, 1990). Pg 3.

point of contention for some (typically, those who operate within the heteronormative mainstream), and a point of liberty and autonomy for others (those whose identity is supported and championed by the freedom of fluidity).

These are fairly new concepts in the scope of humanity; therefore, taking them on in theatrical modes has posed new and unique challenges. Through the scholarship of Joshua Gamson, Jose Esteban Munoz, and Jen Jack Giesecking, this chapter seeks to analyze instability in a way that can illuminate the queer experience so that those who do not align within it can engage with it in a meaningful way in theatrical practice.

I look to American scholar Joshua Gamson's thoughts on the instability of queerness in his essay on identity titled "Must Identity Movements Self-Destruct? A Queer Dilemma\*" to postulate how the fluidity of gender/sexual identity can lead to problematic notions of authenticity and ownership in theatrical storytelling. Gamson's article revolves around the social and political sphere where he argues that the challenge of queer theory exists in its outright rejection of sex and gender boundaries and categories.

He also argues that fixed identity categories "are both the basis for oppression and the basis for political power."<sup>11</sup> The gay/straight and man/woman binaries are where the basis of historical oppression exists; therefore, fluid experiences of identity that queerness and gender nonconformity articulate become modes of reclaiming power and social control. It is the very disruption and rejection of the gender and sexual binaries that are key to liberation and freedom of expression.

To the notion of identity-based social and political movements such as women's rights and gay rights, Gamson argues that "[queerness] calls for a more developed theory of collective

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<sup>11</sup> Joshua Gamson, "Must Identity Movements Self-Destruct? A Queer Dilemma\*" (*Social Problems*, Vol. 42 No. 3, 1995) Pg 391.

identity formation and its relationship to both institutions and meanings, an understanding that includes the impulse to take apart that identity from within;” furthermore, the use of the term “collective identity” here is defined as “a continual process of re-composition rather than a given; a dynamic, emergent aspect of collective action.”<sup>12</sup> This definition speaks to the ever-changing fluidity of queerness that relates back to the idea of the gender galaxy. Queerness, as Gamson articulates, socially and politically strives “to blur and deconstruct group categories, and to keep them forever unstable. It is that tendency that poses a significant new push to social movement analysis.”<sup>13</sup>

This instability takes on a different meaning in the perspective of Jose Esteban Munoz, whose book *Disidentifications* focuses on how queerness as an identity is about more than simply aligning oneself with culture or positioning oneself against it. His process of disidentification deals with how those who exist outside the heteronormative mainstream negotiate majority culture not by aligning themselves with or against exclusionary practices, but by transforming these practices for their own cultural purposes. His thoughts on “minority performance, survival, and activism attempt to navigate a queer world that works on, with, and against dominant ideology.”<sup>14</sup>

His definition of disidentification is important in my analysis because he discusses the fragmentary nature of identity that, within the realm of queerness, speaks to instability in a way that does not diminish the aspects of majority culture that can work within queerness and vice versa. If queerness attempts to dismantle categorization in order to not limit its own definition, it must negotiate its own instability in order to establish power.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid Pg 391.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid Pg 391.

<sup>14</sup> Jose Munoz, “Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics” (University of Minnesota Press, 1999) Pg 11.

Critical queer feminist and scholar Jen Jack Giesecking introduces the term “in/stability” in his essay on his experience as a researcher in the Lesbian Herstory Archives (LHA), which is an archive and community center that preserves lesbian history and houses the world’s largest number of materials by and about lesbians. His use of the term “in/stability” draws from a definition of stability as “resistance to change, constancy, and dependability,” and instability as “changeability, inconstancy, and unreliability,” and he indicates a usefulness of the former collective term that “illuminates a turn in queer analyses by examining and sitting in queer struggles rather than succumbing to binarial mores.”<sup>15</sup> The LHA operates within its own in/stability in order to create a “radically inclusive and useful space of growth and difference;”<sup>16</sup> the use of the phrase “radically inclusive” speaks to the nature of my own theory of authenticity which denotes a crucial need to dismantle exclusionary practices.

Indeed, the scholarship of Giesecking and Munoz support the notion that queer identities are fluid and ever-changing, meaning that the binary categories that support exclusion from queerness are considerable misrepresentations that contribute to an illusion of categorization. Gamson cites Judith Butler, whose thoughts on identity politics in her book *Gender Trouble*, support the argument that “butch and femme [put the] very notion of an original or natural identity into question.”<sup>17</sup> In Butler’s argument lies her postulation that gender is performative—“an act that constitutes identity by repeated construction, not a put-on but a constitutive condition of existence without which we would not be able to think, to live, to make sense at all.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Jen Jack Giesecking, “Useful In/stability: the Dialectical Production of the Social and Spatial Lesbian Herstory Archives,” (*Queering Archives*, Intimate Tracing issue, 2015), Pg 2.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid Pg 3.

<sup>17</sup> Judith Butler, “Gender Trouble,” (Routledge, 1990) Pg 123.

<sup>18</sup> Lisa Disch, “Review: Judith Butler and the Politics of the Performative” (*Political Theory*, Vol. 27 No. 4, 1999) Pg 550.

The idea of gender and sexuality being a constantly negotiated identity reaffirms my theory of authenticity that rejects a fixed existence and supports an ever-changing model of identity navigation. Butler's thoughts on the performativity of gender and sexuality link back to Gamson's thoughts on visibility and the specific visibility of ambiguity that queerness and transness indicates. He includes transgender identity separate from queerness in order to specify his thoughts on how the visual presence of gender ambiguity subverts the notion of a fixed binary of gender.

Visibility, in this way, becomes more than a locus of power but a potential site of subversion. Gamson's thoughts on the radical visibility of transgendered individuals and bisexuals goes beyond an expansion of identity and symbolizes more a subversion of it; he states, "The overarching strategy of cultural deconstruction, the attack on the idea of the normal, does little to touch the institutions that make embracing normality (or building a collective around inverted abnormality) both sensible and dangerous."<sup>19</sup> Instability and visibility seem to converge here in the notion that subversion of cultural power, rather than a shift in cultural power, can sometimes be the ultimate goal.

The visibility of gender ambiguity not only rejects the concept of fixed gender binaries, but also subverts the idea of those binaries as identity-building; in fact, he states that identity production is, "purchased at the price of hierarchy, normalization, and exclusion."<sup>20</sup> The subversion of fixed sexual orientations and gender binaries exist in the radical visibility of gender ambiguity, which can be synonymous with the word *fluidity* as it implies the same kind of un-fixedness.

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<sup>19</sup> Joshua Gamson, "Must Identity Movements Self-Destruct? A Queer Dilemma\*" (*Social Problems*, Vol. 42 No. 3, 1995) Pg 399.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid Pg 400.

When it comes to queerness, which is something that can't always be immediately *seen* as an immediate trigger of identity, how do we define authenticity? The idea of being able to “see” someone’s gender or sexuality, onstage or in everyday life, incites further questions of identity expression and the modes in which construction of identity is enacted. Visual presentation, how one literally adorns oneself in any sort of physically identifiable manner, is absolutely a factor in building identity and can even reaffirm gender and sexual identity in circumstances of gender nonconformity.

In contemporary society, “judging a book by its cover” is generally frowned upon, yet it is at the core of human nature to take unconscious notes on what one is seeing before them, make a judgment call informed by experiences, and act accordingly. When it comes to determining what pronouns to use for any given person in daily life, one should certainly not assume one way or another if what is being presented to them is overtly ambiguous (the lines become blurry here as the concept of ambiguity is entirely subjective; for the sake of this argument, I use the term “ambiguous” to characterize a rejection of traditionally heteronormative visual presentations of gender/sexuality).

