ARE THEY FAMILY?:

QUEER PARENTS AND QUEER PASTS IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN CULTURE

BY

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ABSTRACT

The early twenty-first century saw a marked increase in depictions of LGBTQ people and communities in American popular culture occurring alongside political activism that culminated in the repeal of the Pentagon's Don't Ask, Don't Tell policy (2010) and the Supreme Court's overturning of same-sex marriage bans in *Obergefell v. Hodges* (2015). Even as these events fueled a triumphant progressive narrative in which social and political representation moved LGBTQ people into a better future, a significant strain of LGBTQ-focused popular culture drew its attention to the past. My dissertation, *Are They Family?: Queer Parents and Queer Pasts in Popular Culture*, examines how American film, television, and literature between 2005 and 2016 construct relationships among LGBTQ people across recent history in generational and familial terms. These works queer the concept of the family by deploying parents and parental figures to examine the role of families in the transmission of queer knowledges, practices, and identities, countering notions of families as mere precursors to queer identity—"families of origin"—or as the agential creations of out LGBTQ people—"families of choice." These works demonstrate how such dichotomous conceptions of family limit the people, experiences, and forms of affect that are legible within the category of LGBTQ history. In my first chapter, I analyze how the reality series *RuPaul's Drag Race* (2009-present) produces kinship through shared queer knowledge and how contestants cite this knowledge in their performances. My second chapter examines how the melodramatic aesthetics and narrative of the film *Carol* (2015) re-inscribe pleasure and sensation into historical narratives of the lesbian 1950s. Together, these two chapters analyze how contemporary media demonstrate how seemingly retrograde queer modes of constructing kinship through shared relationships to dominant culture persevere even amidst a relative surfeit of LGBTQ representation. Chapters three and four turn to the nuclear family,

examining the figures of the closeted gay father and husband and the ostensibly heterosexual wife and mother in Allison Bechdel's graphic memoirs *Fun Home* (2006) and *Are You My Mother?* (2012) and Mike Mills' films *Beginners* (2010) and *20th Century Women* (2016). In the third chapter, I analyze how these works by the children of closeted fathers use non-linear narratives to overcome the historical meanings assigned to the lives of closeted men and establish affective connections to their fathers. Chapter four examines how Bechdel and Mills position their mothers, who are often reduced to stand-ins for compulsory heterosexuality in their husband's stories, as figures queered by their proximity to LGBTQ history—a project later taken up by the Netflix series *Grace and Frankie* (2015-present). Together, these chapters demonstrate how queerness within families is not limited to the presence of LGBTQ individuals within them but that families of origin themselves, often seen as queer-antagonistic structures, contain people, experiences, and forms of affect that are rendered illegible within a conception of LGBTQ history that sees LGBTQ-identified people—and the families and communities that they make—as its sole province.

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INTRODUCTION

EMORY: *Thanks, sonny. You live with your parents?*

DONALD: *Yeah. But it's all right—they're gay.*

— *Mart Crowley,* The Boys in the Band (36)

1. Introduction

On 20 March 2019, as this dissertation approached completion, André Aciman confirmed that a sequel to his 2007 novel *Call Me by Your Name* would be published later that autumn. *Find Me*, the publisher's blurb announced, would focus not only on the continuing lives of the book's lovers Elio and Oliver but also on Elio's father, classics professor Samuel Perlman, for whom "a chance encounter on the train leads to a relationship that changes [his] life definitively" (Harris). The announcement followed in the wake of the success of Luca Guadagnino's film adaptation of the book (Sony Pictures Classics, 2017) which grossed $41.6 million globally ("The Numbers: Call Me by Your Name") on a budget of $3.5 million (Katz). Though hardly a blockbuster, these box office numbers are thrilling for an international art house movie about queer desire, and the film has acquired a sizeable fanbase. The film served as a star-is-born moment for Timothée Chalamet and helped revive the career of Armie Hammer, who had spent much of the first half of the 2010s in critical and financial disappointments such as *J. Edgar* (Warner Bros., 2011) and *The Lone Ranger* (Disney, 2013). Many reviewers and fans also singled out Michael Stuhlbarg for his performance as Elio's father, the character who receives so much attention in the publisher's note announcing *Find Me*.

Much of Stuhlbarg's praise for his performance centers on a moment late in the film, after a devastated Elio returns home from seeing off Oliver on his journey back to America. The

scene's dialogue comes almost verbatim from the novel. "You're too smart not to know how rare, how special, what you two had was," Samuel tells his son (223). In both the novel and the film, there is something unspoken between them, a refusal to pinpoint exactly what Samuel and his son share; Elio narrates: "His tone said: *We don't have to speak about it, but let's not pretend we don't know what I'm saying*" (224). Samuel continues:

> "I may have come close, but I never had what you two had. Something always held me back or stood in the way. How you live your life is your business. But remember, our hearts and our bodies are given to us only once. . . . and before you know it, your heart is worn out, and, as for your body, there comes a point when no one looks at it, much less wants to come near it."

Elio reacts:

> "Does mother know?" I asked. I was going to say *suspect* but corrected myself. "I don't think she does." His voice meant, *But even if she did, I am sure her attitude would be no different than mine.* (225)

The ambiguity of Samuel's statement, and Elio's ambiguous response to it, carry over into Guadagnino's movie. In an interview at the time of its release, Stuhlbarg emphasized this ambiguity: "It's very possible [that Professor Perlman was gay]. I saw him as a very passionate, loving, generous spirit. So he very likely could be, that may have been the thing that he was alluding to. I'm not sure" (Stuhlbarg). In part, the scene serves as a kind of wish fulfillment for viewers who were once themselves young queer people: many viewers "wish that these words [of parental encouragement] had been said to them" (Stuhlbarg). But the encounter leaves Elio at least as confused as he is consoled: "Was my father someone else?" Elio asks himself. "And if he was someone else, who was I?" (225). Elio's conundrum illustrates the destabilizing potential of

the queer parent; even for queer children, the revelation of a queer parent calls into question their own identities. The roles of queer parents in various forms of intergenerational transmission provoke deep anxieties about the coherence of narratives around which people articulate their own identities and their relationships to families.

In order to examine the role of the queer parent in contemporary American culture, my dissertation examines media produced between 2005 and 2016: Alison Bechdel's graphic novels *Fun Home* (2006) and *Are You My Mother*? (2012), and the former's musical adaptation (2013 off-Broadway; 2015 Broadway), the reality competition cable television series *RuPaul's Drag Race* (LOGO, 2009-16; VH1, 2017-present), the streaming comedy series *Grace and Frankie* (Netflix, 2015-present), and the movies *Beginners* (Focus Features, 2010), *Carol* (Weinstein Company, 2015), and *20th Century Women* (A24, 2016). LGBTQ political narratives of this period were dominated by triumphant narratives in which political successes move LGBTQ people from persecution toward inclusion, epitomized by the repeal of the Pentagon's Don't Ask, Don't Tell policy (2010) and the Supreme Court's overturning of same-sex marriage bans in *Obergefell v. Hodges* (2015). In the face of these narratives, I ask how popular media negotiate attachments between LGBTQ people in the present and figures who lived through earlier moments in US history. By focusing on parental figures, my project considers the nuclear family as an overlooked site of queer knowledge transmission, contesting scholarship that positions family as an antagonistic regulating mechanism of gender and sexuality or as an institution that can be queered only by creating chosen or elective families. I argue that these parental figures disrupt LGBTQ history's reliance on linear political trajectories and singular historical figures, revealing queer people, experiences, and forms of affect that have been previously rendered illegible within the category of LGBTQ history.

2. Homosexual Problems and Recovery Projects

The queer parent is, in many ways, an oxymoron. In a viciously heteronormative culture, the idea of the queer parent can often be relied on for a good laugh. For Mart Crowley's off-Broadway audiences in 1968, and for the gay characters in the play who have created their own tenuous affective unit, the gay parent is such a theoretical impossibility that its very mention evokes laughter. Of course, queer children also experience various forms of linguistic and theoretical foreclosure. Kathryn Bond Stockton reminds us that the queer child has "no established forms to hold itself in the public, legal field" (6). When the queer child does arrive in popular culture, it is already an adult—and, like the queer parent, it is a problem to be addressed by the family. In the revised edition of his seminal book *The Celluloid Closet* (1981, rev. 1987), Vito Russo dismissed the wave of theatrical and television movies in the 1980s dealing with familial and spousal reactions to the coming out of gays and lesbians, such as *Making Love* (Fox, 1982) and *An Early Frost* (NBC, 1985), saying that in these movies, "there are no homosexuals, only a homosexual problem" (277). In relationship to activist film and video of the 1980s and 1990s that sought new avenues for exploring sexuality, kinship, and worldmaking, mainstream depictions of gays and lesbians continued to regard them, albeit more sympathetically, as social problems and case studies to test the limits of liberal tolerance. As the AIDS crisis dragged on and other calamities such as the Pentagon's Don't Ask, Don't Tell policy offered the American public a series of problems through which to understand the social and political incorporation or expulsion of gays and lesbians, American film and television followed suit. Harvey and Bob Weinstein's nascent Miramax scored early hits with voyeuristic queer and trans content, including *Paris Is Burning* (1990), the celebrated documentary that takes an anthropological lens to queer and trans of color ball culture in New York City, and *The Crying Game* (1992), for

which the revelation of a transgender character's penis was part of a marketing strategy that turned a film that failed to recoup its budget in its initial UK release into a $62.5 million global hit ("The Numbers: The Crying Game"). Playing oppressed gays and lesbians became a lucrative opportunity for performers too; *Kiss of the Spider Woman* (Island Alive, 1985) and *Philadelphia* (TriStar, 1993) netted Oscars for William Hurt and Tom Hanks respectively, while Glenn Close and Judy Davis both won Emmys for *Serving in Silence: The Margarethe Cammermeyer Story* (NBC, 1995).

After movie stars discarded their red ribbons and the George W. Bush era's family values-inspired assaults on LGBTQ adoption, housing, and marriage rights began in earnest, the relationships between LGBTQ people and families emerged as a highly-contested site of the renewed culture wars. Two of 2005's major Oscar players, *Brokeback Mountain* (Focus Features) and *Transamerica* (Weinstein Company) focus on LGBTQ parents. *Brokeback Mountain* shows lovers Jack (Jake Gyllenhaal) and Ennis (Heath Ledger) and their—largely unhappy—lives as husbands and fathers. In *Transamerica*, Bree (Felicity Huffman) reconnects with her long-lost son Toby (Kevin Zegers) as a condition set by her therapist (Elizabeth Peña) in order to approve her gender-confirming surgery. In both films, families are still imagined as narrative problems to overcome: Jack and Ennis marry and have children because of the paucity of options open to them in 1960s Wyoming; and Bree establishes a bond with her son as a requirement of gaining institutional access to surgery that she regards as an essential component of her gender transition.

Though beholden in some ways to the "problem" model described by Russo in the 1980s, these depictions heralded a relative boom in depictions of LGBTQ parents and children in American television and movies in the late 2000s and early 2010s. On television, the gay dads

and their adopted daughter in *Modern Family* (ABC, 2009-present) constitute one wing of an affluent, multi-racial extended family in suburban Los Angeles; the lesbian parents in *The Fosters* (ABC Family/Freeform, 2013-8), one a cop and the other a school vice principal, preside over a racially-mixed, blended family of biological, foster, and adopted children in San Diego; and Maura Pfefferman in *Transparent* (Amazon, 2014-present) becomes "moppa" to her—affluent, Los Angeles—family during and after her transition. Lisa Cholodenko's *The Kids Are All Right* (Focus Features, 2010)—predictably set in the sunny, affluent suburbs of Los Angeles—set off a particularly contentious discussion about depictions of domesticity, parenting, and queer desire in American media. Suzanna Danuta Walters criticized this wave of portrayals as constituting "an exploding and harshly attenuated queer visibility—in popular culture, in political life, in our courts, in our universities" (917-8). Indeed, these depictions of LGBTQ parents within families are often assailed for their normative politics (Griffin 2), a critique gestured toward by the title of the much-hyped but short-lived Ryan Murphy/Ali Adler sitcom *The New Normal* (NBC, 2012-3)—centered on, of all things and in all places, a wealthy white gay couple and their surrogate in Los Angeles. These relatively numerous portrayals would seem to indicate a major cultural shift in attitudes about gender and sexuality. However, LGBTQ representation in popular culture during this period remained largely centered on white gay men. In 2015, 72.3% of LGBTQ characters in major studio movies were white and 77% were gay men (GLAAD). Indeed, the return to the family seen in these films and television series focused primarily on white, gay or lesbian parent-headed nuclear families and the increasing acceptance of gay, lesbian, and occasionally transgender children by their parents and siblings.

Likewise, while mainstream LGBTQ activists argue that recent US history reveals a shift in attitudes toward gender and sexuality, queer studies scholars have strenuously critiqued these

claims. Lisa Duggan argues that activism seeking inclusion in institutions such as marriage and the military has channeled the energies of LGBTQ politics into an assimilationist agenda that privileges recognition by the state and marginalizes radical politics aimed at transforming violent, neoliberal systems (50-1). Foundational work in LGBTQ media studies implicitly helped produce these triumphant narratives; Russo, for instance, documented historical gay and lesbian engagements with popular culture at a time when the emergent influence of gay and lesbian politics allowed for increasing public acknowledgement of the histories they recovered. Andrea Weiss sought to illustrate the intertextual network of "faint traces and coded signs" that signified the existence of lesbian spectatorship (1) while Alexander Doty made visible "the complex range of queerness that has been in popular culture texts and their audiences all along" (16). In addition to providing a history of gay, lesbian, and bisexual characters in American television from the 1930s through the 1990s, Steven Capsuto also documents the tactics deployed by activists in the early 1970s to interfere with the production of homophobic content and increase visibility, many of which are not apparent to scholars focusing on textual analysis of narrative fictional content (62). Writing in 1996, Thomas Waugh articulated this recovery model of historicizing: "If we are to understand the dynamics and the challenges of our present cultural and political place, we must reanimate this history of images forgotten, confiscated, and denied" (5). Waugh positions himself as curator of images that carry same-sex male erotic histories that can now be relayed to a wider public due to the "courage, self-realization, and mobilization" of a triumphant gay political movement (5). This recovery project model of LGBTQ historicizing relies on the assumption of suppression, either of texts or public acknowledgement of their queer content and circulation, rectified in the present by the scholar/curator.

3. Locating Families Within LGBTQ Historical Narratives

The progress narratives that undergird recovery projects reject negative affect as out of place in contemporary LGBTQ life. However, a prideful reclamation of confiscated histories must negotiate the fact that they are often marked by shame. Heather Love theorizes that this paradox creates a state of "feeling backward" in which "the survival of feelings such as shame, isolation, and self-hatred into the post-Stonewall era is often the occasion for further feelings of shame" (4). For Love, queerness refuses to align with the temporal markers by which heteronormativity organizes the progression of a life, thereby making this call to temporal/affective alignment a particularly seductive opportunity for LGBTQ people—and queerness itself—to redeem themselves "as part of the modern social order" (6-7). In this context, "It Gets Better" reads as more of a mandate than a reassurance; feeling bad becomes the fault of individuals to properly align themselves with history's positivist thrust. My project examines how the LGBT elder stands precariously in this temporal intersection of shame and pride. Their politics are thrillingly revolutionary *for their time* but embarrassingly retrograde *in the now*. Their identities and practices are part of a hard-won historical record but carry with them the shame of obsolescence. They are sources of pride when figured as icons cemented in a linear timeline but, as living people, their bridging of abject pasts and hopeful futures produces ambivalent intergenerational relationships.

