“Include Women in the Sequel”:
Representation and Women of Color in the Second Golden Age of Broadway

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Introduction

The year is 2009. Barack Obama has been sworn in as America's first Black president. The venue is the White House Evening of Poetry, Music, and the Spoken Word. Playwright, composer, and actor Lin-Manuel Miranda jitters through the introduction to his performance for the night. Instead of doing a number from his Tony Award-winning musical *In the Heights*, he is giving the audience—which includes the President and First Lady—a taste of his current work-in-progress: "It's a concept album about the life of someone I think embodies hip-hop: Treasury Secretary Alexander Hamilton."[1] Polite laughter ripples through the room. No one is laughing eight years later, when the original Broadway cast of *Hamilton: An American Musical* performs select numbers at the White House. *Hamilton* commemorated the beginning and end of the Obama administration. On the national stage, Obama became the site of debate about U.S. social progress, the historic significance of his election transformed into a herald for a post-racial America. On the Broadway stage, actors of color stepped into the roles of founding fathers, prompting discourse about colorblind casting in musical theatre. In an interview with *The Atlantic*, Miranda explained: "This is the story of America then, told by America now."[2] Miranda's words—in conjunction with the image of the cast at curtain call, a long line of Black and Brown actors in period costume, holding hands to take their final bow—indicate a progression from past to present, much as Obama's presidency supposedly signified the ultimate fulfillment of the American dream. *Look at how far we've come*. The intentional casting of actors of color in *Hamilton* became part of an ongoing discussion around diversity on Broadway, and the presence of Black and Brown persons in principal roles should force us the audience to

[1] *The Obama White House*, "Lin-Manuel Miranda Performs at the White House Poetry Jam," 2 Nov. 2019. Video: 4:26, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WNFf7nMIGnE&ab_channel=TheObamaWhiteHouse
[2] Edward Delman, "How Lin-Manuel Miranda's 'Hamilton' Shapes History," *The Atlantic,* 29 Sept. 2015

reckon with a history of national and institutional racism, including the exploitation of nonwhite persons for white entertainment.

Theater producers and directors have explored two ways of decentering whiteness as normative onstage: race-conscious and colorblind casting. The former intentionally places nonwhite actors in 'white' roles to explore how audience expectations are subverted when reading the text through a racialized lens. 'Colorblind' refers to the practice of using interracial casts without acknowledging the ways in which having nonwhite actors in major roles might change interpretation of the text. While these definitions are useful, I must point out that the distinction between them blurs in practice, and popular usage tends toward 'colorblind' as a catch-all term for nonwhite actors playing non-racially specified roles. In any case, there can be no separation of the nonwhite bodies onstage from the histories of violence that America has inflicted and continues to inflict upon them: instead, I would argue that their presence signals a temporal collapse, undoing the artificial distance between past and present. The institutional effort to be 'inclusive' ends up reinscribing difference and reifying binary oppositions between those with power and those without it (i.e., Broadway vs. playwrights, directors vs. actors, principal cast members vs. understudies). The commercial success of *Hamilton* marked what I'm calling a Second Golden Age of musical theater, with an increase in Broadway productions featuring actors of color in major roles: from revivals such as the 2019 *Oklahoma*, which cast Black actress Rebecca Naomi Jones as Laurey, to original works like *Natasha, Pierre, and the Great Comet of 1812* (2017), with Black actress Denee Benton playing Russian debutante Natasha Romanov, or *Hadestown* (2019), with mixed-Asian actress Eva Noblezada as Eurydice. Not to mention the ongoing productions which have made a point of advertising their actors of color in the wake of the push for more inclusive casting—one example would be the marketing

of Brittney Johnson as the first Black woman to play Glinda the Good Witch in an English-speaking production of *Wicked* (2003), despite her being a standby and the show having run for sixteen years at that point.[3] As these examples might indicate, the musicals I discuss in the dissertation do not center around historic experiences of Black and Brown people—works that might situate racism as an obstacle for the main character to overcome, or that provide a voyeuristic glimpse into nonwhite modes of life for a presumed white audience. Rather, I'm interested in works where race inserts itself despite attempts to elide difference in a neoliberal gesture that ends up recentering whiteness. Theater scholar Brandi Wilkins Catanese denounces these attempts to "transcend" race as erasing Blackness and advocates instead for what she calls "transgressive" casting, which challenges assumptions of whiteness as normative and neutral.[4] I want to extend her framework of transgression to analysis of recent musicals featuring colorblind or race-conscious casting, in order to locate those moments of transgression within performance.

My dissertation focuses on roles played by women of color. At the intersect of race and gender, Black and Brown women in principal roles become the site of major scrutiny and expectation. They face pressure from the institution, directors, and audiences to fit a type, a character easily bounded within familiar lines of knowing. Yet these women also work within the constraints of their medium to subvert expectations, inviting the audience to imagine alternative ways of being, beyond racist and sexist frameworks. In those moments, their performance provides metatextual commentary on the work in question. I explore the tension between theater as an institution (as represented via Broadway), which recreates and profits from historic

[3] Paula Rogo, "This Actress Just Made History as the First Black Woman to Play Glinda in Broadway's *Wicked*," https://www.essence.com/entertainment/this-actress-just-made-history-as-first-black-woman-to-play-glinda-in-broadways-wicked/ (14 Jan. 2019)
[4] Brandi Wilkins Catanese, *The Problem of the Color[blind].* MI: University of Michigan Press (2011)

violence against nonwhite bodies, and the actresses of color who negotiate identity and representation through staged performance.

The discourse around race-based and colorblind casting is not new to theater. Angela Pao details the history of organizations such as the Non-Traditional Casting Project and Actors' Equity Association, which in the 80s and 90s pushed for more diverse casting choices, since Black, Asian, and Latinx actors were often limited to either minor appearances or roles that specified nonwhite characters. Her book *No Safe Spaces: Re-casting Race, Ethnicity, and Nationality in American Theatre* (2010) explores some of the critical responses to these attempts at promoting greater racial representation onstage. Pao argues that nonwhite actors who sought major roles in mainstream productions laid claim to their right to define American culture as Americans, rather than be relegated to the margins. She states, "The power and privilege to define dominant social and cultural values that had been assumed and protected as the exclusive privilege of white Americans of European origins was very visibly challenged by cross-racial and interracial casting, as black bodies both literally and metaphorically were placed in roles previously assumed only by whites."[5] While Pao remains critical of race-conscious and colorblind casting, she also acknowledges that these practices grant nonwhite actors some degree of cultural (and financial) capital. Similarly, Brandi Wilkins Catanese pushes back against the ways that colorblind casting assumes whiteness as neutral and Western art as the pinnacle of artistic expression. In *The Problem of the Color[blind]: Racial Transgression and the Politics of Black Performance* (2011), she argues that attempts to "transcend" race position Blackness as a problem to be overcome, and whiteness as an ideal to which nonwhite persons should aspire. At

[5] Angela C. Pao, *No Safe Spaces: Recasting Race, Ethnicity, and Nationality in American Theater*. MI: University of Michigan Press (2010), p. 17

the same time, Catanese rejects playwright August Wilson's claim that only Black theater can produce radical art: his stance assumes a monolithic Black experience and ignores the agency Black actors exercise within white-dominant spaces. In the space where race is supposedly made invisible, nonwhite actors might choose to read race into the text, exposing the contradictions of racism and upsetting static representations of nonwhite experiences.

Both Pao and Catanese reckon with decades of debate around nonwhite actors in 'white' roles mainly in spoken theater. Musical theater scholarship has not yet addressed this issue in depth. With the exception of one-off articles such as Larissa Irizarry's "Queer Intimacy: Vocality in *Jesus Christ Superstar*,"[6] which analyzes the balance of power in a production that casts a Black Judas against a white Jesus, discussions around race in musical theater tend to follow a particular narrative telos: acknowledging the genre's uncomfortable relationship to blackface minstrelsy, detailing the fraught business of interracial casting during the Golden Age, and concluding with a nod to the 'progress' that has been made post-Civil Rights era (i.e., some Black productions such as *The Wiz* or *Dreamgirls* made it to Broadway). With regard to this narrative, Mark Grant (*The Rise and Fall of the Broadway Musical*, 2004) takes it for granted that the musical is on its last gasp, so any analysis must be of an artifact, rather than an ongoing and evolving genre. Raymond Knapp's *The American Musical and the Foundation of National Identity* (2006) examines the ways in which Broadway has directed and reflected who gets to represent America. To that end, Knapp also talks about who has been excluded from that group, but most of his attention goes toward Golden Age musicals and their problematic depiction of Jewish, Black, and Asian identities. The collection *Reframing the Musical: Race, Culture and Identity* (2019), edited by Sarah Whitfield, includes analysis on twenty-first century works;

[6] Larissa Irizarry, "Queer Intimacy: Vocality in *Jesus Christ Superstar*," *Women and Music*, Vol. 24 (2020), pp. 162-177

however, these works all revolve around real-life persons of color or stage an 'authentic' representation of Black and Brown cultures. The question of colorblindness, or color-consciousness, never comes up. Rather, musical theater scholarship seems fixated on either redeeming the musical or condemning it as already dead. Even the second edition of Warren Hoffman's *The Great White Way: Race and the Broadway Musical* focuses on how the genre has historically constructed notions of whiteness for a certain class of Americans. But even Broadway, for all its middle-class conservatism, has featured non-traditional casting—Norm Lewis as Javert in the 2006 revival of *Les Misérables*, Lin-Manuel Miranda as the titular *Hamilton*, or Brittney Mack as Anna of Cleves in the Broadway previews for *Six: The Musical* (2020). There is a conversation to be had about these performances and how we understand them in context.

Rather than reiterate well-known histories, I turn toward the work of critical race theorists and feminists of color in order to analyze the performances of Black and Brown women. The inimitable Daphne Brooks is one model for me: her book *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom* (2006) brings together theory (her concept of Afro-alienation) and performance as she examines turn of the century theater as a site for Black actors to complicate ideas around race and gender. I see Brooks and Catanese as working in tandem in their exploration of multifaceted representations of Blackness in theater and Black agency in white-dominant spaces. Likewise, Nicole Fleetwood discusses hypervisibility in relation to Black women's performance in her work *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness* (2011). Both Fleetwood and Brooks recognize the precarious position of Black female performers in visual culture, where they are seen as spectacle and object. Their work builds on the distinction that theorist Hortense Spillers made between body and flesh, as the sites

of material violence and racialized difference, respectively. Similarly, in *Ornamentalism* (2018), Anne Anlin Cheng extends Spillers' framework to describe the fetishization of Asian women in visual media. In addition, I owe a debt to the work of Jamaican theorist Sylvia Wynter, who argues against the humanist impulse towards representation, instead critiquing the Human as a Western categorization that excludes most human beings and must be dismantled. For all of these scholars, the staging of racialized women turns them into objects for an audience to consume—and yet these female artists manage to flip the script, blurring the division between subject and object, observer and observed. That space where expectations are subverted, where new ways of seeing and hearing become apparent, is what Fred Moten calls "the break."[7] Moten specifically connects the break to auditory experience—the vocalizations and sonic events that disrupt, unsettle, and reconfigure the familiar.

The musicals I discuss have myth in common, partly because myth facilitates the use of non-traditional casting. Myth is intrinsic to identity formation and performance. Wynter argues that we humans are a hybrid species, both *bios* and *mythos*—or from another angle, we are the stories we tell about ourselves.[8] Whether these identities take shape around national, local, or familial lines, they depend on a fixed sense of self and community. Narrative is one site where such delineations can be challenged, and by looking at the roles women play in these stories, I examine the ways in which nonwhite women (both as fictional characters and as real, embodied performers) expose the limits and contradictions of myth.

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[7] Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*. MN: University of Minnesota Press (2003)

[8] Sylvia Wynter and Katherine McKittrick, "Unparalleled Catastrophe For Our Species? Or, to Give Humanness a Different Future: Conversations," *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis*. NC: Duke University Press (2015)

I begin with *Hamilton: An American Musical*. Mapping the titular character's life onto a modern immigration narrative, *Hamilton* presents America as a site of possibility, imperfect but capable of making real the lofty ideals articulated in its founding documents. The musical gives starring roles in a reimagined American mythos to male actors of color, but the scripted roles for nonwhite women are all defined by their relationship to Hamilton: his wife Eliza, his sisters-in-law Angelica and Peggy, and the seductress Maria Reynolds. At the same time, I read Eliza and Angelica as positioned to critique Hamilton's masculinist arc. Using Nicole Fleetwood's framework of the Black woman as excess, I discuss Renee Elise Goldsberry's performance of Angelica as a sonic loophole in the historic and theatrical linear narrative. As the only woman who raps in the musical, and as a meta commentator within its (re)telling, Angelica occupies a vestibular space in the staged world, adjacent to yet outside its imposed limitations. She also draws our attention to relationships outside a heterosexist or male-centered orientation. Hers and Eliza's sisterly bond is stronger than romantic attachment, physical distance, and even death. Likewise, Eliza cultivates relationships with the people around her, rather than embracing the ego-driven individualism that consumes the male characters. In the final scene, we the audience realize that she has been the impetus behind the musical all along. I analyze her portrayal by Asian-American actress Philippa Soo and the trope of nonwhite women as keepers of memory. The Schuyler sisters disrupt the bootstrap narrative so integral to the American dream, yet they also become agents of meta-myth, retelling stories on behalf of the dead, despite their own commitment to life.

If women work and speak from the margins in *Hamilton*, then they openly drive the narrative in *Natasha, Pierre, and the Great Comet of 1812* (2016). Based on an excerpt from Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, *Great Comet* centers around a young woman (Natasha Rostova) who

falls in love with a charming cad while her fiancé is fighting in the war against Napoleon. Natasha's choices drive the musical's narrative: she has more agency than her character in the Tolstoy novel. I read Denee Benton's performance of Natasha in tandem with Audre Lorde's "Notes on a Trip to Russia," where Lorde describes her experience as a Black woman outside a North American context. Russia doesn't erase Lorde's Blackness but rather gives her distance from which she can newly describe the contours of American racism, as well as greater freedom of movement (as a Black person, as a lesbian) than she has in America. Similarly, *Great Comet* transports us to a fantastical Russia, a liminal space where our expectations might be subverted and interrogated. I argue that Benton unsettles the 'fallen woman' trope, a role often assigned to Black women. One such way she does this is through her vocal performance: Benton's light soprano voice departs from the stereotype for dark-skinned Black women on Broadway, which emphasizes the lower register, belting power, and a rich, resonant sound. Benton's voice conveys Natasha's youthfulness and naivety without hypersexualizing her or condemning her as 'asking for it,' where 'it' includes sexual aggression, manipulation, and abandonment. Yet even liminal spaces have limits: I also discuss actor Oak Onaodowan's brief tenure as Pierre and how gender plays into 'acceptable' (read: marketable) conceptions of Blackness.

I return to the U.S. in the third chapter to talk about the 2018 revival of *Oklahoma!*, which features Rebecca Naomi Jones as Laurey. In her review for *The Undefeated*, Soraya McDonald argues that the revival highlights the musical's "unbearable whiteness": Jones is a Black woman playing the love interest of two white-passing men, in a setting that presumes American expansion and exceptionalism.[9] Instead of a romantic coming-of-age story, this version of *Oklahoma!* emphasizes how vulnerable Laurey is in this male-dominated, white-supremacist world. At the same time, such a staging furthers the musical's erasure of Native American

[9] Soraya Nadia McDonald, "The Unbearable Whiteness of 'Oklahoma!'" *The Undefeated* (16 Sept. 2019)

culture. Theater studies scholar and director Courtney Mohler reads the play that *Oklahoma!* is based on, *Green Grow the Lilacs*, as referencing Native presence and themes, in part because the playwright Lynn Riggs identified as mixed-Cherokee.[10] While Mohler identifies allusions to Native folk songs in the original play, she also notes their absence in Rogers and Hammerstein's production. The 2018 revival strips down the orchestration to a folksy ensemble, and the cast sings with exaggerated country accents (all honeyed vowels and rounded diphthongs), but the sound remains familiar as a Rogers and Hammerstein musical. I analyze Jones' performance in relation to a double erasure, of both Native and Black presence. The latter absence is most evident through the refraction of African-American musical styles into a musical theater score and again into a whitewashed folk sound. Jones-as-Laurey sings in the same vernacular as everyone else, her voice sonically subsumed by the musical's all-consuming whiteness.

Where both *Hamilton* and *Oklahoma!* deal with national myths, *Hadestown* (2019) takes Greek myth as its inspiration. Based on the tale of Orpheus and Eurydice, *Hadestown* draws on the Great Depression for its visual aesthetic and musical soundscape. I discuss the musical's use of traditional Black genres (mainly folk and blues) in conjunction with its theme of (social, environmental, and human) death. Since *Hadestown* makes explicit reference to border politics with its number "Why We Build the Wall," I argue that Eurydice (as played by actress Eva Noblezada) occupies a position of social death that foreshadows her tragic end. Unlike *Hamilton*, which frames immigration as a door into futurity, *Hadestown* interrogates the capital machinations that create borders and reconfigure people as fugitives and fungible laborers. While the casting call for Eurydice does not specify a nonwhite actress, I see Noblezada's performance as a woman of Mexican and Filipina descent as crucial to this reading, in an era where U.S.

[10] Courtney Mohler, "The Native Plays of Lynn Riggs (Cherokee) and the Question of "Race"-specific Casting," *Scholarship and Professional Work - Arts*, 23 (2016).

politicians and news outlets frame disenfranchised Asian and Latinx migrants as an external threat to national identity.

In the final chapter, I examine the problems with colorblind casting in a U.K. context. I use *Six: The Musical* as an example, since various iterations of the cast have included nonwhite women in the roles of the wives of King Henry VIII. The musical attempts to give these women a voice, but its conceit of the wives singing about their experiences with Henry actually highlights their lack of agency, an irony the final number tries to resolve as the wives imagine an alternative past where they might have been independent of one powerful man. In its effort to recast history as more inclusive and empowering for women, the musical ends up reproducing sexist and racist tropes. The (white) songwriters perform a kind of sonic blackface in their arrangements, which blatantly reference contemporary Black female pop icons. While the original cast album features three Black women as Henry's (ex)wives, their characters are stereotypes of Black womanhood: Catherine of Aragon is the religious, resilient mother whose husband leaves her for a younger (and nonblack) woman; Anna of Cleves is the dominant, aggressive player who leverages her sexuality for wealth and power; and Catherine Parr is the survivor, the long-suffering one who manages to outlive the man who upends her world. As Jayna Brown has documented in *Babylon Girls: Black Women Performers and the Shaping of the Modern* (2008), the U.K. has imported Black pathos and spectacle from American contexts since the days of vaudeville in the late nineteenth century. I argue *Six* represents the latest iteration of this impulse, which ignores structural instances of racism and instead propagates a globalized neoliberal diversity. Perhaps in this sense *Six* serves as a cautionary tale against the impulses that confuse representation with liberation and presence with power.

Throughout the dissertation, I play with boundaries most would like to consider fixed: disciplines, methodologies, the line between fiction and 'real.' Part of this is due to the slippages that occur when an actor *as* a character, when their personhood overlaps in the eyes and ears of the audience. However, I also find refuge in these indeterminate spaces, these "loopholes of retreat," which I believe have value for those of us in the margins.

Chapter One
"A Woman Who Has Never Been Satisfied": Love and Memory as Disruption in *Hamilton: An American Musical* (2015)

"The world turned upside down…"

Hamilton: An American Musical made its Broadway debut in 2015 after a critically-lauded run at the Public Theater. Since then, the show has played several consecutive seasons in New York and Chicago, won a Grammy for its cast album (produced by hip-hop legends Questlove and Deep Thought), and gone on three national tours, as well as premiering in London and Sydney, Australia.[11] The original Broadway cast performed at the White House in 2016, a benediction of sorts to the final term of America's first Black president.[12] Given the musical's meteoric rise into the popular consciousness, a summary seems almost redundant, but here goes. Based on the popular biography by Ron Chernow, *Hamilton* tells the story of the "ten dollar Founding Father" through a mix of hip-hop, R&B, and other popular music styles, from Hamilton's arrival in the States via the West Indies, to his service in the Revolutionary War, to his participation in early American government, culminating in his fateful duel with political rival Aaron Burr. In addition, all of the main characters (with the singular exception of King George III) are played by Black, Asian, and Latinx actors. Explaining the choice to cast people of color as Founders, the musical's creator Lin-Manuel Miranda declared, "This is the story of America then, told by America now."[13]

Others have taken issue with that statement. Historian Lyra Montiero objects to the erasure of actual Black, Brown, and Indigenous persons in 18th century America: the enslaved, the murdered, the fugitive. The ones whose lives served as capital for white settlers to build a

[11] https://www.hamiltonmusical.com/ lists locations around the globe where the show can currently be seen, along with ticket and cast info
[12] Daniel Kreps, "Watch the Hamilton Cast Perform at the White House," *Rolling Stone* (15 March 2016) https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/watch-hamilton-cast-perform-at-the-white-house-229328/
[13] Edward Delman "How Lin-Manuel Miranda's 'Hamilton' Shapes History," *The Atlantic,* 29 Sept. 2015

new nation. She asks, "Is this the history we want most black and brown youth to connect with—one in which black lives so clearly do not matter?"[14] Likewise, theater scholar Donatella Galella critiques the casting conceit as upholding an ideology that disenfranchises real Black and Brown people. "The price of nationalist neoliberal multicultural inclusion is celebrating the nation's aestheticized racial diversity and individual bootstrap success at the expense of critiquing the material inequalities purposefully created and sustained by people like Hamilton."[15] For both Montiero and Galella, the nonwhite bodies onstage obscure the white-supremacist foundations of America, their inclusion eliding an ongoing, systemic *exclusion* of those who exist outside of (or refuse to confirm to) a State-approved narrative. Montiero and Galella's criticisms mostly center around *Hamilton*'s reception, discussing the limitations of representation without systemic change. They also vent the frustrations of that period between Obama's final months as president and the dawn of the Trump administration, a bitter-bleak *we told you so* from those who had seen the handwriting on the wall, who recognized that Obama's so-called 'progressive' administration took great care not to upset the status quo too much, and that despite this centrist stance, Black presence in the White House could only ever result in conservative backlash. Jefferson's famous statement, quoted in the musical, "we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal" has always been predicated on unspoken qualifiers—unspoken because they are in fact self-evident within a framework that privileges whiteness. In an article on *Hamilton*'s use of hip-hop vernacular, Loren Kajikawa concludes, "Obama's story, *Hamilton*'s story, and contemporary mainstream rap all feature

[14] Lyra D. Montiero, "Race Conscious Casting and the Erasure of the Black Past in Lin-Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton*," *The Public Historian*, Vol. 38 No. 1 (2016), p 98
[15] Donatella Galella, "Being in the 'Room Where It Happens': *Hamilton*, Obama, and Nationalist Neoliberal Multicultural Inclusion," *Theatre Survey*, Vol. 59 No. 3 (2018), p. 380

powerful symbols of blackness that substitute celebrations of achievement for more difficult discussions about the ongoing legacy of racial discrimination."[16]

I am not contesting these critiques. The very conceit of *Hamilton* spotlights the problems of colorblind casting—the insertion of nonwhite bodies into roles understood as 'white' because of cultural, historical, or textual markers. As Brandi Wilkins Catanese succinctly describes the situation: "An uncritical deployment of colorblind casting invites the question of whether race is truly irrelevant in American performance practices, or if the rhetoric of color blindness only diminishes the value of nonwhite cultures, while leaving whiteness intact."[17] At the same time, Catanese rejects the idea that colorblind casting always results in the erasure of nonwhite presence. While denouncing attempts to "transcend" race, she argues that such casting practices have the potential to "transgress" assumptions of whiteness as neutral and normative. Miranda's statement in *The Atlantic* seems to position *Hamilton*'s casting as transgressive, pushing against the categorization of 'American' as a static, inherently white identity, during a period when Obama's Blackness constituted sufficient reason for conservatives to question his legitimacy as President, when (im)migrants from Central America became national boogeymen stealing jobs during an economic crisis. In that context, *Hamilton*'s cast claims America as belonging to the Black and Brown, the fungible and the illegal. Perhaps such intention can co-exist with *Hamilton*'s cooptation into a neoliberal narrative.

Without dismissing the real historic violences that *Hamilton* obscures, enabling their perpetuation in the present—work that the above-cited scholars, as well as others, have done—I want to consider the musical's potential for transgression. This transgression is less of an outright

[16] Loren Kajikawa, "'Young, Scrappy, and Hungry': *Hamilton*, Hip-Hop, and Race," *American Music*, Vol. 36 No. 4 (Winter 2018), p. 477-478
[17] Brandi Wilkins Catanese, *The Problem of the Color[blind]: Racial Transgression and the Politics of Black Performance*, (2011), p. 34

disavowal of the systems that enable America (and by extension, *Hamilton*) to exist, and more along the lines of what José Esteban Muñoz terms 'disidentification.' Disidentification is a type of deferral, an ironic engagement with cultural signifiers that highlights their limited application to marginalized subjects. Muñoz describes it as "the third mode of dealing with dominant ideology, one that neither opts to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly opposes it; rather, disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology."[18] An imperfect response to the ideologies that drive racist, sexist, and homophobic systems, disidentification privileges minority survival through a process of negotiation between the dominant public and marginalized subjects. In the case of *Hamilton*, the centering of nonwhite actors might be read as a performance of disidentification, since it neither challenges a nationalist mythos nor strictly adheres to its conditions—that is, the very exclusion of those Black and Brown persons on which America was founded. Muñoz makes clear that disidentification is not necessarily a viable strategy for all minority subjects. However, it can also open up a new site of resistance, a crawlspace where non-normative subjects can exist.

What interests me in particular is something that seems to merit little discussion among scholars: the women of *Hamilton*. Granted, the roles for female actors of color are limited, with only three scripted roles: Hamilton's wife Eliza (nee Schuyler), his sister-in-law Angelica, and the dual-cast Peggy Schuyler/Maria Reynolds, a virginal kid sister in Act I and a red-lipsticked seductress in Act II. Two other historical women—Martha Washington and Sally Hemmings—get a singular namedrop from male characters. (Burr plays up Hamilton's alleged insatiable sex-drive to the audience: "Martha Washington named her feral tom cat after him!" Jefferson receives his appointment as Secretary of State with a handwave to his enslaved mistress, "Sally, be a lamb, darling, won't you open it.") Then there is the Bullet, one of the

[18] Jose Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentification*. MI: University of Minnesota Press (1999), p. 11

female ensemble members, who represents Hamilton's frequent brushes with death and his ultimate demise. Only those women with direct ties to Hamilton have a voice in the musical, which raises the question: do these female characters serve a function beyond one of sexual or romantic interest?

I consider how the women of *Hamilton* undo the premise of *Hamilton*. I analyze their relationship to the titular character, as well as each other. I define their positioning as one of excess, a concept theorized by Nicole Fleetwood to discuss transgressive performance. 'Excess' gestures both toward the systems that categorize Black and Brown women as *excessive*, and toward the ways in which Black and Brown women can and do *exceed* the limitations placed upon them. With the term 'excess' and 'excess flesh,' Fleetwood borrows from the work of Hortense Spillers, who distinguished between the body as a site of material violence and the flesh as a site onto which a dominant culture maps racialized difference. In Spillers' seminal essay "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," she argues that for Black women, the flesh bears the multiple and contradictory identities of the body as an ungendered worker who can be exploited without recourse, a hypersexual deviant who can be violated without consequence, and a utilitarian mother who can reproduce the next generation of fungible labor.[19] Fleetwood adds the modifier "excess" to emphasize the outsider position of the Black woman in a patriarchal economy: in a white-dominant, heternormative context, the Black woman is an aberration, denied legal personhood with its attendant rights and denied recognition as female, since she is unable to conform to a gendered ideal that hinges on whiteness, both in not being able to possess it or reproduce it.[20] Even nonwhite persons—including Black men—can leverage their proximity to patriarchal privilege against her. Like Spillers, Fleetwood views the

[19] Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Black, White, and In Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture*. University of Chicago Press (2003), pp. 203-229
[20] ibid, p. 217

vestibular position of the Black woman as a potential space for critique, by drawing our attention to patriarchy's inherent contradictions and injustices. In this sense, excess might be performed. Fleetwood argues, "To enact excess flesh is to signal historical attempts to regulate black female bodies, to acknowledge black women's resistance of the persistence of visibility, and to challenge debates among black activists and critics about what constitutes positive or productive representation of blackness..."[21] Though outwardly imposed, excess can also represent a performative choice on the part of an artist. It redirects audience attention to the patriarchal systems that create certain expectations when a non-white woman occupies center stage, while simultaneously giving her a space to challenge those expectations.