There are instances, however, where someone may desire that people take their physical appearance at face value if it reaffirms their gender transitioning. This is why it can and should become normal practice to include one’s pronouns when introducing their name to new people—it takes any and all assumption out of the picture.

For the characters of a theatrical production, the idea of being seen in a way that denotes who that character is below the surface is essential to the translation of important information to an audience. Whether the visual presentation of a character indicates certainties or ambiguities of gender/sexuality, being seen relies upon the predispositions of the audience that help to construct

the character they see before them on a deeper and more meaningful level. For example, a queer character stimulates an impression through their costuming, their hair and makeup, the physical embodiment/quality of movement of the character, etc., none of which has to do with the identity of the actor or where they may be at in their own gender/sexual journey.

Queer theory suggests that queerness doesn't *look* like one particular thing and can inhabit an unlimited amount of visualities; it relies upon the notion that it *can* look like anything because it is inclusive of any and all expressions of identity that are physical and seeable. If this is true, in embodying queerness onstage the line between putting on a costume and putting on queerness as an identity becomes blurry. Stepping into the queerness of a role is not regarded the same as stepping into the occupation or emotional mindset of a character, it is fundamentally a part of their identity that defines them. Therefore, in the vein of theatrical representation of queerness, what does this all mean for queer or non-queer actors who recognize their own potentiality for fluid identification, or for queer stories that support this rejection of categorical definition?

If queerness is a refutation of traditional gender/sexuality boundaries that embraces willful ambiguity and inclusivity, why is there problematic discourse surrounding ownership of queer narratives on the stage? There are plenty of famous instances in which a cisgender and heterosexual actor has embodied a queer character and it has reinforced damaging stereotypes, yet also examples of where it has been done successfully and contributed to a genuine and positive representation. If queerness is in fact unstable and fluid, even the average cisgender heterosexual individual has every right to negotiate their own gender and sexual identity at any given time.

Referring back to Butler's notion that gender identity is not simply "put-on," but rather a fundamental negotiation that is not fixed or permanent, the barriers placed on heterosexual performers taking on queer roles/narratives denies those performers the freedom to engage in the fluidity of queerness itself. This kind of exclusionary mode of thought indicates the very boundaries that queerness has worked to dismantle. This begs the counterargument that there are in fact performers who may superficially or artificially use this to their advantage without taking the onus to understand that the queer identities represented in a theatrical text hold weight and value in society that go beyond the concept of "stepping into a character."

The social and political negotiation of this exists both in the performer themselves and also the facilitator of the content (director, casting director, etc). While it is unrealistic (and illegal according to SAG-AFTRA's Equity & Inclusion law) to demand that all seemingly heteronormative performers receive a thorough identity exam upon auditioning for a role, in the cases of theatrical content that includes queer identities and embraces queerness as a fluidly unstable identity, there is absolutely a need for dialogues between actor and facilitator that consider how the identities present in the room will impact the overall meaning of the piece itself.

Furthermore, queerness does not always exclusively indicate sexual preference, gender identification, or even romantic interests—queerness for some, who may for example identify as asexual or agender, can indicate the way one looks at the world, how they navigate it, who they surround themselves with, and fields of interest that they occupy. Queerness exists even in heteronormative individuals who identify with the fluidity and freedom that it advocates for; beyond being an ally to the queer community, there are plenty of cases where a heterosexual individual embraces queerness in many different avenues and wholly understands the intricacies



of it without ever engaging in sexually queer acts or identifying their gender as queer. This is another instance where the attempt to categorize within queerness is not sustainable.

Theatre and performance artist Taylor Mac takes the rejection of the binary and of identity categorization altogether a step further, offering insights to inclusion that operate under the notion that, “identity politics are always a subplot [...] because I want to change my identity! I always say that my gender is performer, and performing gender.”<sup>21</sup> Mac’s theatrical experiences rely on inclusivity and collective meaning-making through many different methods from audience participation to innovative uses of space that make audiences feel as though they are an integral part of the theatrical event.

Mac has been known for artistic eccentricity and breaking barriers between performance, activism, and pure self-expression. As seen on judy’s website, Mac says, “My pronoun is judy (only capitalized when at the start of a sentence, like a normal pronoun). A few people have claimed I use this pronoun as a joke. They are uninformed. It’s not a joke, which doesn’t mean it’s not funny. It’s a personalized pronoun for someone whose gender (professionally and personally) is constantly changing.”<sup>22</sup> The origins of the use of judy as a pronoun assumably relate to the iconic queerness of Judy Garland, who became a queer icon to the gay community in the 1950’s.

Judy Garland, who was assumed as heterosexual and cisgender for her life, is one of many individuals of the same orientation who became queer icons while they themselves were not queer in their own lives. Other historic and contemporary examples of the latter are celebrities like Cher, Barbra Streisand, Pink, and Beyoncé. The iconography of these people tends to be linked to their relationship to the queer community, the element of camp in their

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<sup>21</sup> Taylor Mac, “Taylor Mac: Bio,” [Taylormac.org](http://Taylormac.org), 202, [Home \(taylormac.org\)](http://Home(taylormac.org))

<sup>22</sup> Taylor Mac, “Taylor Mac: Bio,” [Taylormac.org](http://Taylormac.org), 202, [Home \(taylormac.org\)](http://Home(taylormac.org))

work, and the inspiration they provide to LGBTQIA+ communities. Judy Garland is one of many examples of how a non-queer icon becomes a symbol adopted by the queer community as a way to take mainstream figures and integrate them into queer culture as a strategy of social empowerment.

Taylor Mac's use of *judy* as a pronoun is indeed an example of the fluidity of queerness and a rejection of categorization that doesn't trivialize attention to pronouns, but seemingly takes the pressure off of strict adherence to the pronouns available to any individual. Mac's acknowledgment of the fact that *judy*'s pronoun assertion is not a joke but can still be funny allows for conversations to be opened up that do not penalize those who may not have the foundation to understand why *judy* rejects the standard pronouns available to us in society. What *judy* has done through this particular stance is make a profound statement on diversity and individuality that queerness is meant to champion.

What the scholarship of Gamson, Giesekeing, Munoz, Butler, and Mac all assert is the unique quality of queerness as a collective identity defined by its unfixed malleable nature. This rejection of categorization indicates a problematic relationship between ownership and authenticity; if there is no authentic way to be queer due to queerness' core principle of fluidity, then the basis of ownership of queer narratives onstage cannot be exclusive.

If we prohibit those who at any moment identify outside of the LGBTQIA+ community, then we refute the basic understanding of queerness that advocates for a constantly shifting definition. However complicated the relationship between authentic queerness and ownership of queer narratives may be, it's important to recognize that it is the inherently non-exclusive fluidity of queerness that must be upheld in order for the representation of queerness to be justified.

## Chapter 3

### Historical Overview of Queerness in Theatre

The purpose of this chapters' historical analysis of queerness in theatre is meant to provide a framework for this thesis that puts into context the progression of representation of queer identities in popular theatre. Queerness, queer characters, and queer stories have existed in theatrical works since the first of them were written. From the queer-coded works of William Shakespeare to the stock characters of Commedia dell'arte to the medieval British tradition of Panto, and so on, queerness has always been, either overtly or in a coded manner, intertwined within theatre through characters and stories.

Because most American theatrical tradition comes from British theatre origins, this historical overview will in part draw from such history. As it is a vast and complex history, attempting to condense the entirety of queerness in theatre over the past 500 years into this chapter will not do many playwrights and theatrical works proper justice. The goal in this chapter is to highlight major cultural landmarks that have brought us to where we are today regarding queerness' representation within the mainstream theatrical sphere.