To uproot these elders from their historical anchors, I draw on recent queer work on temporality. Given the field's focus on futurity and world-making, the figure of the child has received much attention, most notably in Stockton's theorizing of the child as a "not-yet-straight" figure (7) whose queerness undermines developmental narratives of "growing up" (4) and Lee Edelman's polemic against the child as undergirding heteronormative investments in futurity (2-

3). However, the queer elder is largely absent from discussions of queer temporality. When they do appear, as in José Esteban Muñoz's discussion of gay male sexual cultures lost in the HIV/AIDS pandemic, they tend to be abstract presences available only through the ephemeral traces they've left behind (*Cruising Utopia* 42). To open possibilities for understanding queer elders as more than historical figures of loss and melancholia, I take up Elizabeth Freeman's engagement with "queer time" in *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* and its ability to "fold subjects into structures of belonging invisible to the historicist eye" (xi). Therefore, I largely eschew works that directly depict touchstone moments of LGBTQ historicizing and politics in the US, such as the much-critiqued Roland Emmerich movie *Stonewall* (Roadside Attractions, 2015), David France's documentary on New York City AIDS activism *How to Survive a Plague* (IFC, 2012), or the cable series *POSE* (FX, 2018-present), which returns to *Paris Is Burning*'s houses/families amidst the HIV/AIDS epidemic of the Reagan/Bush era from the vantage point of the Trump era's existential threats to the lives of LGBTQ people of color. I instead turn my attention toward familial histories uneasily situated in an LGBTQ historical narrative that privileges public visibility and overt political exigency.

The queer parent is further obscured in LGBTQ historical models that regard the nuclear family as a precursor to, and not constitutive of, LGBTQ identities and cultures. The family is often assumed to be a pristine heteronormative container into which queerness is introduced through the revelation of an LGBTQ individual among its occupants, often through the process known as "coming out." Much of the discourse on queerness and families focuses on the post-coming out integration of LGBTQ individuals into pre-existing families or the building of nuclear families by out (usually partnered) LGBTQ individuals. Often, queerness is seen as the negation of reproduction—a terminal branch of the family tree; in *Are You My Mother?*, Alison

Bechdel takes comfort in knowing that she will not reproduce, that she is—as she puts it—a "terminus" (7). And yet, as I analyze in chapters three and four, Bechdel's own coming out fails to produce the disruption in family time that she expects. The proximity to queerness of both her closeted father and her ostensibly heterosexual mother folds her back into her family of origin's lineage, another permutation rather than a mere terminus. Such a simultaneous embeddedness within familial and queer lineages complicates David Halperin's framing in which, "unlike the members of minority groups defined by race or ethnicity or religion, gay men cannot rely on their birth families to teach them about their history or their culture. They must discover their roots through contact with the larger society and the larger world" (7). Michael Warner similarly imagines the monolithic family as a heteronormative safeguard and longs for a queer variant of "the institutions for common memory and generational transmission around which straight culture is built" (51). For Halperin and Warner, normative institutions such as family and education fail to pass down queer histories and cultures and often violently resist them. Thus, in these models, only by leaving the heteronormative structure of the family can gays establish their own subcultures, politics, and bodies of knowledge.

In some ways, this configuration of family builds upon John D'Emilio's influential claim that the development of gay identity was predicated upon the decentering of the family as a unit of production and sustenance in a free labor economy, thereby allowing for "some men and women to organize a personal life around their erotic/emotional attraction to their own sex" (470). However, D'Emilio recognized that the model of capitalist family transformation he outlines was most prevalent among the urban, white middle classes (469). Indeed, Halperin's claim that other minority groups have access to their histories via family and collective memory, which is also implicit in Warner's critique of a monolithic "straight culture," elides how the

forces of colonialism, slavery, and genocide have affected these lineages. Unsurprisingly then, some of the strongest rebukes to claims like Halperin's have come from queer of color scholars who have cited, among other things, the often unacknowledged class and racial politics of these assertions. William G. Hawkeswood documents the interconnected networks that formed the black gay community in Harlem in the 1980s, in which "gay members of each individual's social network become his 'family' and are accorded familial titles" (1). Mignon Moore argues that the "structural positions Black women have historically occupied in the labor market, in their families, and in cultural institutions. . . are critical to how Black lesbians define themselves and use those definitions to construct families" (3). Arguing for "a return [to the family], not transcendence" in his study of the roles of *la familia* in Chicano/a cultural politics, Richard T. Rodríguez sees the family as a "symbol and social category" whose meanings are not exclusive to heteropatriarchy and whiteness (2-3). For Hawkeswood, Moore, and Rodríguez, the family is not a monolithic entity in opposition to queerness or LGBTQ identities, but rather a complex and varied category whose shifting meanings are as much contingent upon race, ethnicity, and class as they are by gender and sexuality.

Indeed, a goal of much LGBTQ scholarship in recent decades has been to challenge the seemingly stable heteronormative definitions of family that prevail throughout much of US culture such that alternative forms of caretaking, kinship, and allegiance become visible. Daniel Winunye Rivers argues that since the end of World War II, "lesbian mothers, gay fathers, and their children existed in cultures in which their family ties were illegible and seen as virulently dangerous when they were discovered" (3). Valerie Lehr argues that the taken-for-granted purview of the nuclear family in caring for children leads us to ask "who should control the child" rather than "how the care that is provided by multiple people can be recognized and

preserved" (175). Kath Weston illustrates the tenuous rhetorical relationship between LGBTQ people and families with a vignette in which she, standing appropriately out in the rain, sees a sign in a store window that reads, "Closed so employees can be with their families for the holiday." Weston wonders precisely who is included within this public assertion of the importance of family; her mind become occupied with the "hackneyed image of 'the older homosexual'. . . alienated from relatives and living out his or her last years alone in some garret" (2). Echoing Lehr, Weston calls for a more elastic conception of family that can embrace "friends . . . lovers, coparents, adopted children, children from previous heterosexual relationships, and offspring conceived through alternative insemination" (3). Thus, while acknowledging how the family has been a vehicle for anti-LGBTQ erasure and violence, my close readings of parental closet and coming out narratives examine the family as a site that entwines queer knowledges with family histories and makes other members of those families proper subjects of LGBTQ historicizing. Attempts to move queer media studies away from the centrality of LGBTQ-identified people have been met with concerns over erasure, such as Brett Farmer's accusation that queer theory offers a post-modern "democratic pansexuality" that elides the specificity of gay and lesbian representations and viewing positions (16). Critiquing the recovery model's insistence on a coherent LGBTQ historical subject who can be recuperated in the present, Martha M. Umphrey eschews "a historiographic gesture based upon stable identity categories as epistemological foundations for history," opting for a historical method that can incorporate "incoherent and indeterminate" figures (12).

The historical queer parent is such a figure whose presence potentially queers the family and those within it. In recent decades, the concept of the chosen or elective family has taken precedence in discussions of the family's queer potential. In the 1980s, Weston argues, the

discourse around gay families differed from that of past generations in its "emphasis on the kinship character of the ties gay people had forged to close friends and lovers, its demand that those ties receive social and legal recognition, and its separation of parenting and family formation from heterosexual relations" (22). The creation of these families, Weston argues, is almost always spoken of using the language of agency—"families we choose"—in contrast to the lack of agency regarding one's family of origin (109). Kadji Amin, however, alleges that queer studies, for all its critiques of normative historiography, has often responded to "this damaging legacy of shame and stigma by loudly idealizing the alternatives that emerge from deviance" (6) in "an effort to amplify the ethics, politics, and inventiveness of marginalized cultures" (8). Thus, within queer studies, "our families, because freely chosen, are uniquely supportive and antihierarchical" (6). In this dissertation, I examine a variety of family formations as unstable and contested sites for sexual identity formation. I see my approach as allowing us to look beyond the individual victimized by prohibitions on gender and sexuality and to analyze larger systems of regulation that govern which people, forms of affect, and relationships are legible within the category of LGBTQ history.

4. Dissertation Outline

In 2016, two years after publishing *Ethereal Queer: Television, Historicity, Desire*, Amy Villarejo wrote in *Social Text*:

> Sure, television is queerer now, with a visual and aural richness we would do well to appreciate, even celebrate. What is more important than celebration, in my view, is a kind of responsibility toward these lifeworlds that can appreciate what and where they are queer in a way that makes a televisual intervention. That

> means understanding the work beyond the text, the makers beyond the stars, the creative energies surging around the studio lots that are doing their thing despite the centripetal and destructive inclinations of capitalist culture industries. ("Adorno by the Pool" 85-6)

Villarejo's 2014 book, which moves from the 1940s through the 2000s and covers broadcast, public, and cable television content, argues for LGBTQ television studies to adapt its methodologies to focus less on analyzing textual representations of LGBTQ people and instead pay rigorous attention to the relationships among queerness, time, and the medium of television itself in its cultural, technological, and industrial contexts. Villarejo's 2016 article, however, begins by asking, "Where is queer television, now? Not just the nagging ontological question, what is television now?, but where? Where should we look for it and its consequences?" (71). Indeed, what makes television "queerer now" is not simply a proliferation of LGBTQ representations in traditional forms of media, but a porousness of boundaries across media that engenders not only new forms of representation, but also new and eclectic modes of production, methods of access and viewing, and audience formations. Amidst a convergence of media in the early twenty-first century, scholars have responded to the entwining of forms of media previously understood as disparate with a convergence of methods that allows us to understand the intersections of industry, text, spectatorship, and circulation. Such methodological convergence is not a new phenomenon, nor is it limited in application to contemporary media. Miriam Hansen influentially argues that the "sheer eclecticism and promiscuity of sources" (175) of D.W. Griffith's *Intolerance* (Triangle, 1916) exceeds the "naive concept of referential realism" (175) of Griffith's previous film, *The Birth of a Nation* (Epoch, 1915); thus, *Intolerance* produces a "promiscuous mobilization of meanings in which the ostensibly first, denotative level

is just one among a whole range of representations and figurations marked by graphic particularity, by a variety of textual and intertextual resonances" (177-8). As Sabine Haenni summarizes, "the text's promiscuity necessitates or provokes the spectator's promiscuity" (190). Such a promiscuous methodology, Haenni argues, has become "even more important in an age of proliferating media platforms and proliferating archives" (189-90).

Thus, this dissertation deploys methodologies from cultural studies, media and cinema studies, and queer theory to analyze an eclectic and multi-modal archive. My first chapter, for example, analyzes *RuPaul's Drag Race* on textual and extra-textual levels, considering not only the content of individual episodes, but also how this content and its reception is shaped by contemporaneous political discourses, the mechanisms of reality television production, the changing nature of reality television spectatorship in the early twenty-first century, fan engagement on social media, and the show's connections to the subcultural performance realm of drag from which it draws its contestants. On the other hand, my second chapter on *Carol* primarily uses formal and historical modes of analysis in keeping with that film's evocation of archaic modes of film production and reception. As in Hansen's analysis of *Intolerance*, my own methodological promiscuity is a response to the eclecticism of my sources. In *Beginners* and *20th Century Women*, for example, Mike Mills combines the aesthetic forms of narrative feature films with those of other forms in which he works, including still photography, music videos, and graphic design.

Furthermore, my case studies mostly involve forms such as reality television, the graphic memoir, and the semi-autobiographical movie that blur distinctions between fact and fiction, reality and narrative. Freeman writes, "As the winners of a battle between sensory and cognitive modes of apprehending history declared it, history should be understood rather than felt, and

written in a genre as clearly separable from fiction (if not from narrative) as possible" (*Time Binds* 95). In the media I analyze, the figure of the queer parent allows contemporary media artists to argue for a relationship to history that is grounded in approaches that are simultaneously affective and cognitive, felt and understood. All four of my chapters are united by a focus on figures seen as irrelevant or outmoded within contemporary discourses surrounding queerness within families. How does the queerness of a family's patriarch locate his heterosexual wife and child within LGBTQ narratives in *Beginners* and *20th Century Women*? What does it mean, as in Alison Bechdel's relationship with her father in *Fun Home*, for much of one's formative understanding of queerness to come from a father who never actually comes out? What pleasures can be derived from *Carol*'s ironic redeployment of mid-twentieth century models of lesbianism as perverted mother-daughter love? How do the queens on *RuPaul's Drag Race* embody earlier permutations of queer practices, performances, and kinship? Taken together, how do these examples demonstrate a contemporary desire to reconnect with forgotten or obscure pasts—a desire to engage with aspects of queer lives that have been jettisoned in order to construct coherent, linear, and clearly generational historical narratives?

My first two chapters analyze how contemporary media demonstrate how seemingly retrograde queer modes of constructing kinship through shared relationships to dominant culture persevere even amidst a relative surfeit of LGBTQ representation. In my first chapter, I analyze how RuPaul and the contestants on *RuPaul's Drag Race*, a reality competition series in which drag queens vie for the title of America's Next Drag Superstar, form a family that forges kinship through pleasure in shared knowledge and queer citation. I consider how RuPaul polices which forms of affect can occupy this archive. While Mama Ru might tell a sobbing queen on her stage that gay folks get to choose their families, there is more to being her child than identity; *RuPaul's*

Drag Race presents a form of family in which the pleasure of belonging is predicated upon adherence to neoliberal gay historical narratives. My second chapter focuses on the title character in Todd Haynes' film *Carol*. Based on Patricia Highsmith's novel *The Price of Salt* (1952), the film depicts surveillance of same-sex relationships, psychiatric pathologizing of lesbians, and the revocation of custody to lesbian parents. I explicate how *Carol*'s aesthetics and narrative insist on pleasure and the importance of queer forms of belonging in the face of loss. I ask how this film reconciles these pleasures despite anti-queer violence, focusing on Carol's relationships with her daughter, her best friend, and her younger lover.

My third and fourth chapters turn back toward the nuclear family. My third chapter examines the figure of the closeted husband and father in Alison Bechdel's graphic memoir *Fun Home* and Mike Mills' movie *Beginners*. I analyze how these works use non-linear narratives to historicize the closet in starkly different ways. In *Beginners*, narrative lapses function as caesuras that contain Hal, the closeted father, in the distant past as a historical relic; the closet renders him a cipher who occupies the margins of the family and the cinematic frame. In *Fun Home*, these lapses through time function more like ellipses that find uncomfortable affinities between closeted gay father and openly lesbian daughter. Ultimately, Bechdel and Mills' uses of non-linear narratives culminate in moments of touching across time that point toward recuperative ways of engaging with the affective legacies of the closet. My final chapter moves to a figure typically regarded as tangential in coming out discourses: the ostensibly heterosexual partner. In both *Beginners* and *Fun Home*, the figure of the wife and mother stands in between gay father and child, disrupting *Beginners*' attempts to read these men's experiences through a lens that prioritizes political narratives of visibility and emergence and *Fun Home*'s attempts to find affinity based upon shared queerness. Bechdel's graphic memoir *Are You My Mother?* and Mills'

movie *20th Century Women* recuperate their relationships with their mothers partially by reckoning with how their fathers' coming out narratives have reduced their mothers to mere stand-ins for compulsory heterosexuality. *20th Century Women*, *Are You My Mother?*, and the Netflix series *Grace and Frankie* examine the cost of compulsory heterosexuality not just for LGBTQ-identified people. They return to the figure of the wife and mother in order to reveal scars of intergenerational traumas that triumphant LGBTQ historical narratives cannot heal.

CHAPTER 1: SNATCHING AN ARCHIVE: GAY CITATION, QUEER BELONGING, AND THE PRODUCTION OF PLEASURE IN *RUPAUL'S DRAG RACE*[1]

> *Drag queens have always been the keepers of our queer history. We make it, we tell it, we remember it, we misremember it, and we love it. — Sasha Velour*
> ("Grand Finale" 11:21-30)

1. Introduction

In the first act of Mart Crowley's 1968 play *The Boys in the Band*, a gay man performs an impromptu bedroom tribute to Judy Garland's rendition of Harold Arlen and Ted Koehler's "Get Happy" in *Summer Stock* (MGM, 1950). When his friend Donald refuses the call to diva worship, Michael asks in weary resignation, "What's more tired than a queen doing a Judy Garland imitation?" Donald's famous retort: "A queen doing a Bette Davis imitation" (11). This jest attests to the centrality of female celebrities in gay culture, to the extent that such citations were already cliché in 1968. Yet, such attachments and the performances they produce remain vital to gay culture, from bedroom lip-syncs to arena concert adoration.