Fleetwood provides a useful framework for thinking through *Hamilton* for two reasons. First, *Hamilton* uses Black sonic signifiers to establish its characters, in particular linking a 90s-inspired hip-hop to the Revolution's younger players. Kajikawa points out, "Although the music of the cast recording is stylistically and temporally diverse, it consistently draws upon sounds from the Black Atlantic to represent its revolutionary heroes."[22] Washington, an older figure with godlike status even before his entrance, sings in a gospel style that nods to the genre's emphasis on rhetoric and the (solo) virtuoso. Jefferson grooves to boogie-woogie in "What'd I Miss?", signaling the age difference between him and Hamilton while also conveying his slick personality.[23] Hamilton raps with all the braggadocio of a gangsta emcee; complex internal rhymes, double entendres, and cultural references demonstrate his formidable intellect. His friends deliver simpler, but no less aggressive, verses—at least until Lafayette blows them all out

[21] Nicole Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness*, IL: University of Chicago Press (2011), p. 112
[22] Kajikawa, "'Young, Scrappy, and Hungry,'" p. 469
[23] Miranda: "Figuring out the 'sound' of Thomas Jefferson was a fun challenge. My reasoning: He's a full generation older than Hamilton, and he was absent for much of the fighting of the Revolutionary War…So I wrote him in sort of a Lambert/Hendricks/Ross/Gil Scott-Heron mode—jazzy, proto-hip-hop, but not the boom bap of Hamilton. He has just as much fun with words, but they swing and they sing." Lin-Manuel Miranda and Jeremy McCarter, *Hamilton: The Revolution*. NY: Grand Central Publishing (2016), p. 152

of the water with a machine-gun patter in "Guns and Ships." The women lean R&B, "The Schuyler Sisters" deliberately invoking such groups as TLC and Destiny's Child. While *Hamilton* has never specified Black actors for these roles (the casting call only limits main roles to 'nonwhite' actors), it undeniably owes its appeal to Black sound. That sonic Blackness, with all its recumbent connotations, performs and is performed as a kind of excess in the context of its arrival, a musical theater scene where hip-hop still signaled Blackness despite its integration into the rest of mainstream culture.

Second, Fleetwood's concept of excess has direct application to the women of *Hamilton*. Two of the three scripted roles were originated by Black actors, who also feature on the cast album: Renee Elise Goldsberry as Angelica, and Jasmine Cephas Jones as Peggy/Maria. Their interpretations have influenced subsequent productions, which tend to cast darker-skinned Black women in these roles, whether as a form of (stereo)type-casting or in an attempt to replicate the original cast. In that Goldsberry and Jones play characters who function in part as sexual interests for the protagonist, they signal ongoing representations of Black women as aggressive, hypersexual, and extralegal. (Both Angelica and Maria engage in extramarital affairs with Hamilton, the former an emotional affair and the latter a physical one.) Yet their characters also make metatextual (*excess*) comments in the musical, alternately driving and pausing the narrative action; unlike Hamilton, caught in the current of fate, they exist in a liminal space, both subject and objecting to the limits of historical record.

By comparison, Chinese-American actor Phillipa Soo debuted the role of Eliza.[24] While I argue that she also occupies a position of excess, her portrayal by/as an Asian woman means she is racialized in other ways. I turn to Anne Anlin Cheng, who theorizes the "yellow woman" as a

[24] Since Soo's tenure, the Chicago and North American Tour productions have tended to cast Asian or light-skinned Black women as principal Elizas

hybrid being, "present/absent, organic/synthetic, a figure of civilizational value and a disposable object of decadence."[25] Rather than the Black woman's reduction to bare flesh, the yellow woman is posed as an inorganic construct, an ornament. Cheng also invokes Spillers in her discussion of 'thingness' and the ways in which yellow and Black women have been categorized as nonhuman. Without dismissing Fleetwood's focus on Black female self-representation, I want to suggest 'excess' as a description that might encompass women of color more broadly, while acknowledging that racialized hierarchies founded on antiblackness result in varying inscriptions on the flesh of Black and Brown women. I encourage us to be aware of overlaps in pop cultural representation—stereotypes abound of the nonwhite woman as sexually insatiable and emotionally excessive, as inscrutible (read: unfeeling/inhuman) and a blank slate for fetishization. All of these serve to render the nonwhite woman a nonperson. To quote Imani Perry:

> Hortense Spillers's theory of the vestibular, Gloria Anzaldúa's borderland theory, and Gayatri Spivak's subaltern are theoretical tools that emerge directly out of the human lacunae of Locke's ideas. That some are left standing either in the vestibule (as in the case of the slave, who is of the plantation household but not fully in it) or at its borders (as in the case of hunted yet desired *atravesados*) or outside yet under the thumb of hegemonic power is written into the idea of liberal subject. [26]

I listen for the transgressive in Goldsberry, Jones, and Soo's performances. I refer to the Original Broadway Cast Recording, the text that generated hype and discussion for fans who could not afford to see the show in person, before the release of the official film version on Disney's streaming platform (Disney+) in 2020. If Fleetwood attends to excess as a performative

[25] Anne Anlin Cheng, *Ornamentalism*. UK: Oxford University Press (2019), p. xii
[26] Imani Perry, *Vexy Thing*. NC: Duke University Press (2018), p. 21

choice in visual mediums, then I consider the sound of excess. On what frequencies, what registers, do women in the vestibular sing?

Angelica: "I love my sister more than anything in this life"

Angelica in *Hamilton* is a woman outside time. Introduced in "The Schuyler Sisters" in Act I, she foresees the Revolution as having democratic potential across gender and class divisions, proclaiming that when she meets author of the Declaration of Independence Thomas Jefferson, "Imma compel him to include women in the sequel!"[27] She leaves the cloisters of her upper-class upbringing to roam the 'realer' streets of pre-industrial New York with her sisters, in search of "a mind at work." When she meets Hamilton, she immediately clocks his intellectual and political potential, even as she recognizes he lacks Old World credentials (money, land, a name with power and influence). She has prophetic insight beyond the constraints of the historical and musical narrative. In later numbers, "Satisfied" (Act I) and "It's Quiet Uptown" (Act II), she breaks the fourth wall and narrates directly to the audience. She represents a point of sexual attraction for Hamilton but defers him to her sister, placing herself on the sidelines, making herself a witness. She is the only female character in the musical who both raps and sings. Kajikawa hears this gendered division as reflective of mainstream rap in the 90s—the decade from which Miranda takes inspiration and which the record industry marketed as predominantly male.[28] However, there is another explanation for why men rap and women sing: in-musical, it serves as an aural indicator of the period separation between the public and private spheres: rap denotes intellect and rhetorical prowess, while song denotes sociality and sentiment. Hip-hop sounds the political arena where men hold power. But rap is also an anachronistic sound, out of time, outside the time of the musical, disturbing our sense of a clear boundary

[27] Miranda, McCarter, p. 44
[28] Kajikawa, "'Young, Scrappy, and Hungry,'" p. 472

between past and present. Angelica's rapped verses in "Satisfied," as I'll discuss momentarily, rupture time as a linear unfolding, a current rushing toward an inevitable telos, instead holding us in the eddies and shoals of memory.

Another temporal displacement: Angelica in the musical is and is not her historical counterpart. Angelica Schuyler Church was the eldest daughter of a prominent Dutch family, whose father served as a general in the Revolutionary War. She maintained a regular correspondence with her brother-in-law Hamilton, but also other political figures such as the Marquis de Lafayette and Thomas Jefferson. Her letters reflect a keen mind with an interest in politics. Miranda, in part due to following cues from Chernow's biography, takes creative liberties with the personality revealed through her surviving documents. Angelica in the musical becomes a proto-feminist, a behind-the-scenes influence on Hamilton's political thought, a force to be reckoned with. She 'gives' Hamilton to her sister Eliza but maintains a flirtatious relationship with him, riding the line of sexual tension until he actually cheats on his wife with Maria Reynolds. In reality, Angelica married John Barker Church, a British businessman, long before she ever met Hamilton. While Chernow suggests an emotional affair between Angelica and Hamilton, there's little textual evidence to support such a claim.[29] Hamilton's letters to her contain fond remarks that might be taken as something romantic—he routinely calls her "my dear" and in one letter chides her for a "most critical *comma*," signing off with what (in absence of the letter that prompted his remark) might be presumed as a similar gesture, "Adieu, ma chere, soeur [Farewell, my dear, sister]."[30] The musical depicts this as a moment of yearning in "Take a Break" in Act II, Hamilton and Angelica staged on concentric turntables traveling in opposite

[29] Ron Chernow, *Alexander Hamilton*, NY: Penguin Books (2005), p. 133
[30] "From Alexander Hamilton to Angelica Church, [6 December 1787]," *Founders Online,* National Archives, last modified June 13, 2018, http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-04-02-0172. [Original source: *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, vol. 4, *January 1787–May 1788*, ed. Harold C. Syrett. New York: Columbia University Press, 1962, pp. 374–376.]

directions, symbolizing their physical distance (Angelica is in London, Hamilton in New York) as well as their diverging lives (Angelica is now a married woman, Hamilton is working as Treasury Secretary). Goldsberry harmonizes with Miranda's Hamilton as he asks, "And there you are an ocean away / Do you have to live an ocean away? / Thoughts of you subside, / Then I get another letter, / And I cannot put the notion away." Later, she references the above cited letter: "I noticed a comma in the middle of a phrase / It changed the meaning, did you intend this? / One stroke and you've consumed my waking days—" Goldsberry spills into the quote ("my dearest, Angelica"), near-breathless as she elides the space between phrases. The orchestra drops out. Hers and Miranda's voices sound intimately close on the album as they almost speak the words to each other. Meanwhile, the historic Hamilton, in the same letter and others, reasserts his familial relationship to Angelica in the same gesture, so that regardless of the intent behind "dearest," there remains a clear boundary in the form of their mutual commitment to her sister. Historic Angelica is fixed in writing, in the past, unable to comment further on her words or explain her choices; whatever we 'know' about her is the ghost that animates her surviving records, via the medium of our own imperfect understanding. Angelica as a musical character is fluid, constantly being rewritten in every production, performance, and playback of the album.

Musical Angelica is a Black woman, who exists and never existed. She is Black in sound: Kajikawa says her rapping "evokes strong female MCs such as Queen Latifah and Lauryn Hill."[31] The original casting call, using pop culture references as shorthand for character types, describes her as a Nikki Minaj, who in 2015 would have signified a woman caught in the crosshairs of media objectification for her stylized presentation while simultaneously taking no shit from her critics and peers.[32] Angelica is Black on the OBCR, as given physical presence

[31] Kajikawa, "'Young, Scrappy, and Hungry,'" p. 472
[32] Jillian Hernandez, *Aesthetics of Excess*. NC: Duke University Press (2020)

through Goldsberry. Her Blackness is a disruption, an interruption, unsettling in the contradictions it raises. She is a Black woman performing the role of a historical white woman who traded in Black bodies.[33] While others have debated the casting of Black actors as Founding Fathers who enslaved Black persons, they gloss over the role that women like Angelica Schuyler Church had in the perpetuation of slavery. Historic Angelica could wield a certain degree of social power because of her class and racial positioning; at the same time, her privilege doesn't negate the real sexism that prevented her from engaging in politics directly. Goldsberry's Angelica does not resolve the imbalances of power that foster oppression. But she is a Black woman who goes beyond the gendered limits of the musical, who puts the narrative on pause to voice her feeling, who waits in the wings for more than a man, for a time when her own ambitions can be realized.

Meditating on the conditions of Blackness, Moten asks, "What is it to be thrown into the story of another's development; and to be thrown into that story as both an interruption of it and as its condition of possibility; and to have that irruption be understood as both an ordering and a disordering movement? And what if one has something like one's own story to tell? One engages, then, in the production of a subplot, *a plot against the plot*, contrapuntal, fantastic, underground…"[34] *Hamilton's* Angelica presents the same problem. She occupies the sidelines, yet she engineers the major relationship that underpins the musical. She helps make the narrative possible. Goldsberry is interposed for a woman whose position as a wealthy, educated socialite depended on the suppression/oppression of Goldsberry's ancestors. Goldsberry, too, makes the narrative possible—not just onstage, or in the recording studio, but as part of an ongoing attempt

[33] Jesse Serfilippi, "Alexander Hamilton's Hidden History As An Enslaver," Schuyler Mansion State Historic Site (2020), https://parks.ny.gov/documents/historic-sites/SchuylerMansionAlexanderHamiltonsHiddenHistoryasanEnslaver.pdf

[34] Fred Moten, *Black and Blur,* NC: Duke University Press (2017), p. 68

to separate the ideals on which the United States was founded from its past and present atrocities. What can be salvaged? What work is happening in the margins, where the so-called subaltern speaks? Goldsberry-as-Angelica opens up a subplot that works against the plot: she introduces something counter to the trajectory of the bootstraps narrative, prioritizing her relationship with her sister above the individualism that drives Hamilton to success and, later, to death.

This subplot appears relatively early on, in a moment that (dis)ruptures both storied and historical time. Angelica's number, "Satisfied," mirrors the preceding "Helpless," where we witness the starry-eyed Eliza Schuyler fall in love with (and marry) General Washington's "right hand man." "Satisfied" then opens with Angelica giving the toast at her sister's wedding. As she raises her glass with the invocation, "May you always be satisfied," the scene *rewinds, rewinds*: Angelica stands alone while the choreography flows in reverse, until the other actors have returned to their places at the start of the previous number. Pre-recorded samples of "Helpless" play in looped fragments, at once recalling and distorting what we just heard. "I remember that night—" Angelica starts and stops and starts again, like a scratched record. Caught in the loop of remembrance, she brings us with her where we've already been. In doing so, she wrests control of the meta-narration from Burr, in both acts—her love has nothing to do with his regret over Hamilton's death. Yet what (*when*) exactly is Angelica remembering? This moment never happened. Historical Angelica encountered Hamilton after both of them were married to their respective spouses, so any relationship between them beyond a mutual (familial) affection was never a real possibility. Historical Angelica eloped with John Barker Church, not out of obligation but some other impulse, romance or adventure or the need to buck social expectations.[35] "Satisfied" is a total fiction, but its fiction opens a route into an alternative

[35] UVA Library, "The Angelica Church Archive [Exhibit]," co-curated by Michael Plunkett and Lucie Wall Stylianopoulos (1996), https://explore.lib.virginia.edu/exhibits/show/church

mythos, a context where *what might have been* has equal or greater power to the incomplete, inequitable record of *what actually happened*.

What alternative, what subplot, does "Satisfied" open? Relationality as practice, as praxis, an action to be taken again and again in consideration of who we are to each other. When Angelica initially encounters Hamilton, she tries to locate him within the social hierarchy she knows best, one where surnames indicate importance and marriage as a tool consolidates wealth, power, and influence among elite families. Hamilton evades her attempts to categorize him ("Where's your family from?" / "Unimportant, there's a million things I haven't done, but just you wait…"), yet his evasion implicates him, as Angelica observes in an aside to the audience: "He's penniless, he's flying by the seat of his pants." Angelica's attraction to him overrides concerns about his socioeconomic position. (It goes unsaid but the musical implies that Hamilton's closeness to Washington gives him some social advantage—if the revolutionaries win, he's poised to be involved in the politics of their new nation.) However, when she realizes that her sister is also smitten by Hamilton, she formulates her "three fundamental truths," a lawyerly argument in defense of the choice she both is going to make and has already made. The first two points are rapped: in line with the separation between rhetoric and sentiment, Angelica rationalizes her decision to let Eliza pursue Hamilton ("I'm a girl in a world in which / my only job is to marry rich. / My father has no sons so I'm the one / who has to social climb for one"[36]), as well as Hamilton's attraction to her ("He's after me 'cuz I'm a Schuyler sister, / That elevates his status, I'd / have to be naive to set that aside…"). She frames hers and Hamilton's motives in economic terms. He intrigues her *in spite of* the duties she feels as eldest child, but she

[36] Miranda, McCarter, p. 83. This detail is also a fiction. Schuyler had multiple sons, and while daughters could and did secure familial alliances, their birth order did not necessarily dictate weighted responsibility (that is, each of the Schuyler daughters would have been expected to marry a respectable young man who might further secure their social position, but at the same time, they would propagate their husband's familial name).

understands her role is to secure a good match for the Schuylers, not to give in to personal desire. Likewise, she believes Hamilton's attraction is genuine, but she also recognizes the advantages he stands to gain through her. While Angelica acknowledges her feelings in both verses ("That doesn't mean I want him any less" / "Nice going, Angelica, he was right, you will never be satisfied"), she uses the musical's language for political argumentation in order to make her points and, in doing so, she demonstrates her rhetorical skill as being on par with any of the male characters. Goldsberry stresses plosives and intra-syllabic rhymes while delivering some of the fastest lines in the musical. At the same time, she sustains breath to sing certain words or phrases, emphasizing their importance ("I introduce him to *Eliza,* now *that's* his bride"). In the third verse, where Angelica delivers her strongest point against pursuing Hamilton, she moves away from rap and closer to song, as she moves from economic language to one of sentiment, of sisterly devotion.

> **Angelica:** I know my sister like I know my own mind,
>
> You will never find anyone as trusting or as kind,
>
> If I tell her that I love him, she'd be silently resigned,
>
> He'd be mine,
>
> She would say, "I'm fine."
>
> **Company:** She'd be lying.

Angelica identifies Eliza as separate from the sociopolitical sphere she has learned to navigate as eldest. Unlike Angelica, "the oldest and the wittiest," the one embroiled in the "insidious" gossip of the New York elite, Eliza is recognized (at least in her sister's estimation) for her kindness, for her ability to know and be known. None of these qualities are valuable in a society built on patriarchal logic, except maybe as 'feminine' graces for a would-be wife and mother. But Eliza's

personhood, her mode of Being, changes the course of the narrative, diverts it by subtle means away from one that solely promotes ambition and individualism at the cost of all else. Angelica makes the selfless gesture to introduce her sister to Hamilton, to cede him to Eliza, because she anticipates Eliza's willingness to sacrifice her own desire. Her sister takes precedence—above a potential match that would place Angelica within another hierarchical arrangement (from being subject under her father to under a husband), above her duties as a Schuyler daughter, above her interest in positioning herself as close to the pulse of the nation's politics as possible.

Angelica's choice does not undo her attraction to Hamilton. She confides that much to us—the audience she breaks the fourth wall to acknowledge, the only ones who can hear her as "a world-class intellect in a world that does not allow her to flex it."[37] Appended to her declaration of her sister's trust, she admits, "But when I fantasize at night, / it's Alexander's eyes / As I romanticize / what might have been…" By ceding Hamilton to Eliza, Angelica moves to the margins of the narrative, becoming a 'forbidden' female figure who Hamilton can gaze upon but never touch—a position reflected in the number's final bit of choreography, where Hamilton looks back from escorting his newlywed bride offstage to see Angelica, standing alone. Her new position renders her both "abject and desirable," a Black woman heard as beautiful and brilliant, who becomes marginalized when she is no longer sexually available.[38] (When she becomes *excess*, excessive, unnecessary to the male-dominated plot.)

That shift highlights the gendered and racialized hierarchy that displaces Angelica as a historic figure, as a character, and as a Black woman in a multiracial cast. Yet where her relation to Hamilton has changed, her relationship with Eliza remains constant, founded on what she frames as a mutual understanding and affection. Theirs is a more horizontal relationship, since it

[37] Miranda, McCarter, p. 83
[38] Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision*, p. 118

doesn't involve the same power dynamics on which Angelica and Hamilton's flirtations depend. While there are issues of colorism with regard to the production's casting choices, as I'll discuss later, Angelica and Eliza as characters occupy a similar social space, as women from an upper-class family whose social and financial privilege doesn't erase their gendered disadvantages. As a result, Angelica can freely gesture to her love for her sister without placing conditionals on that action. Spillers argues that such horizontal relations (reaching across, rather than up or down) can be a means to resist further reiterations of oppressive hierarchies.[39] Where vertical relations encourage strife, prioritizing the individual above the collective, a horizontal view allows us to "look around, look around" and form communities with others, including those categorized as excess, vestibular, or across borders.[40] As Angelica's choice not to pursue Hamilton is framed as both deliberate and generous: although it puts her in a tenuous position with regard to her new brother-in-law (desirable but untouchable), it also proves her to be a person who values familial ties ("I love my sister more than anything in this life") over the idea of an exceptional genius ("I'm looking for a mind at work"). In this way, she poses a critique of the masculinist system that excludes her, while lauding the sisterhood that includes her even in the bonds of matrimony.

Maria: "Please don't leave me with him helpless"

There are limits on the critique that Angelica presents. The most obvious one is that she remains a subplot, never brought fully into the main narrative; it isn't until the final number that the musical's singular focus on Hamilton is reframed as the perspective of his widowed wife, a shift enabled by Angelica's metanarrative. Much of the Founders' so-called achievements go uncriticized, from the ratification of the Constitution (which created a centralized federal

[39] Hortense Spillers, "The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual." *boundaries 2*, Vol. 21 No. 3 (Fall 1994), p. 65-116
[40] Miranda, p. 44

government at the cost of the continued enslavement of African-Americans) to Washington's legacy as the first American president (also made possible through institutional slavery, both in a national and a personal sense) to the establishment of 'The United States of America' as a settler-colonial nation. What Angelica introduces does not undo the violences enacted and enabled by her brother-in-law and his political colleagues, in part because she is invested in the same systems.[41] Her vision is limited: which women does she intend for Jefferson to include in "the sequel" to his Declaration? What freedom can be had in becoming part of the nationalist project that might benefit either from one's subjugation or one's inclusion? How does that project shift its language, its narrative, to better accomplish its goals, which might not have changed all that much in the last 200 years? The question becomes not simply *whose* stories are told, but *how*.

Enter Maria Reynolds.

If Angelica disrupts *Hamilton*'s emphasis on Great Men, then Maria embodies a sharp return to a patriarchal logic vis-a-vis respectability politics. Per the casting call, she is framed as a "seductress," the catalyst for Hamilton's professional downfall.[42] She has one number, a duet in Act II with Hamilton, though she appears as a silent spectator in subsequent numbers. Taking its narrative cues from Hamilton's 'Reynolds Pamphlet,' published in 1797 in response to accusations of embezzlement during his tenure as Treasury Secretary, "Say No To This" relays the historical events as follows: Hamilton, overworked and tired from trying to get Congressional support for his national bank, encountered Maria Reynolds as a young woman who begged him for money to escape domestic violence. Ever the gentleman, Hamilton loaned her some cash and

[41] Audre Lorde: "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house." *Sister, Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. NY: Penguin Random House (1984)
[42] "Audition for *Hamilton* at the Richard Rodgers Theater,"
https://www.broadwayworld.com/equity-audition/HAMILTON-Richard-Rodgers-Theatre-2015-10518

offered to walk her home. There, Maria "let her legs spread" and Hamilton, lonely and horny since his wife was visiting her parents upstate for the summer, succumbed to temptation. However, the affair—which would continue on and off for a year—turns out to be a scheme on the part of Maria's husband, James Reynolds, who blackmails Hamilton for money on the threat of making said affair public. Devastated by the prospect of his beloved wife finding out, and drawn to Maria's sexualized pathos, Hamilton pays Reynolds with the admonition, "nobody needs to know." The irony, of course, is that everyone knows—the audience, and later the in-musical nation—via Hamilton's public recounting. That knowing will have direct repercussions on both Hamilton and Maria, but where we chart the former's life in the aftermath, the latter fades into the background ensemble after a single number.

Throughout "Say No To This," Maria exists as a character, a caricature, who only speaks when Hamilton prefaces her lines with "she said." She is one woman's performance of the fictionalized Hamilton's version of Miranda's iteration of Chernow's interpretation of the historic Hamilton's characterization of the historic Maria Reynolds *three years after* their affair had ended. In addition, the purpose of the original Reynolds Pamphlet was to explain inconsistencies in Hamilton's private financial records that led to the accusation of embezzling government funds, without casting doubt on his competence or honor as a public figure. Hamilton could not appear overly foolish for being hoodwinked by the Reynolds couple, which meant casting them as villains with base motivations (money, power) who took advantage of his nobler sentiments (pity, charity, affection). Nevermind that he might have given her money without getting anything in return, or helped her escape her abuser (as his rival Aaron Burr did when he aided Maria in obtaining a divorce from James with full custody of her daughter).[43] This is all to say

[43] Nancy Isenberg, *Fallen Founder: The Life of Aaron Burr*. Penguin; NY (2004), p. 121

that the surviving record of what happened between the historic Hamilton and Maria Reynolds is heavily biased in Hamilton's favor.

Yet Maria refuses to be easily dismissed. The actress who portrays her on the OBCR, Jasmine Cephas Jones, treats her neither as a femme fatale nor as a woman duped by her husband's schemes. When Hamilton first introduces Maria, Jones sings with an exaggerated pathos, her drawled vowels a huskier version of the kid sister she plays in Act I. Most of the allies from Act I reappear in Act II as enemies, the dual-casting rendering familiar faces in a new light. But Jones maintains a tenuous connection to her Act I character via her performance choices, beckoning us to hear Maria Reynolds with the same sympathetic ear we regarded Peggy Schuyler. Maria, too, is a young woman being pulled along by currents she can't control, can only divert in minor ways for better or worse. When Hamilton confronts Maria about her husband's blackmail, she alternately denies knowing about his scheme, protests her own moral ignorance, and begs for Hamilton not to abandon her to her abuser. All of these might be true. None of them might be true. Her words are statements Hamilton alleges Maria made to him over the course of their affair.[44]

> **Hamilton:** I hid the letter and I raced to her place
>
> Screamed, "How could you?" In her face, she said
>
> **Maria:** No, sir
>
> **Hamilton:** Half dressed, apologetic, a mess, she looked pathetic, she cried
>
> **Maria:** Please don't go, sir
>
> **Hamilton:** So was your whole story a setup?
>
> **Maria:** I don't know about any letter

[44] ed. Joanne Freeman, *The Essential Hamilton: Letters and Other Writings*. Library of America; NY (2017), pp. 293-219

(**Hamilton:** stop crying God dammit, get up)

I didn't know any better

(**Hamilton:** I am ruined)

Please don't leave me with him helpless

(**Hamilton:** I am helpless how could I do this?)