### The Western Queer Canon

To analyze historical queerness in theatre, recognizing the presence and importance of the queer canon is key in understanding the trajectory of representation. In order to look at the queer canon within Western theatre, one must first acknowledge the power and presence of the Western canon that the queer canon works within/against. I include Matthew Moore's definition and description of the canon/canonicity in *Troubling Traditions: Canonicity, Theater, and*

*Performance in the US*, here because he asks key questions that challenge not only the presence of the canon but also the origins of it and the ways in which it is maintained in society:

“The canon is supposedly a corpus of texts that achieve some kind of heightened, valued, important, and universal status. But where is the authoritative list? How do we decide what belongs there? And who is “we”? Different times, places, and individuals would doubtlessly construct very different lists of plays (or not plays) based on familiarity, commercial success, artistic influence, social impact, perceived aesthetic merit, or other criteria—and they do! So, despite common references to a stable and agreed-upon list, we have to acknowledge that the referent (the canon) is ephemeral, multiple, porous, and changing. Canonicity provides a way of talking about the animating sets of ideas, affinities, values, and processes that continuously create the sense of a canon. Canonicity points to the desires that stand behind individuals and collective acts of nomination to an imagined canon.”<sup>23</sup>

As Moore points out the reality of the canon, a contrasting idealistic description of the theatrical canon would be that it is rich with diverse works and intersectional representations of identity that are valued as important. As the Western canon of theatre has been undoubtedly impacted by those who existed on the fringes of society, it is impossible to exclude the underground and unconventional groups and individuals that have built what we know today as the mainstream. The Western theatrical canon always pulls inspiration from non-mainstream or avant-garde countercultures, and once incorporated into the mainstream, they become a part of the larger canon.

It is those who championed queerness and legitimate representation of it in theatre at times in history when it was not only eccentric and risqué, but illegal and dangerous, and demanded their stories be heard that have built what we know today as the queer canon in popular theatre.

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<sup>23</sup> Matthew Moore, “Introduction: Troubling Traditions,” (*Troubling Traditions: Canonicity, Theater, and Performance in the US*, Routledge, 2021) Pg. 6.

As defined by Finn Lefevre in his chapter of the aforementioned book, the queer canon is, “unreachable, and yet always reaching. It pushes back against the boundaries of the traditional canon while pushing forward into an imagined queer future. It is in this space that a queer canon resides, in the push and pull, the tension between visibility and legibility, between desire and dissent.”<sup>24</sup> This definition speaks to the instability of queerness detailed in Chapter 2 of this thesis and asserts the queer canon as yet another example of the fluidity that queerness advocates for.

There is no historically supported definition of the canonical queer experience based on the theatrical texts of past and present, but “there’s a complex web [...] that shapes us all, and embracing the ephemeral and profound nature of this kind of sharing over static lists of texts is part of what we might call queer canonicity”<sup>25</sup> The queer canon as a concept is contested because canonicity assumes an authoritative value judgment of what should or should not influence society; conversely, the queer canon works to break down binaries that suggest such value judgments. The queer canon exists in opposition to the traditional canon. Thus, the idea of the queer canon cannot be separated from the counterculture that it creates and is created by.

Queerness is inextricably linked with counterculture due to the origins of radical queerness and performance of it onstage as an active rebellion against heteronormative hegemonic ideals. In suggesting that contemporary society’s popular or conventional theatre now contains a level of representation of queerness is meant to illustrate the progression of representation and the hopeful forward momentum of integration into the mainstream.

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<sup>24</sup> Finn Lefevre, “Chapter 12: Toward and Away: The Dramatic Tension of a Queer and Trans Canon,” (*Troubling Traditions: Canonicity, Theater, and Performance in the US*, Routledge, 2021) Pg. 175.

<sup>25</sup> Lindsey Mantoan, “Chapter 21: How Do we Queer the Canon?” (*Troubling Traditions: Canonicity, Theater, and Performance in the US*, Routledge, 2021), Pg. 309.

When queer stories and queer characters become a norm of inclusion into traditional theatre, it is possible that ownership of queerness onstage will be supported by the same justification for queer individuals who embody heteronormative stories onstage. The question then becomes, if queerness is integrated into the canon so much so that it becomes a norm, is it therefore still the queer canon? Would it have the same value? I look once again to Lefevre's thoughts on this paradox: "What was transgressive at that moment will someday, and possibly even through canonization itself, become naturalized. A queer canon today will be queer theatre history tomorrow, and a new canon—or several—will emerge. Despite this paradox, canonize we do, and probably always will."<sup>26</sup>

### **Historical Landmarks of Queerness in Theatre**

In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries, queer theatre/acts—including burlesque, circus, cabaret, dance, drag, etc.—were pushed to the underground as censorship controlled theaters under the Licensing Act of 1737 that dictated what is "legitimate theatre."<sup>27</sup> The Theatres Act of 1843, which stated that any play that sought live performance required a license of approval from the Lord Chamberlain's office, brought forth inconsistent censorship laws that prohibited any political, religious, or social content that was deemed detrimental to, "good manners, decorum or the public peace."<sup>28</sup>

The condemnation and arrest in 1895 of Oscar Wilde for the queerness of his plays as evidence of his personal life is a prime example of the public denigration by governments of anything they decided was indecent or deviant to what they legislated as acceptable artistic

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid, Pg. 176.

<sup>27</sup> Holly Adomah & Sean Brooks, "Here and Queer: A Brief History Lesson in Queer Theater," Stratford East, February 2021, [Here and Queer: A Brief History Lesson in Queer Theatre \(stratfordeast.com\)](https://stratfordeast.com/here-and-queer-a-brief-history-lesson-in-queer-theatre)

<sup>28</sup> Holly Adomah & Sean Brooks, "Here and Queer: A Brief History Lesson in Queer Theater," Stratford East, February 2021, [Here and Queer: A Brief History Lesson in Queer Theatre \(stratfordeast.com\)](https://stratfordeast.com/here-and-queer-a-brief-history-lesson-in-queer-theatre)

expression. The moral clampdown on queerness of the Georgian and Victorian era led to a thriving underground scene of queer theatre through cabarets where nightlife flourished. Because plays featuring homosexuality could only be performed in clubs, rather than in licensed theaters, in Europe throughout the 1900's cabarets and other nightlife settings that catered to queer clientele thrived. Meanwhile, anxieties grew surrounding any openly queer content that could be cause for arrest in a legitimate theater.

As the decriminalization of queerness began in 1967, queer relationships onstage were still few and far between in mainstream theatre. It wasn't until 1968 that the Theatres Act was repealed, and the governmental censorship of UK stages was abolished. Even after the decriminalization of homosexuality and the allowance of queerness in licensed theaters, the general public's desire to see queerness onstage remained confined to the fringes of society.

Shelagh Delaney's play *A Taste of Honey* was a groundbreaking production with one of the first depictions of a gay person onstage in a governmentally mandated production in 1958. Delaney was one of the first playwrights to overcome the censorial control on stage plays that openly exhibited gay characters or disclosed queer plotlines.<sup>29</sup> The queerness of the character in Delaney's play, Geoff, is understated but confirmed through lines spoken in the play, specifically in a scene where another character chastises Geoff about his sexuality. This play was one of the first instances where a gay person was portrayed onstage with sensitivity rather than humor. The role of Geoff was originated by British actor Murray Melvin, who later won the Best Actor award at Cannes in 1961 when he reprised his role in the film adaptation of the play. While highly speculated, it has never been verified if Melvin identified as queer in his personal life. It

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<sup>29</sup> Holly Adomah & Sean Brooks, "Here and Queer: A Brief History Lesson in Queer Theater," Stratford East, February 2021, [Here and Queer: A Brief History Lesson in Queer Theatre \(stratfordeast.com\)](https://stratfordeast.com/here-and-queer-a-brief-history-lesson-in-queer-theatre)

was around this time also that Joe Orton's plays, in collaboration with his lover and eventual murderer Kenneth Halliwell, were produced to mixed criticism.