The drag repertoire of celebrity impersonation is key to the appeal of the reality competition series *RuPaul's Drag Race* (LOGO, 2009-16; VH1, 2017-present), in which drag queens under the tutelage of the titular drag matriarch compete to become America's Next Drag Superstar. Scholars tend to regard the show as the epitome of "commercial drag," defined by José Esteban Muñoz as a mode of performance in which "the sanitized queen is meant to be enjoyed as an entertainer who will hopefully lead to social understanding and tolerance" ("The White to Be Angry" 85). Certainly, the show's status as a revenue-generating production for a

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fledgling cable network incentivizes performances that align with dominant ideologies. After Alaska Thunderfuck 5000—competing under the cable-friendly moniker "Alaska"—won the second season of *RuPaul's Drag Race: All Stars* (2016), RuPaul praised Alaska's "marketing genius," adding that marketing is "really the future of drag" ("Reunited").

However, the show must navigate contradictions inherent in its attempt to market drag to mainstream audiences while maintaining its subcultural affiliations. In the interstices formed by this dual encoding, I argue, the show constructs a viewership based less upon shared gayness than upon shared knowledge of gay iconography, and participation in its circulation. In addition to people and events populating a gay history, the show's archive draws upon queer modes of relating to culture, particularly of producing pleasure. Building upon recent scholarship on affect and reality television, I analyze the transfer of pleasures among RuPaul, her drag daughters, and viewers. I trace how *RuPaul's Drag Race* curates an archive of gay culture over which it portrays RuPaul as wielding matriarchal power. The show thus constructs kinship through rituals and citations that signal shared subcultural knowledge and attitudes. While Mama Ru might tell a sobbing queen that gay folks get to choose their families, there is more to being her child than identity; *RuPaul's Drag Race* deploys a model of family that forges kinship through pleasure in shared knowledge and queer citation, and that has the potential to inculcate its viewers with queer modes of feeling about its archival objects.

To make this argument, I focus on Snatch Game, a parody of the game show *Match Game* (CBS, 1973-9), in which queens impersonate celebrities and try—or comically fail—to answer fill-in-the-blank questions. In a successful Snatch Game performance, a queen draws on essential drag skills—makeup, mimicry, and improvisation—to perform her knowledge of an icon for the pleasure of those in-the-know while opening up these pleasures to willing converts.

As such, Snatch Game's index of queer feelings does not exist simply for mainstream consumption; by foregrounding queer modes of producing pleasure and the bodies that channel them, *RuPaul's Drag Race* makes a case for the continued importance of queer mediations of popular culture.

2. The Family Brand: Ritual and Belonging in *RuPaul's Drag Race*

In season 5, episode 7, the category is "RuPaul Roast" and the pageant queens are in trouble. Throughout the season, tensions run high between pageant queens—who excel at creating and modeling polished looks—and comedy queens—who succeed at acting and improvisation. This episode's main challenge requires the contestants to write and perform comedy material roasting RuPaul before a panel of judges and a live audience. Though comedy queens Alaska and Jinkx Monsoon perform as well as expected, pageant queen Coco Montrese wins for her performance as Ru's "good cousin from the Brewster Projects." RuPaul and the judges harshly critique the performances of Coco's fellow pageant queens Alyssa Edwards and Roxxxy Andrews, who are this episode's bottom two contestants. RuPaul initiates the show's ritual of expulsion: "Two queens stand before me. Ladies, this is your last chance to impress me and save yourself from elimination." The camera sweeps across the stage and over the contestants as the lighting dramatically changes. "The time has come for you to lip-sync *for your life*." RuPaul finishes: "Good luck, and don't fuck it up!" The song is Willow Smith's "Whip My Hair" (2010), and the show's rapid editing offers only snippets of the performance. Alyssa drops to the floor and writhes to the music. Roxxxy whips off her wig, a gesture usually regarded as a desperate *faux-pas*. But she reveals another wig beneath the first, and as she flails her neck to

bring her second wig to fullness, judges and fellow queens signal their vociferous approval. When the music ends, the queens return to their starting positions and await their fates.

In each episode, the components of this judging, lip-sync, and elimination sequence comprise a media ritual, which Nick Couldry defines as "formalized actions . . . whose performances suggest a connection with wider media-related values" (85). In reality competition series like *Survivor* (US edition: CBS, 2000-present) and *The Apprentice* (NBC, 2004-17), media rituals provide episodes and seasons with structural templates, and construct the values that determine which contestants are worthy of the competition's prizes. Each episode of *Drag Race* requires competitors to improvise performances, design and assemble costumes, apply makeup, and model their looks onstage, enshrining these skills as essential to drag through ritual repetition. The show heightens the primacy of lip-syncing as a mode of contemporary drag performance by placing it at each episode's climax as a test for determining which queen will remain ("shantay, you stay"), and which one will be expelled ("sashay away").

As the ritual unfolds at the end of "RuPaul Roast," the show makes a rare departure from this template. Roxxxy bursts into tears; concerned reaction shots follow. Alyssa asks, "Are you okay?" "So many emotions," Roxxxy responds with her face buried in her hands, her yellow nails and gaudy rings masking her running mascara. Roxxxy attempts to deflect attention, but RuPaul insists that she offer disclosure: "Tell me about it." Roxxxy replies:

> It just hit me and like [pause] not feeling wanted and not being good enough. I just feel like my mother never wanted me and [pause] my mother left my sister and myself at a bus stop when I was three and I remember it like it was yesterday. And, like, I come off this strong character; I try to stay so strong, but I'm so weak, and I'm so tired [breaks down weeping]. It just hurts that I was left: nobody cared!

This editing intersperses medium close-ups of Roxxxy with reaction shots of the queens and judges. When Roxxxy begins her monologue, the camera presents an unusual composition showing her in the foreground at the extreme right of the screen; in the background, four other queens fill the remainder of the frame: Alaska, Jinkx, Coco, and Detox. This brief, unifying shot sets up RuPaul's response:

> We love you and you are so welcome here. You know, we as gay people, we get to choose our family, you know, we get to choose the people that we're around, you know what I'm saying? I *am* your family. We are a family here. I love you.

Behind Roxxxy, queens embrace. Michelle Visage, RuPaul's longtime sidekick, cosigns the message with a nod. When the ritual resumes, a soaring underscoring replaces the usual downbeat music played as RuPaul reveals the queens' fates: "Shantay, you *both* stay." Instead of ending with the remaining queens dancing to a RuPaul single, "RuPaul Roast" ends with a group hug. Eventual season five winner Jinkx Monsoon says in the episode's last insert, "These are no longer just drag queens I'm competing with. I'm growing attached to these people. We are like the seven sisters right now" (36:07-42:08).

Though this sequence departs from the ritual's formalized actions, it sustains its underlying values. RuPaul coaches Roxxxy in constructing a "branded self," which Allison Hearn describes as the product of "affective, immaterial labor that is purposefully undertaken by individuals in order to garner attention, reputation, and, potentially, profit" (446). Roxxxy makes her story legible within existing templates of queer abjection while making her trauma constitutive of her nascent celebrity persona, creating a familiar yet distinct branded self. In proving herself a formidable drag queen in her lip-sync and a marketable media persona via her performance of "prior hardship and present gratitude" with the goal of attaining social and

economic capital via her participation in the show (Goldmark 502), Roxxxy upholds the show's construction of successful drag and RuPaul's position as a figure of maternal authority.

The show thus styles RuPaul as the matriarch of a queer family like those featured in the Harlem ball culture documentary *Paris Is Burning* (Miramax, 1990), which the show regularly cites. In it, Pepper LaBeija, legendary mother of the House of LaBeija, describes how younger queens' experiences of abandonment lead them to turn to her "to fill that void"; behind LaBeija, a young person tenderly nods their head (23:20-24:00). In interviews, RuPaul characterizes her "kids" as having been "alienated and ostracized" before finding emotional validation and material success in drag (Jung). Critics, however, highlight the socioeconomic gulf between RuPaul and house mothers like LaBeija. Matthew Goldmark sees *Drag Race* as a space where "economic and racial divisions are necessarily forgotten . . . in order to abstract the US queer community into a coherent group that uniformly achieves integration based on individualism and merit" (507). Indeed, Roxxxy's triumph over adversity mirrors RuPaul's rags-to-riches backstory. When RuPaul coaches contestants in creating marketable personas, her material success lends authority to her deployment of neoliberal tropes, similar to how *America's Next Top Model* (UPN, 2003-6; CW, 2006-15; VH1, 2016-present) marshals host Tyra Banks's status as one of the first African American supermodels. Amy Adele Hasinoff asserts that, on the latter show, the "model neoliberal citizen must not only succeed at hanging upside down or crawling through mud, she must do so with a smile and with complete faith that the competition (and neoliberal capitalism) is fair" (339). Hasinoff's claim recalls *Drag Race*'s redeployment of queer—and queer of color—resistance strategies such as "fierceness" toward a stoic acceptance of the ludicrous demands of neoliberalism, manifested most spectacularly in challenges that require queens to pose while jumping on trampolines or maintain their poise while being blown by giant

fans. In this way, drag families formed for survival and affirmation in the wake of violence and rejection from nuclear families and state institutions transform into networks of grueling competition to acquire resources.

This troubling conflation of the familial, the queer, and the corporate is evident throughout criticism of the show. Writing about the first season, Eir-Anne Edgar criticizes the "limiting scope of the show [that] impedes progress for drag culture. . . . [when] our current political and cultural environment demands an inclusion of the complexity of queer representation" (145). Edgar's assertions rely on assumptions that recent media scholarship calls into question: namely, as Amy Villarejo enumerates, "that television reflects its viewers; that television *ought* to do so; that it has an *obligation* toward diversity of representation; or that diverse representation leads to political change" (*Ethereal Queer* 3). This progressive narrative, Villarejo charges, sees television as a mere reflection of the social world rather than as "a specific type of system, abstraction, and temporal object" (*Ethereal Queer* 5). F. Hollis Griffin furthermore argues that an evaluation of a program based on the purported accuracy of its representations, "pits a profit-minded gay and lesbian consumer market against a potentially more transformative queer activism, pushing points of overlap out of focus and leaving little ground to parse out how the tensions between them play out in practice" (13). Such a view takes television's meanings as singular and easily-nestled within dominant ideological currents, occluding ways that viewers and participants might relate to programs in ways that exceed their ideological frames.

Indeed, this focus on a cable series' investments in neoliberalism obscures how a vital function of queer kinship survived the leap to television: the inter-generational transmission of queer knowledge. In praising season two winner Tyra Sanchez ("the other Tyra"), RuPaul says:

> You came here with a drag mother who clearly taught you the rules of drag. In the wedding challenge you come out on your knees behind the biggest bouquet of flowers I've ever seen. You peekaboo around it, throw the flowers in the air, and jump up without support on your feet. And when I called you out after your runway presentation, you had tears in your eyes and you pulled the veil [pause] over your face [pause] back in the back of the room. [pause] Bitch, your pussy was on fire! That shit was fierce. Now I told you, I'm just under three-hundred years old; I've seen a lot of queens. That kind of behavior that you had clearly learned from another elderly queen such as I—that's magic. That's magic shit right there. ("Reunion" 31:48-32:47)

RuPaul positions herself within a lineage of elders who educate young queers in knowledge that they cannot gain from heteronormative institutions, and in doing so, makes a case for queer pedagogy. Indeed, this knowledge, and the performances it enables, produces something ephemeral and unique: "magic shit." This knowledge also entails rules and a "kind of behavior," suggesting that one function of RuPaul's maternal role, and thus the show bearing her name, is to establish continuity to counter the threat of intergenerational loss.

3. Separating the Men from the Boys: Gay Archives and Hierarchies of Knowledge

RuPaul's praising of Tyra's "behavior" after presenting her with the season's grand prize underscores that her maternal function is also disciplinary. The rituals of citation that *RuPaul's Drag Race* deploys to construct its network of belonging have long served as points of affinity between gay men, but they also make visible power hierarchies within their communities. Moments after their celebrated Judy/Bette exchange in *The Boys in the Band*, Michael quips to

Donald: “The only thing mature means to me is *Victor* Mature who was in all those pictures with Betty Grable.” Donald is still unenthused: “I understand people having an affinity for the stage—but movies are such garbage, who can take them seriously?” This time, Michael has the rejoinder: “Well I'm sorry if your sense of art is offended. Odd as it may seem, there was no Shubert Theatre in Hot Coffee, Mississippi!” (13). Later, when sissy Emory conjures the image of 1940s adventure movie queen Maria Montez, Donald scoffs again. Emory defends her honor: “What have you got against Maria?—she was a good woman” (25). There is a hierarchy of gay citation at play: for slumming WASP Donald, a stage doyenne such as Helen Hayes is a suitable object of devotion; for Michael—raised far away from New York—movie icons such as Grable are central to his formative experiences of gay culture; for Emory—who insists “I never miss a Rosemary De Camp picture” (84)—that position is held by lower-tier semi-stars and camp divas. Resurrected in the 1960s queer underground by Warhol “superstar” Mario Montez, Maria Montez remains a somewhat obscure figure for mainstream audiences due to her racialized star image, the brevity and medium-specificity of her stardom as the “Queen of Technicolor,” and her employment by Universal—one of the studio era's lesser players. This obscurity allows Michael and Emory to derive pleasure from their mutual knowledge of the diva and her queer circulation.

Of the play's eight gay or bisexual men, however, three are not embraced in this fellowship of gay citation. Hank, the married schoolteacher who left his wife and children to live with his lover, is hostile to gay culture and dismissive of its archives. “Not all of us spent their childhood in a movie house, Michael,” Hank says. “Some of us played baseball” (84). While Hank declines membership in order to distance himself from the stigma of un-masculine cultural attachments, the group never offers it to Cowboy, the sex worker who is Emory's birthday present for his friend Harold. Says Harold upon evaluating his gift: “Oh, I suppose he has an

interesting face and body—but it turns me right off because he can't talk intelligently about art" (63). Cowboy's status as a sex worker marks him as a provider in the play's economy of pleasure, not as someone to share in collective citation. Bernard, the play's only black character, though seemingly knowledgeable of references made throughout the evening, never himself makes the kind of citations rattled off by Michael; the play seems unable to position a black character as an active participant in the construction of its gay archive.

Such divisions extended through gay culture of the period, especially among the drag queens who most spectacularly performed these citations. Esther Newton observed that one of the primary divisions running through the drag communities she surveyed in the late 1960s was between the "stage" queens—mostly older, white performers who drew on the theatre and nightclubs—and the younger "street" queens—whose references came from less respected forms of entertainment and whose offstage lives were more precarious (7-15). Constitutive of the generational, class and racial dynamics that shaped these groups was a division in knowledge that was apparent when the two groups mixed: one group of queens tended not to know the references shared among the other group, limiting inter-group camaraderie (97). Thus, one's deployment of citation—in performance or in conversation—performs positions related to gender, class, race, ability, age, and other categories which point to affinities inside and outside of LGBTQ communities. Seen in this light, Donald's repudiation of Montez, the group's refusal to permit Cowboy access to the sharing of pleasure, and Crowley's inability to incorporate Bernard into the rituals of citation police this archive's boundaries by resisting intersectional elements that call into question its coherence.