Just give him what he wants and you can have me

(**Hamilton:** I don't want you, I don't want you)

Whatever you want, if you pay

You can stay

Here Maria evades Hamilton's narration ("she said"), wresting momentary control from him via sheer vocal power. Where Miranda spits out consonants, Jones elongates vowels to encompass multiple syllabus with ornate melismas. Over the course of the verse, a shift occurs: we go from Miranda being the primary speaker, with Jones singing brief responses, to Jones being the aural focal point, with Miranda interjecting. Jones belts out the last line—"you can *staaaaay*"—pushing higher in pitch and volume on the tail end of the phrase. This verse builds to the final iteration of the chorus ("Lord, show me how to say no to this"), where the ensemble (serving Greek chorus energy) shouts *no!* while Hamilton moans and cries *yes* in ecstatic pleasure as Maria spirals into vocal riffs. Maybe the intention, maybe the effect, of Maria vocally overwhelming Hamilton is that, aurally as well as visually, he succumbs to temptation—a sonic framing that once again shifts the blame for his infidelity to Maria. Like Angelica, Maria is played by a Black actress; like Angelica, Maria is sonically Black, based on R&B singers who trained in Gospel choirs and church services. And, (un)like Angelica, Maria is fungible: a Black woman who represents a point of sexual interest, who can be shunted aside or offered as a

scapegoat when no longer desirable. Hamilton falls for her alleged grift because, in his words, his wife and sister-in-law are unavailable. But where Angelica can maintain a respectable connection to Hamilton via familial goodwill, and where Angelica has wealth and social status to buoy her through a patriarchal world, Maria is trapped between two men—a powerful politician who should know better than to get involved in a scandal, and an abusive husband who uses her body as another means to quick cash. For a moment, she vocally rises above them, but only to sell herself as an object, never a subject.

Eliza: "Look around, look around, at how lucky we are to be alive right now"

Who is the subject of *Hamilton: An American Musical*? According to the opening number, it's Alexander, "a bastard, orphan, son of a whore," a war hero, first Treasury Secretary of a nascent nation. But in the final number, his wife Eliza takes center stage. Where, over the course of two acts, Hamilton strives for a legacy, something for which he can be remembered, at the last moment the musical flips the script and posits that legacy is less about grandiose deeds and more about "who remembers your name, who keeps your flame, who tells your story?" That person, for *Hamilton*, is Eliza. She is the reason that the musical exists: after her husband's death, she collected and preserved his papers, she championed him as a significant figure in America's founding, and she performed political and social work in his memory. In stepping forward, in singing "I put myself back in the narrative," Eliza assumes the meta-narrative control that has actually been hers all along. And in doing so, she reveals herself as both author and subject. She objects to objectification, eludes being categorized as a "thing," whether that thing is *woman, wife, mother, widow.*

"Thingness" is what Asian-American studies scholar Anne Anlin Cheng identifies as the shared condition of the Black woman and the yellow woman. ('Yellow' encompasses Asian

immigrants across nationalities, a slur reclaimed as a common identity marker, but Cheng mostly uses it in reference to East Asian subjects.) She claims, "Simultaneously consecrated and desecrated as an inherently aesthetic object, the yellow woman calls for a theorization of persons and things that considers a human ontology inextricable from synthetic extensions, art, and commodity."[45] *Commodification* is key here, the point at which Cheng draws parallel lines between Black flesh as fungible and the yellow woman as ornament, both artificial categories based on the dehumanization of an entire group.[46] That point of comparison also becomes a point of contrast, as Cheng recognizes the different historical experiences of Black and Asian women in America. Similar to the Black woman, the yellow woman is posed as an eternal outsider, physiologically marked as Other via her racialized features, and vulnerable to bodily exploitation for labor (maternal and material). Dislocated, dispossessed, disenfranchised. Of course, the yellow woman does not have the same experience of transatlantic passage and chattel slavery, and in fact the yellow woman has been used as a prop for antiblackness, via the 'model minority' myth that pits minority groups against each other for the unlikely reward of being recognized as white-adjacent. For that very reason, Cheng argues that the goal should not be to move from 'object' to 'human,' because such a goal obscures the ways that 'human' is yet another artificial categorization. Her aim is neither to equivocate Black and Asian experiences in America, nor to establish some kind of 'oppression olympics' between marginalized groups; rather, she draws parallels between the Black and yellow woman to highlight their common interest in dismantling the white supremacist, patriarchal, capitalist system that marks them as inhuman, as (to recall Fleetwood) excess flesh.

The yellow woman, then, presents a possible ally for Black women, a point for coalition

[45] Cheng, p. 2
[46] Alexander G Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*. Duke University Press; NC (2014), p. 5

building across racial as well as gendered lines. I consider *coalition* in relation to *Hamilton*'s race-conscious casting, particularly in relation to Eliza as character and meta-narrator. Actress Phillipa Soo (second-generation Chinese-American on her father's side) originated the role in workshops and served as principal Eliza during the Off-Broadway and 2015-2016 Broadway productions. She also featured on the OBCR. As with her co-stars Goldsberry and Jones, Soo's visibility in press releases, cast interviews, and photo shoots, sometimes in period costume from the show, elided the distance between actress and character.[47] The trio of women were referred to as 'The Schuyler Sisters' when they appeared together, such as when they sang "America, The Beautiful" at the Super Bowl LI Pre-Kick show.[48] Soo's presence refigured the Schuyler Sisters as a multiracial group rather than an all-Black trio.[49] Her Eliza, the one who was disseminated via a Grammy-award winning album that topped charts, who set the tone for all the Elizas to come, can be visually read as Asian, even as she's audibly *nonblack* in the sonic context. With the exception of "Helpless," her first solo, Eliza is marked by her exclusion from the hip-hop, jazz, and gospel that drive the rest of the cast.[50] Or rather, hers is a music so far removed in time and style from modern sonic indicators of Blackness that she sounds, by default, 'white,' as the reification of a Broadway sound has become synonymous with white composers and majority-white audiences. Soo sings in a silvery, clear soprano typical of female leads in

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[47] Gina Mei, "Here Are Some Incredible Photos of the *Hamilton* Cast In Honor of Their Big Night," *Cosmopolitan*, https://www.cosmopolitan.com/entertainment/news/a59806/exclusive-hamilton-photos-tony-awards/ (13 June 2016)

[48] Olivia Clement, "Hamilton Schuyler Sisters Wow At Super Bowl," *Playbill*, https://playbill.com/article/hamilton-schuyler-sisters-wow-at-the-super-bowl (5 Feb. 2017)

[49] What would have been the implications of an all-Black trio? At very least, such casting might have given a visual parallel to the women's sonic similarity to R&B groups like Destiny's Child, which often originated with sisters and/or close friends. It would have also meant the representation of a Nuyorican/Black relationship onstage, which for some might have recalled alliances between radical Black and PR groups in the late 60s.

[50] "Helpless" borrows its beat and theme from Beyonce's "Countdown." This reference works both as love song and as foreshadowing to Hamilton's affair (establishing a sonic parallel between Beyonce/Jay Z and Eliza/Alexander)

megamusicals, and Eliza's numbers evoke the orchestrated sounds of Sondheim and Webber, the brass and rhythm sections subdued so that lyric strings, keyboard, and vocals can take the foreground.

Eliza's sonic difference operates on multiple registers. On one hand, it signals assimilation into a certain classed performance of American identity. Soo's Eliza evokes the version of 'immigrant-realizes-the-American-Dream' that the musical promotes, via Soo's embodiment as Chinese-American and the narrative framing around her joining the *Hamilton* cast.[51] But she also highlights the gendered expectations placed on women of color versus their male counterparts. These expectations appear in the peripheries of *Hamilton*: Eliza is supposed to get married to a decent husband and have children with him; she is supposed to support her husband's career and value his public name above his private actions; she is supposed to remain quiet, resolute, patient, and kind despite taking on the bulk of the household and childcare duties, despite her husband's publicized affair, despite her son's untimely death. Her relegation to the domestic sphere explains in part her almost exclusively Broadway sound—per the gendered division between hip-hop and song discussed earlier, she is denied the space to engage in more rhetorical forms of speech. Hence Eliza's appeals to her husband operate on sentiment: for example, her insistence that he abandon the war effort in "That Would Be Enough" in order to spend time with her and their unborn child, or her pleas for him to set work aside and prioritize their family in "Non-Stop" and "Take a Break." Unlike Angelica, who transgresses the lines between personal and public discourse, Eliza doesn't overtly challenge her musical positioning. "I have never been the type to try and grab the spotlight," she sings in "Helpless," and that line frames her as the ideal partner for Hamilton, the restrained complement to his reckless ambition.

[51] Miranda, McCarter, pp. 71-72: "Lin liked Pippa for the role because audiences instantly and instinctively warmed to her, just as Eliza's contemporaries had done."

Her (seeming) passiveness is a desirable trait.[52]

On the other hand, Eliza's sound as feminine, as anti-aspirational, places her in opposition to *Hamilton*'s male-centered individualism. Parallel to the rappers that inspired Miranda's approach to the character, Hamilton promotes the hustle, the grind, the desire for personal achievement at any cost, even his closest relationships. Despite the people who buoy him through his career (the denizens of St. Croix who funded his trip to New York, his revolutionary friends, the Schuylers, Washington), Hamilton describes his ascension to political power as "*I* wrote my way out" ("Hurricane," emphasis mine), as though self-determination alone were the reason he survived poverty, natural disaster, and war. His is a bootstraps narrative insofar as he himself fails to recognize the people and systems that enabled him to live. Even then, his desire for a legacy depends on others remembering him and circulating that memory so he can have some kind of afterlife. His musical style reflects the priorities of gangsta rap, with self-referential monologues ("My Shot"), named callouts of his political opponents ("Cabinet Battle 1"), and usage of clever wordplay to demonstrate intellectual superiority ("Cabinet Battle 2"); these, in turn, are elements in a genre-specific performance of a masculinity built on impressive actions, name-recognition, and personal honor.[53] Meanwhile, Eliza has no need or desire for the upward mobility that her husband pursues: in "That Would Be Enough," she tells him, "We don't need a legacy, we don't need money," arguing that she would be satisfied with them simply getting to share a life together. Her reveal as meta-narrator is less the conclusion of a character arc (the girl who never wanted the spotlight becoming the woman who commands the stage) than another iteration of the care she's shown her husband throughout the musical. Her

[52] Cheng identifies restraint and composure as "desirable" qualities in the yellow woman because they denote her as a synthetic ornament for others to fetishize, adopt, or discard at will.
[53] "Ten Duel Commandments" takes its name from the gangsta classic, "Ten Crack Commandments," with the intention that the audience recognize there were rules to duels as part of a larger code of honor. Joanne Freeman discusses this in-depth in her book *Affairs of Honor*

care extends to others, too: as she details in "Who Lives, Who Dies," after her husband's death, she interviews his fellow soldiers from the war, she campaigns against slavery as an institution, and she establishes "the first private orphanage in New York City." She fosters relationships, makes connections. Where Hamilton strives for originality as a self-proclaimed genius, Eliza borrows ideas and phrases from others—her refrain "look around, look around, at how lucky we are to be alive right now," is first sung by Angelica in "The Schuyler Sisters," though Eliza adopts and adapts it to her own values. "Helpless" gives her a brief moment to flex with space for vocal improvisation in the bridge, but otherwise Eliza's numbers don't feature flashy melismas or impossibly high notes, instead relying on a quiet build toward an emotional climax. She presents a sonic and ideological contrast to Hamilton.

Yet Eliza gets the final word. In the concluding number, yes. But she also exercises a kind of narrative agency in "Burn," where she deliberately destroys her correspondence to her husband in response to his publicized affair with Maria Reynolds. "I'm erasing myself from the narrative," she sings. "Let future historians wonder how Eliza reacted when you broke her heart…" We know about Eliza Hamilton's letters through her husband's references to their correspondence; however, none of the physical documents have survived, as it was uncommon for such personal writings to be archived unless by a surviving family member (i.e., John Adams' preservation of Abigail's letters after her death). Miranda reframes Eliza's absence from a logocentric discipline as a choice, a denial of others dissecting and categorizing her experiences. She rejects participation in "the narrative," insofar as it signifies Hamilton's hunger for recognition from a system that limits her own role to *scorned wife*. Likewise, when she steps forward in "Who Lives, Who Dies," she makes a deliberate choice: "I put myself back in the narrative." She archives her husband's papers, she gives him an afterlife in remembrance, and

she takes action beyond his limited political scope, in one sense spending the rest of her life working *against* the effects of a capitalist government he helped establish (poverty, enslavement, homelessness). If *Hamilton* exists as a result of her efforts, then she assumes an authorial role, not strictly subject to either Hamilton or Miranda. In that sense, Eliza evades the 'memory keeper' stereotype to which nonwhite women are sometimes reduced, as though the Black or yellow woman were a vessel for men's stories—or to reverse the metaphor, the shell in which the ghost resides.

Instead, "Who Lives, Who Dies" gives Eliza a tacit benediction for her authorial stance. Her attention to relationships is linked to survival—her own and others—where her husband's individualism results in senseless death. This moment, where Eliza steps out of time to address the audience, might be heard as a mirror to "Satisfied": Angelica breaks the fourth wall to pose a critique, and Eliza turns that critique into praxis, borrowing and expanding on her older sister's ideas as she always has. Her call to "look around" is similar to what Imani Perry terms the "call to curate." Perry explains, "Curatorial practices are deliberate ways to be in relation to others in our midst—other people, but also other life forms, artifacts, and knowledge—with the understanding that we are being made as well as *being* in that process."[54] Eliza curates more than her husband's papers: she curates community, beyond and across times.

[54] Perry, p. 231

Chapter Two
"Now Blossoming Into a New Life": A Fantastical Russia as the Site for Black Girlhood in *Natasha, Pierre, and the Great Comet of 1812* (2016)

Natasha, Pierre, and the Great Comet of 1812 made its Broadway debut in November 2016, amid the upheaval of an election that made Republican candidate Donald J. Trump America's 45th president. Based on a 70-page excerpt from Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, *The Great Comet* offered an escape from the grim political climate via the glitter and gossip of the bourgeoisie in pre-revolutionary Russia. The story centers on Natasha Rostova, a young girl making her social debut in Moscow under the supervision of her aunt and cousin. Although engaged to a man fighting in the war against Napoleon, Natasha falls in love with the dashing Anatole Kuragin, causing a scandal among her family and peers. However, her social downfall is also her emotional maturation, and the musical ends on a hopeful note, as the epilogue skips several years into the future to offer us a glimpse of Natasha married to the quiet and thoughtful Pierre. *The Great Comet* began as an immersive production at Ars Nova in 2012, but it expanded during its Off-Broadway run at the American Repertory Theatre into the proscenium stage that would become a feature of its Broadway version. Director Rachel Chavkin and set designer Mimi Lien staged the Imperial Theater to mimic a Russian club, with tiers of onstage seating for audience members to sit among the cast. Art Deco inspired set pieces signaled modern luxury: gleaming metal rails around winding staircases, floors patterned with golden geometric designs, starburst chandeliers making an electric night sky. Sprawling but intimate, much like Tolstoy's work. *The Great Comet* was well-received by critics. Charles Isherwood called it "the most

innovative and the best new musical to open on Broadway since *Hamilton*."[55] It was nominated for 12 Tony Awards in 2017, winning Best Scenic Design and Best Lighting Design in a Musical.

One of *Comet*'s features that prompted comparison to *Hamilton* was the production's 'colorblind' casting. In the review cited above, Isherwood claims that *The Great Comet* "shares with *Hamilton* a willingness to refract a historical period through a contemporary lens." He then proceeds to describe composer and playwright Dave Malloy's approach to the score, which elsewhere has been described as "electropop opera."[56] However, while it goes unstated, *Comet*'s use of nonwhite actors in the roles of characters Tolstoy certainly envisioned as white is no doubt part of its historical refraction. But where *Hamilton* cast nonwhite actors as the Founding Fathers to make a political statement about racial inclusion in a so-called democracy, *Comet* adhered to the traditional function of colorblind casting—making more roles available to nonwhite actors. Organizations such as the Non-Traditional Casting Project aimed to get people of color onstage, in mainstream productions, rather than pigeonholing them based on assumed racial and ethnic experiences.[57] Of course, the push for greater representation of marginalized communities began as—and remains—a political goal. But as Brandi Wilkins Catanese discusses in *The Problem of the Color[blind]*, colorblind casting as a practice does not inherently dismantle theater's racial hierarchies; in fact, she argues that its uncritical deployment recenters whiteness as neutral and obscures the vibrant realities of nonwhite cultures.

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[55] Charles Isherwood, "Review: 'Natasha, Pierre, and the Great Comet of 1812' on the Heels of 'Hamilton,'" *The New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/15/theater/natasha-pierre-and-the-great-comet-of-1812-review.html?_r=0 14 Nov. 2016

[56] David Clarke, "BWW CD Reviews: 'Natasha, Pierre, and the Great Comet of 1812' is Astonishingly Complex," *Broadway World*. https://www.broadwayworld.com/article/BWW-CD-Reviews-NATASHA-PIERRE-AND-THE-GREAT-COMET-OF-1812-Original-Cast-Album-is-Astonishingly-Complex-20131222 22 Dec. 2013

[57] Pao, pp. 3-4

Critics praised Black actress Denée Benton for her Broadway debut as Natasha. Apart from Isherwood's implicit mention of her presence as ahistorical, none of them commented on her race. In fact, the person who most often considered Natasha through a lens of race was Benton: in a *New York Times* profile piece from 2017 Benton spoke about the limitations placed on Black female actors by the film and theater industries. Even then, the NYT journalist skirted around the issue of racialized typecasting: "[Benton] knows that most people don't automatically envision women like her for lead roles."[58] *Women like her*. Dark-skinned women? Black sopranos? *Lead roles*. Presumably Soloski means 'lead roles that otherwise signal a certain kind of white woman,' because Black women on Broadway have been playing leads in musicals that center on Black pain for decades, from *Porgy and Bess* (1935) to *Caroline, or Change* (2004). But Black women don't often play the ingenue, the princess, the starry-eyed girl. Benton mentions this in the NYT piece, with Brandy in the 1997 Disney *Cinderella* being the exception for her growing up. *The Great Comet* received the 2017 Extraordinary Excellence in Diversity on Broadway Award, but critics and interviews seemed reluctant to talk about race in the show apart from a tacit approval that Malloy and Chavkin allowed nonwhite actors into the main cast.[59] Only later, when the show attracted controversy for cutting short *Hamilton*-alum Okieriete Onaodowan's run as Pierre, did the conversation around *The Great Comet* and race gain traction—and only in the context of Onaodowan's contract, as part of a larger discussion on Blackness as disposable in media.

I'll come back to the issue of Onaodowan's departure from the show. In this chapter, however, I want to focus on Benton's Natasha as one possible representation of Black girlhood.

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[58] Alexis Soloski, "Denée Benton, Tony Nominee, Embraces Her Inner Natasha," *The New York Times*. 11 May 2017

[59] editorial staff, "*A Doll House, Part 2, Come From Away, The Great Comet* Receive Equity Diversity Award," *Theater Mania*. https://www.theatermania.com/broadway/news/equity-diversity-award-recipients-2017_81530.html 22 June 2017

While critics ignored Benton's race in reviews, Benton clearly understood her performance of Natasha as encompassing her Blackness. Her conversation with Soloski, even paraphrased, articulates a desire for more nuanced representations of the Black female experience, because dominant stereotypes exclude her and others as 'not Black enough.' In particular, her light soprano doesn't conform to industry expectations, which equate Blackness with Gospel and R&B vocal types. Benton's voice is what got her the role as Natasha: quoted in the Soloski piece, Malloy said that casting was searching for someone who could "be the classical soprano and do the nasty, biting, belting thing." Yet despite not having the stereotypical 'Black voice,' Benton's performance was still racialized in obscure terms via references to her "intuition" and "expressiveness" by directors, co-stars, and critics. If we stop ignoring her Blackness, then how might that inform our reading of her performance? What does it mean for the Tolstoy character Natasha Rostova—a member of the Russian bourgeoisie, someone with incredible socioeconomic privilege who is also a young woman limited by the sexist constraints of the world she inhabits—to be Black?

"Chandeliers and caviar, the war can't touch us here!"

Before examining Benton's performance, however, I want to consider the mechanics that make a colorblind adaptation of an excerpt from *War and Peace* possible. Unlike *Hamilton*, where the gap between what the audience knows as historical fact and what they witness onstage serves as its own political statement, *Great Comet* does not encourage audiences to mull on its anachronism. In fact, the production sonically and visually works to disorient, with its pastiche of period references. Malloy swings from a Russian folk-inspired musical ensemble number in "The Prologue" to EDM boosted bass thrum in "The Opera." The main characters have aural signatures, some of them quite distinct: Hélène (Anatole's sister and Pierre's wife) slinks over

pitches and swings through syncopations in a proto-jazz, Anatole makes his dramatic entrance to electronica, and Sonya croons like an indie pop singer (think Regina Spektor or Fiona Apple). When everyone is involved in a big number such as "Letters" or "The Abduction," the effect of their combined styles can be chaotic. (On the flip side, the women's solos, "No One Else" and "Sonya Alone," feel very intimate in comparison.) The proscenium stage recreates the 'immersive' aspect of the Ars Nova production, where actors literally moved among audience members seated at tables, but it also contributes to the show's sprawl, with no seat truly ideal for viewing all the action. (During *Comet*'s run, *Playbill* made a seating chart based on which spots offered the best view of certain numbers.[60]) None of the costumes are period accurate to 1810s Russia, nor are they accurate to the Art Deco era, with the men in waistcoats and military-esque uniforms and the women in metallic slip dresses that teeter between regency and flapper. Early on in Act I, Pierre laments that he isn't fighting in the war, instead spending "hours at my screen."[61] Pierre also plays an upright piano, as well as an accordion, an instrument that wouldn't be available in Russia for another twenty years. Where are we? *When* are we for that matter? "In nineteenth century Russia," the cast insists at the top of Act II, but that isn't entirely true. The Russia of *Great Comet* is less a fixed, historical setting than a fluid, fantastical one. I propose that Russia as it appears in *Comet* is not intended to evoke the place where Tolstoy set his work. Rather, 'Russia' signals an Otherworld, somewhere these disparate elements aren't out of place/time.

Russia has long existed in the Western imagination as a shadow self, a bogeyman. It has also represented a site for potential alternative to American capitalist imperialism. In the 1960s

[60] Playbill staff, "Where Should You Sit to See 'Natasha, Pierre, and the Great Comet of 1812'?" https://playbill.com/article/where-should-you-sit-to-see-natasha-pierre-the-great-comet-of-1812 (18 May 2017)

[61] ed. Steven Suskin and Dave Malloy, *The Great Comet: The Journey of a New Musical to Broadway*. NY: Union Square & Co. (2016): this is a holdover from a version of the lyrics that included more references to modern tech

groups such as the Black Panthers and the Young Lords cited Lenin and referred to Russia as an example of praxis: given that the Soviet Union also acted as a colonial hyperpower extending into Eastern Europe and West Asia, not to mention its involvement in Middle Eastern and South American governments, their employment of the USSR as a counterpoint in discussions of American racism as a systemic issue seems to be a rhetorical choice.[62] Aligning themselves with a communist nation was more a stance against the so-called democracy that the United States sought to export than it was an endorsement of the USSR. Similarly, Audre Lorde's "Notes from a Trip to Russia," a collection of journal entries from when she was invited to the Union of Soviet African-Asian Writers Conference in 1976, presents Russia as a site where certain ever-present anxieties of the United States are absent. "There was in [a stranger's] eyes absolutely no look of rancor," Lorde marvels. "I thought with a quick shock how a certain tension in glances between American Black and white people is taken for granted."[63] Later, as she describes the landscape, she muses that "Everything looks massive, bigger, in Russia. The roads are wider, the trains longer, the buildings bigger. The ceilings are higher. Everything seems to be on a larger scale."[64] While she doesn't idealize Russia—she acknowledges the tension between the Soviet Union and the Uzbeks, for example—Lorde contrasts her experience there with her life in the U.S., and Russia in comparison becomes a place where she doesn't exist in constant, sustained terror. "I have no reason to believe that Russia is a free society," she admits in her final entry. But she observes that bread is cheap, that healthcare is accessible, that many people are literate and well-read despite censorship. For all its problems, Russia in her account

[62] Johanna Fernández, *The Young Lords: A Radical History.* UNC Press; Chapel Hill, NC (2020)
[63] Audre Lorde, "Notes from a Trip to Russia," *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Penguin Random House (1986)
[64] ibid

has reminded her that the anti-blackness, poverty, and heterosexism she faces in the U.S. are not inevitable.

None of this is meant to imply that Malloy chose a Russian novel as the basis of his musical in order to make a critique against American nationalism with all its attendant evils. Rather, Russia as a setting for American audiences signifies a degree of distance from certain expectations. It also signifies a degree of historical revisionism or forgetting: Russia's ascension during the twentieth century to global power, its attempts at expansion that resulted in the further erasure of minority cultures, the social and economic failures of the USSR. Russia in the American imagination seems to be a mishmash of exoticism, stereotypes, and national propaganda. One of the best examples within the musical genre might be the 1997 animated film *Anastasia*, produced by 20th Century Fox Animation. The plot centers on the Grand Duchess Anastasia Nikolaevna, the daughter of the last tsar of Imperial Russia, who according to legend escaped the Bolsheviks. From that point the film rapidly spirals from 'alternate historical timeline' to 'straight-up fantasy' as Rasputin uses magic to incite the revolution, demons attempt to prevent an orphaned and amnesiac Anastasia from finding her birth family, and a series of fateful coincidences align to reunite her with her aunt (and to secure her a future husband). Russia is a catalyst for the action, rather than a real presence. *Anastasia* doesn't resolve the political implications of its choices. The Bolsheviks are murderous villains, the Russian Revolution was powered by satanic magic. But these threats are comically exaggerated so as to be surreal, so as to generate sympathy for the titular character. *Anastasia* is a fairy-tale with a princess at its center. In many ways, *Great Comet* is, too. Natasha fits the princess archetype: she's on the cusp of adulthood, she desires romance, she waits for her prince, who is associated with security and love and future happiness. Russia is an exotic backdrop to her character arc,

Tolstoy the means for a sprawling cast and unapologetic glitz. The overall effect is one of spatiotemporal collapse.

"Natasha is young…"

Audiences might not expect *Great Comet* to be historically accurate, or even necessarily faithful to its original text. But, as discussed above, that doesn't mean Malloy and Chavkin made choices in a void of associations; if anything, they leverage those associations where possible as shorthand. Hence, each character embodies a different genre, a different sound. Yet associations are generative, sometimes to unforeseen effect. Malloy and Chavkin were aware of this, to an extent: for instance, there's a line in the Act II number "Sonya and Natasha" where Natasha sings of Anatole, "He's my master and I am his slave." In the annotated script, Mallow observes:

> "Rachel [Chavkin] and I are both committed to diverse casting, to totally embracing the idea that people of any race can play any character in a show that is not explicitly about race; but it's also important to us to stay fully awake to the added layers of meaning that diverse casting can create, and to realize that sometimes these layers can take the audience out of the story you are trying to tell…When Denée joined us as Natasha, this line took on a new and unintentional connotation: a black woman singing this line about a white man in twenty-first-century America will inevitably cause the audience to think of American slavery. I reached out to both Denée and Rachel, and found that all three of us had a similar experience upon hearing this line with our new casting: an initial flinch, followed by contextualization, and a realization that this is just a profoundly messed-up thing for *anyone* to say about a relationship…"[65]

[65] Suskin and Malloy

The line was changed to "My life is his, I'll do anything he wants me to" for the Broadway production. Benton likewise commented on the lyric change in an interview: "...the fact of the matter is that we are in America. And this does have that history. And do we want the audience to even go there? If I'm saying I'm the slave of this white man who I'm in love with?"[66] While the original line comes from the Tolstoy translation that Malloy referenced, in the context of a Black actress as Natasha it accrues unintended, undesirable meaning. Benton, as quoted above, gestures to this contextual weight: *that history* sidesteps naming the actual systemic violence against Black persons, even as it refuses to reduce those horrors to an explicit temporal event, as though they are not ongoing. *Do we want the audience to go there?* No, but not for the same reasons Malloy gives, the temporal dissonance that unsettles the audience. Instead, the evocation of chattel slavery in relation to Natasha would undermine her agency. Natasha *chooses* to elope with Anatole; her being swept up in the fickle passion of youth doesn't negate her action. Benton frames this avoidance of (negative) association as a performative choice.