The works of Delaney and Orton preceded gay activism such as the Stonewall Riots in New York City which furthered queer liberation. Shortly after the Stonewall Riots, in 1975 in London, a season of gay plays was put on by the Gay Sweatshop Theatre Company whose purpose was, "to counteract the prevailing misrepresentation in mainstream theatre of what homosexuals were like and to make heterosexuals aware of the oppression they exercise or tolerate."<sup>30</sup> They performed their first season titled "Homosexual Acts" at the Almost-Free Theater in London.

Also following the activism of the Stonewall Riots, in 1980 in the United States, Lois Weaver and Peggy Shaw were inspired by performance troupes such as Hot Peaches and Spiderwoman Theater that were featuring the stories of queer women, women of color, transgender women, etc. They premiered an 11-day international women's theatre festival under the name The Women's One World (WOW) Café. The WOW Café bills itself as "the oldest collectively run performance space for women and/or trans artists in the known universe."<sup>31</sup> Year-round, the WOW Café features performances by women and transgender people.

From the 1960's to the 1980's, there was a spike in queer content in theatre as a result of the decriminalization of homosexuality as well as the dismantling of censorship. Queer stories could now be seen by more people and could contain more politically charged messages. This boom also included an emergence of queer stories onstage that depicted the HIV/AIDS epidemic that was beginning to come to deadly fruition, including but certainly not limited to shows like

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<sup>30</sup> Alan Clark, "Gay Sweatshop: Homosexual Acts," Introduction, [Gay Sweatshop: Homosexual Acts \(sagepub.com\)](http://www.sagepub.com)

<sup>31</sup> WOW Café citation\*\*



Louise Parker Kelley's *Anti Body* (1983), Larry Kramer's *The Normal Heart* (1985), Noel Grieg's *Plague of Innocence* (1988), and Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* (1991).

In the 1980's-90's, queer stories in mainstream theatre almost entirely revolved around the HIV/AIDS crisis, or, in the case of Martin Sherman's *BENT* (1979) or Moises Kaufman's *The Laramie Project* (2000), around the tragic lives and public persecution of queer people. When these plays were in production, there was no discourse surrounding who was portraying the queer individuals depicted onstage because the importance was focused on getting the stories of these marginalized people out into the open for the world to see to inspire action.

Until the 1990's, it seemed that those who were urgently telling queer stories were doing so out of a personal stake in the stories that they were writing and performing—they were personally implicated. In the United States the only people writing queer stories for the stage *were* queer people, and it was in getting heteronormative individuals to produce and finance these productions that improved visibility.

Jonathon Larson's *Rent* (1996) was a groundbreaking musical that entered the mainstream as a rock-opera inspired by an 1896 opera entitled *La Boheme*. The musical featured the stories of young people in New York City scraping by under the shadow of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Whereas the aforementioned playwrights all identified as queer in their lifetime, Jonathon Larson did not. His sexuality has been speculated on over time and, while he kept the company of many queer people, he never came out privately or publicly as gay and was only known to have romantic relationships with women.

At the time of its conception and production, the sexuality of Larson was not contested as problematic in regard to the musical's subject matter. At the end of the day, *Rent* reached

mainstream audiences like no show featuring queer storylines had before. While Larson may not have been a bisexual woman, a gay man, or a drag queen (some of the identities he features in his musical), his experiences with queer communities in NYC inspired his empathetic perspective through characters like Maureen, Tom, and Angel. Ultimately, Larson and his musical made space in the Western theatrical canon for queer stories while not actively participating in the queer community he features in his show.

Larson's presence as a conduit of the queer stories of his musical furthered conceptions of how queer stories can be told on stage and why it matters that queer stories are pushed to the forefront. At the time of its growing popularity, there was no concern regarding the sexual orientation or gender identification of those who originated the roles of his musical because it wasn't nearly as topically important as the reality of dire situations that the musical presented. I look to this as a key example because it signifies the importance of *story* over *storyteller* and detaches personal stake of performer in presenting queer theatrical content. It also emphasizes the immense need for these queer stories to be understood by the public as real, urgent, and happening all around us.

### **Influential Perspectives**

While there is limited empirical data or studies conducted on this topic, there are a plethora of credible perspectives worth considering which support and influence my thesis and provide context to this topic.

The aforementioned production of Martin Sherman's *BENT* featured prominent actor Ian McKellen, who has been an outspoken advocate for LGBTQIA+ rights in Hollywood for decades. McKellen, who came out officially at 49 years old, takes a stance on the topic that

advocates for total separation of identity from character. In a 2022 interview with Andrea Towers of *Entertainment Weekly*, McKellen asked, “Is the argument that a straight man cannot play a gay part, and, if so, does that mean I can't play straight parts and I'm not allowed to explore the fascinating subject of heterosexuality in *Macbeth*?”<sup>32</sup>

Of those who agree with McKellen’s sentiments are Neil Patrick Harris, acclaimed stage and screen actor, and Kristen Stewart, popular film actor, who are both queer and have throughout their careers played both queer and heterosexual characters on camera and onstage. Harris echoes McKellen’s perspective and remarks his own portrayal of a straight womanizer in the TV show *How I Met Your Mother*.

Harris asserts that actors should hope to be seen as options for all kinds of different roles across sexual diversities. Stewart openly suggests a hypocrisy in demanding that all queer roles be played by queer people if she herself still envisions auditioning for heterosexual character roles.<sup>33</sup> A spotlight to this issue was put on American actor Darren Criss, who made a public claim on the issue in 2019 after winning several awards for his role as a queer man in *The Assassination of Gianni Versace*. He stated that his role in the series would be his last gay role in an attempt to “make sure I won’t be another straight boy taking a gay man’s role.”<sup>34</sup>

English screen and stage actor Chris New takes a similar yet opposite stance to Criss that exposes the converse side of this issue of queer actors being put on a symbolic reserve only for

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<sup>32</sup> Andrea Towers, “Ian McKellen doesn’t think gay roles should be reserved for gay actors: ‘We’re pretending’” [Ian McKellen doesn't think gay roles should be reserved for gay actors | EW.com](#)

<sup>33</sup> Andrea Towers, “Ian McKellen doesn’t think gay roles should be reserved for gay actors: ‘We’re pretending’” [Ian McKellen doesn't think gay roles should be reserved for gay actors | EW.com](#)

<sup>34</sup> Yohanna Desta, “Darren Criss will no longer play gay,” *Vanity Fair*, \*link is being weird here\*

queer characters. New has made claims that mention how he has felt pigeonholed by his sexuality. In an article on the topic of straight actors playing gay, he says:

“I’m known as being an out gay actor, I’m not—or, at least, I’m not *just* that. I’m an actor, yes, and in my private life I have mainly found that men attract me. I don’t see that, or any other singular aspect of my identity, as defining me or as something that I wish to trade on. In my work, I am increasingly allowed to engage in my culture only when that engagement centers on being gay. Being out has done nothing but restrict my career. In the current cultural climate, I am invited to participate only on the basis of my supposed oppression. Nothing more is required of me. I live in a cultural ghetto.”<sup>35</sup>

Criss and New both represent sides of the same coin that works to even the playing field as far as who has the proper tools to play what, and the fact that opportunity should be more equitable among all identities regarding expectations of the ability to embody a character that exists within or outside of one’s own sexuality. It seems obvious that an actor should never acquire a role solely based on their sexual identity aligning with that of the character, because this leads to issues of typecasting and negates the legitimate value of an actor’s talent, which should ultimately be what gets them the job.