Forty years after *The Boys in the Band* concluded its 1001-performance run off-Broadway ("The Boys in the Band"), similar archival dynamics played out in the *Drag Race*

workroom. In season 2, episode 8, “Golden Gals,” RuPaul tasks the season's five remaining queens with making over older gay men into their “drag mothers.” As 21-year-old Tatianna applies makeup to her “mother,” Michael, the following exchange occurs:

> Tatianna: Who is Oscar Wilde?
>
> Michael: *Who* is Oscar Wilde? [shocked pause] *Who* is Oscar Wilde?
>
> Jujubee (a fellow contestant): Oh my gosh, are you serious?
>
> Tatianna: Who *is* Oscar Wilde?
>
> Edward (another “mother”): That's no homosexual over there.
>
> Michael: We are here to educate the young.
>
> Tatianna (in an interview insert): She told me and I was like, “Great. Fantastic.”
>
> Michael: There is a pantheon one should learn. (25:07-30).

Edward and Michael make explicit what the group's collective shock suggests: that one is “no homosexual” unless one obtains and shares specific knowledge of icons and events. The “mothers”—older, white men—represent a link to gay pasts in contrast to Tatianna—young and mixed-race—whom the show portrays as needing an education in the pantheon of proper gay citation. Interestingly, the episode never tells viewers who Oscar Wilde is. This omission implicitly places the viewer as either within or outside of a community bounded by shared knowledge; if a viewer does not know who Oscar Wilde is, they are presumably no homosexual.

In later seasons, *Drag Race* takes on the role of educating the young, and extending the pleasures of queer affinity beyond those in-the-know. In season 4, episode 6, “Float Your Boat,” RuPaul tasks the remaining queens with creating parade floats based on the original eight colors of Gilbert Baker's 1978 rainbow flag. “So who here knows what Stonewall is?” asks 40-year-old Chad Michaels, who was the oldest contestant yet to compete on the series. 29-year-old

competitors Willam and Sharon Needles respond with a basic outline of the event; shots of other queens listening and reacting are interspersed throughout the discussion. The normally irreverent Willam solemnly adds: “You had to wear at least three articles of clothing that were assigned to your gender at all times or you could be arrested” (11:20-12:20). Chad becomes an educator, teaching the young people in the workroom about their history. Willam and Sharon's participation in the sharing of this knowledge models the successful transmission of knowledge from Chad's generation to theirs. The show embeds itself in this lineage, serving as a pedagogical platform for its viewers, including—but not exclusively—LGBTQ people.

Though the Stonewall scene two seasons later teaches rather than scolds, it upholds the racial dynamics of the Oscar Wilde discussion: the three queens discussing Stonewall are white, while the five queens listening are all performers of color. The editing places 39-year-old Latrice Royale, who is just one year Chad's junior, solely on the receiving end of this knowledge exchange. While the white queens interact with one another in the shots of their conversation, the queens of color react in shots that isolate them. Despite their silence during the conversation, their visual presence while white queens dominate the conversation recalls the erasure of queer of color experiences from the commemoration of the demonstrations. In *Drag Race*, the threat posed by queer of color experiences to the concept of a deracinated gay archive requires the isolation of queers of color from the communal remembering of Stonewall. Yet this simultaneous presence and absence of queers of color makes visible the contradiction between the show's attempts to construct a coherent gay archive based strictly on sexual identity and its positioning of RuPaul, a black gay elder, as a figure of maternal authority.

To sustain RuPaul's maternal authority and her position as a cultural gatekeeper, the show's rituals emphasize obedience and the performance of gratitude by her daughters. This

dynamic is in evidence throughout season four, when troublemaker Willam became the first contestant to be disqualified from the competition. Also known professionally as Willam Belli, Willam received mainstream recognition before appearing on *Drag Race*, most memorably appearing as Cherry Peck in a multi-episode arc on *Nip/Tuck* (FX, 2003-10). As such, Willam troubles RuPaul's narrative of plucking drag performers from their subcultural spaces into the mainstream; throughout the season, William repeatedly calls attention to the fact that she is not a part of the club performance circuit from which most of the other contestants hail. In season four, episode eight, Willam is expelled from the show for an unexplained infraction against the competition's rules. In that season's reunion special, Willam explains that she was caught having "conjugal visits" with her husband during filming, in violation of the contestants' contracts (Michael K). Willam's narrative arc as the rebellious daughter disciplined by Mama Ru follows Couldry's argument that contestants who pose a "threat to the show's norms, or rituals of incorporation" usually become villains whose expulsion inspires celebration among fans and contestants alike (96).

However, within the show's fan community, this story is regarded as suspect. Rumors circulate that Willam was sought out by the producers—rather than going through the audition process—explicitly in order to fulfill this "bad girl" role (_cunce). In at least one interview, Willam fed these rumors, noting that just two days after her elimination, she was in rehearsals for an off-Broadway show; the timing was so serendipitous that it was "almost like it was planned" (Belli). Popular fashion bloggers Tom and Lorenzo openly claimed that Willam was a "ringer" whose storyline on the show was planned out in advance (Tom and Lorenzo). While Willam's repudiation of the show's official narrative might seem scandalous, it simply became part of the ephemeral archive of fan knowledge dispersed across various platforms.

4. Not to Be Real: Reality Show Aesthetics, Drag Pedagogy, and Cable Demographics

The fact that this open secret had little-to-no effect on the show's fortunes has to do with changes in reality competitions series aesthetics and viewer expectations in the decade preceding *Drag Race*'s debut. Whereas reality television producers in the early 2000s sought to construct a veneer of impartiality and verisimilitude (Haralovich and Trosset 80), they later embraced, as Misha Kavka puts it, "a more obvious scriptedness, a winking artifice that meets media-savvy audiences halfway" (460). The winking artifice of *Drag Race* places the show within a tradition of reality programming that includes *Project Runway* (Bravo, 2004-8; Lifetime, 2009-present) and *Hell's Kitchen* (US edition: Fox, 2005-present). In the interviews interspersed throughout episodes of these shows, contestants speak as though events are occurring in the present, even though the interviews are obviously conducted after the fact. In *Drag Race*, this temporal inconsistency is even more pronounced as the interviews always feature the contestants out of drag even when commenting on events occurring while they are in drag. The transformation of the confessional devices central to early seasons of *The Real World* (MTV, 1992-present) and *Big Brother* (US edition: CBS, 2000-present) into interviews marked explicitly as sites of performance reflects a shift away from this earlier generation of reality programming and their conceit that "surveillance [is] a natural mode through which to observe the social world" (Couldry 90). In these moments of temporal contradiction, *Drag Race* does not mask production-level mediation but invites viewers to revel in its artifice.

Reflecting this shift, after season four the show no longer marked transitions between days via shots of contestants waking up and preparing for work. These snippets in drab gray hotel rooms emphasized the ordinariness of the contestants outside of their drag personas before they burst into the vibrant pink workroom, foregrounding their positions as competition series

participants performing work differentiated from their daily lives. Telling changes occur in the *mise-en-scène* of the workroom as well: in early seasons, microphones are more often visible on performers' bodies and, in multiple episodes, a performer's shirt is blurred due to the presence of a copyrighted logo ("Starrbootylicious" 2:28-10:08, "The Snatch Game" [S3] 9:58-10:28). These unwelcome presences suggest verisimilitude through a lack of mediation of on-camera events. In contrast, season four winner Sharon Needles enters the workroom in a "McCain/Palin" campaign shirt in one episode and a "Nixon Now" cut-off t-shirt in another ("Float Your Boat" 11:19-21, "Snatch Game" [S4] 2:38-41). Such incongruous attire marks the workroom as an explicit location of performance. In this way, the show's embrace of artifice becomes apparent in its physical production.

This artifice is also embedded in the show's audio and visuals. The early seasons' jittery camera movements, erratic framings, imprecise editing rhythms, and murky sound mixing suggest verisimilitude and a lack of mediation belied by the later seasons' smooth rhythms, sophisticated sound design, and controlled *mise-en-scène*. In season 7, episode 6, "Ru Hollywood Stories," as RuPaul remembers Merle Ginsberg, a judge during seasons one and two, a thought bubble featuring Ginsberg appears above her head, "I can almost see her now," Ru reminisces, "so soft, so wise, so *blurry*" to the competitors' knowing delight (7:31-52). While the show's elevation to LOGO's flagship program and the resulting increase in budget produced these changes, they also reflect the show's movement toward a more transparently mediated aesthetic.

As seen in the Stonewall example, the show's archival policing occurs both at the level of on-set interactions and in how the show constructs them for viewers. The show's embrace of artifice allows for the construction of the Stonewall sequence as a discrete lesson. It begins with

a shot of Chad's face gradually coming into focus before she asks the initial question. Instead of conveying in-the-moment capture, however, this shot is clearly pre-meditated as it is fully in focus before Chad speaks. The queens interrupt their work and project their voices, giving the scene the aura of a performance. The editing cuts between shots of the speakers and shots of queens reacting to something offscreen; there is nothing in the frame itself to suggest that they are reacting to the conversation. These temporally unfixed shots hint at the conversation's post-production assembly. In contrast, the Oscar Wilde scene's aesthetics convey a sense of verisimilitude. Jujubee applies makeup to Edward's face in the background of the first shot. The cut to the next shot—when she says "Oh my gosh, are you serious?"—matches the first exactly with Jujubee's hand movements and the position of her body continuing across shots, indicating temporal immediacy. Tatianna's interview insert provides the only ellipsis in the action, and she speaks of the conversation in the past tense. The contestants do not seem to be playing for the cameras, but remain engrossed in the application of makeup to their drag mothers' faces. Their voices remain low and the sound mix barely captures Tatianna when she asks the initial question. Whereas this scene conveys having been *captured*, the Stonewall scene appears *produced* in order to provide knowledgeable viewers with a sense of shared history, while offering other viewers a degree of access into this community of shared knowledge.

This demographic maneuver recalls Katherine Sender's account of how cable network Bravo engaged in "dualcasting" to gay male and straight female viewers in order to "navigate a narrow line between signaling a niche appeal and retaining large enough audiences" (303). In fact, in marketing programs such as *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* (later shortened to *Queer Eye*, 2003-7), Bravo spent far more effort on appealing to women, assuming that gay men, hungry for representation, would watch anyway (309). Furthermore, Sender argues that gay men

were not the primary audience targeted through dualcasting because gay men are dispersed across several of the demographic categories measured by agencies like Nielsen, which mainly categorize by gender and age (308). In some ways, *Drag Race* employs a similar dynamic. In the season six Snatch Game, guest judge Gillian Jacobs establishes herself as a "super-fan" of the show by saying, "I've seen just about every episode" (13:10-20). Later, she proves her place in the fellowship of gay citation with references such as "Guess Ad '94 realness" in response to a queen's runway outfit (32:19-27). Jacobs's assimilation into gay citational fellowship illustrates how *Drag Race* privileges participation in the citation of gay knowledge over gay identity as a criterion for inclusion.

5. Feeling Snatch Game: Queer Pleasures and the Limits of Gay Archives

However, *Drag Race* does not make its gay audiences secondary. The tensions between the sharing of queer pleasures and the policing of gay archives embedded within the show most spectacularly manifest in Snatch Game. Since its debut in season 2, episode 4, Snatch Game has become a highly-anticipated event by fans and contestants alike. Before season five's Snatch Game, Jinkx Monsoon makes explicit what is implicit in Snatch Game's status as the only challenge that recurs every season: "Snatch Game challenges your improv skills, your wit, and your impersonation skills; without these three things, a drag queen might as well not call herself a drag queen" (9:26-38). In admonishing Kenya Michaels after her performance as Beyoncé in season four, RuPaul says "That's what drag is about—you have to have a knowledge of pop culture" (35:30-51). In making Snatch Game a ritual, the show codifies this knowledge as central to its construction of drag.

Indeed, the citation of gay iconography in Snatch Game consists of specific knowledges and practices legitimated by the show through ritual repetition. Tatianna, who wins the first Snatch Game, executes a convincing portrayal of Britney Spears' mannerisms, impressing RuPaul in the workroom by immediately breaking into character: she snaps her jaw as if chewing gum and opens her eyes wide. When RuPaul models Britney's head toss and hair flip, Tatianna mimics it (12:51-13:14). Pandora Boxx likewise imitates Carol Channing's raspy lisp and wild facial movements. When RuPaul asks Pandora what era of Channing's star persona she will impersonate, she responds with *Thoroughly Modern Millie* (Universal, 1967), a decision she made in part because she lacks the iconic saucer glasses that feature in Channing's later looks (14:06-42). These two interactions demonstrate that reproducing the visual and physical idiosyncrasies of the celebrity is central to the show's construction of successful drag. In addition, Pandora's conversation with RuPaul suggests what later Snatch Games make more explicit: a successful Snatch Game performance also performs one's *knowledge* about a figure's life, career, and star image.

Snatch Game itself draws upon particular knowledge of popular culture and its queer circulation. *Match Game*, Snatch Game's object of parody, has aired in multiple iterations on NBC (1962-69, 1983-4), CBS (1973-9), ABC (1990-1, 2016-present), and in syndication (1979-82, 1998-9). The CBS episodes, which have found new audiences on cable networks such as Game Show Network, have a particular queer following, not in the least because of the presence of Charles Nelson Reilly. Like Paul Lynde on *The Hollywood Squares* (multiple networks and iterations), Reilly was a camp-fabulous supporting player in Broadway musicals before becoming a game show personality. And like Lynde, who occupied the *Squares*' center square, Reilly had a permanent spot on the show: top row, right in *Match Game*'s two rows of three

celebrity panelists. Elana Levine argues that the deliciously queeny Reilly, with his "oversized glasses, decorative ascots, quick wit, and bitchy barbs," was the wielder of jokes about queer sexuality and that "the audience's excitement at this shtick was rooted in its ability to 'get' Reilly's joke," unlike much of the homophobic humor of seventies television that made queerness and queer people solely its objects. (199). Thus, in addition to representing camp queenery, Reilly's camp labor produces a complex address that interpellates viewers into a community marked by knowledge of queer lives and practices.

In a similar way, *Drag Race* centers gay audiences while engaging in practices similar to dualcasting. In examining how the archive constructed through Snatch Game captures queer attachments to popular culture, I turn to scholarship on reality television and affect. Kavka argues that critics' tendency to privilege narrative obscures these shows' affective components, leaving critics reluctant to analyze programs that foreground sensation such as *Fear Factor* (NBC, 2001-6) and *Wipeout!* (ABC, 2008-14) (464). Although Kavka does not explicitly mention performance as a sensory component, this call for a revision in media studies recalls Diana Taylor's call for performance studies to de-emphasize narrative and "pay attention to milieu and corporeal behaviors such as gestures, attitudes, and tones not reducible to language" (28). The pleasures of *Drag Race* are highly sensorial, with vibrant costumes, heightened emotions, and intense color schemes; furthermore, the bodily spectacle of drag and the show's evocation of fierceness invite viewers to experience visceral pleasure. If, as Kavka writes, "the affective forces mobilized by reality television resonate between participants and viewers and producers and even objects, in an indeterminate space of possibility that enlivens and enlarges the formulaic mechanisms of television production" (461), then the pleasures of *RuPaul's Drag*

Race exist as pleasures transferred and shared between and among performers and viewers and are not contained within an onscreen diegesis.

5.1 "What… a… dump!": Chad Michaels as Cher and Bette Davis

In the season four Snatch Game and in "RuPaul's Gaff-In," a parody of the sketch series *Rowan and Martin's Laugh-In* (NBC, 1968-73) during the first season of *RuPaul's Drag Race: All Stars* (2012), Chad Michaels performs her in-depth knowledge of gay icons to evoke histories of queer reception and performance while making their pleasures legible across broader demographics. Chad's choices of canonical—perhaps "tired"—drag icons would surely have made Crowley's Donald groan: Cher and Bette Davis. Indeed, in disparaging Delta Work's season three performance as Cher, Michelle Visage says, "It's CHER! You learn that in drag school 101!" (53:21-37). As a kind of surrogate parent to younger queens, Chad represents tradition, community, and professionalism. Yet, her age is also presented as an obstacle to her ability to entertain contemporary audiences. Chad's polished look, figured by the show as both the product of a long drag career and of a fading era of drag, leaves judges repeatedly asking her to be more "messy" ("Float Your Boat" 34:30-42). Still, Chad's Cher won season four's Snatch Game and her Bette Davis received praise from the judges. Ultimately, *Drag Race* validates Chad's attachments to canonical divas by deploying her as a legitimating link to gay pasts. Chad becomes a historical figure, and viewers can derive pleasure from the divas she impersonates and the historical attachments to gay archives she embodies.