But the alteration of a single line doesn't change Benton's positioning. She is still a dark-skinned Black woman in a white-dominated industry that often employs people of color with ambiguous racial or ethnic features to avoid more explicit engagement with race. As Nicole Fleetwood explains in her discussion of colorism and visual arts, "Colorist hierarchies depend on a mythic conception of whiteness as the standard of measurement and a totalizing blackness as its depraved opposite. One's degree of blackness becomes the basis of colorist hierarchies;

[66] Playbill staff, "The Great Comet's Denée Benton and Sweeney Todd's Norm Lewis Have a Frank Chat About Race," *Playbill*. (26 May 2017) The article title is a misnomer: the chat, of course, is moderated by the *Playbill* staff, as well as the knowledge that their audience is largely white. Benton and Lewis can be honest about past experiences with racism, so long as those events remain fixed 'in the past' and the individuals who caused harm are not identified. Their language is predetermined by politics of respectability and professionalism. Similarly, the overall tone of the article is one of 'progress,' celebrating that Benton and Lewis can perform traditionally white roles 'now' as opposed to an unidentified past when racism was worse.

whiteness, as the normative standard, gets measured by blackness, or its perceived absence."[67] Thus darker-skinned women bear the associations of dominant culture in their bodies, whether that means 'depraved' and 'non-normative' or the more abstract evocation of a history some (white) people find uncomfortable. Erasing the word 'slave' doesn't change the dynamics between her and her co-star, between a Black Natasha and a white Anatole.

If anything, race perhaps makes the inequalities of their narrative dynamic more starkly apparent: Anatole wields enormous power as a well-traveled male aristocrat, and while Natasha indeed chooses him over her fiancé André, she also lacks the experience to recognize the ways in which Anatole is manipulating her, or even that her entire life has been curated around marriage as its ultimate goal and purpose. For Anatole, Natasha is an object, not a person. He calls her as "a new pleasure" in a conversation with Pierre, and later he disassembles her into parts, "What a foot she has, what a glance!" ("Preparations") Though her Blackness goes unmentioned, she is described by Anatole as a fetish, an exotic diversion that might be abandoned when he gets bored without legal or personal impact for him. Because, as we find out, Anatole is already married—though his friend Dolokhov arranges for an "unfrocked priest" to wed them, the question of whether or not the ceremony will be legally binding remains unanswered. Dolokhov frets about Anatole being convicted for fraud, but Anatole brushes his concerns aside. And in the end, Anatole suffers no real consequence for his actions: Pierre threatens him against returning to Moscow, with violence, and he runs to St. Petersburg with his tail between his legs. Meanwhile Natasha is left to weather the fallout. She attempts suicide but lives. Her (now ex-) fiancé Andre refuses to contact her, even going so far as to return all the letters she wrote him. His rejection encapsulates the social stigma she faces as an unmarried woman who ended her engagement to a

[67] Nicole Fleetwood, "Chapter Two: Colorism, Vision, and the Dark Female Body," *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness*. University of Chicago Press (2011), p. 75

respectable man and attempted elopement with a scoundrel. Pierre indirectly refers to Natalia as a “fallen woman,” despite her not having sex with Anatole or even physical contact beyond their encounter at the opera. She bears the blame in her body nonetheless.

Malloy translates that stigma as either silence or quiet. Natasha begins Act II as an effusive and dramatic singer. When her cousin confronts her over the affair with Anatole, Natasha whiplashes from total infatuation (“It seems to me I’ve loved him a hundred years”) to explosive anger (“I hate you, Sonya…I hate you, I hate you, you’re my enemy forever”) to solemn resignation (“Forget everything and forgive me, but I can’t be André’s wife”), all over the course of a single number (“Sonya and Natasha”). Benton conveys these extreme emotions with a power that belies her light soprano. However, by the end of Act II, Natasha has been reduced to quietude. Once she has determined to elope with Anatole, she fades into the larger ensemble: the arrangements to abduct her are all made without her direct participation, and she’s one of many voices that hail sleigh-driver Balaga during that rollicking number. When Marya interrupts the elopement, Natasha has an outburst that ends in her shrieking, “Go away! Go away! You all hate and despise me!” (“In My House”) But her subsequent suicide attempt happens offstage: Sonya narrates the event in the brief number “Natasha Very Ill.” We the audience are not privy to the thoughts that drove Natasha to drink poison, or her decision to inform her cousin after the fact, prompting medical care. All her excess of feeling is gone, absent. That quietude persists when she does sing again, in the penultimate number “Pierre and Natasha.” Natasha comes to Pierre as a friend of her ex-fiancé, to tell André that she’s sorry about what has transpired; she pleads,“tell him that I beg him to forgive, forgive, forgive me…for everything.” Pierre takes pity on her and tries to comfort her. Benton performs Natasha as subdued: she keeps her voice low, her tone even, regardless of frustration or sadness. The last

words Natasha speaks in dialogue are, "I am not worth it." She has a verse of exposition, where Natasha tells the audience that Pierre's awkward encouragement makes her smile, gives her hope about the future. But her final in-character words are muted acceptance of her 'fallen' status.

Natasha being identified as a 'fallen woman' puts her in a position of abjection. Blackness as abject is not unfamiliar to us; neither is the Black woman as a tragic figure. Anatole frames Natasha as a kind of Jezebel, a seductress whose bodily assemblage (hand, neck, foot, glance) makes her impossible to resist, forcing him to take action to possess her. He and the other male characters equate her visibility with both agency and consent. Natasha does not refuse this framing. Discussing abjection as one possible condition of Blackness, Nicole Fleetwood claims, "In part the black subject comes to know herself by being identified and called out as such and by the repetition and circulation of cultural narratives…that restate and reconstitute the subject's blackness and the cultural meaning associated with this position."[68] Other characters (primarily men) call Natasha out as abject, and she recognizes herself as such in declaring her own worthlessness. While the text doesn't acknowledge Natasha's race (despite the principal actresses for her on and off Broadway all being women of color[69]), Benton does regard her Natasha as Black, and so did audiences, as demonstrated in the interviews I've cited. However, I would argue that Natasha is also racialized through her proximity to abjection and excess within the text. I discussed Fleetwood's theorization of excess in the previous chapter: 'excess' in her usage functions on multiple registers, from an economy of bodies to a form of social regulation based on gender, race, and class norms. Natasha exceeds the norms of her social circle in ways others deem unacceptable. She is impulsive, emotional, transparent. (Benton's soprano works well here, as she bites out syllables, flies into her head voice, or quavers pitches in order to convey

[68] Fleetwood, p. 96
[69] Pippa Soo played Natasha during the Ars Nova run; Shoba Naranyan took over the role after Benton moved on from the Broadway production.

Natasha's huge, sudden, almost violent feelings.) She possesses a physical attractiveness others describe as unnatural—Anatole calls her "bewitching," Helénè uses "charming," both words that implicitly refer to magic, as though Natasha has put a spell on them, relieving them of any responsibility for their actions. When Natasha tries to remind Anatole that she is engaged, he responds, "Don't speak to me of that! When I tell you that I am madly, madly in love with you! *Is it my fault that you're enchanting?*" ("The Ball," emphasis mine) Natasha's spoken fears—of impropriety, of harm done against her or André—are brushed aside as not worth consideration, while her embodied presence is taken as an act of sexual aggression. The designation 'excessive' is imposed on her by others who seek to maintain a social order that privileges them, whether or not they understand their motivations in those terms. Likewise, 'abject' becomes a means to control her perceived excesses: a means of regulation over where she can go, who she can be with, what choices she can make. Her youth, her womanhood—all of which are refracted through her Blackness—must be controlled lest they disrupt the heteropatriarchal norms of upper-crust Moscow.

"Just in the very pose she used to stand in as a young girl
When she went to the middle of the ballroom to sing…"

Given the above, it might seem that no reparative reading is possible for Natasha. We might think that those who praised Benton's performance as a Black woman in a principal role on Broadway were themselves performing a liberalism that equates surface-level representation with structural change. Sure, Benton played a character not usually considered among the repertoire for Black actors, but Natasha ultimately embodies a trope that portrays women of color as immoral, hypersexual (non)subjects. However, I find such a conclusion ungenerous for two reasons. First, it hinges on a dichotomy of 'good' vs. 'bad' representation. Such a dichotomy tends to result in all-or-nothing thinking, where a work's perceived value is based on whether it

conforms to a predetermined set of ideals. Natasha is not a respectable character, therefore she is a bad representation of Black womanhood. These kinds of broad dismissals ignore the multiple registers on which production of a work happens. Second, that conclusion forecloses any agency Benton had in the production. As demonstrated in the previously cited quotes from the lyric book and interviews, Benton had input on lyric changes in addition to her artistic choices onstage and in the recording studio.

I want to consider what work Benton is doing within the strictures of narrative. Natasha's ending is predetermined, but Benton clearly does not understand her as a solely tragic character. In the Soloski interview, Benton mentions a Black teenage girl in the audience who commented that Deneé was a princess onstage, something she hadn't thought possible. Her reference to this specific perspective begins to articulate what Benton sees her performance doing for certain audience members. Benton's Natasha provides a representation of Black girlhood and the transition to adulthood without the usual traumatic signifiers. She is not poor, she is not disenfranchised, she is not enslaved. Her arc does not involve some kind of bootstraps rags-to-riches story ala *Hamilton*. The narrative drama hinges primarily on her emotional turmoil—how will she respond to her circumstances?—but Malloy doesn't poke fun at the character for her big feelings, instead giving her space to express them. In other words, Benton's Natasha is *allowed to be a young woman*, with all the messiness that entails, without sacrificing any of the glamor of her surroundings. She gets to wear the furs, the glittering beaded gowns, yet she is not expected to be remote, austere, or reticent. Instead she can be fervently sincere, unabashedly open in her voice and gestures. This is not a privilege afforded to many Black girls. Black women learn early in life to modulate their tone, to control their movements, to curate their appearance in response to white-dictated norms. The unnamed Black teenager who thought

being a princess impossible wasn't wrong, because it *is* impossible, at least in the world she inhabits. What Deneé does in this role is create possibilities where there had been none, or few, before. If Tolstoy makes Natasha abject, then Benton will make her brilliant. If Malloy reduces Natasha to quietude by the end of the musical, then Benton will make sure she is heard before that moment, in all her delight and anger and sadness and love.

In order to discuss Benton's performance of Natasha, I refer to Imani Perry's definition of 'the passionate utterance,' via Cavell and Austen. Perry explains, "The passionate utterance is essential for outsiders to conventional forms of recognition because it is a form of invitation for which there is no existing conventional procedure to produce a particular effect. The speaker is using emotion to assert standing before the one who is being spoken to, and doing so vulnerably. The invitation comes from an interior expression made public or simply externalized in traveling from one interior to the next. Yet it is also an assertion, a self-naming in community."[70] Natasha makes passionate utterances throughout *Comet*. Malloy's approach to lyrics, which function both as present-tense, in-musical exchanges and as a transposition of lines from Tolstoy's novel, means that all the dialogue is, in effect, breaking the fourth wall, collapsing the distance between the players and the audience.[71] In that sense, characters are always speaking *to* someone, even when they are alone. Natasha's Act I number "You and I" is one example. After a terrible first-meeting with her fiancé's family, Natasha takes a meditative moment to reflect on her love for André. Ostensibly, Natasha sings to an André who is absent ("André isn't here" is a refrain of the "Prologue"), but she also sings to us. Benton gazes out into the crowd from her spotlight of

[70] Imani Perry, *Vexy Thing: On Gender and Liberation*. Duke University Press (2018), p. 205

[71] The set design intentionally reinforces this collapse between performer and witness. Scenic designer Mimi Lien comments, "The most important thing is to feel that you are not merely *watching* something happening, but *part of* something happening. When the performers are circling around you and sitting down at your table, you are no longer a passive audience member but are engaging with the piece in a different way. By the same token, the audience is also everywhere. Our goal was to break down the boundary, or the frame, that sits between the audience and the actors—and if the actors are going to be everywhere in the room, so too will the audience; there is no separation." [Suskin and Malloy, p. 33]

cool blue, her fur-lined coat glittering like snow, and she holds out her arms to us as she soars into the final, blistering repetition of "you and I…and no one else." Benton's voice rockets from girlish sweetness to an unrestrained belt. It is hard not to feel as though she means you, the listener, either at her most exuberant or at her most coy. The elision between actor and audience—between an unnamed other and the person listening—is an invite to recognition, "an interior expression made public," as Perry states. Natasha asserts her personhood through the act of making herself emotionally vulnerable to, effectively, a stranger, but she also names herself *in relation* to another. Rather than a Hegelian 'I' formulated opposite an (implied lesser) Other, Natasha envisions an intimate duality that affirms both participants on an equal footing. *You and I* becomes *we*: "We've done this all before / We were angels once, don't you remember?" Again, this number comes after Natasha has met her fiancé's father and sister, who both reject her as vapid, silly, and inadequate as a possible wife for their beloved André. Upon leaving their house, Natasha cries, "Ohhh, they were so *awful*." Yet her next action is to reach out—to the absent, to the audience—and establish connection, relationship, belonging. She declares herself a subject (not an object). She asserts her place in the narrative.

Benton's soprano is a crucial aspect of Natasha's expression. The disruption between expectation (that Benton's Blackness will be echoed in her voice, what she calls the "gospel sound that was supposed to be etched into my DNA"[72]) and reality (a soubrette associated with Western classical opera) becomes really apparent in "You and I," Natasha's first solo. Until that moment, we've heard hints of her soprano—for example, her verse near the end of "Moscow," when Natasha wistfully imagines André as a proverbial white knight, whisking her into a blissful future. But otherwise she is in dialogue with other characters, their music bleeding into hers: whether Sonya's Regina Spektor quaver or Bolkonsky's Tom Waits rasp. "You and I" reduces the

[72] Suskin and Malloy, p. 77

sprawling cast and eclectic ensemble to just Benton and a piano. Over a swaying, middle-register accompaniment, Benton's high, clear voice glides through sustained pitches. When the tempo increases in the second verse, she sounds almost breathless, though later she demonstrates her belting power as she rockets toward the climax. Benton's register, her delivery, and her audible passion all emphasize what we know of Natasha: she's young, and "she loves…with all her heart."

In her contribution to *The Great Comet* lyric book, Benton says, "[Natasha] is teaching me that all things are possible." Natasha, for her, functions similarly to the unnamed Black teen who marveled from the audience: she connects Benton to a girlhood rich with potential, rather than one defined by (imposed) limitations. A space where a Black young woman is not predetermined to be an object, a tragedy, a single register that can only ever signify pain and sadness. Natasha's quiet exit from the end of the musical is not *her* last word.

Her last words are "I leave the room smiling."

"I'm ready to wake up"

Great Comet closed on Broadway in August 2017.[73] Despite the production's twelve Tony nominations, declining ticket sales foreshadowed the end. In February, looking ahead to Josh Groban's departure, producers Howard and Janet Kagan tried to utilize star power to keep the show afloat, announcing that Nigerian-American *Hamilton* alum Okieriete Onaodowan would be coming on as the principal Pierre that summer. Onaodowan had been part of the original Broadway cast of *Hamilton* and performed the dual role of Hercules Mulligan/James Madison. However, there were problems with the transition between actors: Onaodowan delayed his debut as Pierre by a week, citing the need for more time to learn the material; he and director

[73] Michael Paulson, "Race, Money, and Broadway: How 'Great Comet' Burned Out," *New York Times*, 29 Aug. 2017

Rachel Chavkin disagreed over his interpretation of the character; changes had to be made when it became apparent Onaodowan couldn't do everything the role required, including playing piano and accordion as part of the ensemble. Neither did Onaodowan's name garner enough attention in the form of sales. The Kagans arranged for Mandy Patinkin to replace him. Due to another engagement, Patinkin was only available for the period that overlapped with Onaodowan's last three weeks on contract. The Kagans considered that an acceptable substitution—Onaodowan would be paid, Patinkin's return to Broadway after an over-decade hiatus would be sure to generate buzz, and the producers hoped that Patinkin might be persuaded to extend his run with *Comet* after his other obligations were complete. News of the Kagans' decision leaked before the production released an official statement. Black and Brown actors (including Tony-award winner Cynthia Erivo) protested the choice to cut short Onaodowan's tenure for Patinkin. In particular, the Kagans' framing of their decision as based in finances—wanting Patinkin's fame to boost ticket sales through another season—raised the uncomfortable idea that they understood Onaodowan, a Black man, as an investment with unprofitable returns. His Blackness, which was highlighted and celebrated in the mega-hit *Hamilton* (in perpetuation of a neoliberal nationalism, sure), seemed like a marketable asset; however, when his connection to a blockbuster failed to generate the same hype for *Comet*, he (as a body occupying a role, as a 'difficult' actor) became a liability and therefore disposable. He could be traded/exchanged for a more profitable white person(a) without consideration for his perspective. Onaodowan's defenders argued that his aborted tenure exposed the industry's continued privileging of whiteness at the expense of Black persons. Despite the production team's attempts to salvage the situation, *Comet*'s reputation had suffered a blow. Patinkin withdrew, citing ignorance of the terms under which he would be

performing. Nonwhite actors who had previously considered roles in the show ditched what they saw as a sinking ship. *Comet* was done.

I mention Onaodowan's departure because it presents the other end of the binary that governed liberal public discourse around *Great Comet*. On the one hand you have critics like Isherwood and Soloski, who praised the production for casting Benton as Natasha while avoiding direct references to race, and or Actors' Equity awarding *Comet* for its commitment to diversity. On the other hand, you have the criticism that circulated around Onaodowan's experience, which drew attention to the racial aspect of power dynamics within the industry. But that criticism was short-lived, with dissatisfying repercussions: *Comet* closing meant Benton and other nonwhite actors, designers, and technicians would be (at least temporarily) unemployed, and the production faced an audit given the discrepancy between beginning-of-year sales and Howard Kagan's claim of financial woes. Kagan has not been credited as a theater producer since *Great Comet*.[74] In 2022 Malloy took legal action against the Kagans for unpaid royalties on Japanese and Korean productions of his musical.[75] But the discussion around Blackness as fungible, as disposable, on Broadway did not result in more equitable conditions for Black performers, or in a restructuring of the power dynamics that led to Onaodowan being replaced with a more popular white actor.

Don't misunderstand: I believe these discourses have value beyond short-term action. But I find it frustrating that mainstream conversations either worked to elide race as a hurdle that had been overcome or as an ongoing point of sociopolitical contention that must be avoided in the future. Both of these approaches to race ignored the work that was happening onstage, work that

[74] Broadway World, "Profile: Howard Kagan," https://www.broadwayworld.com/people/Howard-Kagan/, last accessed 26 Oct. 2022

[75] Nicole Rosky, "Dave Malloy Takes Legal Action against GREAT COMET Producers for Unpaid Royalties," *Broadway World*, 22 April 2022. https://www.broadwayworld.com/article/Dave-Malloy-Takes-Legal-Action-Against-GREAT-COMET-Producers-for-Unpaid-Royalties-20220422

Benton tried to articulate in multiple interviews, only to be subsumed by bland platitudes about social progress.

Chapter Three
Black Womanhood, Desire, and the Politics of Revival in *Oklahoma!* (2019)

"now more than ever"[76]

"Not your grandma's *Oklahoma!*"[77] Critics and cast members call the 2019 revival 'intense,' 'dark,' and 'sexy.'[78] Director Daniel Fish opts for a different approach from the colorful camp of the original 1943 production, which subsequent revivals and films have mostly replicated in ardent devotion. Instead, Fish's take on the classic musical strips down the lush orchestra to a honky-tonk band, replaces the gaudy costumes with down-to-earth Levis and plaid shirts, and moves the performers from a distant stage to the center of a community hall styled venue, where the cast serves chili to the audience during intermission. But while the music and set design encourage a communal feel, removing highbrow signifiers to create a more accessible performance, the minimalist aesthetic also throws the tensions of *Oklahoma!* into stark relief. In Fish's production, the love triangle between Laurey, Curly, and Jud has higher stakes than 'who will Laurey ask to the social?' Jud, as played by Patrick Vaill, is no longer a one-dimensional villain but a quiet, serious man simmering with barely checked resentment at being made the butt of the town's jokes. For him, marrying Laurey means being accepted as part of a community that currently positions him as an outsider, regardless of how long he's lived and worked among them. Damon Duanno's Curly presents an appealing alternative—less morose and introverted, a local golden boy—but he also has a hidden streak of violence. Unlike the original climax, which has Jud falling on his own knife while he and Curly brawl, this version has Curly shooting Jud

[76] Morgan Parker, "Now More Than Ever," *Magical Negro*. NY: Tin House Books (2019), pp. 32-34
[77] Ruthie Fierberg, "Why Broadway's Upcoming Oklahoma is Not Your Grandma's Version of the Rogers and Hammerstein Classic," *Playbill* (March 2019), https://www.playbill.com/article/why-broadways-upcoming-oklahoma-is-not-your-grandmas-version-of-the-rodgers-hammerstein-classic
[78] Elena Nicolaou, "Why Everyone Is So Obsessed With Sexy *Oklahoma!*" *Refinery29* (June 2019) https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/2019/06/234642/oklahoma-broadway-revival-sexy-reputation

on the pretense of Jud making a threatening gesture. A farcical jury acquits him on the spot. Meanwhile Laurey, played by Rebecca Naomi Jones, is caught in the middle of their rivalry: the object of affection, the prize to be won for the better suitor. As a single young woman, she *has* to marry a man, and the town expects she'll pick one of these two vying for her hand. Jud is a hard worker with a shy bearing that hints at a gentle soul. Curly is magnetic without acting like he's entitled to Laurey's attention. Yet both men also pose some level of threat—at the very least, Laurey will lose her independence and have to take on the mantle of domestic. For her, the question isn't 'who will she choose' but 'who represents the lesser danger?'

The 'sexiness' of Fish's production hinges on that omnipresent potential for things to tip over into violence. The difference between erotic and explosive tension is a hair trigger. Staring into the barrel of danger, the audience recognizes that maybe this tight-knit community isn't as monolithic as it thinks. The real threat is not Jud, who can be easily dispatched and discarded as a kind of scapegoat, but rather the community itself as a material expression of certain values. What do we value? Who or what constitutes 'us'? Who is left on the outside, on the margins, between the lines? One article in *Popular Music* argues, "An important ideological feature of *Oklahoma!* is the manner in which it works to contain anxieties about the future of the USA within an exuberant, optimistic, and nostalgic appeal to a simple, comprehensible, and idealized past."[79] Raymond Knapp concurs, stating that the coming-of-age theme "resonates with both the United States' emergent role in world affairs [post-World War II] and the manifest-destiny-driven evolution of its western lands into statehood."[80] Laurey's passage into womanhood, as an adult member of the community, parallels Oklahoma (and future territories)

[79] Paul Filmer, Val Rimmer and David Walsh, "*Oklahoma!*: Ideology and Politics in the Vernacular Tradition of the American Musical," *Popular Music*, Vol. 18 No. 3. Cambridge University Press (1999), p. 385
[80] Raymond Knapp, *The American Musical and the Formation of National Identity*, "Chapter Six: American Mythologies," NJ: Princeton University Press (2005), pp. 126-127

becoming part of the American nation. Knapp then locates a possible justification for settler expansion in Jud's misdeeds and tragic death, which mark him as an outsider among the territory folk.[81] At very least, the Oklahoma Territory folk represent an idealized rural America which must eliminate the Other in order to maintain their pastoral life. The 2019 revival complicates this reading. Fish layers the past and present by bringing the violence underlying the original text to the foreground. At the closing reprise of the titular number, Laurey and Curly sing in blood-splattered wedding clothes, while Jud, ostensibly dead, rises up with the chorus to join in. This tableau is neither optimistic nor simple. Jones's Laurey gazes into the audience with horror on her face. While the visuals rely on certain rural stereotypes (unfinished wood for the set, racks of rifles hung on the back wall, vintage clothing for a working-class look), Fish rejects a nostalgic framing of rural life as idyllic, the pure opposite to the chaotic urban. Rather than contain his anxiety about the future, Fish uses *Oklahoma!* to express his anxiety about the present. But his concern centers around the same subject, if from a different direction: how we define America.

Of course, 'America' is not a monolithic identity. Fish nods at the demographics of both historic and contemporary Oklahoma with a diverse cast that includes Ali Stoker (Ado Annie) as the first wheelchair user to perform as a featured actress in a Broadway musical. Yet as critic Soraya McDonald points out, that diversity makes apparent "the unbearable whiteness of *Oklahoma!*"[82] McDonald's review focuses on the relation of that whiteness to a Black Laurey. Jones is not the first Black woman to play Laurey (that distinction, at least in regard to a major production, goes to Valisia LaKae, who performed the role at the Arena Stage in Washington

[81] ibid, p. 134
[82] Soraya McDonald, "The Unbearable Whiteness of *Oklahoma* on Broadway," *The Undefeated* (2019), https://theundefeated.com/features/the-unbearable-whiteness-of-oklahoma-on-broadway/

D.C. in 2010[83]), but Jones is the first Black principal Laurey on Broadway, and she is cast opposite two white male leads. Her subconscious in the dream ballet is performed by Black dancer Gabrielle Hamilton, and Jones's alternates—Sasha Hutchings and Chelsea Lee Williams—are Black women. It follows that Laurey *as a Black woman* is an intentional choice on Fish's part. Rather than paint a portrait of the Oklahoma territory as a utopian, raceblind society, Fish pries at the seams of 'inclusivity' to find its limitations. In McDonald's reading, Jones's "blackness serves to reinforce just how vulnerable and disenfranchised Laurey is in a place where men hold an overwhelming amount of sociopolitical power and women have nearly none."[84] Laurey might be a member of the Oklahoma community, unlike hired hand Jud, yet she still lacks agency to determine her future within that community. For McDonald, Jones's Blackness highlights the gendered inequalities of *Oklahoma!*, a musical where the central female protagonist gets sidelined by her own romantic interests and their pissing contest. Fish's Oklahoma is not as homogenous as mayo, just as the historic Oklahoma Territory featured a lot more Native, Black, and Brown people than Rogers and Hammerstein might have led audiences to believe. Attention to race and gender adds another layer of tension to the performance.

With a work as beloved and canonical as *Oklahoma!*, any change to what audiences perceive as 'the text' becomes a site for interrogation. In her analysis of the 2010 Arena production, Donatella Gallela observes that some critics mention the race and ethnicity of the nonwhite actors as a noteworthy detail; though they praise the performance, their reviews call attention to racial difference while refusing a deeper consideration as to its significance, in essence normalizing a 'colorblind' approach.[85] Gallela argues that their refusal to engage with

[83] Jessica Lewis, "Photo Flash: *Oklahoma!* at Arena Stage," *Broadway World* (Nov. 2010) https://www.broadwayworld.com/article/Photo-Flash-OKLAHOMA-at-Arena-Stage-20101110
[84] McDonald
[85] Donatella Gallela, "Redefining America, Arena Stage, and Territory Folks in a Multiracial *Oklahoma!*" *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 67 No. 2 (May 2015), pp. 213-233

the casting choices further obscures ongoing racial dynamics in both theatre and America. Similarly, Bill Rauch's 75th anniversary production of *Oklahoma!* at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival in 2018 garnered positive reception for its casting of Laurey and Curly as a same-sex couple. Critics noted the spectacle of a woman playing Curly and otherwise applauded the choice as good queer representation, the interracial aspect of the main couple passing with minimal comment. Neither the Arena nor the OSF productions got overtly negative reviews from major or local publications, though I am sure some people felt or expressed discomfort at these changes from the usual all-white, heteronormative casting. What interests me is the binary thinking behind these reactions. Either the changes are unfaithful to the original, or they are laudable as 'progressive' choices. Neither option gets past a value judgment of 'good' or 'bad,' and neither option goes beyond a gut reaction or political alignment. 'Interrogation' in this sense means weighed and found wanting (or not).