American playwright Jordan Seavey, in response to Criss’ public statement and issues relating to what New gets at in his own public statement, said, “I don’t think a straight actor playing a gay role is ‘taking’ the role from a gay actor. What would be nice is if gay actors got cast more often, especially in straight roles, and if film and television featured queer characters way more prominently. Parity and equality feel most important.”<sup>36</sup> This echoes my own thoughts

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<sup>35</sup> Ryan Gilbey, “Playing it straight,” The Gaurdian, [Playing it straight: should gay roles be reserved for gay actors? | Acting | The Guardian](#)

<sup>36</sup> Ryan Gilbey, “Playing it straight,” The Gaurdian, [Playing it straight: should gay roles be reserved for gay actors? | Acting | The Guardian](#)

of this issue being a much bigger matter of representation and identity, but it is impossible to ignore the minutiae of problematic examples.

There has always been an inequity between how straight-cis-women and straight-cis-men are publicly judged for portraying queerness on stage or screen. The famous and endless examples of straight-cis-men being praised, admired, and awarded for portraying queer or transgender characters only slightly outweigh the examples of straight-cis-women in the same vein. Yet, these women are less often judged, questioned, or reprimanded for playing queer characters when they themselves are heterosexual.

The same can be said for teenagers and children, obviously, because people at these ages are still developing their sense of self and identity. To assume the gender or sexual orientation of a minor has seriously problematic implications. When young people are onstage portraying queerness, such as in Lisa Kron's musical adaptation of Alison Bechdel's novel *Fun Home*, there is less impetus for debate surrounding the authenticity of the queer character because one understands that they themselves, character or actor, are not yet solidified in their identity.

In *Fun Home* the younger version of the principal character, Alison, has a song entitled "Ring of Keys" where she sings about how she sees a butch lesbian for the first time in her life at the age of 10. The song explores themes of feeling suddenly seen and discovering an inner truth based on witnessing someone who is androgynous and living outside of the heteronormative ideals of gender presentation, and for the first time realizing that it is possible to exist and even thrive outside of the traditional binary.

One would never cause uproar over whether or not the young actor playing Small Alison is actually queer in real life, because in the play the character herself is still figuring it out, just as

people her age are in real life. There seems then to be a steep jump between minors and adults when it comes to authenticity and there is little to no grace allotted to adults who are similarly discovering their own identity later in life. If queerness is considerably predicated on its openness to anyone who wants to participate and identify within queer culture, should the same allowances be made for adults as it is for children and teenagers?

The purpose here of including contemporary actors' discourse on the matter from perspectives of queer and heterosexual individuals is to illustrate how varied the opinions on it are. There are queer and heterosexual people on either end of opinion on the subject, and, in such a gray area, it can be tenuous to take a definitive stance one way or the other. At the end of the day, performing is a job like any other in which discrimination (according to SAG-AFTRA Equity & Inclusion law) based on sexual orientation is illegal. If a queer actor insists that queer identities on screen or stage should only be allowed embodiment by those who define as LGBTQIA+, it negates their own ability to participate in heterosexual and heteronormative characters.

On the contrary, the problems of cis/straight individuals historically playing queer, and even being highly socially valued for doing so, heavily outweighs the opportunities for queer actors to play those same roles. Seavey's remarks on parity and equity are highly relevant here, but this utopian idea, while inspirational and certainly possible in our advanced society, is simply not the environment we live in.

## Historical Implications

By looking at a very broad historical overview of the visibility of queerness in theatre, I seek to highlight the importance of inclusion into the mainstream that does not undermine the radical origins of queer artistic subject matter. The history of in-theatre queerness is wrought with inequities and exclusion from the mainstream as well as a plethora of particular instances where queer stories were utilized in an advantageous manner by heteronormative individuals and groups.

In looking at the history of theatrical queerness via the lens of the canon, we are forced to reconcile the fact that the theatrical Western canon is built on texts of the past that are by nature problematic or of non-queer origin. The canon,

“suggests a future written in terms of the past, operating according to the logic of the durable text, and conscripting bodies into ongoing narratives of reality and social values. If we wish to reorient our values, we need to rethink our relationship to text and futures, move away from singularity toward multi-plicity, [sic] and decentralize authority.”<sup>37</sup>

In order to decentralize authority and establish a better relationship in utilizing queer canonical texts, moving away from singularity, the access to queer narratives cannot be exclusive.

It is undeniable that heterosexual-presenting actors have historically had a leg up over queer individuals in every industry, including the arts, film, and theatre. However, this cannot be justification for an all-determining exclusivity that denies heteronormative individuals the right to step into a queer narrative in a way that respectfully acknowledges the intersectionality of

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<sup>37</sup> Lindsey Mantoan, Matthew Moore, Angel Farr Schiller, “Introduction: Troublind Traditions,” (*Troubling Traditions: Canonicity, Theater, and Performance in the US*, Routledge, 2021) Pg. 18.

queerness; if being queer is not the entire value of every queer character's identity, it should not and cannot be the sole justification that allows an artist to embody it onstage.

The inclusion of popular debates of performers that have famously taken on these narratives within a historical analysis of this chapter is not to suggest that there is a perfect compromise of opinion between the two extreme sides of this issue. Rather, I assert that there can be a Methodology of Paradoxes that accounts for exceptions while also offering guidance for ways to justify the instability of representing queer identities onstage that allows space for any identity to artistically embody queerness.

In August Wilson's famous speech, "The Ground on Which I stand," he states,

"I believe in the American theatre. I believe in its power to inform about the human condition, I believe in its power to heal, 'to hold the mirror as'twere up to nature,' to the truths we uncover, to the truths we wrestle from uncertain and sometimes unyielding realities. All of art is a search for ways of being, of living life more fully."<sup>38</sup>

The history of American Theatre gives us something to hold the mirror to as we continue to champion the queer canon, how it is represented, through what voices and through what manner it is presented.

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<sup>38</sup> August Wilson, "The Ground on Which I Stand," (*American Theater*, 2016), <https://www.americantheatre.org/2016/06/20/the-ground-on-which-i-stand/>



## Chapter 4

### ***The Inheritance* Case Study Interviews**

*The Inheritance* was inspired by the 1992 Film *Howard's End* (based on the 1910 novel of the same name by E.M. Forster), but the play is not an adaptation of the film or book. Playwright Matthew Lopez takes the basic plot and characters and reframes them in the 21<sup>st</sup> century with gay characters to tell a story of stories. The play applies E.M. Forster's questions of social class featured in his novel to being a gay man in America to ask the essential question: *What are the responsibilities of gay men from one generation to another?* Themes of the play include contemporary queerness, intergenerational trauma, and the importance of storytelling as a means to honor queer people that have come before us and paved the way.

The purpose of conducting interviews with cast members of our production of *The Inheritance* serves as an analysis of how our production incorporated actors across a wide range of gender/sexual identities with the collective intention of telling the story of the gay men that the play revolves around. These interviews were conducted at the site of our production, the Robert B. Moss Theater in Richmond, Virginia, between February-March of 2023. Kasey Britt (played Young Man 5), William Vaughn (played E.M. Forster/Walter Poole), and Adam Turck (played Eric Glass), each described their experiences of identity throughout the process of the show and their thoughts on the idea of authenticity.

The reason I decided to interview these three actors is because they each provide different insights of how their own identity either aligned or contrasted with their character/s, and because of their unique perspectives on how the play itself and our production dealt with not only the identities of the play, but with the identities in the room.

When Lucian Restivo (co-director) and I began the process of auditioning for the show, we realized quickly that we were not going to have the luxury of selecting from a pool of strictly gay and cis-male actors that exactly align with the characters. The character breakdown of Lopez’s play is 13 gay cis-men and 1 cis-woman. The men (referred to within the play and in this thesis as “the Lads”) are explicitly described as homosexual and cisgendered either by self-identification within the text or in conversation regarding one another (regarding pronoun use and other literary examples).