Chad performs her mastery of Cher even before Snatch Game begins by enumerating the vital characteristics of Cher's star image to the amusement and annoyance of the other queens. Sharon Needles playfully says, "You'll clock someone doing Cher wrong; they always do it too

big!" "'Show me *one* tape where Cher went," she says before performing a standard Cher imitation move: she yells "Oh," wags her tongue, cocks her head, and mimes flipping back her hair. "*She never did that!*" (9:15-50). When RuPaul performs the exact same gesture, the show positions Chad's knowledge of an iconic drag diva as *superior* to RuPaul's (12:29-13:01). Chad's singular attachment to Cher recalls Wayne Koestenbaum's assertion that "only one diva can have the power to describe a listener's life" (19). Such devotion inspires and is sustained by an encyclopedic knowledge of the diva; Koestenbaum can determine the approximate date of an Anna Moffo recording simply by listening to the qualities of her voice (32). Chad's devotion to Cher, then, embeds her performance, and by extension *Drag Race*, within a genealogy of gay performance and diva devotion. The rituals of citation in *RuPaul's Drag Race* require that Chad make this knowledge accessible to viewers in a way that invites them into the cult of the diva. During the challenge, Chad changes wigs and costumes multiple times in order to present different iconic Cher looks—first sporting a leather jacket and wavy black hair that evokes Cher's 1990s looks (17:00-18), then removing the jacket to reveal a breastpiece similar to the one from the iconic Bob Mackie outfit she wore to the 1986 Academy Awards, topped with a blonde wig that recalls Cher's "Farewell Tour" appearances (18:05-25), and, finally, donning a jacket and a copy of the iconic headpiece of the Mackie ensemble (19:23-39). This visual abundance and citational overlap affords viewers multiple points of reference, catering to viewers who became aware of Cher after the release of her 1998 album *Believe* while providing Cher's longtime fans with a wealth of iconic looks.

Chad's Bette Davis benefits from similar citational abundance. After revealing her choice, Chad mimics holding a cigarette while shouting, "What a dump!" Chad cites *All About Eve* (Fox, 1950) when RuPaul asks what era of Bette Davis she will perform. Although her wig and red

dress suggest Gladys Witten's hairstyling and Edith Head's costumes for that film, her makeup, voice, and mannerisms suggest an older Bette, a mixture of Jane Hudson in *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* (Warner Bros., 1962) and her later interviews with Johnny Carson and Dick Cavett (17:48-18:04). Of course, in uttering "What a dump!" Chad is not performing Bette's comparatively restrained line reading in *Beyond the Forest* (Warner Bros., 1949) but an exaggerated reading that owes much to Elizabeth Taylor's parody of it in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (Warner Bros., 1966) (4:21-4). Taylor, in turn, draws upon Uta Hagen's reading of the line in the 1962 original Broadway production of Edward Albee's play ("Fun and Games" 3:00-3). And if, as Donald asserts in *The Boys in the Band*, Davis was already a predictable choice for a drag queen in 1968, then queens had been shouting "What a dump!" in bars before Hagen uttered it onstage. Hagen/Taylor/the drag repertoire's inflection of the line bleeds into Chad Michaels' other dialogue as Davis (17:48-18:04). Chad's performance is, thus, a richly intertextual creation that offers viewers multiple points of entry by invoking multiple Davis iterations, Hagen and Taylor, every drag queen who ever bored Crowley's Donald, and those that followed.

Chad's performance also draws upon the work of legendary male actress Charles Pierce. Borrowing the concept from Ann Cvetkovich, David Román describes Pierce's performances as Davis and other celebrities as constituting an "'archive of feeling'—feelings of love, admiration, and respect that escape or elude more traditional forms of documentation" (159). While Pierce's performances included camp send-ups, they also included dramatic monologues and touching solos such as Katharine Hepburn's famous "calla lilies" speech from *Stage Door* (RKO, 1937) and her touching solo "Always Mademoiselle" from the Broadway musical *Coco* (1969) (160). Chad evokes such tender attachments through relentless intertextuality. Rosa Moline's yearning,

Margo Channing's fierceness, Martha's regret, and the brittle strength of Davis's own later media appearances all exist within Chad's performance, which recalls histories of queer performance and spectatorship from an array of spaces: the Broadway stage, classical and post-classical Hollywood, chat shows, classic movie reruns, and gay bars. These links to the past legitimate *Drag Race* as part of an archive of historical queer performance while trading on iconography that makes Chad's Bette accessible to viewers by giving them numerous points of reference.

5.2 "People *Should* Know Who She Is": Jinkx Monsoon as Little Edie

Whereas Chad stuck to canonical figures, Jinkx Monsoon chooses American socialite Edith Bouvier ("Little Edie") Beale—cousin to Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy Onassis—whose unconventional personality and milieu enliven the *cinéma vérité* documentary *Grey Gardens* (Portrait Films, 1975). In the years preceding the episode's 2012 filming, Little Edie had undergone a limited resurgence in popular culture via Christine Ebersole's Tony-winning performance in the 2006 Broadway musical *Grey Gardens*, the Criterion Collection's DVD release of the film that same year, and Drew Barrymore's Golden Globe-winning performance as Little Edie in a television movie of the same name (HBO, 2009). Even so, Jinkx's fellow queens are skeptical when she reveals her choice. "Do you think a lot of people are going to recognize that character?" asks Ivy Winters, who has chosen the inarguably iconic Marilyn Monroe. The other queens mock her choice, but she tells the viewer via insert, "Not everyone's gonna know who she is but I think people *should* know who she is" (7:56-8:54). Jinkx casts her choice in pedagogical terms and she uses Snatch Game to recuperate a figure at the margins of gay archives. If performing as Lady Gaga or Beyoncé is the early twenty-first century equivalent of a "tired. . . . queen doing a Judy Garland imitation," then Jinkx's winning performance eschews the

expected by introducing Little Edie to new audiences while simultaneously providing the pleasure of belonging for Edie's fans.

Thus, Jinkx provides an abundance of visual and aural references. Her props include an American flag on a stick, a can of "paté," and a magnifying glass for reading the book (of horoscopes?) in front of her. Her outfit and makeup manifest Little Edie's destitute glamor: a ruffled fur coat, scarf that might be a dish towel, head wrap like the one that Edie wore to cover her alopecia-afflicted scalp, monocle dangling ostentatiously on a simple chain, and movie star eye and lip makeup on an otherwise pallid face. Her use of Little Edie quotes as non-sequiters ("The label's faded; I can't tell if it's paté or giblets for the cats.") and her exaggeration of Little Edie's old-money accent and elocution (she contorts "cats" into something like "kaaayits") complete the distinctive caricature (16:15-30). Her gestures are oversized and somewhat awkward: she leans assertively forward and views another contestant with her magnifying glass, her features comically distorted in the lens (19:31-4). This referential overkill provides ample clues to the uninitiated; Jinkx's performance is simultaneously a loving tribute for the pleasure of those in-the-know and an initiation for those who are not.

Jinkx balances this need to address the initiated and the uninitiated when she disparages the lack of "real" stars on the panel and asks RuPaul, "Couldn't you have gotten Leslie Caron or Audrey Hepburn?" The reference to Hepburn, whose Givenchy-bedecked image is as iconic as Monroe's, positions Edie in relation to old Hollywood glamor for a broad audience while the reference to the more obscure Caron demonstrates Jinkx's deep knowledge of the gay canon of movie icons (22:26-45). The show highlights this knowledge when RuPaul hands Ivy Winters an obvious joke by asking her, "You're into politics, aren't you?" In the next shot, Ivy shifts uncomfortably in her seat and awkward silence stills the rhythms of the sequence. Jinkx seizes

the joke and the camera reframes to capture her: “Quite the scandal actually—with my cousin-in-law, really? It was in all the magazines at the time” (19:17-35). The reframing to favor Jinkx, a technique that highlights the show's artifice via its pretense at verisimilitude amid the slick, tightly-edited flow of Snatch Game, implicitly positions the show's mechanisms of manipulation in support of Jinkx's portrayal. In addition, the positioning of Little Edie in relation to John F. Kennedy and Marilyn Monroe provides an additional anchor for those coming to her portrayal with little or no foreknowledge. RuPaul addresses the need to navigate these two audiences before the challenge begins by telling Jinkx that it will be a challenge to make Little Edie “pop for the unwashed masses” (11:59-12:51). On one level, RuPaul's comment attempts to reign in Jinkx's queer attachments and push her toward a more mainstream choice. But it is also highly ironic: Who would refer to an audience they're trying to court as “unwashed masses?” RuPaul's comment sets up those who know about Little Edie as part of an elite community bound by knowledge of queer icons. By portraying the other queens as initially uncomprehending, however, the show provides a buffer between viewers and the “unwashed masses.” In other words, the show frames the pleasures of queer subcultural knowledge not just as coming from a position of already-knowing but as something to be gained by initiation.

As a counterpoint to Jinkx’s performance, the show frames Robbie Turner’s performance as influential *Vogue* and *Harper’s Bazaar* editor Diana Vreeland in the season eight Snatch Game as a failure. Like Jinkx, Robbie's competitors are skeptical of her choice. Bob the Drag Queen asks, “You [don't] think that’s a hair obscure?” “No, not at all,” Robbie scoffs (“Supermodel Snatch Game” 5:49-6:14). Like Newton's stage queens, Robbie’s attitude is elitist, whereas Jinkx seeks to share her knowledge. Robbie's use of visual iconography in her performance roughly evokes the period of Vreeland's reign in the fashion world: a cigarette;

bracelets and necklaces; a Chanel scarf about her neck. Her makeup is severe, with exaggerated age lines, and a stiff expression (13:11-9). While these visual cues present an exaggerated portrait, the show's construction of Robbie's performance does not mobilize them toward a distinct characterization. The editing and soundtrack frame Robbie's performance with moments of stillness and silence, as it did to Ivy's Marilyn. During the judges' deliberations, RuPaul and Michelle display a knowledge of Vreeland that is superior to Robbie's by citing the evolution of her personal style. "Why didn't she go for the blown-back hair?" asks Michelle, to which RuPaul replies knowingly: "With the bun at the top?" An image of an elderly Vreeland appears onscreen that matches their description of Vreeland's look, creating a discrepancy between Robbie's look and the real Vreeland shown in the photo. In addition, it comes after Snatch Game, rather than before, meaning that viewers without foreknowledge of Vreeland have no visual referent until after the performance has already been negatively critiqued (33:34-34:02). The show thus constructs Vreeland as a legitimate gay icon, despite her faded renown; however, its framing of Robbie's performance relies on her audience's gay cultural literacy to get her citations. If Jinkx and Robbie think that we should know the icons they impersonate, the former means it as an invitation whereas the latter means it as an admonishment.

5.3 "I Just Wrote 'Corn!'": Bob the Drag Queen as Uzo Aduba and Carol Channing

In the same episode, Bob the Drag Queen wins Snatch Game by switching from Uzo Aduba to Carol Channing midway through the challenge. In order to perform as Channing, Bob first has to uncouple her from whiteness by presenting Channing's white femininity as the product of performance—and therefore justifying as what Michelle pointedly specifies as "an African American Carol Channing" (34:50-6). While RuPaul's adage "we're born naked and the

rest is drag" might portray the body as a canvas, the whiter the canvas, the more likely it is to be read as blank. When dark-skinned, plus-sized queen Stacy Layne Matthews wants to perform as model and reality television personality Anna Nicole Smith during season three's Snatch Game, RuPaul and her fellow competitors convince her to perform as actress Mo'Nique instead (13:56-14:49). In contrast, lighter-skinned, thinner latinx queen Adore Delano receives no such pushback for her cross-racial performance as Smith in season six. Bob acknowledges this inherent policing in an insert preceding her Snatch Game performance: "I know some folks are gonna question why is a 6'2" black man doing Carol Channing, but it's because I feel a connection with Carol Channing—I really do" (6:30-53). Bob echoes Jinkx's strategy three seasons earlier. When pressed by RuPaul to justify choosing a somewhat obscure art house cinema icon, Jinkx says, "none of them speak to me the same way" (11:59-12:51). These assertions evoke affective qualities of embodiment beyond physical reproduction and mimicry.

Hence, Bob's performance evokes the qualities that propel the queer circulation of Channing's star image. In choosing a Broadway icon, Bob references a long history of gay attachments to musicals and women who star in them. She demonstrates her knowledge of these attachments when, in response to the final Snatch Game question, she reveals her answer card: "I just wrote 'corn'!" (21:10-8). Bob's subsequent commentary on the digestive properties of maize are potentially bewildering to viewers unfamiliar with the oft-told and oft-embellished story she references, which Michael Musto provides in its most basic form: "Carol Channing was allegedly heard to announce in a bathroom stall, 'Corn? When did I eat corn?'" (Musto). Like Robbie, Musto relies on his *Village Voice* readership's gay cultural literacy to provide the omitted details that make the story hilarious: Channing's big personality, distinctive voice and mannerisms, and status as a Broadway legend. The multiple versions of the story in circulation

and the loving addition of details in subsequent retellings—in some versions, Channing's bathroom break occurs mid-performance and her body microphone is left on, filling the auditorium with fart sounds and the ruffling of toilet paper before she delivers the punchline—attest to the story's lasting popularity as gay subcultural knowledge. Most importantly for *Drag Race* viewers, RuPaul's appreciation of this story legitimizes it as part of the show's gay archive. When Pandora Boxx announces that she will perform as Channing in the first Snatch Game, RuPaul shouts with joy and imitates Channing: "Corn? I don't remember eating corn!" (14:19-22). The remark is not explained, making it a bizarre non-sequitur for the uninitiated. Its repetition by Bob is also unexplained, but this earlier reference establishes it as part of *Drag Race* lore. "Corn" thus becomes a treat for Channing's fans while providing pleasure to fans of *Drag Race* in its recollection of Pandora's performance and RuPaul's appreciation of Channing as a gay icon.

In addition, Bob exploits the slippage between performer and star image apparent in Chad's Bette Davis, calling into question the realness of the "real" Channing. Bob initially performs as Uzo Aduba, though her Snatch Game character is clearly a version of Aduba's character Suzanne on *Orange Is the New Black* (Netflix, 2013-present). Thus, her shift in Snatch Game character is also a shift from performer as character —Aduba as Suzanne—to performer as self—Channing's performance of her own star image. Bob suggests both characters via wigs, distinctive articles of clothing, and a brief catalog of gestures and tones. Bob's first outfit reproduces Suzanne's basic appearance: an orange jumpsuit, a thermal shirt, and bantu knots. Bob suggests and exaggerates Aduba's performance via speech patterns, jerky movements, wide eyes, and a self-directed forefinger (13:50-14:08). She just as simply executes Channing's look; a sweater and jacket, blonde wig, red lipstick, and the saucer glasses that Pandora lacked. Like

Pandora, Bob imitates Channing's unmistakable voice and speech patterns (19:27-43). The seeming simplicity of the switch—abetted, as was Chad's, by editing that has it occur off-screen and without delay—and the discrepancy between switching from performer-as-character to performer-as-self presents the 'real' Carol Channing as the creation of a performer. Bob executes an uncanny physical impersonation of Aduba's Suzanne—thereby adhering to the show's rituals of citation that treat race as a limiting factor for the transformation of black and brown bodies—while asserting herself as part of the network formed by Channing's queer circulation through her citations and claims of a strong affective connection with this Broadway icon.