I am interested in a deeper mode of interrogation. Building on McDonald's work, I consider Rebecca Naomi Jones as Laurey in the Fish revival. A Black Laurey does not have the luxury of her white counterparts to remain passive until their sexual awakening in the dream ballet. A Black Laurey with two white suitors must consider her options carefully. A Black Laurey in a racially integrated town isn't safe, because it's 1906, it's 2019, and a visible Black woman is considered more object than subject. I argue that Jones's presence and performance disrupt the narrative of *Oklahoma!*, which portrays the rural as reflective of 'American' values and identity. More than exposing the suffocating whiteness of *Oklahoma!*, Jones makes evident that a Black Laurey cannot exist as a free person in the community that Rogers and Hammerstein imagined, no matter who populates it. Like *Hamilton* (2015), Fish's revival of *Oklahoma!* grapples with 'America' as a concept related to nation-building and personhood. But unlike

Hamilton, where the presence of nonwhite women suggests alternatives beyond nationalist myth, Jones as Laurey in *Oklahoma!* exposes the impossibility of an inclusive America. The premise of nationhood needs an Other against which it might draw its borders; its very existence depends on violence, whether direct or displaced.

"you are a woman now
but you have always had skin"[86]

Jones's performance is loaded with associations. Perhaps this is inevitable, as she plays the protagonist of a well-known work and represents the first Black woman to do so on Broadway. Behind her hover the ghosts of all the white Laureys prior. Onstage, she negotiates audience expectations around Black womanhood and how it 'should' be expressed. These expectations might include stereotypical representations. Patricia Hill Collins, in her seminal work *Black Feminist Thought*, outlines the five major "controlling images" that are applied to Black women in art and real life: the Mammy, the matriarch, the welfare queen, the respectable lady, and the Jezebel.[87] These stereotypes comfort nonblack persons (or even Black men) in their flattening of Black femme subjectivity, in their pathologizing of Black women's anger, desire, intellect, or care. They present the Black woman as one-dimensional, able to be confined to a simple set of predictable characteristics. Or maybe audiences anticipate Jones playing the tomboyish Laurey as a Strong Black Woman, as a subversion of the ingenue trope. But Joan Morgan points out how 'strong' as a descriptor for Black women goes back to their enslavement, as justification for whites forcing them into grueling labor alongside their male counterparts. Morgan explores how 'strong' has been internalized by Black women, too, as a means of coping with racism and sexism at work, home, and social environments. When faced with the

[86] Parker, "Everything Will Be Taken Away," p. 6
[87] Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, "Mammies, Matriarchs, and Other Controlling Images," Routledge, 1st edition (2008)

overwhelming reality of structural inequalities and their impact on the day-to-day, she says, "strong is a helluva consolation prize."[88] 'Strong' as a descriptor again recalls racist caricatures around Blackness, as well as erasing the lived experiences of femme identified people. Jones must make her performance choices amid these contexts, in addition to the changes Fish brings to the musical.

For the purposes of this chapter, I'm going to focus on Joan Roberts as a point of sonic comparison: she originated the role in the Broadway premiere and sang it on the 1943 original cast album. That album, released by Decca, gets credit for establishing cast albums as a feature of and marketing point for Broadway shows.[89] Audiences might also be familiar with the 1955 film version, starring Shirley Jones, but Roberts established a precedent I hear in subsequent performances, particularly with regard to a certain mode of white femininity. Her Laurey comes across as the stereotypical ingenue: naive, flighty, childish. She acts out to 'punish' Curly for not giving her sufficient attention. Though nervous around Jud, she seems oblivious to his darker impulses, despite everyone else in the town having knowledge of his bullish nature. The denizens of Oklahoma Territory orbit around her, even as she takes minimal action to dictate her future. "Make up your mind, Laurey," the women's chorus admonishes her ("Out of My Dreams"), before the dream ballet sequence shows her who she really desires. Unlike the other cast members, who affect thick country accents, Roberts sings in a clear soprano, her voice trembling with vibrato on long notes. She floats in her chest register and makes frequent arcs into her head voice. Listen to her warble out the final note of "Many a New Day," which she sustains with almost operatic fervor, if less rigorous technique. Roberts's high, light sound reinforces the impression of Laurey as young and girlish. The dream ballet in Act II, then, represents her sexual

[88] Joan Morgan, *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost*. NY: Simon and Schuster (2000), p. 110
[89] Larry Stempel, *Showtime: A History of Broadway Musical Theatre*. NY: Norton & Company (2010), p. 311

awakening after she's articulated romantic attraction to a man as a real possibility ("Out of My Dreams"), rather than something to be scorned or sublimated through teasing. Originally conceived and choreographed by Agnes de Mille for the Broadway premiere, the dream sequence features a dancer avatar for Laurey's sleeping subconscious. She enacts bodily Laurey's unarticulated feelings, as she dances with Curly and watches in horror as Jud shoots him, leading to the realization that Curly is the man she loves.[90] In the very picture of Christian heterosexual union, Laurey 'becomes a woman' at the moment she accepts Curly as her life partner, an accession formalized in the wedding at the finale. Appropriately, while performing Laurey's conscious moments, Roberts evokes such Golden Age Hollywood girls as Judy Garland, Shirley Temple, or Gloria Jean, with their carefully curated innocence.[91]

Rebecca Naomi Jones cannot play this Laurey. Not because she lacks the vocal or acting talent. Rather, a Black Laurey in an ahistorical, racially integrated Oklahoma Territory does not have the luxury of naivety. While she has allies in her Aunt Eller (Mary Testa) and her friend Ado Annie (Ali Stoker), the town will not intervene to preserve her virtue. Marriage is a means of protection against unwanted advances, because other men will respect one man's legal claim to a woman if not her autonomy. Aunt Eller knows this, and she pushes Laurey to choose the lesser of two evils. McDonald observes, "From the beginning of the musical, Aunt Eller is telling Curly how much her niece likes him, no matter how much Laurey's behavior indicates the opposite. It's strategic: Aunt Eller's trying to provide some security for Laurey, in the limited way that she can, by playing matchmaker." McDonald reads Jones's performance of Laurey as reluctant to cede her future to either of these white men. According to her reading, Jones plays

[90] Tim Carter, *Oklahoma!: The Making of An American Musical*. CT: Yale University Press (2007), pp. 121-136

[91] cf. Tim Carter, "Chapter Two: Contracts and Commitments," pp. 48-66. Shirley Temple was one of the suggestions for Laurey during *Oklahoma!* early casting, but she (or her agent) turned down the role on the grounds that it was too mature for the fourteen-year-old actress (56).

Laurey as more cautious than indecisive, more self-sufficient than stubborn. She is virginal but not simple. She can't be, not if she is going to help manage the farm, navigate the community's expectations, and placate two white suitors for whom rejection might be cause for violence.

I listen to Jones's performance within this context, which is echoed in the orchestration choices. Composer and sound designer Daniel Kluger takes away the sumptuous violins of the original production, foregrounds the acoustic guitar, and adds some rockabilly twang with an electric guitar and accordion.[92] Instead of the thick orchestral sound, which creates a dreamy, pastel canvas for Roberts and Drake's overwrought voices on the 1943 album, Kluger moves away from musicals and into country music. Some reviews have erroneously called the small ensemble a bluegrass band.[93] But the Fish production has no banjos or sawing fiddles. This band skews closer to honky-tonk, which emerged as a genre in the South and Southwest during the 40s and reached its golden age in the 50s with popular singers including Ernest Tubbs, Johnny Horton, Loretta Lynn, and Patsy Cline[94]. The distinction is important, because bluegrass and honky-tonk carried different associations for listeners at the time. In particular, honky-tonk borrowed elements from rock-n-roll, such as instrumentation, emphasis on rhythm above melody or harmony, and a certain performance of working-class identity. If bluegrass could recall an ancestral home, whether the Appalachians or further back across the ocean, then honky-tonk dealt in migrant dissatisfaction with the present, as rural southerners were forced to move into urban environments to find work.[95] It was a genre for a younger generation, who could

[92] Ian Axness, Lucas Syed, "How Daniel Kluger Put a Contemporary Twang on 'Oklahoma!,'" *American Theatre* (July 2019), https://www.americantheatre.org/2019/07/04/how-daniel-kluger-put-a-contemporary-twang-on-oklahoma/
[93] Fierberg
[94] ed. Paul Kingsbury, Michael McCall, and John W. Rumble, *Encyclopedia of Country Music*. Oxford University Press (2012)
[95] Emily Neely, "Charline Arthur: The (Un)Making of a Honky-Tonk Star," *A Boy Named Sue: Gender and Country Music* (ed. Diane Pecknold and Kristine McCusker). MI: University Press of Mississippi (2004), p. 47

appreciate its modern inflections while also using it as an outlet for their sense of dislocation in the modern world. The theme of dissatisfaction makes sense in Fish's *Oklahoma!*, since his production grapples with an uneasiness about the American Experiment. It's appropriate, too, for Jones's Laurey to express herself through a genre related to displacement, since she is displaced in time—a Black woman being courted by two white men in a year when Oklahoma would have still been segregated, when it would not have been considered a violation if either of them had tried to take her by force. Yet while racial segregation has officially ended (whether or not it lingers in real estate markets and educational systems and other institutions), and interracial unions are no longer illegal, the violence that Laurey faces—as a Black person in America, as a woman in a heteronormative, patriarchal society, as a person who lacks the legal rights and protections to determine her own future—continues to be familiar to us. Imani Perry argues that representation and increased access for minorities as a feature of neoliberalism reproduces the same systemic inequalities it claims to eliminate. She states, "The old architecture of patriarch through property, personhood, and sovereignty remains, but there are fewer absolute exclusions yet more intensive competitive demands that disadvantage those who were once absolutely excluded."[96] We hear the temporal echoes in Fish's *Oklahoma!* We recognize what has not changed from 1906 to 2019.

I read Jones's performance as a negotiation among the community represented by the cast (and in some sense, the audience). In the same chapter from which I pulled the above quote, Perry refers to "the dance between the self and the community" in describing how we might understand the individual as a construct that is constantly being reimagined and revised. This Laurey moves through the musical with a hyper-awareness of those watching and their possible reactions to her Blackness, her female embodiment. As I will discuss in further detail, Jones

[96] Imani Perry, *Vexy Thing*. NC: Duke University Press (2018), p. 104

performs a sonic whiteness that's in line with the production's honky-tonk aesthetic, allowing her Laurey to blend into a communal sound, indicating her belonging. It's also significant that Jones has no solos in this production. Laurey's original solo number "Out of My Dreams" goes to Aunt Eller, the lyrics changed to "out of *your* dreams" (emphasis mine), as her aunt tries to convince her that marital bliss is something she wants. While Jones sings alone on the final verse, echoing what she's just been told, her a capella voice sounds stark and unsure. What does Laurey want, in the absence of everyone else's expectations? She tells the peddler Ali Hakim that she "want[s] things [she's] heard of and never had before...Things so nice, if they ever did happen to you, your heart would quit beatin'." But the exact nature of those things is left to the imagination, dismissed in the moment as innuendo.

Innuendo features in songs written and performed by female honky-tonk stars. Though explicit sexual allusions were uncommon, some women found an outlet for their desire through the frank, down-to-earth language of country music. The 'honky-tonk angel' might have been a femme fatale in men's songs, but she also provided a persona through which women might express dissatisfaction with constricting gender roles, as well as 'unladylike' feelings of arousal, anger, and aggression.[97] While the prevailing image of a female honky-tonk star was the demure, domestic woman, assertive performers such as Charlene Arthur and Patsy Cline appealed to audiences by giving (presumed white) working-class, female listeners a grammar for their lived experience.[98]

That grammar, in turn, informs Jones's performance as Laurey. Though her exchange with Ali Hakim alludes to her sexual inexperience (further reinforced by her foil, the proudly promiscuous Ado Annie), Laurey nonetheless explores the language of desire in her numbers

[97] Neely, p. 48
[98] ibid, p. 52

with Curly. If the community expects her to marry one of her two suitors, then she attempts to wrestle back some agency by controlling the tenor of their courtship. She shares no numbers with Jud—Vaill's Jud is simultaneously too reclusive and too entitled to make such overtures, staking his hopes on the social as the grand gesture that will win Laurey's hand. But prior to the dream ballet revelation, she appears in two numbers with Curly, who pursues her with boyish tenacity, demanding her attention through outrageous claims and promised gifts. "Honey, here's the way it's gonna be," he declares, before launching into an imagined date between the two of them ("Surrey With The Fringe On Top"). Laurey holds her own against him, because the alternative is being pulled into his orbit, unable to exercise even her limited power to choose. Her pushback comes in the form of flirtation and teasing: the former might be a means of testing the extent of her influence on him, while the latter might represent a soft 'no' where she feels unsafe or unable to articulate a firmer boundary.

In the live performance, Jones's Laurey maintains a physical distance between her and Duanno's Curly in "Surrey," moving across the stage and putting tables between them, even while she plays hard to get, making fun of Curly's attempts at wooing her and later showing real anger at his extravagant, impossible fantasies ("Why did you even come around here, with your stories and lies?"). We learn at the top of the number that Laurey feels hurt over Curly paying attention to another girl last summer; her coolness toward him in "Surrey," then, is her response to perceived scorn, to being second choice. She resists him claiming her, just as she resists Aunt Eller's suggestion that Curly "just grab her and kiss her," as though she is an object to be passed from person to person. At the same time, their history implies a mutual attraction: he's handsome, with a boyish charm and generous smile, and his occupation as a cowhand has an air of adventure. While she mocks him and calls out his boasts, she also expresses desire in this

number, the first time the audience meets her or witnesses the dynamic between her and Curly. Jones's voice is pitched in a teasing register, drawling sarcastic interjections between Duanno's phrases. Laurey gets swept up in Curly's dreaming: when he describes the surrey in which he'd take them to the social, she asks, "Does it really have a team of snow white horses?" She echoes his melodic line, rushing through the beginning of the question in almost breathless eagerness and soaring up into drawn-out anticipation on the last three words. Just as quick, when Curly answers "One's like snow, the other's more like...milk," she delivers the spoken dismissal, "Oh, so you can tell them apart." But for a moment we hear that desire—for romance, for wealth and what it signifies (taste, class, distinction), for a girlish idea of courtship. She succumbs to it again in the last chorus of "Surrey," when Curly sings slow and soft, the stage bathed in surreal green light. Here Laurey has no clever retort, no defensive sarcasm. She is silent. Yearning. Then the song ends, the light returns to its usual glaring brightness, and she lashes out at Curly for exposing her want.

For this Laurey, desire is an ongoing mediation between her inner self, the vulnerable girl who dreams about big romantic gestures, and her public-facing self, who refuses to be seen as 'easy' and instead projects independence, resolute that she doesn't 'need' a man. The latter persona protects the former, though both are equally *her* and reflect those desires that may or may not be oppositional. In "Many a New Day," Laurey asserts, "Never have I once looked back to sigh, over the romance behind me. Many a new day will dawn before I do." On the 1943 album, Joan Roberts sings this number as a solo, soaring up into an operatic head voice, buoyed on orchestral waves of sound; her fluttering soprano comes across as girlish dramatics, made in a fit of stubbornness. But the Fish production does something different. Jones sings "Many a New Day" as a group number with Ali Stroker and Mary Testa, the female members of the cast

coming together to declare their self-reliance. Rather than a private pronouncement made by an immature young woman, the number becomes a communal statement about the women of Oklahoma Territory, of various ages and experiences, who understand that men cannot be relied upon, even if the world would have women dependent on them. Jones's voice rings full-throated and defiant on the final verse: "Many a red sun will set, many a blue moon will shine before I do!" The other women never shame Laurey for her desire—Ado Annie relishes her own sexual appetite and, as McDonald describes, Aunt Eller nudges her charge towards choosing the better of her two options, knowing that's who Laurey really wants. But the staging of "Many a New Day" makes evident that desire, for these women, for Laurey, is a complicated thing with deep repercussions.

Laurey's desire becomes most sonically evident in her Act I duet with Curly, "People Will Say We're In Love." In this number, Curly tries to convince Laurey to attend the social with him as her date, but Laurey, who has already agreed to go with Jud, turns him down. However, Laurey *wants* to accept Curly's offer. We know from their earlier interaction that she was upset by his flirting with another girl, that he got her hopes up with the proposal of a romantic night out. She feels comfortable enough to make fun of him—unlike Jud, whose gunpowder rage she intuitively skirts, not giving him an overt rejection lest she light an explosion. Curly gets around her prickly, stubborn exterior to her inner dreamer. So, while Laurey sings *don't*, her voice belies that refusal. "Don't throw bouquets at me," she tells him. "Don't sigh and gaze at me." But the way she delivers these imperatives suggests the opposite: *do* give me flowers, *do* pursue me, *do* express open and obvious affection. On the album, Jones stretches vowels out like taffy and enunciates consonants with coy precision. She builds anticipation into each phrase: in the first stanza ("Don't throw bouquets at me / don't please my folks too much / don't laugh at my jokes

too much), she elongates the verb in each short statement, lingering on the arc of the musical phrase, and there is hardly space to breathe before she insists *don't* again. The tension (build, pause, resume) only resolves in the consequent ("people will think we're in love"), which comes across as more of a tease than a let-down. Duanno interrupts the sensual undertones with a scripted humorous aside—"who laughs at your jokes?"—but Jones pushes ahead to the next verse ("Don't sigh and gaze at me / your sighs are so like mine"), once more generating anticipation, even as her flirtatious tone eases into something more like fondness. Despite another interjection from Duanno ("Don't start collecting things," she sings, and he squawks, "Like WHAT?"), Jones gains intensity as she moves toward the climax. "Sweetheart," she cries, her voice almost breaking, "they're suspecting things." She sounds like she is falling apart, a little, under the weight of her wanting what she can't have. Or maybe she sounds like she is falling apart in a more pleasurable way—I think back to her entrance, when she sighs, "*Oh*, what a beautiful morning," with orgasmic relish. In either reading, Laurey's desire outstrips her control over the situation.

The Fish production frames Laurey's desire in this moment as something to be taken seriously, not discounted as the whims of a flighty and inexperienced girl. Unlike the 1943 orchestration, where the strings spell out the melodic line as Joan Roberts sings it, almost carrying her quavering voice through each phrase, the 2019 ensemble cedes the melody to Jones, the strings instead providing a gentle supportive swell behind each of her crescendoes. Instead of fanfare winds on a descending motif, there is an acoustic guitar which, apart from being less intrusive, less like it's repeatedly smacking us in the head with the obvious, reinforces both the general country aesthetic and the slight humor present in this number. Such humor is not quite at Laurey's expense: rather, it comes across as a wink to the audience, a self-aware commentary on

its context. Laurey thinks she's telling Curly she doesn't want him, all while singing like she's flirting and accompanied by the very instrument we associate with him. (On the 2019 album, Duanno plays acoustic guitar as part of the ensemble; in the live performance, he swaggers about onstage with the instrument slung across his back for ready access.)

Of course, Curly catches the undertones of her meaning, and he responds in kind. With a rolled chord to shift the tonic up a half-step, he launches into his riposte: "Some people claim that you are to blame as much as I / Why do you take the trouble to bake my fav'rite pie?" Then, in the same format as her "practical list of don't's," he tells her all the things she should avoid doing if she doesn't want to give the impression that they're in love—and much like her own list, the items are a mix of things desired and things that might have already happened between them. ("Grantin' your wish, I carved our initials on that tree…" sounds like an action their younger selves performed.) Curly starts out teasing her for the disconnect between her words and her feelings—"Don't praise my charm too much, / don't look so vain with me"—but he, too, falls into the rhythm of his desire. Duanno has a crooner's voice: while crooning carries associations with white, working-class masculinity, as I'll discuss in a moment, here it also works as aural shorthand for real tenderness, his syrupy, affected drawl infused with warmth. Unlike Jud, who obsesses over Laurey in private, who wants her for what she represents for him rather than as a person in her own right, Curly wears his heart on his sleeve, unable to maintain his gentle ribbing for long before he moves into sincere declarations ("Your hand feels so grand in mine"). By the third verse, he is taken by the current of desire: "D-do-d-do-do-d-don't dance all night with me," he sings, swinging into the beat, "till the stars fade from above…" The electric guitar that accompanies his half of the duet speaks back both to its acoustic twin and the honky tonk genre, which adopted electric instruments during its golden age in the 1950s. That nod to rock n' roll's

influence highlights Curly's own youth and uneasy positioning in the Oklahoma landscape: as a cowhand, he contributes to the United States' westward expansion, yet his occupation is juxtaposed against the local farmers (a conflict that boils over in "The Farmer and the Cowman"), as it represents the encroachment of an industrial system on what's supposed to be a pastoral landscape. In some ways, Curly stands at the fringes of the community—at least, until he marries Laurey and takes on the responsibilities of her family farm, becoming 'one of them.' Likewise, just as his work crosses borders between urban and rural life, between metropolis and agriculture, so too does his performance (via Duanno) transgress binary divisions of race and gender. As Michael Bertrand discusses in relation to Elvis, country music in the late 1940s through the 1950s took increasing influence from rock n' roll and rhythm-and-blues music, a trend that started in honky-tonk and became reified in rockabilly.[99] In the process, white, Southern working-class musicians crafted a particular performance of masculinity, one which copied from Black men, and one which can be seen in Duanno's version of Curly. His croon, his exaggerated drawl, his amateur guitar all come to country through its absorption of blues; likewise, his low-slung belt, loose-legged stride, and rolled up shirt sleeves (exposing his forearms) contribute to his sexual stage presence.[100] Insofar as he is able, he meets Laurey on her level, his falsetto almost girlish, his stylistic choices speaking back to hers.

In comparison, the 1943 cast album emphasizes the gender differences between Laurey and Curly. Joan Roberts sings without much inflection—or the exaggerated vibrato that Shirley Jones affects in the 1955 film—and she moves quickly through her verses, not pausing to give any single word or phrase particular weight. Contrasted with Alfred Drake's booming baritone,

[99] Michael Bertrand, "I Don't Think Hank Done It That Way: Elvis, Country Music, and the Reconstruction of Southern Masculinity," *A Boy Named Sue: Gender and Country Music* (ed. Diane Pecknold and Kristine McCusker). MI: University Press of Mississippi (2004), pp. 60-62
[100] ibid, p. 66

she sounds almost childish, something that becomes most evident in the final verse, which they sing together. Where in the Fish production that final verse goes to Curly alone, for Roberts and Drake it functions as a mutual declaration of love. In their performance, the form of the number (solo, solo, harmonized duet) belies Laurey's denial and establishes an expectation that this is the desirable pairing, that Curly is the 'right' choice for her. Roberts performs this number without the audible desire that infuses Jones's recording; however, she is performing a certain mode of middle-class white womanhood, one that teaches its daughters to act demure, practice good manners, and keep their legs crossed. This gendering sees (white) women as an implicit moral force, if prone to an overabundance of feeling, and therefore a counterweight to male reason. But it's a delicate balance: 'too much' emotion expressed via improper means goes beyond feminine sentiment and unsettles the social structure, rendering the woman a threat. How emotion and its expression becomes labeled 'too much' is yet another series of assemblages, based on an Enlightenment understanding of gendered and racial differences. A white woman who shows too little feeling has her femininity called into question; if she shows an excess of feeling, particularly negative emotions like anger, then her whiteness comes under scrutiny. In a very real sense, Roberts *can't* show desire, at least not the lustful, bloodred drive at the heart of the Fish production. To do so would be to risk her Laurey being ungendered, shaded off-white. Sure, she can be flighty, impulsive, and temperamental, but those can be excused as youthfulness, female irrationality, rural frankness, or some combination of all three. What's crucial is that Laurey can eventually become the dutiful housewife, the helpmeet to her husband. Their duet symbolizes this potential, their voices complementing each other through the contrast between soprano and baritone, the aural representation of male/female duality and heterosexual union.

Rebecca Naomi Jones's performance relies on what Nina Sun Eidsheim calls "attitudes around the voice as essential, innate, and unmediated:" we are meant to hear her voice as indicative of Laurey's 'true' feelings, rather than take her words at face value.[101] This assumption works on multiple levels throughout the number. Narratively, it lends credence to the moment in the dream ballet where Laurey consciously acknowledges her feelings for Curly, since it gives the leading actors a chance to further develop the chemistry between their characters, even as Laurey denies that attraction. Musically, a duet puts them on equal footing ("Surrey" is Curly's number, his attempt to impress her), and it allows for a reprise in Act II, when they declare their mutual love. Character-wise, this number tells us something(s) about Jones's Laurey: she is an idealist, she is stubborn as fuck, she is a little blind to herself in the way all young people are. She is as horny as any teenaged girl in a repressive, patriarchal town might reasonably turn out to be.

But Jones is also playing with a tried-and-true aspect of female honky-tonk performance: denial and deflection as an expression of affection. Some of Patsy Cline's greatest hits hinge on such juxtaposition between words and sound, such as "Walkin' After Midnight" and "I Fall to Pieces." Listen to her ballad "Sweet Dreams," which features shimmering strings and a gentle rocking piano line as Cline mourns her feelings for someone who doesn't reciprocate them—not much of a lullaby, even if she sounds soft and wistful, as though she could sing herself to sleep. Her declaration of love comes alongside the simultaneous acknowledgment that it's impossible, all her desire and disappointment conveyed in a languorous melody. The sentiment—and its vocalization, Cline singing with syrupy slowness and naked feeling—echoes a central element of blues music, where longing, anger, and heartache coexist without any attempt to resolve them.

[101] Nina Sun Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre, and Vocality in African-American Music*." NC: Duke University Press (2019), p. 27

Jones sounds more like Cline than blues queen Bessie Smith or even later Black female jazz singers like Dinah Washington; she does not bend pitches or slide across microtones, nor does she sit low in her voice or rasp over the arcs of phrases; instead, she favors a lighter, sweeter delivery that is no less intimate. Like Cline, she infuses her tone with affection, uses pet names, and sings with clear, sustained notes, no vibrato, a choice that reads as frankness. Like Cline, she captures an 'unladylike' ethos, the 'too muchness' that Roberts so carefully avoids, her voice full of the desire she denies, her movements casual in jeans. Cline's catalogue has a certain schmaltz in common with Golden Age musicals, with its heavy use of strings and piano, its almost embarrassing sentimentality. Unlike Bessie belting raw and honest about her hurt, or Dinah coolly declaiming her love in precise, poetic lines, Cline revels in a kind of melancholic nostalgia, each moment, each note something to be held and examined carefully before she can move to the next. Even her more upbeat songs maintain this consideration, all her loves—past, present, painful, delightful—treated with utmost tenderness. Jones takes a similar approach in "People Will Say We're In Love," lingering on her verses of supposed rejection as though she would delay the fallout that will leave her without the man she wants, trapped with a man she fears.

"When I walk into the world and know
I am a black girl, I understand
I am a costume."[102]

But even the man Laurey wants cannot protect her from the violence Jud represents, because Curly embodies that violence, too. The 1943 production frames Jud as "the monster within (America's 'Id') and an outside intruder," the character everyone else 'knows' is volatile but no one takes any direct action to defuse until the moment he attacks Curly at the wedding.[103]

[102] Parker, "When a Man I Love Jerks Off in My Bed next to Me and Falls Asleep," p. 37
[103] Knapp, p. 127

While he presents a real physical danger to Laurey, his bullish attitude hinting at the possibility of assault, he also poses a threat to the community's ideals, the belief that all Territory folks are honest, hard-working, and altruistic. In order to maintain those ideals, Jud must be dealt with, and sans a miraculous change of heart, the solution is removal—from the Williams farm, from the Territory, from life. Rogers and Hammerstein scripted the final conflict so that Jud's death is his own fault, as he falls on his knife during the fistfight with Curly. Jud removes *himself* from the community, through his choices leading up to the moment he dies. However, the 2019 Fish production makes a small yet significant alteration: instead of a knife, Jud brings a gun to Curly and Laurey's wedding as a gift for the couple, and when Jud moves to brawl with Curly, the groom goes for the gun and shoots him in alleged self-defense. The OK denizens then acquit him in a hastily assembled kangaroo court. Fish makes explicit what Rogers and Hammerstein tried to obscure, that the community shares responsibility for Jud's outcome, because the community enforces its ideals through violence.