Given that the theatre community of Richmond, Virginia, is relatively small compared to that of Chicago or New York or even Washington D.C., and because our own ability to budget for out-of-town equity actors was limited, we knew that we were going to have to be strategic in how we cast our show given the amount of auditionees we had to work with.

The conclusion we came to after the first day of auditions resulted from a discussion where we asked ourselves who this show was meant *for*. The answer we came to was that this show is indeed for anyone and everyone—people who lived through the HIV/AIDS epidemic, people who were born after it, queer people, straight people, and everyone in between. While we had prior knowledge due to previous theatrical relations about some actors who confirmed their gender/sexual identity, for many others we did not know for sure. When we cast our play, we ended up with a diverse range of races, ethnicities, and gender/sexual orientations. We quickly realized that this ultimately meant that the story we were telling was going to be different than perhaps Matthew Lopez intended.

Just as HIV/AIDS did not only affect gay men, we knew that the stories of these characters didn’t either. Although terms like “gender non-conforming” and “nonbinary” may not have been popularly used in the 80’s and 90’s, those people absolutely existed, and a portion of

the population were undoubtedly impacted by the epidemic. Therefore, if men, women, nonbinary individuals, and transgender people were all impacted by stories similar to those that Lopez explores in his play, then we felt the onus to allow all of those identities an opportunity to participate in telling them.

The following conversation is an excerpt from my interview with Kasey Britt (they/them/theirs) who played Young Man 5 in our production.

**KW:** “When you were cast in your role, what were your initial thoughts on how your own identity either aligned or contrasted your character?”

**KB:** “I was really confused as to whether I was playing a man, whether I was playing a gender queer person, or whether I was playing a butch lesbian, as the, like, singular representation of lesbians during the epidemic, because lesbians also got AIDS. Nobody likes to talk about it. Yeah, I actually never got clarity on what I was supposed to be playing, which I think helped, because it wasn't like I was looking for a way to compare and contrast it with my own experience. And it took me a while to sit down and be like, hey, you're, as a Lad, not necessarily playing a character. You're playing a concept. You're playing history, and so it didn't really matter. But I was like, ““Oh, okay, this is actually enriching. I'm not trying to play a gender. I'm trying to tell the story.””<sup>39</sup>

This notion of playing a concept and playing history speaks to how our team thought about the idea of playing queerness onstage, in the fact that it's never about playing the queerness itself; it is about the actor playing the *person* and the unique ways that queerness manifests within each of them. Queerness both on and off stage comes in an endless variety of embodiments; it looks different from one person to the next, and it is expressed differently from person to person.

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<sup>39</sup> Kasey Britt, Interview by author, Richmond, February 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2023.

In the context of the play which explores many varied expressions of what it means to be a gay man, the diversity in our actors' own expressions of queerness bolstered our idea of collaboration in storytelling. The Lads in *The Inheritance* constantly jump in and out of telling the story from third-party omniscience to playing out the story in real time from first-person points of view. The meta-theatricality of the play allowed the Lad ensemble to participate in telling the story and to have an outside perspective on the story itself because the Lads symbolized the real people who were victims of the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

In Lopez's play at the end of Part 1, Act 1, the ensemble rallies around the character of Eric Glass who visits the home of Walter Poole—a home that Walter had opened to sick men during the epidemic who had nowhere else to go, shunned by their families, so that they could die peacefully and on their own terms. When Eric enters the home, he's confronted by a group of people that welcome him and he knows immediately they are the ghosts of those men who have passed. Just as the fictional Lads embody the very real people who have succumbed to the disease, our actors were embodying them in the same way. It didn't matter who personally identified as male and who did not, what mattered was the space made to represent and honor the real people of all identities who lost their battles with HIV.

As a Lad, Kasey's experience of their own nonbinary gender identification against the male-gendered characters they embodied in the play represents how, while the play itself is centered around gay men, the true issues at the heart of the play impacted people of all identities; therefore, Kasey was operating within a very real set of circumstances being a gender-non-conforming individual portraying a human impacted by HIV/AIDS.

Gay men, lesbians, straight men and women, and even nonbinary people who at the time likely did not have the verbiage to describe themselves as such were all affected by the virus;

therefore, representing them onstage with our particular ensemble reflected this. The meta-theatricality of *The Inheritance* lends itself to this notion of collective embodied storytelling—the Lads did not have to actually *be* men to embody the ghosts of the men that greeted Eric, conveying the emotional impact of what it meant for Eric to be welcomed by them into Walter’s home.

Talking to Adam Turck (he/him/his) who played Eric Glass in our production, in a discussion on authenticity and acting, he stated:

**AT:** “For me, acting for years has never made me think, ‘I’m putting something *on*.’ I have felt like I am bringing something *in*, you know? The one thing I can bring into the room that no one else can is me. I’m finding myself approaching acting more and more in that way, bringing that into the room and allowing any deviation from who I am to occur organically in the process, and just trusting that. Acting to me is a very pragmatic profession. I think what we do is about chasing away the bullshit, but there is a little bit of magic in there. Eventually, through the work, what becomes real or authentic is what organically comes up through the work itself. So that’s why authenticity for me is about relaxation and allowing myself to become a conduit of my own impulses and of my own discoveries. Encouraging the input of the other artists in the room, and not being precious with any of it, *that’s* authenticity to me as an actor.”<sup>40</sup>

Adam’s analysis of his own process of acting enlightened me to my initial thoughts of acting defined by always putting something *on*. While the embodiment of people onstage cannot exist without the conduit of the real person, the actor, this doesn’t mean that one’s own identity must come into play of the character. A character exists on a page, and a person exists on the stage, and without the conduit of the actor, the person can never come to life. It is impossible to not bring oneself into a character on the base level of communication through physical

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<sup>40</sup> Adam Turck Interview by author, Richmond, March 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2023.

embodiment, but the misalignment of the gender or sexual identity of the performer does not and should not hinder that of the characters.

One can acknowledge this while also operating under the aforementioned notion of separation between personal self and character self. Adam's portrayal of Eric Glass had little to do with Adam's own heterosexuality and everything to do with his relation to how Eric Glass interacts with the world, with loss, and with love. When asked about any internal conflict of getting into character, Adam stated:

**AT:** "Do I know what it's like to be in love with a man? No, but I know what it's like being love. Do I know what it's like to have my heart broken by a man? No, but I know what it's like to have my heart broken. Like Eric Glass, I know what it's like to be disillusioned with someone who I was so in love with. What it's like to feel lost in life. I know what it's like to have people telling me that I'm good at things and yet having the worst imposter syndrome. All these things that are universally understandable, those are the things I latched onto. I was like, 'there are voices in this room who will keep me honest.' And I just trusted them with that because I can't personally understand the queerness of that specific experience, but I can understand the universality of what Eric was going through."<sup>41</sup>

Adam's trusting of the queer "voices in the room" is in reference to his willingness to allow the queer people in the rehearsal space who *do* have certain lived experiences that he lacked, to both hold him accountable and feel justified in adding their input. This kind of dialogue was encouraged because we had established a space that allowed for mistakes to be made, discoveries to be shared, and learning to happen through open conversations.

This understanding of character beyond gender/sexual identity that Kasey also spoke of brings critical attention to the fact that the queerness of these characters does not negate all of the other factors of their identities. In the play, the character of Jason #2 isn't *only* personified by his

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<sup>41</sup> Turck, Interview.

Latin identity, the character of Toby Darling isn't *only* personified by his abusive childhood, and so on.