Furthermore, Bob's performance highlights Channing's history as a biracial performer whose parodic construction of white, blonde femininity was central to her star image. Channing's racial background had long been subject to rumor when she revealed that her father was of partial African American ancestry in her 2002 memoir, in which she writes that her mother, "went on to say that this is why my eyes were bigger than hers (I wasn't aware of this) and why I danced with such elasticity and why I had so many of the qualities that made me me" (8). Her mother's words evoke a not-quite-whiteness that she sees as intrinsic to her daughter's mixed-race body. This description casts in explicitly racialized terms the common assertion that Channing was too unique in appearance and talent for a sustained career at top-level stardom. Tellingly, Twentieth Century-Fox gave the role of Lorelei Lee in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1953) to Marilyn Monroe, whose iconic blonde femininity seems to repudiate any racial anxieties produced by Channing's performance in the 1949 Broadway production. Seen in this light, Channing's position of being legible only as a variant of herself within the star systems of Hollywood and Broadway parallels Bob's position as a black queen navigating rituals that encourage white and light-skinned performers to appropriate blackness and brownness while

simultaneously encouraging dark-skinned performers to make themselves legible through racialized stereotypes. Bob's switch subverts these demands, assailing a racial policing of non-white pleasure in gay citation. If both Crowley's play and *Drag Race*'s rituals of citation ambiguously position queers of color in relationship to gay archives and the pleasures of belonging, Bob the Drag Queen provides a pointed clarification.

5.4 “He Been in Drag His Whole Life”: Kennedy Davenport as Little Richard

The anxieties over gender, race and the boundaries of gay archives thus made visible also animate Kennedy Davenport's season seven performance as rock 'n' roll legend Little Richard. As a queer black man performing as a queer black man, Kennedy does not traverse the binary enforced by the show's conception of drag as men impersonating women. In making the case for Little Richard's performance of fabulous sissiness as drag, Kennedy embodies queer of color resistances to gender regulation that do not align with hegemonic categories of masculinity and femininity. In awarding Kennedy a win, the show would seem to validate her efforts. RuPaul, however, undercuts this challenge to the show's rituals of inclusion by declaring the show's first-ever tie in a main challenge, awarding a second win to Ginger Minj's caricature of pop star Adele. Like Crowley's play, RuPaul's show betrays a resistance to queer of color knowledges that challenge its gay archive's rituals of inclusion.

Thus, the show portrays Kennedy's choice of Snatch Game character as a challenge to its rituals. Kennedy nervously laughs as she reveals her choice: “I was thinking about, um [pause] doing Little Richard.” The woodblock sound effect that the show frequently employs to heighten moments of tension—and sometimes ridicule—provides underscoring for her fellow queens' shocked looks. “You can't do that. . . . it's a man,” Ginger Minj replies. In an insert, a wide-eyed

Katya helpfully explains, "*It's a man!* 'Snatch' [pause] *vagina!*" Katya implicitly cites RuPaul as an authority in offering this binary and biologically essentialist conception of drag: the challenge's name refers to a slang term for the vagina, the show's companion web series is called *Untucked* in reference to the practice of taping back the penis and testes while in drag, and RuPaul's opening message in each episode was called 'You've Got She-Mail' until the show discontinued using the slur following an outcry that included season three contestant Carmen Carrera, who came out as trans after her participation in the show (Molloy and Reynolds). The rituals through which the show archives gay culture, then, construct a model of drag that equates genitalia with gender, even as trans and non-binary contestants take part.

The show's construction of Kennedy's performance makes clear that its gender politics and its racial policing of gay archives are co-constitutive. Ginger suggests that Kennedy perform as viral video star Sweet Brown. Katya begins listing Brown's catchphrases in African American English: "cold pop," "bronchitis," "ain't nobody got time for that!" (5:21-6:06). This encouragement to perform as a character who reinforces hierarchies of race, class and gender in the show's gay archive complicates Esther Newton's argument that drag queens "represent the stigma of the gay world" (3). For black men, deviance from sexuality and gender norms produces stigmas that demonstrate inextricable links between white supremacy and heteronormativity. Roderick A. Ferguson argues that throughout the twentieth century the liberal ideologies of the state frequently deployed African Americans' adherence to heteronormative standards of family, sexuality, and gender as a rubric for incorporation (21). As such, performances of gender and sexual transgression by African Americans risked being co-opted by the state as evidence of their un-fitness for inclusion. In the context of African American political activism in the mid-twentieth century, Marlon B. Ross argues that political change was "strongly

identified with the forward thrust of virile agency, not the impotence, weakness, flamboyance, and decadence projected onto the sissy" (635). For Ross, the racialized gender transgressions of Little Richard's sissy performances mark them as a distinct form of resistance to these multiple vectors of power: "Little Richard's snarling, popping, screeching erotic noise announces the arrival of the black sissy, not exactly as a credit to the race, but as a flaunting presence whose racialized homoeroticism cannot be completely shamed or purged" (640).

Thus, when Kennedy counters Ginger and Katya with "I'll still be in drag—he been in drag his whole life," the rejoinder operates on multiple levels. On a literal level, Kennedy evokes Little Richard's late 1940s and early 1950s drag persona Princess Lavonne by lovingly capturing and amplifying the traces of Lavonne in Little Richard's later star image. She wears a gold, shimmering jacket and shimmies her shoulders. Her immaculate eyebrows and contoured features are unmistakably the products of drag makeup, yet evocative of Little Richard. Makeup brushes and a hand mirror rest next to Little Richard's name card. She punctuates Little Richard's responses with high, drawn out falsetto notes and yells "shut up!" (13:38-14:01). In making these connections, however, Kennedy also figures the later performances for which Little Richard became internationally famous *as* drag. When Kennedy adjusts Little Richard's moustache in a compact mirror, the gesture conveys more than the seeming incongruity between the feminine and the masculine. Throughout the series, queens shave before performances, and queens whose makeup suggests or fails to hide five o'clock shadow receive harsh criticism. The removal of facial hair is thus part of the show's rituals, and Kennedy's grooming of her false moustache marries a drag aesthetic to this masculine object.

More pointedly, Kennedy's responses to the Snatch Game questions evoke Little Richard's inextricable experiences of heteronormativity and white supremacy. In response to a

prompt in which a gay Batman and Robin "convert the Batcave into a _____," guest judge Michael Urie provides an answer inflected with class and racial politics: "a bed and breakfast." "I would stay there," RuPaul says appreciatively (18:17-36). Kennedy's response is an outrageous rebuttal to their gentrified tastes: "Bath house with a dark room with glory holes" (20:03-14). Kennedy shatters the image of polite, white, upper-middle class domesticity, replacing the respectable couples who populate a Provincetown B&B with anonymous figures having illicit sex in dirty public spaces. Such spaces are central to the formation of Little Richard's talent and persona. In a 2010 interview with *GQ Britain*, Little Richard credits the flamboyant R&B performer Esquerita with teaching him his style of playing piano. He met Esquerita at a Macon bus station where he also, in the words of the interviewer, "lingered longer than most" in the men's room (Chalmers). This coy description of cruising contrasts with Little Richard's own joyous retellings of his sexual exploits. Race, gender, sex, and pedagogy mesh in this segregated men's room in a Georgia bus station, in which Little Richard absorbs varied, but interlinked, forms of black queer knowledge that shape his style, his desires, and the future of rock 'n' roll. Indeed, Marybeth Hamilton asserts that Little Richard's rock 'n' roll sissiness is not an anomaly, but rather makes apparent the genre's indebtedness to subcultures of black queer performance (162-3). Little Richard makes this legacy explicit: "Mick Jagger used to sit at the side of the stage watching my act. Every performance. Where do you think he got that walk?" (Chalmers). Jagger's swaggering walk, gained from mimicking Little Richard rather than from rough sex in a segregated men's room, carries these traces even as it disavows them.

Kennedy's performance thus illustrates drag's potential to keep such black queer knowledge from being obliterated by its white appropriation. As RuPaul and the guest judges convulse with laughter at Kennedy's delightfully vulgar rejoinder, Kennedy adds "a lot of singin'

goin' on up in there, baby," before finishing with another long falsetto note (20:14-22). This linking of Little Richard's voice with illicit sex further recalls the relationships between black queer spaces and rock 'n' roll aesthetics. In celebrating the outrageousness of Little Richard, Kennedy resists the gentrifying impulses of *RuPaul's Drag Race* that would trade bathroom cruising for a stay at a bed and breakfast. In presenting Little Richard's gender performance as drag, Kennedy shows how black queer gender transgression takes forms more complicated than binary gender crossing. And, in qualifying Kennedy's success by anointing another winner, the show demonstrates a continued resistance to the challenges posed by queer of color experiences to gay archival projects whose rituals of inclusion imagine a single axis of identification and belonging.

6. Conclusion

The tensions embedded in these Snatch Game performances over subcultural knowledge and mainstream audiences are mirrored in the show's relationship to its first network, LOGO, and its corporate "parent," Viacom. When it debuted in 2005, much of LOGO's original programming consisted of news and documentaries aimed at LGBTQ audiences, but the network ceased producing these programs in 2009 (Griffin 95); *RuPaul's Drag Race* debuted in February of that year. In 2012, LOGO adopted the slogan "Beyond Labels" and aimed to expand its demographic reach, but in 2015 incoming network head Chris McCarthy promised a return to the network's "core gay roots" (Hod). LOGO's unstable relationship to its audiences came to a head in February 2017 when Viacom announced that the ninth season of *RuPaul's Drag Race* would air on VH1, leaving LOGO with just two original programs: the critically-lambasted dating series *Finding Prince Charming* (2016) and the reality show *Fire Island* (2017)—neither of

which has returned for a second season as of June 2019. The news came as a part of an announcement that Viacom would focus on maintaining flagship brands such as BET, MTV, and Paramount (Lieberman). As part of this restructuring, lucrative productions from lesser members of the Viacom "family" migrated to more successful ones (Andreeva). LOGO was thus reduced to running reruns of its former flagship program, and any subsequent successes seemed destined to be poached by more lucrative channels.

For *RuPaul's Drag Race*, VH1—which is more successful than LOGO but *not* a Viacom flagship network—is a kind of limbo between its former network and assimilation into the heteronormative mainstream. Yet, the show's move to VH1 seemed to pay off for Viacom. According to the Nielsen Organization, the ninth season premiere on 24 March 2017 was seen live by an estimated 987,000 viewers—"a sizable bump from typical numbers at its former home" (Welch). These ratings were likely buoyed by the appearance of Lady Gaga as guest star. Gaga's much-ballyhooed presence so dominated the episode that in the place of the typical runway challenge, the new queens modeled outfits based on Gaga's iconic looks while Gaga provided commentary, usually in the form of name-dropping designers with whom she's collaborated. So bounteous was the gift of Gaga that the episode ended in a reprieve: no queen would be sent home until the end of the second episode ("Oh. My. Gaga."). This disruption of the media ritual's formalized actions, even more pronounced than in "RuPaul Roast," designated Gaga's presence as spectacular, worthy of arresting the progress of the show so that contestants and viewers alike could bask in the radiance of the diva who deigned to visit the spaces in which she is worshipped.

Like Margo Channing or Tinkerbell, Gaga lives for the applause. "Clap until your hands hurt, so the diva will hear your tribute separate from the applause of other fans," Wayne

Koestenbaum implores the potential opera queens reading his book (39). Koestenbaum's love for opera is even more niche in the age of *Drag Race* when music industry superstars—and, more recently, reality show participants—far outnumber even the movie stars who usurped the centrality of stage divas in the gay pantheon. But in a way, the ascendency of the music diva returns a sense of corporeal proximity to diva worship. Admittedly, the opera queen rising from his seat in the stalls to applaud Maria Callas had a much better chance of establishing aural distinction than a Beyoncé fan in the upper levels of a cavernous arena. There, the queen who performs as Beyoncé in her local drag show becomes one fan in a sea of adoration. But she can hope, and she can clap until her hands are raw and shriek until her voice is in tatters.

Gaga's flipping of this script by delivering herself unto a site of gay diva adoration is not a new phenomenon. The Broadway musical *Applause* (1970) features a scene in which its Broadway diva scurries with her gay hairdresser to a Greenwich Village gay bar one night after the curtain comes down. Midway through "But Alive," she enters the bar and the Village gays sing rapturously:

> She's here, my dear, can you believe it?
>
> She's here, oh God, I can't believe it!
>
> She's here, it's just too groovy to believe!
>
> Whoo! ("But Alive" 2:00-11)

She is not just any diva; she is Margo Channing, for *Applause* is a musicalization of *All About Eve*, starring Lauren Bacall in the role portrayed onscreen by Bette Davis. The craven attempts of its creators to appear current with its gaggles of groovy Greenwich Village gays, its ever-so-hip references to pot, sex, and booze, and its coy post-*Hair*/*Oh, Calcutta!* onstage (near-)nudity render *Applause* a delicious camp object. Despite winning a Tony Award for her performance,

the legends surrounding Bacall's limited musical abilities—stories circulate involving Ethel Merman loudly heckling Bacall in mid-performance—render her performance a kind of failed drag: a bad imitation of both Margo Channing and of a Broadway diva.

"But Alive" came full circle and returned to the gay subcultural spaces from which it drew its dubious energies when it became part of the repertoire of iconic New York City drag performer Lypsinka. In a video of one such performance uploaded to YouTube as "LYPSINKA AT 'BOYBAR' IN 1993," the audience is quietly appreciative as Lypsinka lipsyncs to Bacall croaking lyrics like "I'm half Tijuana, half Boston/ partly Jane Fonda and partly Jane Austen" (1:27-3:04). The song is interrupted by "phone calls" featuring lines and lyrics from other divas. Rescued from the banality of Lee Adams's lyrics, the audience begins to stir (3:04-4:12). Then comes *Mommie Dearest* (Paramount, 1981). "Barbara, *please*! Please, Barbara," Lypsinka mouths as whoops go up from the crowd (4:12-7). More "calls" follow in rapid succession featuring Bette Davis, Elizabeth Taylor, Faye Dunaway, Joan Crawford, Faye Dunaway as Joan Crawford, and so on, eliciting varying levels of response from the audience (4:17-6:23). Lypsinka then seems overwhelmed by the incessant ringing and launches into a frenzied monologue that cobbles together passages from multiple sources, ending with Elizabeth Taylor's overwrought "I loved it!" monologue from *BUtterfield 8* (MGM, 1960) for which Taylor won her first Oscar, a win that—legend has it—had more to do with sympathy generated from her recent tragedies and near-death experience than the quality of her performance (6:23-8:09). As her own performance climaxes, Lypsinka launches back into "But Alive," this time to applause so rapturous that Bacall's voice becomes hard to discern on the *YouTube* video. She seemingly gets stuck in a loop that alternates between Bacall's shout of "But alive!" and Dunaway's "Barbara, *please*!" (8:09-28). Having melded two dubious award-winning performances—Bacall

and Taylor—with one of the most infamous failed grasps for Oscar glory—Dunaway as Crawford—into a frenzied climax, Lypsinka ends the performance with a mock awards ceremony in which she clutches an imitation Oscar and lipsyncs to various actresses' acceptance speeches (8:28-9:46).

Lypsinka's rapid-fire citation leaves little room for anyone in the bar to worry that they don't get a reference. The structure of the performance allows the audience to take quiet pleasure in the bad lyrics and singing before launching into a repertoire of cultural references that unite those in the club as belonging to a citational fellowship that *RuPaul's Drag Race* later emulates. The repeated audio clips from *Mommie Dearest*, and the ecstatic reaction of the crowd, indicate its position as a key camp text around which an archive of feeling exists. When the performance returns to “But Alive,” it is as if Lypsinka restores the balance upset by *Applause*'s creators when they sent Margo Channing down to Greenwich Village. Greenwich Village is supposed to trek north to Times Square to see Margo Channing, not the other way around.