In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Michel Foucault declares, "The right to punish has been shifted from the vengeance of the sovereign to the defence of society."[104] The offender no longer acts against the king, or God, but "the entire social body," which in turn brings to bear all its power upon him in punishment. "How could society not have an absolute right over him? How could it not demand, quite simply, his elimination?"[105] The Territory folks condemn Jud as ill-tempered, lazy, and violent, and they eliminate him via one of their own in a fit of enraged fear, through lazy and violent means. Perhaps Patrick Vaill's Jud is more sympathetic in his awkward shyness than Howard da Silva's brutish caricature, but he is no less dangerous with his bitterness and entitlement. And yet he is following the social norm: he works

[104] Michel Foucault, trans. Alan Sheridan, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. NY: Random House (1977, 1995), p. 90
[105] ibid

on the farm, he attends the local events, he pursues a wife. We might cringe at his murder attic where he's built a shrine to Laurey, we might disdain how he treats her as an object to possess, ignoring her personhood to such a degree that he sings the original line about touching her "yellow hair" as though he weren't seeing Jones at all. We might condemn his refusal to acknowledge or respect Laurey's non-consent. But these are meta critiques; they do not appear in the text as justification for Jud's death. Jud is not an outsider because he is an incel, he's an outsider because the community has marked him as abnormal, despite his attempts to adhere to its patriarchal, heterosexual structure. To quote Foucault again: "The perpetual penality that traverses all points and supervises every instant in the disciplinary institutions compares, differentiates, hierarchizes, homogenizes, excludes. In short, it *normalizes*."[106] Though Foucault focuses on punishment in the form of penal institutions, i.e. the modern prison, he also draws points of comparison to other social sites of regulation, because all impulse to 'correct' human behavior hinges on a supposition (socially constructed and reaffirmed) that there is a norm to uphold.

In *Oklahoma!*, that norm is embodied in Curly, the masculine ideal, who Laurey *should* wed, because he is hard-working and well-liked and in love with her. Duanno-as-Curly moves in big gestures, limbs loose as he swaggers about, confident in his own skin. His leather chaps cling to his thighs and hips, exposing his pelvis and rear in jeans; his plaid shirt is unbuttoned to reveal his clavicle. He sings full-throated, never shy or hesitant about launching into a chorus. His rockabilly stage presence signifies a maleness located in bantamweight brawls, sexual hedonism, and Protestant work ethic. His openness about his feelings reads as honest, maybe a little simple. In contrast, Jud is obscure: Vaill's costume has multiple layers (a t-shirt, a flannel and a field jacket), and Vaill plays Jud as a man uncomfortable with taking up much space, shoulders

[106] Foucault, p. 183

hunched and steps shuffling as though trying to shrink or hide. His primary emotion is anger, unleashed in private moments ("Lonely Room") and otherwise sublimated into a more acceptable (if still abject) fear. He is almost hesitant to participate in "Pore Jud Is Daid," understandably so, since this is the number where the spurned Curly goes to suicide-bait his rival for Laurey's affection. Yet Jud himself does not seem to be in on the joke; his shyness stems more from an uncertainty around the local golden boy talking to him, perhaps because he expects ridicule. Or perhaps something else is being performed. In the Fish production, this number begins in pitch-black, only a single light illuminating Duanno and Vaill's faces brought close enough together to kiss. Vaill stares transfixed as Duanno imagines the grim details of Jud's funeral in hushed tones. This false eulogy is more praise than Jud has ever received, and much like Laurey in "Surrey," he gets carried away by the fantasy Curly spins, echoing his phrases until Jud's dearest desire (acceptance from the community) bursts out of him, "And now they're feelin' sad / Cause they used to treat him bad / And now they know their friend is gone fer good." The parallels between "Surrey" and "Pore Jud" go further in the Fish production: both numbers contrast Curly's easy-going machismo with that of a more reserved partner, positioning them as 'feminine' in the heteronormative function of duets, and both numbers expose the latter's desire via Curly. Both Laurey and Jud respond to this revelation with anger. Unlike Laurey, Jud nurses his anger in private, rather than lash out at "that smart-aleck cowhand" ("Lonely Room"), yet they share a frustration with Curly for articulating their secret wants, for rendering them vulnerable. These parallels (in tandem with the staging and costuming choices) suggest a possible queer reading of Jud's character, as Vaill portrays him—a Jud whose layered exterior, carefully moderated gestures, and tenor voice pushed down into the lowest end of its register all work to hide his queerness. In such a reading, Jud's obsession with Laurey comes

across less as entitlement and more as desperation, a last-ditch attempt to conform to the norms of the community. Because despite his attempts at integration, at playing the hard-working, masculine farmer, Jud has been marked as Other, as abnormal, by the Territory folks.

Consider this: in the Lynn Riggs play on which *Oklahoma!* was based, *Green Grow the Lilacs*, Jud (Jeeter) Fry was part Cherokee, a nod to the playwright's own mixed heritage and his mixed feelings about it.[107] While Jud's Native roots didn't make it into the Rogers and Hammerstein musical, the pathologization of the nonwhite person survives in his characterization as disturbed, antisocial, angry, as though those were inherent traits and not due to his outcast status. That pathologization resurfaces in the Fish production, which casts a white man as Jud but codes him as queer. The end result is the same: Jud represents the threat from within, his potential queerness as dangerous to the community's heteronormative values as miscegenation would be to its whiteness.

What assurance, then, does a Black Laurey have that she is safe with Curly, with these people who use violence as a means to secure and protect their beliefs about themselves? She witnesses up-close how they deal with Others. The federal marshal, played by a Black actor, says he "feel[s] funny" about acquitting Curly of murder charges, but his comment is the only dissent against an otherwise unanimous decision, easily swept aside. The racially diverse community nonetheless goes along with the desires of its white members, using the slippage around the legal language to declare Curly innocent. It is 1906, it is 2019, and the systems used to determine what is just or who belongs are the same ones that decide whether or not Black persons are property; whether Indigenous people should be pushed further west, forcibly integrated into white communities, or slaughtered; whether anyone who poses a threat to the established norm should

[107] Frank Rich, "*Oklahoma!* Was Never Really O.K.," *Vulture* (April 2019), https://www.vulture.com/2019/04/frank-rich-oklahoma.html

be permitted to exist. Laurey is ‘safe’ so long as she follows expectations, so long as she stays within the boundaries of the systems that govern her life.

Dressed in a bloodied wedding gown, Laurey bellows, “Oklahoma, you’re O.K.!” at the finale with the rest of the cast. What else can she do? The myth exists to kill her, and she intends to survive.

Chapter Four
Black Sound, Social Death, and the Other in *Hadestown* (2019)

"It's an old tale from way back when"

Before *Hadestown* (2019) begins, we know how the story ends. "It's an old song," Hermes tells us in the opening number ("Road to Hell"). The tale of Orpheus has special appeal to those in music studies: the mythic greatest of all musicians, who sang a song so lovely it persuaded the ruler of the Underworld to return Orpheus' wife alive to him. The power of music, which grants miraculous passage into hell and moves Hades to pity, which in its intangibility sways both gods and mortals but fails to hold Orpheus on course, eyes ahead. He turns around, to look, to reassure himself she is there. He always looks. The song is not enough, the verbal promise from Hades is not enough. He is compelled to find visual evidence to combat his doubt. "It's a sad tale, it's a tragedy."

Anaïs Mitchell's take on the myth keeps the tragic ending, but it transposes the characters into a Great Depression era setting, reimagining the underworld as an industrial city where nameless workers labor while Hades presides over them like a king. In *Hadestown*, Orpheus is not a heroic figure but a "poor boy," naïve and idealistic and distant in the way of the archetypal genius, too absorbed in chasing his muse to recognize immediate problems. He falls in love at first sight with Eurydice, a tough, wary girl who has learned to prioritize survival over anything else. Their romance unfolds against the backdrop of a collapsing world where environmental changes have stripped the seasons down to their furthest extremes (blistering summer and bitter winter), resulting in famine, drought, and poverty for the human inhabitants. The reason behind this climate change is the growing rift between Hades and Persephone: as their relationship falters, Persephone spends her time above exerting the full force of summer, and while she's gone, Hades sets the souls of the damned to work building an electrical grid, mining the

underworld for oil and coal, and erecting a wall around the borders of his kingdom. But Orpheus is convinced that he can write a song that will bring back spring. He becomes so absorbed in his efforts to finish this song that he neglects his relationship with Eurydice. Frustrated and starving in a nowhere town, Eurydice takes a ticket to Hadestown in search of material security, where she discovers that the price of her labor is her life. Orpheus must travel to hell to save her, and in the process he finishes the song to heal Hades and Persephone's relationship, returning spring to the world, and unionizes the underworld workers, leading the march out of Hadestown. But, of course, at the last moment Orpheus breaks his deal with Hades and turns around. Eurydice goes back to hell. The workers are not set free. Spring has come again, but whether it will stay, or whether its return is enough to heal the world, is yet to be determined. We the audience do not know.

Given Orpheus' central role in the myth, and his significance for music scholars, it might be easy to dismiss Eurydice as a MacGuffin, rather than a character in her own right. Yet Mitchell attempts to grant Eurydice an agency she is denied by the original myth. In *Hadestown*, Eurydice is self-sufficient, a lone survivor who moves from place to place, who gathers food and firewood against cold and hunger. If her falling in love with Orpheus is framed as against her suspicious nature (fated, if you will), then her decision to leave him for Hadestown is *hers*, a pragmatic choice born out of human need. Relatedly, Eurydice is the only named human character among the main cast—even Orpheus is the son of a muse, demi-godly in his musical talent—which in some ways makes her the audience surrogate. We learn about this world of gods and men through her, as she moves closer in proximity to the divine and its all too familiar cruelty.

I am interested in Eurydice because of her unique positioning within the musical narrative. She's the most vulnerable character among the cast, the one with the most to lose. She has perhaps more agency than her mythic counterpart but at the same time not enough to change her fate. And she has been played by a woman of color both in the Off-Broadway and Broadway productions. I read Mitchell's framing of Eurydice as resilient and independent in tandem with the recorded performances by nonwhite women who further nuance Eurydice's character. In particular, I listen to Eva Noblezada's performance on the Original Broadway Cast album (2019): Noblezada, who premiered the role on Broadway and received a Tony nomination for best actress in a leading role, is of mixed Filipina and Mexican descent. How do we understand her background in relation to a character marked by labor, migration, and death? How might we read Eurydice as a Brown woman? I examine Eurydice's arc in the following contexts: the related histories of Central American and South East Asian immigration to the United States, the recent political discourse around immigrants from the Global South and their labor value, and what the late Jose Esteban Muñoz calls "the sense of brown," the shared ways of being and forms of knowing that shape Brown communities. Muñoz theorizes brownness as a space for coalition, where people whose major shared trait is marginalization might find common ground to dismantle white supremacist systems. I consider Noblezada's Eurydice within the soundscape of *Hadestown*. How is her character sounded? How do we hear her as part of a sung machine that draws heavily from Black music styles?

When Orpheus turns, and Eurydice goes back to hell, what do we make of her voice?

"Oh, you gotta keep your head low
If you wanna keep your head"

Hadestown is built on Black sound. Mitchell's score incorporates folk, blues, and New Orleans jazz in its sonic landscape: Hermes and the chorus engage in call-and-response ("Road

to Hell," "Livin' It Up on Top"), Hades' orchestration crunches through brassy dissonances and carries overtones of the avant-garde ("Chant," "His Kiss, The Riot"), Persephone evokes Prohibition era club singers with her audience interactions, shout-outs to the band, and honey-warm croon ("Our Lady of the Underground"). Mitchell's use of Black music styles has two points of origin. First, musical theatre, which has taken from Black vernacular since its earliest incarnations. As Raymond Knapp discusses in *The American Musical and the Formation of National Identity* (2005), the 'musical sound' developed out of popular music created by Black musicians, incorporating elements of pop genres in ways palatable to primarily white, middle-class audiences.[108] Then there is Mitchell's own background in indie-folk: she has been involved in folksong performance since she was a teenager, recording albums, headlining shows, and winning awards. *Hadestown* began as a "folk opera," with an album in 2010 featuring Mitchell, Justin Vernon (lead singer of Bon Iver), and the Haden Triplets. In both cases, the white bodies onstage or in the studio obscure the Black roots of the music being played, but they cannot erase the fundamental Blackness of its soundscape.

I suggest we hear this sonic Blackness as an aural framing for the conditions of the narrative world. Hadestown is a thinly veiled metaphor for late-stage capitalism: Hades hoards wealth through labor "not his own" ("Epic II"), funneling unnamed workers into the industrial city on the pretext of freedom, a project that wrecks violence on the above world as his greed disrupts the natural balance of things. For Hades, the self-named city represents a grasp at control amid his feelings of insecurity and powerlessness in his relationship with his wife. For the workers, and later Eurydice, Hadestown means something else: guaranteed labor in a world where work equals survival. Eurydice in particular associates Hadestown with having her material needs met, to the degree that she might rest from her constant, desperate scrabble for

[108] Raymond Knapp, *The American Musical and the Formation of National Identity*, Chapter 4

food and shelter—"I want a nice soft place to land, I wanna lie down forever," she sings, and Hades' offer of a ticket to the underworld comes as an answer to her desire ("Hey Little Songbird"). Yet the gods understand that the city is not as advertised. Hermes proclaims, "Everybody hungry, everybody tired, everybody slaves by the sweat of his brow. The wage is nothing and the work is hard—it's a graveyard in Hadestown" ("Way Down Hadestown"). Instead of freedom or security, labor in Hadestown ultimately only results in death. Setting aside the obvious Marxist critique for the moment, I am interested in how the implications of capitalism in *Hadestown* relate to its sonic Blackness. In her article "Toward a Black Feminist Poethics," Denise Ferreira da Silva defines the current category of Blackness as "always already a referent of commodity, an object, and the other," a signifier of slavery, its conditions, and its labor value, which continues to drive and sustain global capital.[109] Da Silva riffs on a tradition of Afropessimist thought that describes Blackness as a set of conditions that render the Black subject a nonperson. Capitalism is one means of enforcing those conditions. In that case, the Black soundscape of *Hadestown* draws a parallel between the (real-world) enslaved and the (stage-world) workers by referencing a musical history of forced labor and exploitation. Yet da Silva points out that Marx fails to account for how enslaved labor produces an accumulation of surplus capital: if Blackness signifies the conditions of slavery, then it also signals creative potential. She argues, "…a moment of radical praxis acknowledges the creative capacity Blackness indexes, reclaims expropriated external value, and demands for nothing less than decolonization—that is, a reconstruction of the world."[110] Perhaps we likewise hear the use of folk, jazz, and blues music in *Hadestown* as signaling revolution, harking back to a history of radical thought and labor organization, foreshadowing the narrative moment when the workers

[109] Denise Ferreira da Silva, "Toward a Black Feminist Poethics: The Quest(ion) of Blackness at the End of the World," *The Black Scholar*, No. 44 Vol. 2, p. 81
[110] da Silva, p. 85

recognize their collective power. The same sound that pries apart the seams of contradictions inherent to capitalism also imagines a new world that might emerge in the break.

The break: the disruption between what is seen and what is signified. The place words don't go.[111] The lyrics provide narrative context, but Black sound complicates a familiar story. Disruption between what is seen—a myth that has become part of a Western canon—and what is sounded—the music of those kept outside the Western construction of Human.

The condition of being the Other against which the Human imagines itself is social death. Jamaican theorist Sylvia Wynter categorizes 'the Human' as the post-Enlightenment, state-sanctioned individual who exists at certain intersections of race, gender, and class—the apogee would be a cisgender, heteronormative white male citizen with a certain degree of social power (education, wealth, investments, secure employment).[112] In such a hierarchy (the Human, the aspiring human, the Other), Blackness is positioned at the bottom, the worst-case scenario to be avoided at all costs. Anti-aspirational. The Black subject is not *someone* but *something*, a fungible currency on which Humans can bank their own existence. Frank Wilderson puts it in the following terms: "The Black is needed to mark the border of Human subjectivity."[113] This border, like any physical border, is enforced via State violence. Toward that end, Black death is both predictable and *necessary*, as Christina Sharpe argues.[114] That violence, that foretold death of the nonhuman which is needful for the Human to live, is what constitutes social death, the shadow knowledge that the Other is always already dead or dying.

Then perhaps we might take the Black sound in *Hadestown* as an unspoken cue: to recognize that the onstage world operates on the same systems as our 'real' world, that the

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[111] Moten, *In The Break*, p. 59
[112] Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument," *The New Centennial Review*, Vol. 3 No. 3 (Fall 2003).
[113] Frank Wilderson, *Afropessimism.* NY: W.W. Norton (2020), p. 164
[114] Christina Sharpe, *In The Wake: On Blackness and Being*. NC: Duke University Press (2016), p. 7

textual critique is indeed meant to be explicit, without a simple resolution. That the Human—embodied in the presumed white, middle-class Broadway audience, in the theatre industry, in Anaïs Mitchell herself as a white female songwriter—depends on the Other's labor, death, and creative power. To be clear, I am not arguing such is Mitchell's *intention*. What she intended in her use of folk and blues is irrelevant. Rather, the *presence* of these Black originated styles stands as its own critique of the Human and the systems that enable his subjective existence. The soundscape is both adjacent and essential to the textual point being made: the Human is at odds with the human race, and only a total destruction of the current system can bring about liberation for everyone. Appropriate, too, that the soundscape pulls together styles from across decades, with New Orleans brass fanfare, smoky blues club ensemble, stride piano, cluttered avant-garde jazz, and a stripped-down revival approach to folk all in the same space. For da Silva, the collapse of whiteness means a collapse of temporalities: if whiteness is located in Time, then Blackness is located in Space. The End of the World that she prophesizes as the beginning of real liberation means going beyond temporality and interiority in order to escape the violence of "universal reason" (Western thought).[115] To put it another way: the end of Time is the end of the Human. The break—the disruption that is the presence of Black sound, across time and struggle—is where that end, which is truly a beginning, might be imagined.

"A lot of spirits gotta break
To make the underworld go round"

Although Eurydice is the only named human character in the musical, she does not qualify as Human under Wynter's framework. She's a poor woman without family or friends, without a home, without anything to mark her as special. Hermes introduces her as "a hungry young girl, a runaway from everywhere she's ever been…no stranger to the world, no stranger to

[115] da Silva, p. 84

the wind" ("Any Way the Wind Blows"). By her own admission, she moves from place to place whenever conditions become inhospitable; "when the weather takes a turn" encompasses lost jobs, homelessness, and failed connections with other people. It's implied that she lacks the resources or privileges to find someplace permanent, whether for employment or just living. Instead, Eurydice is both hungry and haunted: her entrance is framed by the Fates, a trio of goddesses who give voice to her worst thoughts, fears, and impulses, urging her along the tragic path at every crossroads. Her end is sad but inevitable, unavoidable. Existing at a certain intersect of gender and class renders her transient—if she had not attracted the attention of the gods, we would have no reason to know who she is. Hades tells Persephone, "The girl means nothing to me," and Persephone replies, "But she means *everything* to him [Orpheus]" ("How Long"). Her attachment to Orpheus—son of a Muse, beloved by Hermes, talented beyond mortal constraints—gives her value as something more than a laboring body (in multiple possible meanings of the word *labor*, as I'll discuss later). Far from insinuating Eurydice doesn't have agency, I emphasize her position relative to other characters who wield social, systemic, and divine power.

In addition, as she's played by original Broadway cast member Eva Noblezada, Eurydice is also a Brown woman. I argue that Noblezada's brownness makes Eurydice disposable within the narrative systems, which reflect our real-world dynamics, where brownness is associated with low wage or undocumented labor, as well as the illegal or noncitizen Other. In Wynter's analysis, the Human is validated in his existence by the State—he pays taxes, he owns property, he has legal rights that afford him protections and privileges. Formerly a construct of the Christian Church, the Human is now an agent of the secular State, which utilizes the Human to further its own interests. By default, this dynamic means that noncitizens of the State in question

do not count as Human: Wynter discusses enslaved persons, but her categorization could encompass immigrants, migrants, and members of sovereign Indigenous nations, too. As a person of Filipino and Mexican descent, Noblezada embodies a history of (im)migration, colonization, and globalization as it relates to Latinx and South East Asian people. But audiences also might bring their own associations to her performance—for instance, Noblezada's debut as Kim in the 2014 West End revival of *Miss Saigon*, based on Puccini's opera *Madame Butterfly*. Unlike Butterfly, however, Kim is a South Vietnamese girl, who in her struggle to survive the Vietnam War sees her American lover as a possible route out of poverty. Casting Noblezada in the role, despite her being Filipino, encourages a conflation between her racial identity and the character's—an easy suspension of disbelief for white audiences who might visually mark Noblezada as Asian, based on her skin tone and facial features, but who might not know or care enough about cultural/national distinctions for her casting to disrupt their engagement with the story. While *Hadestown* takes place outside time (the use of Greek myth is more of a storytelling device than an exploration of ancient culture), the musical's soundscape and costume design locate its setting as 1920s adjacent. Prior to the Great Depression, the early twentieth century saw an increase in Asian immigration to the United States: Eurydice being a South East Asian woman looking for whatever odd jobs might be available is actually not an improbable situation for this time period, presence of gods and Classical names aside. My point being that based on Noblezada's debut as Kim and the historic reality of Asian laborers in the U.S. during the decade from which *Hadestown* draws much of its aesthetic inspiration, there is reason to read Eurydice in the original Broadway cast as mixed Asian-Latina, as Brown.

The intersection of these conditions—poor, migrant, woman, Brown—are what render Eurydice-as-mediated-by-Noblezada nonhuman. Or to put it another way: Eurydice's

relationship to the systems governing her world orient her as Other. Her positioning is not due to any single identity marker (i.e., class, gender, race), but how they work together in context to diminish her agency. Other named characters don't exist in the same margins. Orpheus is described as poor but possessing "a gift to give" ("All I've Ever Known – Intro"). Unlike Eurydice, he doesn't worry about physical needs such as food and shelter; when winter comes, Eurydice is the one who scrambles to try and ensure their survival, in an assumption of roles that mirrors the heteronormative expectation where the woman takes care of the home while the man pursues his creative vision. The mundane realities of day-to-day survival is linked to the domestic as a feminine sphere, while also subtly implied as *lesser* than art as a creative, masculine sphere. Orpheus is working on the song that will "bring the world back into tune" ("Chant"); he holds the potential power to undo the damage Hades has inflicted on the world. Yet Eurydice must weather the effects of that damage in her daily life, and marrying Orpheus makes her responsible for two lives instead of just her own.

A better point of comparison might be Persephone. In some ways she serves as a mirror for Eurydice: as played by Amber Grey (a light-skinned, biracial actress), Persephone is another woman of color constrained by the limits of her role. But, as goddess of spring and Lady of the Underground, she lacks for nothing in terms of material goods—in fact, she provides for others, her coming Above in the summer heralded with gifts of fruit and wine, her return to the underworld presenting illicit glimpses of stars, rain, and blue sky to those Below. She nurtures her adoring worshippers, not out of domestic obligation but a genuine pleasure in being among others, in being liked. She travels between Above and Below as part of the annual cycle, but she wields power and influence in both places. Her husband imposes a gendered, 'trophy wife' expectation on her in Act II, though it occurs via ironic parable, as he tells Orpheus, "If you want

to hold a woman, son, hang a chain around her throat, made of many carat gold…Bind her with a golden band, take it from an old man" ("Chant II"). But Hades seems to acknowledge the failure of his efforts to tie Persephone down with marriage and wealth, because the sentiment of their union has faded and his rebranding the underworld as an industrial mining town has not endeared him to his wife. For Persephone, love and survival are not mutually exclusive. Survival is not one of her concerns. She can sing, "It's true, the earth must die. But then the earth comes back to life, and the sun just goes on rising" ("How Long"). Persephone is linked to the seasons, but she does not depend on them to live. Meanwhile, Eurydice has no alternative but to enter a labor contract—having no divine blood or help, she must take the most promising route available and hope it sustains her. Her deal with Hades places her in a position of extreme vulnerability with regard to abuse, both as a worker and as a woman. If the earth dies, then Eurydice dies, too. Unless she dies first.

And yet in some sense Eurydice is always already dying, dead. The tragic nature of the myth hinges on her death. In Act II, she must die for Hades to maintain his status quo in the underworld: the deal that Hades gives Orpheus is a dice toss, but if Orpheus is successful in his quest, then Eurydice will be gone and the workers will be freed. Hades remaining King of Hell depends on her loss. But she is lost before the moment when Orpheus turns to look. Her descent into Hadestown involves crossing a border that cannot be easily reversed—the line between a literal and a metaphorical death blurs when she accepts Hades' deal. Hermes makes this explicit when he says, "Eurydice was a hungry young girl, but she wasn't hungry anymore. What she was, instead, was dead. Dead to the world anyway" ("Way Down Hadestown – Reprise"). The moment she entered the story, a young Brown girl struggling against the current of Fate, she was doomed, simply because "that is how the story goes" ("Road to Hell – Reprise").

If Eurydice is both nonhuman and fatally mortal—if her death is necessary for the engine of Hadestown to continue running, for us to witness the story onstage—then she occupies a space analogous to social death. I say 'analogous' because I want to respect the origins of the concept of social death, which comes from Black studies and its ongoing critique of the ways in which nonblack life depends on Black fungibility. Noblezada's Eurydice is not Black, but she is racialized by systems within and outside the narrative. I do not mean to equate the conditions of brownness and Blackness. As Wynter argues, all historical systems of oppression, from religious to economic, are rooted in antiblackness, and nonblack people of color are often deemed nonhuman based on their proximity to Blackness. She identifies a spectrum between nonhuman and Human where a subject might move toward one or the other based on social shifts such as class status, employment, education, religious conversion, marriage, legal citizenship, etc. Within that spectrum, persons who fail to count as Human might recognize common interests in the fight to undo the Human as standard.

At the same time, Alys Eve Weinbaum thinks through the relationship between the nonhuman and social death in her analysis of Kazuo Ishiguro's novel *Never Let Me Go*. Set in a future Japan where human clones are farmed for their organs, *Never Let Me Go* considers biocapitalism (how capitalism invests in fields related to the control, surveillance, and reproduction of the human body as a source of labor) at its most extreme yet unremarkable, the horrible reality underlying a banal day-to-day existence. Weinbaum argues that the clones are racialized based on their status as human beings who lack any social categorization or legal recognition of their personhood. For her, Ishiguro's novel serves as a not far-fetched example of how racist systems insidiously perpetuate themselves. She states, "I treat cloning as a thick metaphor for the range of biotechnological practices that have enabled biocapitalist extraction

over the past four decades and the recalibration of the slave episteme in and for neoliberal and supposedly postracial times."[116] I refer to Weinbaum's work as a model for my theorizing on Eurydice's position. In a colorblind cast, on a stage set outside historical (linear) time, Eurydice is nonetheless racialized and, in being racialized, made (in)disposable.

This position turns Eurydice into a 'thing' which the system can use in its machinations. Anne Anlin Cheng theorizes on the relationship between the Asian woman and 'thingness,' one that constructs her as an ornament, an object for both aesthetic pleasure and labor value. In regard to the figuration of the Asian woman as a 'doll,' and more recent equation of her with the android, Cheng argues that the Asian woman threatens the constructed divide between organic and inorganic, human and thing. She states, "This nonperson, normally seen as outside of modernity and counter to organic human individualism, actually embodies a forgotten genealogy about the coming together of life and what is not life, labor and leisure, that conditions the modern understanding of humanness."[117] The Human is the real construct. Via her analysis of media representations of the Asian woman as doll, as android, as the ghost in the machine, Cheng concludes that bodies cannot be separated from thingness, because an assemblage of identities always functions as a kind of prosthetic. To return to my earlier argument against Eurydice being mere plot device: such a facile reading ignores that Eurydice's choices must be read through the lens of her 'thingness,' or the ways Human agency does not apply to her.