Just as any actor, consciously or not, discovers qualities in the character they are playing that relate to themselves personally, Adam and Kasey were able to not only bring themselves into the characters in a meaningful way, but also negotiated the parts of their characters that did not align with themselves in an even more meaningful way. This negotiation became another layer in how the relationship between story and storyteller is not always linear in its perceived authenticity. Adam could not personally relate to the specific queerness of Eric, yet Eric Glass himself could not articulate his own definition of his queerness, as seen in the play. Adam's interpretation of Eric onstage exemplified the disillusionment of his character because Eric's persona is built on the notion of trying tirelessly to figure out what *kind* of gay man he is and can be in the world.

Eric has a monologue in Part 1, Act 2 of the show where he and the Lads discuss how human culture is built upon stories. At the end of the monologue, he lists the names of famous queer martyrs and how their stories have contributed to the collective identity of queerness:

“In queer culture, we feel the stirring of pride when we reflect on the meaning of Stonewall, Marsha Johnson, Sylvia Rivera, Edie Windsor, Matthew Shepard, Islan Nettles, and the bravery of the people on the front lines of the epidemic. And to let that go means we've relinquished a part of ourselves. If we can't have a conversation with our past, then what will be our future? Who are we? And more importantly: Who will we become? [...] Who will *I* become?”<sup>42</sup>

This section of text ultimately reflects and endorses my own understanding of embodied identity and how stories contribute to the building of collective identity. Eric calls upon these

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<sup>42</sup> Matthew Lopez, *The Inheritance*, (New York City: DramatistsPlay Service Inc., 2021), Pg. 73.

iconic names in order to illustrate how their stories impact modern queerness. The purpose of *The Inheritance* is, through a collection of many stories that tell the varied truths of queerness, to honor the legacy of those who fought to exist so that queer people today can live as their truest selves—it's in allowing themselves the fluidity to figure out who their truest self is that they inevitably thrive.

Lopez's play operates through characters that are fictional representations of very real people, with the exception of one historical figure. E.M. Forster (referred to as "Morgan" in the play) is the only nonfictional character of the show and is written to be played by the same actor who plays the fictional Walter Poole. In my conversation with William Vaughn (he/him/his) who played both roles, his thoughts on playing both characters was very inciteful because it brought up the notion of authenticity in an interesting way:

**KW:** "So, Walter Poole was a fictional character based on very real people, and E.M. Forster was a very real person. Did Forster being a real person affect your portrayal of him?"

**WV:** "Honestly, getting Walter right felt more important than getting Morgan right. I think verisimilitude is overrated. Forster was a real person but he's not real in the sense that people would recognize him as someone they know in their own lives, whereas Walter felt more like a person that people in this audience knew."<sup>43</sup>

William's thoughts on his attention to playing Morgan vs. Walter brings up the consideration of how playing a "real" gay man wasn't the same as the reality of Walter's character in the eyes of the audience. William's care in confronting the realistic nature of Walter's character led me to consider how audience perception becomes the judge and jury of

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<sup>43</sup> William Vaughn, Interview by author, Richmond, February 24<sup>th</sup>, 2023.



authenticity. No one in our audience could possibly know what E.M. Forster was really like even though he was a real person, yet the fictional embodiment of Walter Poole, an older gentleman who survived the HIV/AIDS epidemic, is something that audiences could indeed latch onto more seriously and cause them to make a personal connection to the piece.

Peter Brook articulates this notion of the pressure of audience perception as a warning to not become a “deadly” audience member. Through his scholarship on audience responsibility and the relationship between audience and actor, he analyzes what the obligation is for any audience member to approach art critically and in good faith. He states, “If good theatre depends on a good audience, then every audience has the theatre it deserves. Yet it must be very hard for spectators to be told of an audience’s responsibility.”<sup>44</sup> The power that an audience holds in this way, whether they know it or not, is a continual negotiation of value judgments.

Audience perception constantly relies on the relationship to the content onstage, yet the “realness” of a character actually has little to do with how an audience will relate to them. William’s acute attention in playing Walter therefore carried more importance than playing Morgan and caused him to have a more weight-bearing aspect to his characterization of a queer character. Continuing our discussion on how this relates to authenticity, William answered as follows:

**KW:** “So then, thinking about authenticity with queerness with embodying these two men, with participating in this narrative, what does authenticity mean to you?”

**WV:** “‘Living in the moment’ is boring, but it truly does feel undefinable...and yet definable. But then, at the same time, there is no such thing as authenticity, because, like,

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<sup>44</sup> Peter Brook, “The Empty Space: A Book About the Theatre: Deadly, Holy, Rough, and Immediate,” (First Touchstone Edition, 1996), Pg. 23.

there's no such thing as an authentic way to *be* which to me means that authenticity comes down to intention.”

**KW:** “And how do you codify intention, if it's only in action and then perceived response that you actually attach meaning to it?”

**WV:** “I think authenticity is purely ‘eye of the beholder,’ and it will be influenced by those around you, it becomes like a kind of live Wikipedia entry based on if someone says, ‘I think that's authentic.’ But you really will have the phenomenon of someone being like, ‘I did not buy that,’ and it isn’t up to you. I think it’s just about being kind. It's like, the more that you educate yourself, the better position you are in to participate in a culture that maybe isn't your own.”<sup>45</sup>

William’s thoughts on authenticity ultimately get at the notion that attempting to codify intentionality with authenticity when it comes to portraying queerness on stage seems to lead to a value judgment that does not support ever-changing fluidity. It is impossible to place value on the intention of an actor embodying a role, and it is not what I assert as important when handling queer narratives. It is the *pursuit* of truth, not the perceived *mastering* of truth, that matters.

Adam echoes this importance of the pursuit of truth in his discussion on his experience of working on *The Laramie Project*:

**AT:** “We were doing *The Laramie Project* here at RTP. Before we opened, we did this afternoon tribute on a landmark date of Matthew Shepard’s death. His parents came and spoke, and Senator Tim Kaine spoke. Senator Kaine was talking about perfection and this perfect idea of America, and he said something that I’ll never forget. I think he might have been quoting someone, but he was talking about perfection and the idea of America, and he called it the North Star. And he said, ‘what I mean by North Star is that we can never get there, but the pursuit of that direction is a noble endeavor in life. And the acceptance of the fact that we will never get there is the only way we will ever be at peace with the

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<sup>45</sup> Vaughn, Interview.

journey itself.' I have never forgotten that. It's like, I can never be as good as I want to be but the pursuit of it is where the joy lives."

**KW:** "That is an interesting point because, yeah, whether you are queer or not, it is the pursuit of the truth of the person (the character), and their identity that matters more than mastering it, because I think even with a queer person playing a queer person on stage, that doesn't mean that you have the same queer experience as that person."

Kasey, Adam, and William's experiences of the misalignment of their characters' identity and their own ultimately points to the idea that embodied identity and the artistic agency to decide what parts of one's own identity to infuse with that of their characters', is more important than a prescribed concept of "authentic" identity. What they were able to build through Lopez's characters reflected the core values of the play that did not hinge upon any of their direct relationship to the gender or sexual identity of the character they portrayed. The paradox that exists in what it means to embody a queer role onstage is a constant negotiation of one's own identity and that of their character. Adam speaks to this paradoxical relationship in his below statement:

**AT:** "I'm also reminded now, thinking about what makes it harder or easier to play queerness onstage, of paradoxes. Something that I reckon with every single day and what makes me believe in paradoxes is: the fact that everyone on this earth is worth saving, and the fact that there are true monsters in the world. That's a paradox and there is no reconciling it, there is just accepting that it's a paradox."<sup>46</sup>

Accepting the paradox that comes with portraying queerness onstage is a recognition and validation of the fluidity of queerness that considers the responsibility of the actor and of the facilitator in the room to deeply consider the quality of the portrayal of queerness on stage. In

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<sup>46</sup> Turck, Interview.

every queer individual there exists a paradox—whether it be code-switching to adjust to different environments or the reconciling every single day of where one is at in their journey of identity, there will always be a fluctuation that does not land on a singular and fixed definition.