Gaga's trek to *Drag Race*'s soundstages at Sunset Las Palmas Studios adds urgency to concerns over the mainstreaming of queer cultural production. The perceived erosion of the relationships among camp, queer subjectivities, and gay identity give recent scholarship addressing them a quality that is by turns polemic and elegiac, such as Matthew Tinkcom's claim that gay culture has traded in camp's insights for an assimilationist politics centered on the “banal discourse of human property rights” (190). In making gayness legible within the terms and conditions of dominant culture, gay men have seemingly redirected their energies away from making visible capitalism's contradictions—the labor of camp—and toward sustaining the illusion of its coherence. As the distance closes between the idolizer and the idolized, how much room is left for queer mediation of dominant culture? It seems telling that most winning Snatch

Game performances impersonate stars from previous generations: Cher, Little Edie, Maggie Smith, Little Richard, Carol Channing, Mae West, Björk, Liza Minnelli, and (in a direct nod to Snatch Game's camp origins) Paul Lynde.

Perhaps this trend indicates that the techniques of cultural mediation that inform the drag repertoire's history of celebrity impersonation best channel star images far removed from those re-embodying them. As reality series participants increasingly populate the gay archive, perhaps a reality series is not the place to look for subcultural mediations of celebrity. Indeed, it seems that RuPaul's drag daughters have taken her teachings to heart and used the show as a platform from which to launch their own celebrity. In the winter of 2017-8 alone, season six runner-up Courtney Act, appearing under her birth name Shane Jenek, won the twenty-first season of the UK edition of *Celebrity Big Brother*, season seven winner Violet Chachki closed a show for designer Jeremy Scott's Moschino label in Milan, and Sasha Velour, lauded for her appearance as Marlene Dietrich in season nine's Snatch Game, created the Google doodle honoring Dietrich's 116th birthday on 27 December 2017. Given the newfound ubiquity and material success of RuPaul's daughters, it is perhaps unsurprising that the rhetoric of many articles in the gay press, some of them published via LOGO's *NewNowNext* blog, often casts previous iterations of drag as outdated in a more accepting culture. The opening summary of a 2017 article in *NewNowNext*'s Travel section proclaims: “Drag pageants were once the state of the art, but now the old-school system must modernize to stay relevant. One contest is taking the challenge head-on” (Miksche). Minimizing whatever meanings these performance traditions carry for participants, the article celebrates the entrepreneurial spirit of individual performers who seek to “modernize” the pageant system in order to achieve a relevance measured by profitability. Its placement the travel section frames the pageants as potential tourist destinations,

alongside the beaches of Provincetown and other places associated with the circulation of gay men's capital. In another 2017 article, Brian Firkus, who competed in season seven (2015) and later won the third season of *All Stars* (2018) as his drag character Trixie Mattel, extols the virtues of drag's mainstream embrace: “As a business person, gay people are 10 percent of the population. If you're trying to make money off that percentage of the human race, how will you survive? With *Drag Race* and drag becoming more for everyone, it's been great.” (Firkus). As if confirming Goldmark’s ideological critique of *Drag Race*, Firkus reframes survival in individual and capitalist terms, identifying as a business person and framing gay people as a demographic—one insufficient to support a burgeoning drag industry.

However, the show's performers are not the only members of RuPaul's affective family performing subcultural mediations of popular culture, and the performances constructed through Snatch Game are not singular texts that isolate the meanings of the show's archival project. While much of the conversation on *Drag Race* centers on the verisimilitude of its drag representations, I have argued that *RuPaul's Drag Race* uses reality programming's embrace of artifice to construct a gay archive that contains queer oppositional modes of relating to culture. In this way, the very embeddedness in contemporary media industries that makes the show a compromised platform of subcultural performance enables the show, and Mama Ru, to serve as conduits between queer pasts and queer presents. The push-and-pull between RuPaul's assimilationist rhetoric and her gleeful queer pedagogy casts her as a parental figure with a complicated and sometimes contradictory relationship to the histories she embodies and relays. If the show, while mired in these contradictions, invites viewers into the affective network fabricated through queer citation, Mama Ru's most potent lesson to her queer children might be how to see—and *feel*—culture in ways outside of prescripted norms. The show itself might not

be the place to look for how these knowledges inform new queer subcultural performances, but it does give insight into how contemporary queers deploy them to make their own affective networks around shared feelings about popular culture.

CHAPTER 2: FLUNG OUT OF TIME: *CAROL*, QUEER TEMPORALITY, AND HISTORICAL VOYEURISM

> *That somewhat superior position of pointing out that things are so much better now doesn't really interest me creatively. It's more that the hidden corridors and secret modes that minorities and subcultures had to create to survive are really interesting, and we've lost those. — Todd Haynes* ("The Interview" 20)

1. Introduction

In Guillermo del Toro's fairy tale romance cum cold war monster movie *The Shape of Water* (Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2017), Giles (Richard Jenkins) is a commercial artist in his fifties who has been fired due to his homosexuality, his alcoholism, or perhaps both. He spends his days in an apartment across the hall from the film's protagonist Eliza (Sally Hawkins), drawing kitschy Norman Rockwell-esque drawings for advertising campaigns, petting his many cats, and tuning out the white supremacist violence on the evening news by turning the dial over to reruns of Betty Grable musicals. Occasionally, he visits a local chain restaurant to indulge his desires for unnervingly fluorescent key-lime pies and the young stud manning the counter. He is denied these pleasures when Pie Guy (Morgan Kelly) rebuffs his touch and orders him to leave this "family restaurant." Unlike Hollywood movies of the era in which it is set, such as William Wyler's *The Children's Hour* (United Artists, 1961) or Otto Preminger's *Advise and Consent* (Columbia, 1962), *The Shape of Water* doesn't sacrifice Giles under the logic that a dead queer is more sympathetic than a living, desiring one, but it similarly relies on depressing, pathologizing clichés about queer lives in the long 1950s. In order to construct the present as a time of relative freedom, mainstream narratives of the bad old days of queerness past crush the people who occupied them beneath the weight of abjection.

If *The Shape of Water* can conceive of Giles only as an artifact from an abject past, then Todd Haynes's *Carol* (The Weinstein Company, 2015) circumvents this limiting framework by uncoupling its period romance from the coercive pull of progressive historical narratives. Set in the winter and spring of 1952-3, *Carol* depicts a romance between aspiring photographer Therese Belivet (Rooney Mara) and wealthy, older Carol Aird (Cate Blanchett), who is in the middle of a divorce from her husband Harge (Kyle Chandler). Knowledge of the lesbian affair becomes evidence against Carol in the custody battle over her daughter Rindy (Sadie and Kennedy Heim), subjects Carol to the surveillance of legal and medical regimes, and results in the lovers' separation. Yet, while *Carol* allows its title character to grieve the loss of her daughter, it treats the custody battle over Rindy in a curiously understated manner. While *Carol* incorporates its characters' encounters with heteronormative regimes into its narrative and aesthetic schemes, it does not present them in traditional Hollywood terms as problems to be overcome—or at least valiantly resisted—by the agency of its protagonists, or as forces that delimit the affective lives of its characters. Like the drag queens of my previous chapter, Therese, Carol, and Carol's closest friend and former lover Abby Gerhard (Sarah Paulson) produce and share queer pleasures and sensations despite a heteronormative culture that polices their circulation. By insisting on moments, fragments, traces, and trances as bearers of affect and meaning, *Carol* resists the progressive narratives underpinning so much of LGBTQ historiography. Instead, *Carol* offers alternatives to allegiance to the dubious and deferred promise of future freedom, insisting on affective vibrancy in the face of an oppressive present.

For viewers in the present, *Carol* certainly provides pleasure in its depiction of lesbian love in an era associated with repression and conformity. *Carol*'s incorporation of retrograde forms, both in its use of melodrama as a narrative and aesthetic vehicle and its material evocation

of the 1950s, invites viewers to consider the temporal locations of its characters in relationship to their own. As in much of the writing on Haynes's earlier film *Far from Heaven* (Focus Features, 2002), one might read *Carol*'s period setting as an ironic comment on the time and place in which it was produced. By transporting imagery of the 1950s into a contemporary film, *Carol* might invite the viewer to see unexpected socio-political continuities between then and now. Simultaneously, one could read the film as depicting lesbian love in the 1950s from a vantage point when such stories can, at last, be told. This recovery project model frames the film as not only uncovering these stories, but triumphantly re-inscribing them in 1950s popular media forms to create the lesbian melodrama denied to audiences of the time. While these might seem like somewhat contradictory ends, both are compatible with a progressive historical narrative that posits the present as a moment of relative freedom from which such reclamations and meditations are finally possible.

However, *Carol*'s historiographic strategies complicate the identificatory impulses of present-day LGBTQ viewers to claim these figures as forerunners of themselves. Instead, *Carol* positions its viewers as something akin to historical voyeurs, seeking to consume historical queer affect. Given that this voyeuristic lens is constructed largely through *Carol*'s formal elements, this chapter utilizes close readings as its central methodology. By analyzing the temporal dimensions of cinematic voyeurism—typically conceived of as a spatial/psychic phenomenon—I argue that *Carol* defamiliarizes the historiographic practices of mainstream LGBTQ politics by interrogating the complex desires that underpin the search for cross-generational queer affective connections. In casting a voyeuristic gaze upon experiences contemporary LGBTQ viewers might claim as a rightful part of their history, *Carol* encourages us to look for alternative lineages and arrangements that bring past and present into contact, thus drawing our attention to

forms of inter-generational exchange that remain precarious and unruly even as the liberalization of same-sex marriage and adoption laws in the US folds many LGBTQ parents and their offspring into state-recognized kinship structures. *Carol* invites us to consider how affect and sensation move across time in ways that established methods of LGBTQ historiography can rarely comprehend.

2. "You Belong to Me": Surveillance, Affect, and Point-of-View in *Carol*

This interplay of voyeurism, temporality, and sensation is apparent in *Carol*'s opening sequence, in which sound and image create tension between two archaic subgenres: *film noir* and romantic melodrama. The first, claustrophobic image is of a subway grate, recognizable due to the presence on the soundtrack of screeching train brakes, an announcer's voice, and the clamor of passengers, all of which Carter Burwell's musical score soon drowns out (0:25-1:03). The camera pulls slowly back, then tilts upward to view passengers emerging onto the sidewalk (1:03-41). A lone figure in a hat and trench coat (Trent Rowland) draws the camera away from the throng as he steps into the street. The encroaching frame closes the distance and almost achieves a medium-long shot when he pauses to buy a newspaper, but he resumes his stride and the camera lags behind, then rises for a crane shot as he turns a corner and enters a building (1:41-2:29). This continuous shot initially suggests covert surveillance, but the camera tricks us in the last ten seconds, rising from approximately eye-level to a position high above the street through a maneuver impossible for a covert pursuer. This moment, however, reinforces the scene's *noir* feel by coding him as a wielder of the cinematic gaze, not its object. The next two shots confirm this formulation when he bounds up the stairs of the Ritz Tower Hotel lobby, heads straight for the bar, then scans the room (2:29-45). His corresponding point-of-view shot

pans slowly to the right with his surveilling gaze. Carol and Therese eventually come into the frame, the latter's back to her voyeurs—both the man viewing her and the spectator sutured into his gaze. The shot does not linger but discreetly ends before they are out of the frame (2:45-52). When we return to the shot of the presumed *noir* detective, the words "Based on the Novel The Price of Salt by Patricia Highsmith" appear onscreen, offering the possibility that he might occupy the same universe as Highsmith's amoral con-men and crypto-queer killers Tom Ripley and Bruno Anthony (2:52-7).

Burwell's score, however, is contrapuntal to this *noir* iconography and anchors the film within the milieu of romantic melodrama. Not that aural melodrama is antithetical to *noir*; the romantic bombast of David Raksin's theme from *Laura* (Fox, 1944) and the overdetermined gloom of Miklós Rósza's *Double Indemnity* score (Paramount, 1944) provide pleasures in their excesses as they animate their films' narrative and formal obsessions with *femmes fatale*. Burwell's delicate score, however, suggests melancholic longing rather than crime film intrigue and misogynist violence, and it renders this *noir* figure incongruous to its mood. Burwell's score is abetted by the sequence's color palette. The film fades from black to the image of the subway grate, its grey-black bars gloomily standing out against a pitch-black background. Onto the grate, the credits appear in desaturated hues, cycling through various pale colors. The film's title appears in light blue, much larger than the other credits, and filling most of the screen. Never fully luminous, the name CAROL is translucent and the subway grate is visible through it. Despite the title's ephemeral appearance, it fades slowly over seven seconds (1:03-10). It looms large and lingers long, yet is never fully present to us. As the camera tilts up and reveals a nighttime *noir* street scene, the washed-out palette is punctuated by flashes of vibrancy: a bright yellow taxi cutting through the mist (1:49-54), the rich purple of a passing woman's scarf (2:02-

10), the gaudy reds, greens, and yellows of the magazines on the newsstand (2:07-12), the piercing blues of a passing car, so much richer than the blue of the title (2:05-17), and a blue/yellow lens flare as the camera pulls upward and captures the large light fixtures on the side of the hotel (2:23-9). These lustrous patches of color work with Burwell's score to suggest a richness of feeling beneath these *noir* trappings.

The man's *noir* credibility quickly evaporates and the stakes of the film's investment in melodrama become apparent as he strides over and bellows above the sound of polite chatter and the gentle clink of glassware, "Therese, is that you?" (2:57-3:22). In the ensuing conversation, it becomes clear that he is not a detective performing clandestine surveillance but a much blander type: an interchangeable young heterosexual white man in post-war New York. He appears all the more pathetic as Carol imperiously drags on her cigarette and looks away while Therese obliges him in conversation (3:22-4:10). In rising to leave, Carol places a hand on Therese's shoulder and says, "You two have a wonderful night." Therese turns her head toward Carol's hand. Carol's hand lingers for a moment, then quickly moves to invite a handshake from the man, whose name Carol has learned—and will surely forget—is Jack (4:10-8). Carol's touch lingers just long enough to indicate the depth of feeling between the women but is interrupted by the rhythms of social necessity, just as the lingering title credit bearing her name inevitably gave way to the listing of the film's personnel. However pathetic he may seem, this man's presence has the power to disrupt the women's intimacy. Later in the film, another young man (Cory Michael Smith), whose generic, somewhat wimpy masculinity seems to render him benign, is revealed to be a detective hired by Harge to procure evidence of Carol and Therese's affair. In emphasizing surveillance in its juxtaposition of *noir* and melodrama, *Carol* brings attention to the disciplining gazes that reinforce the norms against which melodrama finds its tensions. If melodrama's

protagonists find that their desires are rendered impossible by social forces, then Haynes's use of the surveillance tropes of *noir* in this melodrama finds strange affinities between these seemingly disparate—and disparately gendered—subgenres.

Haynes and screenwriter Phyllis Nagy use this opening encounter as the narrative fulcrum around which their plot pivots. The ensuing film flashes back several months and takes place in a mostly linear pattern until this scene recurs 104 minutes into the film; this second time, the film follows the conversation between the women until Jack's interruption brings us full circle. In interviews, Haynes has acknowledged *Carol*'s debt to David Lean's *Brief Encounter* (Cineguild, 1945), in which a similarly obnoxious acquaintance interrupts the heterosexual lovers' climactic meeting, instigating a series of flashbacks that eventually bring us back to the time and place where we began ("The Object of Desire"). Though this referential flashback structure seems to place *Carol* within a recognizable template, the film's narrative frustrates linear plot progression through a series of aborted arcs; male surveillance interrupts romantic encounters, Carol and Therese's cross-country road trip to evade these gazes is discovered, arrested, and reversed halfway across the continent, and Carol's coerced return to her role as wife and mother abbreviates the romance plot, upsetting potential audience expectations that Carol will move into some more legibly lesbian existence. The ubiquity and power of disciplining gazes means that the film's lesbian characters end up, in multiple senses, where they began.