Cheng is concerned with the "yellow woman," but her work primarily focuses on subjects from so-called developed Asian countries such as China or Japan. Denise Cruz, in her book *Transpacific Femininities*, examines the Filipina woman as a personage formed through colonial occupation, transpacific cultural exchange, and native self-determination. Prior to the United

[116] Alys Eve Weinbaum, *The Afterlife of Reproductive Slavery: Biocapitalism and Black Feminism's Philosophy of History*. NC: Duke University Press (2019), p. 148
[117] Cheng, p. 136

States recognizing the Philippines as an independent nation in 1946, Filipinas balanced on a precarious line between being perceived as *indio* savages or being upheld as model minorities, proof of the benevolent influence of civilization. To lean too far into either direction meant giving into white supremacist ideas about Indigenous people. Women of mixed Spanish and native islander descent tried to counter these expectations: they wrote fiction in English and Tagalog, they went to college at U.S. institutions, they adapted Western cultural trends to incorporate their personal heritage. In many ways, their experiences mirror those of Asian Americans in the later twentieth century who struggled to assimilate while maintaining some connection to their original culture. Like Cheng, Cruz recognizes the fundamental paradox of her subjects, who must represent the colonized Other no matter their attempts to align themselves with the Human.

The modern Filipina (as Cruz theorizes her) shares much in common with the Latina, whose identity has also been shaped through centuries of Spanish occupation, Indigenous erasure, U.S. interference, and transnational migration. This overlap in experience is what leads me to invoke Muñoz's endeavor of "knowing a brownness that is our commonality."[118] Muñoz defines brownness as "a kind of uncanny persistence in the face of distressed conditions of possibility."[119] An impossible resilience against all odds. Living despite inevitable death. Eurydice is dead before the story begins, but she lives again and again in the retelling. She exists, persists, in the in-between. In this sense, she improvises on the trope of the Brown woman as beyond control or containment: she resists the original myth's effort to sideline her in favor of the male protagonist, refusing to be a passive bystander. Yet, in the invocation of that trope, she also forecloses certain readings of the text. It becomes hard not to hear "Why We Build the Wall"

[118] Jose Esteban Muñoz, *The Sense of Brown*. NC: Duke University Press (2020), p. 2
[119] Muñoz, p. 4

in the context of U.S. border policy and the political rhetoric around Central and South American migrants during the Trump administration. Bereft of options, Eurydice travels from the depot town, where she has nothing but her name and her relationship to Orpheus, to Hadestown, where she is one of a faceless, nameless mass of workers. As the Fates explain to her, the price of her ticket to Hadestown is her soul, and the security she'd been promised is eternal labor, without pleasure or rest. What parallel might we make between her and the immigrants she evokes? The Latinx persons who leave citizenship, family, familiarity behind, who cross borders because there might be work, because Western interference has destabilized the government and economy in their home country. Eurydice goes to Hadestown because Hades has made the world above unsustainable. While Hades preaches that the walls around his kingdom keep out poverty, he recruits souls from Above "to make the Underworld go 'round" ("Way Down Hadestown – Reprise"). Eurydice is not the first poor girl to die in a border crossing. Unless something changes, she will not be the last.

But, as Muñoz points out, brownness imagines alternate possibilities. Noblezada's Eurydice asks, "If I raise my head, could I change my fate?" ("Chant – Reprise") She clings to hope that freedom is possible when Orpheus, the perpetual optimist, despairs. Muñoz claims, "Assimilation and progress are typically coded as male, and the past, ethnicity, and heritage are represented by an abjected maternal body."[120] But Muñoz is speaking about a Western understanding of progress as linear. A "sense of brown" might imagine a different kind of future, one which does not discard the past, one which challenges predetermined ideas about what stories are successes or tragedies. If the Brown subject is a "problem"—as Muñoz riffs on DuBois' question, "how does it feel to be a problem?"—then the *problem* that the Brown woman represents is the failure of a white dominant, patriarchal system to fully account for her. She can

[120] Muñoz, p. 68

never entirely be kept within the line (of nation-state, of language, of Time), and her elusiveness opens other avenues of escape. Where initially Eurydice is the one who believes her contract with Hades cannot be broken, that her life and undeath will always be a struggle to survive, by the end of the second act she holds the conviction that she and Orpheus can simply walk out of hell, that they can lead a mass of people back into a world with sunshine and spring.

"If I raise my voice, could I change the way it is?"

So far I have been discussing Noblezada's Eurydice in a visual context, how an audience might see and interpret her, how her casting might disrupt certain expectations. But I also want to consider how we might *hear* Eurydice. How does Mitchell craft Eurydice's part in relation to the larger Black soundscape of *Hadestown*? How does Noblezada vocally interpret her role? If we understand her Eurydice as racialized both in and outside the narrative, as I have argued we should, then we must account for the ways in which that understanding permeates the sonic aspect of her performance, as well. Nina Sun Eidsheim argues, "As long as we believe in knowable, stable sound, we are compelled to identify sound and to believe that identification to constitute essence. And whatever we believe to be a person's essence—from despairing or ecstatic to white or black—is employed in the interpretation and assessment of the voice."[121] Because we read Noblezada's Eurydice as Brown, we are primed to hear her as Brown. How then can we listen for the "sense of brown" in Eurydice?

Muñoz's refusal to define brownness beyond a commonality shared by nonblack people of color means its aesthetic qualities are variable, infinite. Brownness encompasses a host of cultures that could not possibly be distilled into a monolithic representation. Even so, audiences come to a work with preconceived ideas of what constitutes 'authentic' Brown expression.

[121] Nina Sun Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre, and Vocality in African-American Music*. NC: Duke University Press (2018), p. 154

Eurydice probably meets none of these expectations. Her part keeps within a conservative range, and it lacks the vocal gymnastics that often feature in women's roles—a kind of virtuosic moment for both the character and the actress. Compare her rather simple melodies with the falsetto refrain Orpheus sings (pushing the tenor actor to the limit of his head voice), or the demands of Persephone's role, which include rapid switches from low croons to belted shouts. Eurydice's part also bears little to no cultural inflection: none of the Latin syncopation that drives the Fates' harmonies, nor the bluesy swing that conveys Persephone's charm and easygoing extroversion. As written, Eurydice sounds like standard, whitewashed pop, though she skirts around sonic Blackness when singing with other characters. Noblezada also sings the part fairly straight, without vibrato or stylistic idiosyncrasies. In contrast, the off-Broadway actress who played Eurydice, Nabiyah Be, evokes the blues in her performance on the off-Broadway album, bending pitches and delivering lines with a raw emotion that belies her character's world-weariness. When she sings, "Orpheus, all the pretty songs you sing ain't gonna harbor me…" she aches on the vowels, spits out the consonants, bitter that her love has failed her, angered that she thought he could do otherwise. Noblezada's Eurydice parses the same line with a kind of desperate realization, making her seem younger and rendering her previous wariness as a front against possible harm. With her clear, unembellished voice, she comes across as a little naïve, despite her pronouncements about not relying on other people. This does not quite fit into the usual Brown woman stereotypes: the maternal figure who endures abject suffering, the exotic seductress, the compliant doll. But neither is Eurydice outside the parameters of these tropes, or the racialized associations that compose them.

I hear several layers in Eurydice's whitewashed sound. One of these is the echo of the composer: Mitchell sang Eurydice's part in the 2010 album, and her voice has a breathy,

childlike tenor that recalls Joanna Newsom and Karen Dalton. While *Hadestown* gained orchestral complexity with each iteration, Eurydice's part has stayed close to its original form, including its bare guitar and strings accompaniment. Of all the characters in the musical, Eurydice sounds the most like Mitchell, the indie-folk singer-songwriter who sings unadorned melodies with a terrible earnestness. The best example of this overlap between character and composer is the Act II song "Flowers." Originally written as a single, it was incorporated into the concept album and kept in both Broadway versions. It is Eurydice's only solo number, without Orpheus or the Fates or even Hermes interjecting metanarrative commentary. She has taken the train to Hadestown, signed the contract that gave her soul to Hades, and realized her afterlife is neither eternal bliss nor the extension of the labor she did Above, but rather an erasure of self for a cruel god's enrichment. "Flowers" comes from her resulting despair—an *I want* song at a moment when desire seems hopeless, a character mourning for the security she hasn't known and the love she left behind. In the 2010 album, Mitchell sings over a plucked guitar line; the 2019 OBC album incorporates strings playing a fragment of the 'lovebirds' theme associated with Orpheus and Eurydice, relating the song back to Eurydice's narrative arc, but otherwise the music and lyrics remain the same. Noblezada's performance mostly differs from Mitchell's in her timbre and training: she has a richer, fuller chest voice and better breath support, resulting in a more sustained tone which carries in a large theater. Mitchell affects a warble on her vowels that contributes to a 'folksy' sound in a small space, or in a recording booth, but that would be hard to sustain for eight shows a week while also engaging in physical choreography. Both women's voices could be easily distinguished from each other. But in her choice not to embellish or stylistically alter the music as written, Noblezada recalls Mitchell's approach to Eurydice, her 'straightforward' take loaded with gendered associations.

Those associations run like a current throughout Eurydice's part in the musical, but they come to the surface in "Flowers." This number is Eurydice unfiltered, unmediated, soul bared to the listener in the same way she hints her body has been to Hades ("Lily white and poppy red, I trembled as he laid me out. You won't feel a thing, he said, when you go down"). No other character is made to perform such vulnerability—Orpheus expresses his feelings as a duet with Eurydice ("All I've Ever Known"), and Persephone flaunts her hedonism to an interactive chorus ("Livin' It Up on Top," "Our Lady of the Underground"). Eurydice sings her sadness and desire alone, yet in another sense she is less alone than anyone else, delivering her lament directly to the audience. Her performance embodies what Lauren Berlant calls "the female complaint," the public expression of women's disappointment with the discord between romance and reality, their ambivalence toward the systems that disenfranchise them but also provide the means for articulating their anger. Berlant links the female complaint to sentimentality, which she characterizes as the conviction that "people ought to be legitimated because they have feelings and because there is an intelligence in what they feel that *knows* something about the world that, if it were listened to, could make things better."[122] This conviction is gendered female in part because it appeals to the social realm, rather than a political one removed from the realities of ordinary life, and because it privileges affective attachment over 'objective' Reason. "Flowers" does not argue against the facts of Eurydice's situation, for which she takes responsibility as though she alone is at fault. Instead, she mourns that "this is how it is," something she had previously accepted as fact. "Flowers" represents a turning point, where Eurydice can both desire and envision a nontragic future. But, at the same time, this song changes nothing about how the story will end. We are invited (by Mitchell? Eurydice?) to listen to a lone woman's voice, rendered vulnerable yet available, and to find an aesthetic pleasure in its expression of sincere

[122] Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint*. NC: Duke University Press (2006), p. 2

emotion, all while aware that she is going to die. Her sincerity cannot save her—if anything, it makes the moment when Orpheus turns around that much more painful, because we know she dared to hope for another ending.

The conflation of femininity and sentimentality is usually associated with whiteness, something Berlant acknowledges in her introduction. Noblezada's Eurydice is not white, nor is she Human, but she is the character with whom the audience is supposed to identify. Given the (im)possible task to see themselves in a homeless Brown girl, the audience can take comfort in her sonic whiteness—they do not have to learn another musical language, because they can immerse themselves in the familiar, an approachable pop that might register as 'neutral' compared to the Black-American sound of folk and blues. Displaced from a specific culture or location, Noblezada's Eurydice sounds like anyone. Or perhaps vice versa: anyone can hear themselves in her.

Although her musical 'accent' does not denote brownness, Eurydice's assimilation into sonic whiteness leaves her stranded, belonging nowhere. She stands out amid the Black soundscape. Hers is a reverse alienation: the named (non)human character, the Brown girl with a white voice in a production based on Black music. Noblezada never quite blends with the rest of the cast. In "Hey Little Songbird," Eurydice's duet with Hades, her clear, youthful voice contrasts Patrick Page's deep bass growl. She doesn't respond directly to Hades' overtures, in a number that is ostensibly about her seduction, instead mourning her limited choices to an absent Orpheus. Noblezada leans into the peaks of her phrases but never quite breaks on the notes of Eurydice's anguish; she croons, she laments, but she cannot resolve the apparent disconnect between her and everyone else. Even at the climax of Act II, when she joins the chorus of workers in their revolution ("Wait For Me – Reprise"), her voice is easily distinguished, the

decision to amplify her (whether in the recording studio or during audio edits for the album) reflecting back on her musical displacement.

The only character Eurydice isn't sonically estranged from is Orpheus (performed by actor Reeve Carney on the OBC album), who embodies the white, indie-folk sound on which Mitchell built her career. If Eurydice sounds like Mitchell as a female folk singer, then Orpheus sounds like her as a songwriter. Two halves of the same whole. Of course, it makes sense for the central love interests to have complimentary sounds—an aural indication to the audience that these two are fated for each other. Likewise, there is a precedent for Eurydice's alienation from those with whom she should have some measure of coalition: Maria, from *West Side Story*, whose Puerto Rican identity is told but not shown, her friends Anita and Rosalia singing in Latin rhythms about home and allegiance while she dreams about a future with a white boy. Like Maria, Eurydice cannot be saved by love. Orpheus realizes the workers are trapped in a system rigged against them, and his dissatisfaction with "the way it is" leads the workers to wonder whether there might be another way. But while he champions Eurydice's freedom, he also accepts the conditions placed upon their leaving Hadestown. "Tell me what to do," he begs the workers, and Eurydice implores him, "You take me home with you" ("If It's True," "Promises"). Yet he cedes the final test to Hades. Yet he turns to look. So much for revolution. Whiteness can't save Eurydice, either, even when it tries.

"The song was written long ago"

Let us return to Muñoz's statement that brownness is often represented as the abject maternal. Noblezada's Eurydice sings her sentiments in a white voice, but she cannot access the same privileges as the women Berlant discusses. Emotional, but not redemptive. (Whiteness sees Brown tears as manipulation, as madness, as passion without rhyme or reason.) Sympathetic, but

only at a distance, under the right circumstances. An eternal caretaker for others. La Llorona, La Malinche, the Madonna. While neither virgin nor mother, Eurydice weeps for Orpheus, leaves Orpheus, and cares for Orpheus—in a material sense in Act I, gathering food and supplies against the winter, and in an emotional sense in Act II, urging him to walk out of Hell, encouraging him on the cold and dark march home, singing to combat his doubts up until the moment he fails her for the last time. Such contradictions, such brownness, cannot go unresolved. Eurydice dies, and her (final) death is tragic, but it also contains her, pushes the uneasy aspects of her being into the boundaries of narrative. If the audience identifies with her during the musical, they are relieved of that burden when the lights go up, or the album ends. Catharsis lies in the purge of emotion, the knowledge that a sad song can be revisited but never quite relived.

Perhaps *Hadestown* gets at the limits of art in addressing systemic injustice. Orpheus finishes his song to bring back spring but fails to bring Eurydice back from the dead. In the end, though he defies Hades' authoritarian rule ("It isn't for the few to tell the many what is true"), he submits to the whims of the gods in determining his lover's fate. As Eurydice laments in the off-Broadway version, "all the pretty songs he sings" ain't gonna change the world without some action behind them. *Hadestown* levels a critique against the same engine of capitalism that brought the musical to Broadway. When the audience leaves their seats, when the listener reaches the end of the album, will they see "the world we dream about, and the one we live in now"? Will they listen for a sense of brown, another way of knowing?

Or will they sing the same sad song again and again?

Chapter Five
"Welcome to the Show, to the Histo(re)mix": *Six* and the 'Girlboss-ification' of Historical Revisionism

Six women intone their fates to a screaming audience. *Divorced. Beheaded. Died. Divorced. Beheaded. Survived.* Then the beat quickens, the stage lights flash, and the women announce, "And tonight, we…are…LIVE!" What follows is a pop concert in which these "ex-wives" of King Henry VIII sing about their experiences with the infamous British monarch in order to determine who had it worst. Each queen performs a solo number that centers on her ultimate end as an aspect of her identity; each queen adopts a musical genre that is rife with references to contemporary pop stars and that serves to set her apart as a distinct persona from her peers. Through their vocal gymnastics and choreographed movements, the women work to generate hype among the audience, the final arbiter in this oppression olympics. However, when it comes to the final wife, Catherine Parr, she wonders whether their fixation on comparing and ranking their individual suffering actually recenters Henry as the defining point of their lives. The show concludes with a group number where the women imagine an alternative future where they pursue creative careers and collaborate on an album.

Six: The Musical was conceived and brought into being by Toby Marlow and Lucy Moss. Marlow and Moss met while students at Cambridge and bonded over their mutual passion for theater—both of them had experience in performance and chose Cambridge because of its student theater scene, which has launched careers for several famous actors.[123] When the Cambridge University Musical Theatre Society chose Marlow to write a show for the 2017 Edinburgh Fringe Festival, Marlow tapped Moss to help him realize a concept he had sketched

[123] Michael Paulson, "The Making of 'Six': How Tudor Queens Turned Into Pop Stars," *The New York Times*, 27 Feb. 2020. https://archive.ph/9qmnQ

out in class: a musical based on the the wives of Henry VIII. Marlow and Moss have cited several motivations behind their choice of subject, including an interest in history, a desire to write more prominent roles for female and nonbinary actors, and the politics of the #MeToo movement.[124] *Six* garnered attention at EFF, prompting Marlow and Moss to bring the show back to campus. Composer George Stiles, a friend of the Marlows, convinced West End producer Kenny Wax to watch the show, and Wax helped underwrite its premiere in London (this time with professional actors) along with an Original Cast Recording.[125] The cast recording boosted mainstream attention: the catchy solos (such as Anne Boleyn's "Don't Lose Your Head") did well on social media platforms like TikTok, where teenagers could record themselves lipsyncing along to the original audio. With Moss and Jamie Armitage co-directing, *Six* went on tour in Britain and landed an open-ended run on the West End. Its popularity on the Internet resulted in New Zealand, Australian, and North American tours starting in 2019. While *Six* began its Broadway previews in February 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic shut down all shows in March, delaying its premiere until September 2021. The Broadway production was nominated for the 2022 Tony Awards and won Best Original Score. Currently the 2022 Original Broadway Cast Recording has been nominated for a Grammy.

Given its meteoric success and relevance to the sociocultural zeitgeist, *Six* drew inevitable comparisons to *Hamilton* from critics. Both musicals used popular genres as rhetorical devices to frame questions around historical narrative: who gets remembered and who dictates that remembrance. Both musicals involved various degrees of historical revisionism, while

[124] Sarah Crompton, "With SIX, Playwrights Toby Marlow and Lucy Moss Dramatize the Tudor Dynasty—One Power Ballad at a Time," *Vogue*, 16 Jan. 2020. https://www.vogue.com/article/six-playwrights-lucy-moss-toby-marlow

[125] While many reviews and articles talk about *Six* as a "breakthrough" in musical theater, I want to call attention to the industry nepotism that enabled the show to gain traction beyond a one-off student production. These connections (often framed as family friends) are what propelled *Six* to West End and Broadway in a much shorter time-span than other comparable productions.

claiming to tell previously 'untold' stories. And both musicals featured nontraditional casts whose unspoken racial diversity served to unsettle social and temporal expectations. Yet while *Hamilton* positioned its casting choices as laying claim to a national identity for nonwhite Americans (and even non-naturalized citizens), in part as a reflection of Obama-era neoliberal politics, the function of nontraditional casting in *Six* was (and remains) less immediately clear. The casting call for *Hamilton* asked only nonwhite actors to audition for principal roles, with the exception of the British characters, whose oppositional stance might be represented visually via whiteness. In contrast, the 2021 and 2022 National Tour casting calls for *Six* adhere to the colorblind approach: "The Queens may be performers of all races and ethnicities, and shapes and sizes."[126] The implication is that anyone might play as any of the queens. However, as I will discuss later, these roles are racialized via sonic signifiers, which the production's casting choices (both in the U.K. and the U.S.) have reiterated. In particular, Catherine of Aragon, Anna of Cleves, and Catherine Parr are based on Black female pop stars, and these roles have been primarily performed by Black actors since the 2017 Off-West End production. What does it mean that these figures are represented by Black sound and bodies? While Marlow and Moss have claimed a desire to use their privilege to promote marginalized voices, *Six* conscripts Black and Brown culture to retell the stories of British royalty, in the process romanticizing an empire built on the backs of colonized peoples and erasing lived experiences of gender and race. The end goal of this pastiche seems to be a pop feminist message about how women should support each other in order to dismantle the patriarchy.

In what follows, I consider the intersections of femininity and Blackness as performed in *Six*. I am less concerned with the musical's historical inaccuracies: of course the playwrights

[126] Casting Call: "'Six: The Musical' Nat'l Tour," https://www.backstage.com/casting/six-the-musical-natl-tour-423094/

would prioritize a compelling and coherent narrative over the banal and absurd realities, because ultimately their goal is to deliver a story that sells. I locate *Six* as part of a British theatrical tradition that commodifies Black performance for the entertainment of white liberal audiences. In particular, this tradition imports Black American signifiers as cultural capital, places them within an Anglocentric context, and exports the result back to American audiences via globalizing networks (i.e., touring productions, social media, and official recordings). Through this process, the nuances of the original signifiers becomes lost, flattening nuance and reinforcing stereotypes around Blackness and womanhood. Returning once again to Nicole Fleetwood's concept of excess flesh, I discuss how *Six* frames its titular queens as excessive—emotionally, sexually, and functionally, as each discarded wife represents a failure on Henry's part to maintain his heteropatriarchal order. I listen to the Original Cast and Original Broadway Cast recordings to compare how the actors for Catherine of Aragon, Anna of Cleves, and Catherine Parr approach sonic Blackness. How do their performance choices either repeat or remix what Patricia Hill Collins calls "controlling images"? Finally, I weigh the pop feminism that *Six* promotes versus coalition feminism. What does it mean for interracial and intergenerational women to dismantle patriarchal narratives? What might that work look like beyond a 'girl group' of singular success stories?

"You Want a Queen Bee? Well There's Half a Dozen": The Commodification of Black Spectacle

The staged Black American subject has long been a site of fascination and disturbance for British audiences. Scholars such as Daphne Brooks and Jayna Brown have examined how U.S. antebellum discourses around abolition shaped Black performance on both sides of the Atlantic well into the twentieth century. In her chapter on William and Walker's *In Dahomey* (1903), Brooks discusses the musical's London debut, where critics expressed confusion and upset over

the closing pantomime, which created an idyllic, pre-colonial African landscape with fantastical figures. The subsequent directorial choice to make this epilogue a prologue did not appease British audiences, who lamented the production's American perspective as inauthentic.[127] William and Walker's pan-African aesthetic in the pantomime unsettled white expectations around 'primitive' Blackness. In contrast, Jayna Brown argues that touring Black children's choruses at the turn of the century functioned as a site for British working-class identification and middle-class paternalism.[128] The former compared their struggle for better wages and conditions to the abolitionist movement, while the latter rewrote imperialism as a liberal effort to uplift the poor, nonwhite masses. For white audiences, the Black bodies onstage served as a *tabula rasa* on which they might project their own experiences, desires, and ideals.

I cite Brooks and Brown to remind us that Black actors have been in British musical theater since its earliest inception. However, I also want to reiterate the function that Blackness performed for white audiences: a mirror in which they could see their own suffering and benevolence, a confirmation of their beliefs about themselves and their position in the world. This investment in an 'authentic' Black performance was facilitated by transatlantic cultural exchange between two nations who established their global power through chattel slavery. Furthermore, these scholars reject an impulse to read British audiences as more sympathetic to Black causes. While Britain ceased its involvement in the slave trade almost fifty years before the U.S. Civil War ended—as a result becoming a hub for abolition activists, and later for Black American artists seeking to escape Jim Crow's oppressive weight—the general white British audience continued to engage with Black subjectivity as fungible. Or, to reframe that conclusion:

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[127] Daphne Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910*. Duke University Press (2006), p. 210

[128] Jayna Brown, "Chapter One, 'Little Black Me': The Touring Picaninny Choruses," *Babylon Girls*. Duke University Press (2008)

white Britons recognized Black people as *persons* but not as *human*. Recall that theorist Sylvia Wynter defined the Human as an Enlightenment construction, a product of secular, liberal thought that was positioned opposite Blackness as the embodiment of everything primitive, stagnant, and irrational.[129] Britain's ongoing hegemonic project—through its occupation of other countries, but also its investment in global capitalism that hinges on the deprivation of the Global South—demonstrates that the national perception of who counts as Human has not changed. Blackness continues to exist, in the white British imagination, for consumption.

That relationship between the white gaze and Black spectacle persists in *Six*. When talking about their early brainstorming sessions, Marlow and Moss cite Beyoncé's 2011 video concert, *Live at Roseland: Elements of 4*, as inspiring *Six*'s structure. *Live at Roseland* combined video from Beyoncé's "4 Intimate Nights" shows and behind-the-scenes, personal footage detailing her experiences as an artist, from her years as a member of Destiny's Child to her ascendant solo career. Its construction works on several registers: an accessible recreation of an exclusive concert, a documentary-styled narrative over which Beyoncé exerts total control, and an example of the parasocial relationship between Beyoncé and her fans, which is sustained in part by her curated vulnerability. In her earlier works, such as *4*, she represents a fantasy, the girl who rises to stardom, the woman who has it all (creative genius, successful career, famous partner); this fantasy is facilitated by her hypervisibility as a Black woman. *Live at Roseland* is a spectacle, made arresting through directorial choices and its claim as authentic. Marlow and Moss took the concept of spectacle and applied it to their production without interrogating the underlying thing that made it profitable—the marketing and performance of a persona. As a result, the queens of *Six* must rely on subjectivity in order to make their case for recognition:

[129] Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument,", pp. 257-337

first, reframing their traumas as catchy bops to gain audience approval, and later, performing an imagined alternative life that was 'stolen' from them. But, as I will discuss toward the end of this chapter, the latter is not a better or more ethical approach, because it still relies on Enlightenment logics of the individual, of personal value derived from sociocultural contribution, of legibility to the dominant system as a prerequisite for personhood. Beyoncé leverages both her Blackness and her femininity as capital to navigate the entertainment industry. Marlow and Moss leverage Beyoncé (subject-turned-object) as capital, too, for themselves and their production. Of course, Beyoncé is only the most prominent example: *Six* utilizes other popular Black signifiers to call attention to how these historical white women have been afforded less mainstream attention than their husband.

"Every Tudor Rose Has Its Thorns": Six *and Excess Flesh*

From their dramatic entrance, *Six* positions its queens as exceeding social and historical boundaries. Social, in that they break polite convention to articulate their experiences with Henry as exploitative, against the common narrative wherein they are responsible for their fates. We "know all about the glories and the disgraces," but in fact that is not the full story. Likewise, the queens go beyond temporal limits by coming back from the dead to engage in a #MeToo-inspired callout of their mutual ex. "Remember us, from PBS?" Catherine Parr asks the audience. Five hundred years is not too late for a reckoning. They appropriate modern language and idioms to make their case—itself a contemporary idea, since women had little to no legal recourse against their husbands in fourteenth and fifteenth century England, much less one who represented the highest possible authority. Then again, these women do not want legal justice. We might understand them as seeking reparative justice, an acknowledgment that their persons and lives encompassed more than whatever they represented to one man, whether an heir, an

amusement, or a companion. At least, the opening number, "Ex-Wives," sets up such an expectation when it introduces each of the queens and promises "history's about to get overthrown."