## Chapter 5

### Conclusion: A Methodology of Paradoxes

The purpose of this thesis was to investigate queer narratives in popular theatre through concepts like authenticity and ownership. Using available research this thesis has analyzed what it means when non-LGBTQIA+ individuals portray queer characters on the contemporary stage to develop a methodology that advocates for all identities to have the right to participate in queer narratives.

My approach to this topic included framing the issue within the context of how I define the term authenticity using the research of E. Patrick Johnson, who draws from theories of Regina Bendix and Patricia Williams in his book *Appropriating Blackness*, to support my notion of authenticity that rejects the fixed relationship of authenticity and ownership. I reject traditional definitions of authenticity that justify ownership within queerness due to the nature of queerness that operates on fluidity and intersectionality.

This definition of authenticity is supported by the research in Chapter Two that drew from the scholarship of Joshua Gamson, Jose Esteban Munoz, and Jen Jack Gieseck. This chapter's analysis explored the implications of the instability of queerness and why it should support the notion of non-exclusivity surrounding the topic of ownership of queer narratives. The very nature of queerness and its progression as defined by the aforementioned scholars supports what I understand as *radical inclusivity*.

The historical overview of Chapter Three covered a broad scope of the history of queerness in theatre that drew on the Western queer canon to contextualize how it has been represented and was supported by influential perspectives of professionals in the field. Matthew

Moore's definition and description of the canon/canonicity as well as Finn Lefevre and Lindsey Mantoan's research in *Troubling Traditions: Canonicity, Theater, and Performance in the US*, aided in establishing how the history of the representation of queerness relates to why issues of visibility have always been and will always be crucial in progressing the depiction of queerness in popular theatre. The inclusion of influential perspectives of professionals in the field of both Theatre and the TV/film industry illustrated the variety of opinions on both extreme sides of this topic of interest.

Through the case study interviews of members of our production of *The Inheritance*, Chapter Four detailed how our process of casting worked and why it was beneficial to include non-queer actors into our show. The perspectives of Kasey Britt, William Vaughn, and Adam Turck as individuals who portrayed roles that did not align with their personal gender/sexual identification highlights the benefits of inclusive casting practices. Considering their personal and professional experiences of how their participation in our production impacted the ways that they interacted with the narrative, and therefore artistically engaged with it, has supported my notion of a methodology of paradoxes that acknowledges the complex nuances of playing roles that misalign with one's own identity.

The aforementioned research has led me to establish a methodology of paradoxes in this conclusionary chapter that I assert can and should be utilized by performers and theatre practitioners to engage in intersectional and inclusive practices.

There will always be debates and controversies surrounding the legitimacy of the issue of authenticity related to reconciling the performance of queerness on stage by non-queer actors. This subject is still reasonably new in the world of popular theatre and it opens up a chasm of contention where queer individuals, rightfully so, may fear that this notion of radical inclusivity

opens up opportunities for heteronormative performers to feel justified in taking on queer narratives without putting in the work to assure that their practices are respectful. Identity-conscious casting is a relatively new term thrown around to legitimize someone's ability to play something different to themselves, different from their identity, and it's a slippery slope into the problematic nature of playing stereotypes.

The responsibility that *every* person takes on when embodying queerness is great; architects of theatre spaces and facilitators must shrewdly analyze the ways in which they direct actors and how they present queerness. Opening up this conversation introduces a justification for straight actors to "play queer" in a potentially harmful way, but this will always be the case. There will always be professional productions where actors produce damaging representations of any identity; however, approaching this intersection with a keen understanding of the fluidity of queerness allows for practitioners to investigate queerness at a deeper level without the pressure to "get it right." There is no right way to be queer, but there must be an awareness that diverts from stereotypical depictions.

Queerness has not yet been fully integrated into the mainstream as a norm for narratives that we see on stage, and it may be a long time before that is the case; however, there is absolutely a way to advocate for visibility and representation in mainstream theatre that does not exclude non LGBTQIA+ individuals from participating. In understanding the paradox that will exist for *any* person, queer or not, portraying queerness on stage, we can begin to build a foundation for embodying queerness that embraces fluidity and invites everyone to join the conversation.

When we invite those outside of queer identification to participate in telling queer stories, they are given the opportunity, like Adam and William, to learn so much about the nuances of

queer history that they may not have gotten without being a part of our production. By inviting them to inhabit our world, they are able to develop a deep appreciation and a more acute understanding of what it means to take on that responsibility.

Progressive queer theory suggests that in every single person there exists the possibility of queer identification, and the space to recognize one's own gender or sexual deviance from traditional heteronormative society. If this is where we want to end up, we must start by eradicating exclusionary practices. Identity-conscious casting in the case of queerness requires a spotlight to be put on one's personal identity that not every queer or non-person wants. The purpose of laws that prohibit the requirement of this knowledge are put in place to not only allow for objectivity of the facilitator, but also protect the identity of the performer.

This ultimately leads to what I assert as an important notion of the separation between the actor and embodied identity of the character. While the conduit of the performer will always bridge the gap between the two, I maintain that a healthy artistic practice of character-building should not require drawing from one's own identity in order to justify characterization. The fluid nature of queerness supports this because if there is no singular way to express one's own queer identity, the portrayal through dramatic narratives should be able to follow this same method of fluidity.

As Chris New explains through his disdain of being pigeon-holed into queer roles, a queer character cannot be boiled down to just that as the sole purpose of their existence in an artistic work—it is the intersection of the many aspects of identity that combine to create a unique individual.<sup>47</sup> The problem of authenticity exists in this singular definition—to be

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<sup>47</sup> Ryan Gilbey, "Playing it straight," *The Guardian*, [Playing it straight: should gay roles be reserved for gay actors? | Acting | The Guardian](#)



authentically queer suggests the existence of its opposite, the inauthentic way to be queer, which simply does not exist. To advocate for the fluid instability of queerness is to deny that there is a singularly authentic way to express one's own queerness, and a perspective of radical inclusivity supports this rejection of the standard definition of authenticity applied to queer representation on stage.

As William stated, it comes down to intention and the capacity for kindness, which is impossible to quantify but not impossible to express as a facilitator of a queer narrative. The facilitator of the queer narrative must be able to, as was the case when Lucian and I began our directing process, know that the goal is to exhibit queerness in as many different ways as possible. For us as directors, utilizing the diversity of our actors to do so was crucial and it led to a totally intersectional representation of contemporary queerness.

What we were able to accomplish through this fluid definition of queerness was an acceptance of paradoxes—a character can be gay *and* homophobic, effeminate *and* strong, damaged *and* courageous. All of Matthew Lopez's characters are written to embody these qualities. We allowed our actors to explore all of the different manifestations of queerness no matter how they identified in their personal lives because Lopez's characters do just that.

*The Inheritance*, an epic story of stories, exhibits the possibilities of collective storytelling to not only bring us closer together but to honor the people who fought to get us where we are. Whether someone identifies as LGBTQIA+ at any moment or not, everyone should have the right to honor martyrs and inspirations like Island Nettles, Sylvia Rivera, Marsha P. Johnson, or Matthew Shepard through the artistry of dramatic text and embodied identity on stage. Radical inclusivity within theatrically queer narratives cannot exclude those who want to

contribute to the representation of queerness in mainstream theatre just because they do not currently identify as LGBTQIA+.

If we exclude certain individuals from having a hand in telling our stories, we disregard the notion that queerness can and should be available to anyone who, like Henry Louis Gates Jr. insists, makes the effort to understand, to learn, and to inhabit another world. What a methodology of paradoxes invites to artistic practices is an intersectional understanding of identity that invalidates categorization and opens opportunities for the freedom of queer embodiment on stage to all.

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