Later I'll get to *Six*'s attempt to subvert its competitive set-up in the final number, but for now I want to consider the queens' solos as avenues of complaint in relation to bodies marked as excess(ive). Sara Ahmed reminds us that complaints serve multiple functions across axes of privilege and power: a complaint can be grounds for dismissal, for being categorized as a Problem, or a complaint can be cause for coalition, a catalyst for change.[130] How complaint is perceived often depends on the person doing the complaining. The less Human a person is, the more likely their complaint will be registered as belligerent, unnecessary, and excessive. The queens of *Six* rehash a well-known grievance from centuries ago, and their staged bodies are visually and sonically coded as excessive, both in its positive and negative connotations. While the costumes take inspiration from Tudor era profiles (square necklines, front bodices), they also speak to the styles of rock, punk, and R&B girl groups, with short skirts that flash glimpses of hips and buttocks at every turn, fishnet tights that emphasize long legs, and sequin-studded jackets with exaggerated shoulder pieces. Jewel tones refer back to the women's royal status and draw the eye to the bodies that dance, flex, and strut around the otherwise bare stage. Besides their excessive number—more than the typical three to four members of a group like the Shirelles or Destiny's Child—the queens are dressed to be lavish, choreographed to be over the top. All the focus is on their bodies, either as a collection of features to be ogled or as the source of their spectacular voices.

This focus feels pointed with regard to the queens coded and cast as Black. For example, Catherine of Aragon's sound and design are based on a *Lemonade*-era Beyonce, in particular her

[130] Sara Ahmed, *Complaint!* Duke University Press (2021)

2017 Grammys ensemble, which bared her pregnant body in a sheer dress of gold filigree. The stack of gold bands around her neck gestured to traditional African fashion, while her headpiece, featuring gold roses and a sunburst halo, nodded at Catholic iconography of the Virgin Mother. Similarly, Catherine of Aragon's costume includes a skin-tight bodysuit with a flared peplum that emphasizes the actor's hips, a spiked headband that might be a halo (honoring her motherhood) or a crown ("You made me your wife, so I'll be queen till the end of my life"), and layered cable chain necklaces that recall the accessories of R&B and hip-hop artists from the late 90s and early aughts. On the OCR, Reneé Lamb echoes Beyonce's vocal stylings—her controlled melismas, her crescendoes into a powerful belt, her punch straight into head register. Fleetwood reminds us, "The explicit black female body is an excessive body (from the Hottentot Venus to Josephine Baker to Millie Jackson, Pam Grier, and Serena Williams in her catsuit)."[131] Catherine of Aragon is coded as Black via the multiple visual and sonic signifiers to Black culture; her explicit Blackness marks her as excessive (glamorous, fanatic, loud), despite her characterization as a faithful spouse.

Compare this to the musical's framing of Jane Seymour. Seymour is the other loyal wife—one of two queens who aren't presented as sexually promiscuous or otherwise deviant. Her number, "Heart of Stone," is a power ballad in which Seymour declares her love for Henry and their son. She skirts around Henry's notorious temper and reiterates her own consistency, even from beyond the grave. "Heart of Stone" recalls English singer-songwriter Adele, with its gradual build on a simple melodic idea to a belting final chorus. Drums and keyboard provide a steady, broad pulse in the background but mostly serve as support to the vocalist, who is the auditory focal point. Restraint, control, and sentiment: these are the values used to characterize Seymour. These are also reflected in her costume. While her corset bodice (bedazzled with

[131] Fleetwood, p. 109

rhinestones) and cross-hatched tights fit into the ex-wives' general aesthetic, her costume is more modest than Catherine of Aragon's, with long sleeves and an A-line skirt that falls almost to her knees. The actor—regardless of race, although the principals for Seymour both on the West End and on Broadway have been white, cis women—has their hair straightened and left loose, with only the side bangs pinned back and out of their face. She gives the impression of demure femininity. Perhaps it comes as no surprise, then, that she claims to be "the only one [Henry] truly loved," a statement the other queens find "rude" but otherwise do not contest. Of course, Seymour also gives Henry the thing he wants most from a wife: a son, an heir, who can carry on his name, title, and political agenda. I would argue that Seymour's whiteness (sonically and visually coded, reiterated via casting choices) is essential to her being the only wife who delivers a male heir, the future Edward VI. The child's patriarchal power is bestowed via his father and a socially essentialist understanding of gender; however, the mother's whiteness ensures that he receives the full privilege attendant to that position.[132] Given that Seymour died shortly after childbirth, she leaves no other imprint on Edward's life—he is, in every sense, his father's son. Death ensures she relinquishes any claim she might have to him, after she has bestowed life (both literal and social). In contrast, Catherine of Aragon has a daughter who Henry dismisses as inconsequential, because she cannot fill the role of heir-apparent in a patriarchal monarchy. Catherine mocks him for divorcing her on the grounds that, since she had previously been married to his brother, she must be cursed by God to not have children. "Well, darling, weren't you there when I gave birth to Mary?" she sings, to which the other queens respond, "Daughters are so easy to forget." Bearing a girl is equivalent to being childless; at least, a daughter serves the same purpose, which is to say none.

[132] Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," p. 217

While *Six* ultimately attempts to discourage a comparative approach to female complaint, it also recreates the conditions in which such comparisons arise. It does so through its regurgitation of signifiers that have emerged from (and in response to) a hierarchical, anti-black culture, without interrogating its usage of said signifiers and their implications in the musical. As a result, characters who are intended as homage to Black artists become caricatures, and the stereotypes they evoke constrain the actors' reparative potential. The three queens coded as Black avoid execution but not another kind of death, an erasure that renders them less-than-Human. Their voices become both a site of resistance and restraint.

"But Now We're Ex-Wives": Portraits of the Black Woman as Mad, Deviant, Resilient

> *"My name's Catherine of Aragon,*
> *married twenty-four years, I'm a paragon*
> *of royalty. My loyalty*
> *is to the Vatican,*
> *so if you try to dump me—*
> *you won't try that again"* ("Ex-Wives")

"No Way," centers on refusal. Catherine refuses to accept Henry's annulment of their marriage, she refuses his depiction of her as an unsatisfactory partner, she refuses his revoking of her royal status. In doing so, she asserts her value against her ex-husband's dismissal: "I've never lost control, no matter how many times I knew you lied," "No matter what I heard, I didn't say a word," and "I've put up with your shit like every single day." While aware that he was cheating on her (with future queen Anne Boleyn), Catherine maintained a gendered decorum that demanded her patience, silence, and self-restraint. As Anne and Katherine Howard will later elucidate, Henry had no tolerance for his wives indulging their sexual appetites with men other than him (with one exception, Anna of Cleves, which we'll interrogate later); however, Catherine frames her faithfulness as a choice grounded in her religious convictions: "I have my Golden

Rule," a reference to the Christian aphorism. Ultimately she argues that Henry has no just cause for terminating their relationship since she has upheld her end of the marital arrangement.

Catherine's sound and costume design are based on Beyonce because her situation parallels that of the singer-songwriter's as narrated in her 2016 album *Lemonade*, where she grieves, rages, and celebrates love in the aftermath of husband Jay-Z cheating on her with an unnamed woman. In a queer temporal inversion, Catherine becomes a mirror of the Black icon. She, too, has a daughter who will inherit her legacy of female power and madness (Mary I succeeded her brother after he died of terminal illness); Beyonce includes her daughter Blue Ivy in the music video to "Formation" and sings, "I like my baby heir with baby hair and Afros." Catherine scorns Anne Boleyn via references to "some pretty young thing," and "someone who don't own a wedding ring," similar to Beyonce's dismissal of the Other Woman as "Becky with the good hair," someone her husband only cares about when she's unavailable. Like "Hold Up" and "Sorry," "No Way" recasts the anger of a failed relationship as an empowerment bop, as Catherine denies Henry the satisfaction of a clean ending where she fades out of the story once he decides she's done. Against his attempts to retroactively claim that she was never really queen, she insists, "I won't back down, won't shh, and no, I'll never leave."

"No Way" borrows heavily from Afro-Caribbean musics, which might be a nod to the inspiration Beyonce takes from her Gulf heritage (in "Formation" she describes her ancestry as "Daddy Alabama, Momma Lousianna, you mix that Negro with that Creole, make a Texas Bama") and/or to Catherine's own Spanish background (on the OBCR, Adrienna Hicks calls to the drummer, "give me a beat" and, when they respond, she purrs, "Oh, muy bien"). Drums and acoustic guitar provide a bright, energetic beat over which Catherine delivers rapid-fire verses. The drums also get a Latin-inspired solo as they build to the bridge. "Dance it out, girls," Hicks

shouts. Hicks, more than her UK counterpart Lamb, leans into the Afro-Latino inflections, with vocal whoops, hollers, and accented vowels. Some of that might be a difference in performance context: the UK cast recording was done in-studio, while the Broadway cast is a live recording. Hicks also works to hype the audience with interjections such as, "That's right, boo!" and "Give it up for Marina [Ramirez] on the drums, y'all!" It's dance music, upbeat and celebratory, despite the ostensible goal to argue Catherine's experience as the most tragic.

In refusing to accept the circumstances forced on her, Catherine of Aragon falls into madness. Rather than mourning her relationship, she rages against Henry's audacity, breaking her silence to protest his unfairness. The language she uses—both explicit (the bleeped out use of "shit," all of her "shh"s inflected in the same way) and implicit (her casual dismissal of Henry as a liar and a fool)—again mirrors the tone of songs like "Sorry," with its cool middle-finger salute to the cheating man, the affirmation that she doesn't need him. In the chorus, Catherine declares: "You must think that I'm crazy, you wanna replace me, well baby, there's n-n-n-n-n-n-no way." While the intent of her words might be refusal—no one could measure up to her, no one could fill her shoes, Henry must be insane to think otherwise—the result is a kind of madness, a spurning of reality that moves her beyond its reach. *This has already happened*. Catherine's refusal does nothing for her. The decision was made centuries ago, the decision was made before she knew about it, the decision was made without thought to her consent or reaction. Catherine is extraneous to Henry's larger purpose, whether pleasure or progeny, and therefore she does not need to be involved, even if the outcome affects her. This vestibular position—(ex)wife before the annulment, before Henry can remarry, mother to a (worthless) heir—is maddening. Despite her social status, her wealth, she is not safe from becoming excess(ive) at a moment's notice.

La Marr Jurelle Bruce reminds us, "Any person or practice that perplexes and vexes the psychonormative status quo is liable to be labeled *crazy*."[133] His definition of madness goes beyond medical designation and encompasses psychosocial phenomena such as "insurgent blackness, slave rebellion, *willful womanhood*, anticolonial resistance, same-sex desire, and gender subversion [emphasis mine]." These demonstrate an "unruliness of will," a refusal to submit to the hegemonic norm. In that sense, Catherine's madness opens a loophole of retreat, an escape from the patriarchal system that reduces her to object, even if only in her imagination.

Is that enough? Because Catherine also relies on the logics that render her fungible in order to make a case for why she in particular should be exempt. She cites her lawful marriage against Anne Boleyn's illegitimate status (which would likewise apply to any sons Anne might bear). She weighs her value on her capacity to reproduce, as evidenced in Mary. She maintains her moral high ground on the basis of Christian ethics. In the essay "Moving Beyond Pain," bell hooks criticizes Beyonce's representation of feminism in *Lemonade* for falling short of true liberation politics.[134] While she expresses (some) Black women's pain, Beyonce ultimately ends the album where she began: unreciprocated emotional labor, bootstrap survival, and an insistence for a seat at the table that was built to exclude her. hooks acknowledges the necessity of giving voice to grief, pain, and anger, but she also challenges the idea that representation can be sufficient. If, as Audre Lorde argued, "the master's tools with never dismantle the master's house," then we need to move beyond the rhetorics of current systems in order to imagine alternatives. We need to embrace madness. That is where Catherine of Aragon appears tragically sane. The wronged wife cannot seem to escape a construction of subjecthood outside a patriarchal framework, whether the male authority is a king, the pope, or god.

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[133] La Marr Jurelle Bruce, *How To Go Mad Without Losing Your Mind*. NC: Duke University Press (2021), p. 8

[134] bell hooks, "Moving Beyond Pain," https://bellhooksbooks.com/moving-beyond-pain/

"Ich bin Anna of Cleves (Ja?)[135]
When he saw my portrait he was like—(Ja!)
But I didn't look as good as I did in my pic
Funny how we can discuss that but never Henry's little—" ("Ex-Wives")

If Catherine of Aragon is the faithful wife, then Anna of Cleves represents the failed wife. *Six* frames Anne's match with Henry as parallel to 'catfishing' on a dating app: Henry chose Anne as his fourth wife based on a portrait done by Hans Holbein the Younger, but when he met Anne in person prior to the wedding, he found her plain-looking. In "Get Down," Anne excoriates Henry for his annulment of their marriage based on her appearance. "You, you said that I tricked you," she sings in the chorus, "cause I, I didn't look like my profile picture." Anne falls short of Henry's expectations before they are even wed. However, rather than remake herself to his preference, she revels in her deviance:

Anne: Sittin' here all alone, on a throne,

In a palace that I happen to own.

Bring me some pheasant, keep it on the bone.

Fill my goblet up to the brim, sippin' on mead

And I spill it on my dress with the gold lace trim.

Not very prim and proper.

Can't make me stop.

I wanna go hunting, any takers?

I'm not fake, 'cause I got acres and acres

Paid for with my own riches.

Where my hounds at? Release the bitches.

Chorus: Woof

[135] *Six* uses "Anna" and "Anne" interchangeably as referents for Henry VIII's fourth wife

Anne: Everyday, head back for a round of croquet, yeah,

'Cause I'm a playa

And tomorrow, I'll hit replay.

Anne delights in the luxuries of her station; she chases pleasure, not propriety. Her days are spent feasting, drinking, and sporting. The annulment benefits her: instead of playing the dutiful spouse and trying to produce an heir, she gets her own estate outside the politics of the main house and wealth to support whatever lifestyle she desires. "Now I ain't sayin' I'm a gold digger, but check my prenup, and go figure." Anne costs Henry time, money, and power. In that sense, "Get Down" flips the stereotype of the welfare queen on its head. Living on the Crown's dollar (or pound, as it were), Anne forces Henry to pay for his sexism and cede her an independence that might otherwise be unthinkable. He gets nothing from her—no sexual or aesthetic pleasure, no heir—but she gets to be materially secure and socially unfettered. Her 'failure' is also the site of her freedom.

This is not to argue that "Get Down" takes a liberatory stance for Black women. Instead of exploring the radical possibilities of pleasure, as an alternative to reproduction, Anne, like Catherine, falls back on dominant ideologies to claim empowerment. She mocks Henry in the chorus, a riff on "nanny nanny boo boo," the children's taunting song, as she tells him, "I'm the queen of the castle, get down you dirty rascal." The implication is that she controls him, not the other way around, but it relies on an assumption that there must be domination in their relationship to each other. Based on rapper Nikki Minaj, Anne embodies the stereotype of the femme gangsta as hypersexual and materialistic: she brags about her wealth, her horse-drawn coach (an analog to hip-hop's obsession with cars, often as a euphemism), and her sexual prowess. "Pull up outside in my carriage, don't got no marriage, so I have a little flirt with the

footman…" Later she attracts male attention as she grinds on the dance floor, but she ignores it in favor of a favorite song. Men that aren't Henry exist for her entertainment, when she chooses to indulge them. Minaj isn't the first female rapper to objectify men, but a considerable number of her songs involve fantasies where high-profile artists bow to her superior rap skills and beg her to use them. Meanwhile, Anne's references to 'her' girls ("release the bitches" and "come on, ladies, let's get in reformation") flirt with the permeable boundaries between courtiers, friends, and lovers. This echoes a common theme in Minaj's songs, where other women are positioned as either allies or enemies in a race to the top of the social food chain. Minaj slings insults like "Bitch talking she the queen when she lookin' like a lab rat" ("Stupid Hoe") and "Let's be real, all you bitches wanna look like me" ("Barbie Tingz"), while also acknowledging her friends in lines such as "I'm with some hood girls lookin' back at it" or "We dope girls, we flawless, we the poster girls for all this" ("Feelin' Myself," Ft. Beyonce). Despite her relatively tamer language, Anne shares an ethos of hyper-individualism with Minaj: she's out to get whatever she can, however she can, fuck the rest of them.

Let's pause: I don't want to reduce Minaj to the embodiment of capitalism. Minaj, like the women gangstas who came before her (MC Lyte, Salt n' Pepa, Missy Elliot, to name a few), is working within a largely male-dominated industry, and her explicit lyrics are a response to the ways in which men in hip-hop talk about women. In "Barbie Dreams," for example, she goes through a long list of famous rappers who she claims were unable to fulfill her sexual needs—the ultimate diss track. She plays with gender: she swings her metaphorical dick (bragging that she writes all her own rhymes, spitting rapid-fire verses) and sometimes adopts a male alter-ego, Roman Zolanski, but she also dresses to emphasize her exaggerated hourglass figure and affects a girlish voice for some songs. She orientalizes herself through her character Chun-Li. She

positions herself explicitly as part of a Black Caribbean diaspora, as referenced in songs like "Trini Dem Girls" and her more general, casual use of patois and Afro-Latinx beats. In sum, Minaj signifies a complex network of identities across her work as a whole. If she promotes a lifestyle of material excess, then she also exceeds a certain racialized and classed expectation around success.

In comparison, Anne of Cleves lacks nuance. Of course, her character is limited to one solo in a 75-minute production, in addition to brief verses in the opening and closing numbers, and two spoken interludes that only appear on the OBCR album. Her actor must make do with the given script and whatever vocal inflections or bodily gestures might add dimension to the performance. As scripted, Anne sings in AAVE—this is likely a nod to the Black rappers that inspired her, but it's uncomfortable alongside the fact that the historic figure was considered uneducated, since she was only able to read and write in her native language and lacked the 'refined' skills other court ladies possessed.[136] Why is Anne the only character who uses AAVE? Why the conflation between Black vernacular and miseducation, between Black sound and excess? I don't want to argue for a more respectable version of either Anne or Blackness; rather, I want to interrogate why Anne of all the queens is assigned these signifiers and what they indicate to an audience about her.

On the OBCR, Brittney Mack pushes against framing Anne as either tragic or excessive. In the interlude that prefaces her solo, she says, "I mean, it's the usual story, isn't it? The savvy, educated young princess deemed repulsive by a wheezing, wrinkled, ulcer-riddled old man twenty-four years her senor." Mack's voice drips with sarcasm as she asks, "...how could anyone overcome a fate as devastating as being forced to—to move into a resplendent palace in Richmond, with more money than I could spend in a lifetime and not a single man around to tell

[136] Elizabeth Norton, *Anne of Cleves: Henry VIII's Discarded Bride*. UK: Amberley Pub (2009), p. 10-11

me what to do with it?!" The mic picks up her huffed laughter as she suppresses amusement to deliver her lines with mock distress. That interlude, which does not appear on the U.K. cast recording, makes "Get Down" an explicit reclamation of Anne's 'failure' as a success. Unlike Genesis Lynea, her British counterpart, Mack does not sound polished—the live recording captures the slight strain in her opening verse, as she wavers between spoken and sung pitches low in her register. But it also includes her scoffs and whoops, her shriek that disrupts the "gold digger" line, her asides to the other queens. These sounds render her performance more comedic than serious: she's clearly poking fun at Henry and, through him, the institutions that believe a woman's worth hinges entirely on their approval. At the same time, Mack-as-Anne veers from the ostensible purpose of these numbers, which is to determine whose life was the most tragic. Gloating about how her annulled marriage to Henry has allowed her to live in hedonist excess is not a performance of suffering. Neither does Anne's number contain an ironic twist, as does Katherine Howard's "All You Gotta Do," where she realizes the supposed power she wielded over the men in her life was actually them taking sexual advantage of her. Mack's vocalized pleasure doesn't ever take a more sardonic turn.

Yet Anne, like Catherine of Aragon, imagines power only for herself. *I, me, mine*: "Get Down" associates freedom with individual possession and domination. In the final iteration of the chorus, Mack's Anne tells the queens, "Okay, all right, that was cute. That's enough. This is my song, honey." Other women can share the stage, so long as they don't steal the spotlight.

"Five down, I'm the final wife
I saw him to the end of his life.
I'm the survivor, Catherine Parr" ("Ex-Wives")

After five queens have recounted their tales of divorce and death, Catherine Parr puts an end to the competition. Beginning as an address to her lover Tom, "I Don't Need Your Love"

segues into a lament that her person has been reduced to 'Henry VIII's wife.' If she had been given a choice, she would have refused the marriage, but in the aftermath of her life, she instead refuses to let the other facets of her identity go unspoken. In doing so, she recognizes that the musical's framing device reproduces the same harms these women claim to be escaping: "Why can't I tell that story? 'Cause in history, I'm fixed as one of six. And without him, I disappear. We all disappear." By focusing on how Henry wronged them, they end up recentering him in their own narratives. Parr challenges the other women to imagine Henry as *unnecessary*, to imagine a world where his (dis)approval was not the defining element of their lives.

Parr is marked by her resilience. She names herself 'the survivor,' as the sole wife with the distinction of not being legally or physically discarded before Henry passed. (Anne of Cleves, however, bears the distinction of outliving Henry and all the other wives.) She is a widow twice over. She left a man she loved to marry one she didn't. Her resilience is positioned alongside her insight, as though suffering and wisdom go hand in hand. Once again, she fulfills the trope of the Strong Black Woman: like Aragon and Cleves, she tolerates Henry's boorish behavior and weathers his irrational storms, without the rose-tinted glasses that Seymour wears. She understands that his abuse is not an aberration. In part, her titular declaration is less a revolutionary statement than an articulation of what she's known all along: that she can survive without Henry's love (however one might define that), because she already did.

Based on R&B singers Alicia Keys and Emeli Sandi, Parr sings over a simple keyboard accompaniment in an echo of their soulful approach. Anna Uzele (OBCR) in particular evokes Keys: her gradual build toward a strong, full-throated second verse, her liberal use of appoggiaturas and melismas on long notes, her ability to pull lower register pitches from her gut without breaking the arc of a phrase. Uzele sets the final verse as the big, climactic moment,

where Parr insists she be remembered for her writings, her contributions to women's education, and her support of female artists. Her final question comes almost as an addendum, quiet and open-ended. On the live Broadway recording, Boleyn breaks the moment with her bluntly spoken, "Wait, I don't get it." That launches the cast into the remix, where all the women reiterate Parr's conclusion for themselves. "It's not what went down in history," they chorus, "but tonight, I'm singing this for me." The unsubtle point is that by giving these historical figures a (literal) voice, they are taking control over the narrative and imagining their lives free from Henry's tyrannical grasp. Toward that end, Parr is essential *insofar* as she provides this revelation. Her resilience in the face of constant loss, her strength as embodied in Uzele's vocal control, are given meaning via what she does for the other women—and by proxy, the audience.

Saidiya Hartman asks, "Is the encounter with black suffering merely an opportunity for white self-reflection?"[137] Marlow and Moss assign Aragon, Cleves, and Parr to discrete Black music genres in order to relate their stories of suffering. Any distinctions between the white historical figures, the Black bodies onstage, and the Black sound characterizing these fictionalized women are blurred. The apex of this cross-temporal, interracial identification is Parr, the last woman standing, using Black sound to make a more general argument about (all) women reclaiming their power, as though all women face the same degrees of sexism in a world where gender politics are inseparable from issues of class and race.

"Shall We Do A Histo-rewrite?": Coalition Vs. Pop Feminism in Six

The reckoning promised in "Ex-Wives" only comes to fruition in the closing number, and even then it lacks teeth. "Six" opens a curious loophole of retreat, as the women articulate an idealized past for themselves that never happened and never could have happened. Catherine of

[137] Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. 2nd edition. W.W. Norton & Co.; NY (2022), p. 52

Aragon rejected Henry's proposal and joined a nunnery, where she formed a Gospel group that topped the carts; Anne Boleyn set Henry's love poem to music and landed a gig writing lyrics for Shakespeare; Jane Seymour survived childbirth and started a band; Anne of Cleves became a DJ who toured Prussia; Katherine Howard left her groomer in order to pursue a career as a singer. And Catherine Parr discovered each of them and brought them together to make a collab album. "Six" presents these alternatives as a victory, but their very impossibility makes them a mockery of each woman's agency. The temporal collapse also obscures the power dynamics at work in the past and present: the historic wives could pursue art, education, and travel precisely because of their status as noblewomen, just as the famous artists that characterize the fictional queens gained wealth and fame through privilege, whether that was parents who supported and funded their musical training or personal connections to top record producers. In addition, the direct references to Gospel and DJing assume Blackness as commodity even in this imagined neverwhen.

"Six" presents a horror as a happy ending. Henry's threat to Catherine of Aragon (god can have her, if the king no longer wants her) somehow becomes her choice—nevermind the real Catherine's interest in humanism and her keen grasp of politics. Boleyn cheerfully escapes beheading but ends up as a ghostwriter for another famous man. Seymour is left married to Henry, whom the musical frames as abusive, but nevermind his violent temper because they now have multiple children together, whom they have coerced into a musical group ala the 70s sitcom The Partridge Family. Anne of Cleves bemoans that her face cost her throne—but at least she's talented! Howard, like Seymour, must still experience some degree of sexual violence, though hers acts as a catalyst for her career, where the stage mediates an ongoing consumption of her body, by mass audiences rather than singular lovers. (Has her ability to withdraw consent

increased? Or does an implied control over which parts of her are consumed—and how—suffice?) Meanwhile Parr doesn't get reunited with her beloved, instead once more serving as the Magical Negro who recognizes these women's individual talents and brings them together. To what purpose? To garner attention from an economy that thrives on outrage as much as entertainment. To remind us that women's perspectives have been historically erased or downplayed.

However, *Six* on the whole fails to recognize the problem it claims to address. The issue is not men—either this individual man or men as a whole. The issue is the patriarchal system that values cis women for their reproductive and domestic labor, that draws rigid boundaries around gender and its performance, that justifies its violences with religious dogma. Sure, *Six* makes some pithy asides that acknowledge this, but the final message it spoonfeeds the audience is 'sexism bad!' without daring to imagine what dismantling sexism might look (or sound) like. Marlow and Moss use Black sound—particularly, *Black women's sound*—to articulate their message without recognizing the ways that a patriarchal system disproportionately harms Black women. Their Black-coded characters escape a literal death (despite Boleyn's uncomfortable proclamation "somebody hang you!" to Aragon, a statement that brushes against the specter of lynching for laughs), but they die nonetheless, incrementally, as the musical chips away nuance and reduces them to categories of madness, deviance, and resilience. Marlow and Moss remain ignorant of the Combahee River Collective's mandate—Black women's freedom guarantees all of us get free. Instead they generate a message of female empowerment palatable for the sexist, racist, capitalist Broadway industry.

"We're taking back the microphone," Howard declares. But they're not saying anything meaningful.

Conclusion

This dissertation was primarily written during the second year of the global Covid-19 pandemic. At the time, it seemed the "second Golden Age" would be a brief flare before lockdown and restrictions laid the industry to rest. However, in the wake of the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests and an increased public dialogue around anti-Black and anti-Asian racism in America, nonwhite theater actors spoke out against the discrimination they had faced on Broadway—from producers, directors, white colleagues, and audiences. Black actors formed unions for themselves and other Black theater workers. Actors Equity entered into negotiations about touring cast conditions and contracts. Alums from major productions, such as Karen Olivo from *Moulin Rouge* and the Chicago *Hamilton* cast, pivoted to mentoring young nonwhite actors at colleges and local theater programs while being transparent on social media about the sexism, racism, and ableism that continues to pervade the industry. A reparative reading of the situation might be that increased representation on Broadway has given nonwhite artists a platform to push against the industry's conservative values and profit-driven models. On the other hand, a more paranoid approach might respond that neoliberalism will always shift to accommodate marginalized persons so long as the capitalist system is allowed to continue. I don't see these readings as necessarily being in conflict. Rather, I hope that my dissertation provides a theoretical framework for people to consider the complicated issue of representation for certain, would-be subjects, and that the theoretical, the narrative, the imagined can someday lead to material change.

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