While *Carol*'s narrative is not devoid of arcs and trajectories, it draws its energies from dream-like and fragmented sounds and images, producing what Patricia White describes as a "temporality of reverie" ("Sketchy Lesbians" 12). As Therese, Jack, and their friends travel to a party in Greenwich Village following her interrupted reunion with Carol, the framing and soundtrack place the spectator outside of the cab, separated from Therese visually and sonically

by a rain-streaked and fogged window pane that distorts the sounds from within (4:37-53). The sounds from outside the cab are clearer, but are soon drowned out by the musical score, which consists of forlorn piano notes until it asserts aural dominance with the appearance of a woman who looks like Carol, but turns out to be a doppelganger—though the softness and darkness of the image makes it difficult to discern her face (4:37-5:30). As Therese cranes her neck to gaze upon faux-Carol, the sounds of a siren, clanging bell, and a rushing vehicle overwhelm the soundtrack. Just as the noise reaches its peak intensity, Therese wrenches away her gaze—as if trying to shake away the memory of Carol (5:20-30). There is no reflection of a vehicle on the window, however, and the image cuts to a source for the noise: a toy train in Frankenberg's Department Store, where Therese met Carol while working on the sales floor (5:30-9). Carol appears in a soft focus medium close-up, looking anxious and toying with her scarf. Out-of-focus beams of light dominate the foreground, moving slightly to give the image a shimmering aura. Out-of-focus customers move through the image, interruptions that persist in the reverse shot of Therese gazing at Carol with pursed lips and wide eyes, a look made ridiculous by the Santa hat on her head (5:39-48). Underscoring the difference between this Therese and her more mature incarnation, the next shot returns to the rain-streaked window with Therese looking pensively ahead (5:48-59). The clattering speeding sound of the train—or the fire truck, or both—continues over the memory and into this shot, in the last three seconds of which the sound mix shifts to emphasize the clanging bell (5:56-9). This complex sound bridge that weaves Therese and the viewer across time morphs into the bell of an alarm clock (5:59-6:03). Therese's memories have, in fact, moved a few hours back to the morning before she first encountered Carol. At first, Therese remembers the sensation of first seeing Carol through the din and chaos of a department store in the waning days of the Christmas shopping season. The shimmering *mise-en-scene* and

spatially imprecise but vibrant sound design of the first lapse into memory emphasize moments of sensation. The drab image of Therese waking in her apartment, dimly lit by early morning light, suggests a shift to a more literal and linear approach.

Yet this focus on sensation does not entirely yield to the imperatives of narrative, even in moments that provide obvious moments of plot progression. Later, when Carol picks up Therese for a Sunday trip to her home in suburban New Jersey, *Carol* depicts the journey through a dreamlike flow of sounds and images. As the sequence begins, Carol and Therese drive off, leaving Therese's boyfriend, Richard Semco (Jake Lacy), standing on the curb. They are alone together for the first time. The sound design heavily emphasizes the musical score over dialogue and sound effects (31:47-33:12). The framing foregrounds textures: Carol's fur coat moving in soft focus (32:12-8), her lipstick-red lips (32:21-7), the switch from gray daylight to the blackness of the Lincoln Tunnel that makes its row of green lights suddenly seem vibrant through the windshield's glare, streaks, and bits of grit and snow (32:27-32), Carol's leather-sheathed fingers hold the steering wheel, then move past the bulbous and shiny knob of the gear shift and the gleaming horizontal lines of the dashboard radio to press a square black button (32:32-7). Helen Foster and the Rovers' version of Pee Wee King, Chilton Price, and Redd Stewart's “You Belong to Me” (1952) begins to haunt the soundtrack, entwining its muffled sounds with Burwell's in reverie (32:37-43).

Despite this evocation of what is ostensibly Therese's memory, *Carol* refuses to offer unfettered access to Therese's point-of-view, visual or psychic. The first shot of Carol's face in the sequence is an extreme close-up of her eyes and nose, shot from her right, a position that should roughly correspond to Therese's location; but when Carol turns to look at Therese, her eyes look at a point to the right of the frame, indicating that the viewer has not been granted

access to Therese's gaze, but has been positioned as a backseat voyeur (32:00-4). In addition, the structure of *Carol*'s flashbacks challenge viewer expectations of psychic access. Like Laura Jesson, *Brief Encounter*'s protagonist, Therese in *Carol*'s screenplay departs from her climactic meeting with her lover and recounts their affair in flashback in almost real time. Nagy intersperses the retelling of Carol and Therese's affair with brief scenes of Therese leaving the Ritz Tower Hotel and attending the Greenwich Village party as though she is remembering the affair throughout the evening, often using memories of sensations to draw her in and out of her reverie and across time. In the screenplay, "You Belong to Me" first plays in the car when Carol switches on the radio, then continues as it cuts ahead in time to the party, where Therese briefly watches Richard, from whom she is now separated, dancing to the song with a different woman. Then, she notices an attractive woman gazing at her from across the room. The woman disappears while Therese is looking away, and the screenplay returns to the temporality of Therese's memories (38). In the film, however, Haynes uses sound and image to muddy the distinction between past and present rather than provide such concrete shifts between them. As the song plays, muffled by Burwell's score, over an out-of-focus shot that blurs the green side lights of the tunnel into an indistinct field of color, an image of Therese in the cab on her way to the party—months later—fades in and out as rapidly as the flash of car headlights. The shot fades slowly into similarly blurry shot of Carol seductively staring at Therese. Unlike in previous shots, Carol seems to be staring directly at us, but the haziness of the image—not to mention the fact that Carol would be unlikely to take her eyes from the road for so long while driving—prevents the film from folding the viewer into Therese's literal point-of-view. Just as soon as Carol is about to come into focus, the shot begins to fade into another from outside the car looking in at Carol and Therese, both of whom are staring forward. As in the film's initial

flashback, wherein a set of diegetic and non-diegetic visual and aural elements pull Therese and the viewer across time, the sounds of "You Belong to Me" become part of an overlapping set of sense memories that includes the softness of Carol's fur coat, the warm red of her lipstick, and the fragmented, overlapping nature of the sounds and images themselves as constructed by Haynes and his collaborators, including cinematographer Edward Lachman, editor Affonso Gonçalves, and sound designer Leslie Shatz. The sequence ends with a forward-facing shot through the windshield as the car emerges into the light on the New Jersey side of the tunnel, a light that overwhelms the image with a fade, not to black, but to white (32:43-33:12). If these are Therese's memories, they are less an account of what happened than a fragmentary and discontinuous montage based around how things *felt*—or perhaps how they *might have felt*—that never fully aligns with a singular, capturable experience.

3. Making Strange Lesbians: History and Memory in *Carol*

Carol thus animates a long-standing debate in queer communities and scholarship over the roles of history and memory in political and artistic mobilizations of queer pasts. The ubiquity of surveilling gazes anchors *Carol* in the particular historical moment it depicts, as David K. Johnson asserts that the "Lavender Scare," a campaign of surveillance and persecution targeting gay and lesbian government employees in the late 1940s and 1950s, "was used to justify a vast expansion of the national security state" (10). The surveilling gazes that structure the film's visuals both in shots representing a specific character's point-of-view and, crucially, those seeming to emanate from omniscient vantage points, thus ground the viewer in a historical way of capturing *Carol*'s 1950s lesbianism, as if filtered through the regimes of state-sponsored surveillance that themselves structured contemporary medical and carceral accounts of sexual

and gender deviance. Lesbian responses to such discourses, of course, were not uniform. Lillian Faderman argues that the image of the pathological lesbian in need of therapeutic correction, more often than not, created "cynicism toward the pronouncements of authorities because it was apparent that authorities knew nothing or lied" (137). Thus, the historicizing work of *Carol*'s surveilling gazes does not so much place viewers within the milieu of lesbian life in the 1950s, as emphasize the shortcomings of our attempts to construct a historical point-of-view that captures an individual or collective experience of a given time and place.

The Lincoln Tunnel sequence, however, evokes the temporally destabilizing possibilities of affect and memory in its privileging of sensation over narrative/temporal logics. This focus on sensation and its potential to blur distinctions between past and present extends to the physical medium of the film itself. Lachman shot *Carol* on Kodak Super 16(mm) film stock, the visual characteristics of which—grain, contrast, and especially color—draw more upon street photography and home videos of the 1950s than the 35mm Technicolor stock used by Russell Metty on the era's Douglas Sirk melodramas, which both Haynes and critics have repeatedly used to contextualize Haynes's work, particularly *Far from Heaven*. Scott Higgins notes that while *Far from Heaven*'s formal elements in many ways evoke Douglas Sirk melodramas such as *All That Heaven Allows* (Universal, 1955), aspects such as shot length, camera movement, editing patterns, and the "washes of colour to tint an entire frame blue" owe more to contemporary cinema than to Sirk ("Orange and Blue" 110). Indeed, the prominent lens flare at the conclusion of *Carol*'s opening shot is an artifact that classical Hollywood cinematographic techniques would have likely eliminated. If, as Richard Dyer argues, "pastiche imitates its idea of what it imitates" (55), then *Carol*'s pastiche of early 1950s visual media does not so much attempt to accurately recreate its material objects of reference, but rather their circulation in

cultural memory, mediated by other cultural objects, a kind of overlay of Saul Leiter, Vivian Maier, *LIFE*, and Douglas Sirk onto contemporary cinema aesthetics. Dyer claims that the simultaneous "sympathetic imagining and registering of difference" at work in *Far from Heaven*'s pastiche "suggests that we can enter into the feelings of our forebears through immersion in their art but also reminds us that this is a highly limited and circumscribed activity" (178). Thus, while *Carol*'s film stock and other visual elements evoke its historical setting, the film's refusal to establish concrete relationships between past and present frustrates viewer expectations of access to the past—and those that occupy it—through its artistic forms.

Furthermore, *Carol*'s use of color to blur temporal distinctions is informed by developments in digital postproduction which have brought renewed attention to color as a cinematic technology, placing the film squarely within contemporary industrial contexts. Higgins argues that the "knowing artifice" of digital color alteration in *The Aviator* (Miramax, 2004), portions of which set in the early 1930s emulate contemporaneous bi-pack color systems, "alerts the viewer that color is an active choice and not, as is the norm in contemporary cinema, a formal default" (*Harnessing the Technicolor Rainbow* 220). Kyle Stevens highlights the affective potential of these color strategies, noting that the desaturated palette in *A Single Man* (The Weinstein Company, 2009) reflects the protagonist's bleak worldview, but that flashes of color signal particularly moving experiences that break through his melancholy (115). Kirsten Moana Thompson associates the resulting juxtaposition of saturated and desaturated elements within the frame with the "particular chemical susceptibility to fading" of Technicolor's replacement, Eastman Color (73). Thompson links the film's evocation of the material decay of cinematic images to *A Single Man*'s themes of mourning and loss, arguing, however, that the capacity to fade also carries with it the potential for restoration, just as the potential to bloom in vibrant

saturation carries with it the potential to fade (79-80). The resulting temporal-chromatic relationship intertwines potential for fading and flourishing, loss and generation. Indeed, these eruptions of color amidst otherwise desaturated images in both *A Single Man* and *Carol* signal the potential for emotional and aesthetic vibrancy in the midst of loss, of experiences and sensations that exceed the coercive organizing logics of progressive historical models, and of classical Hollywood narrative.

Thus, in *Carol*, the visual signification of the lesbian 1950s via an evocation of the culture of surveillance that policed queer sexuality provides historical specificity at the cost of affective vibrancy and erotic possibility. Through its aesthetic and narrative evocation of memory, and the disjointed narratives and unstable subjects memory fashions, *Carol* recovers, or perhaps produces, a sense of what it meant to *feel* lesbian desire in the 1950s. This disjunction between history and memory emerges in B. Ruby Rich's account of the release of Gus Van Sant's *Milk* (Focus Features, 2008). Concurrent with *Milk*'s release, the blood-stained and bullet-pierced suit that Harvey Milk wore as he and San Francisco mayor George Moscone were gunned down by Dan White served as the centerpiece of a temporary museum in the Castro dedicated to his memory, in effect creating what Rich calls a "modern reliquary" (236). The reverence with which Milk was elevated to the status of martyr extended to the film, inspiring Rich's ambivalent response:

> Shot by Van Sant's frequent cameraman, Harris Savides, *Milk* felt to me as if viewed at a palpable remove, through a veil or scrim; while I could imagine that being appropriate for an elegy, the right distance for history, what I experienced that night felt wrong. I yearned for closeness and intimacy, I wanted imperfection and improvisation—like the era itself. (249)

Rich's feelings about the film changed in the period between its 28 October 2008 premiere in San Francisco and its 26 November release, during which California voters passed Proposition 8, the state's notorious ban on same-sex marriage. In its aftermath, Rich found solace in *Milk* because it had "brought Harvey Milk back to life at a time when he was needed like never before, for the example of his inspirational leadership and political tactics" (253). Only when tied to the political necessities of the present—the film's diegetic future—did *Milk* significantly move Rich. If *Milk* establishes an overriding affective register of hope for the future, it does so at the expense of the affective experiences of its subject and his contemporaries.

Instead, *Milk*'s offerings fall under Thomas R. Dunn's concept of *queer monumentality*, which "may be defined as an ongoing and evolving assortment of efforts by GLBTQ people, institutions, and communities to give their shared pasts a weightiness, timelessness, and grandeur in order to activate collective power and effect social change" (21). Dunn, however, acknowledges that more ephemeral experiences and practices remain elusive to queer monumentality and that some "may wither and die under such constraints" (182). Indeed, as Rich's response to *Milk* demonstrates, even as conventionally monumental a figure as Harvey Milk can wither in the sanctifying glow of his canonization. The affective and collective elisions that troubled Rich in her response to *Milk* echo Christopher Castiglia and Christopher Reed's critique of queer deployments of history in which "the past is valued mainly because it requires redemption by the future" (6). They see a contemporary return to queer memory as "not a traumatized refusal to live in the present but an active refusal to live in that present *as it is normatively constructed*, a determination to use the past to propose alternatives to current social and sexual systems" (35). Their description echoes Dana Luciano's argument that Haynes' earlier film *Velvet Goldmine* (Miramax, 1998) looks to the past "not in order to generate nostalgia for

the period but to provoke remembrance of what it meant to desire something different" (124-5). *Carol* thus lends itself to what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick termed *reparative reading*, a way around the hermeneutics of suspicion that structured queer theory's impetus toward exposure of hidden violence and negative affect that creates a "future-oriented vigilance of paranoia" (*Touching Feeling* 130). This paranoid stance is limiting, Elizabeth Freeman argues, because "we can't know in advance, but only retrospectively if even then, what is queer and what is not, we gather and combine eclectically" (*Time Binds* xiii). For Castiglia and Reed, this eclecticism is key to memory's reparative potential in that "its combination of past, present, and future generates the plenitude made possible by accretion" (13). Indeed, this accretion allows *Carol* to weave together temporality, affect, and aesthetics such that positive, even pleasurable, affects are co-constitutive of its deployment of memory, alongside, but not eclipsing, loss and abjection. Following Sedgwick, Michael Snediker alleges that, because of its paranoid stance, queer theory "has had far more to say about negative affects than positive ones" (4). Given queer theory's investment in challenging normativity, its focus on negative affect seems a productive response to the progressive assumptions undergirding homonormative LGBTQ politics. Embracing negative affect thus emerges as a necessary corrective to the limiting emotional paradigms of Pride that emphasize personal happiness over the remembering of queer trauma, and the transformative potential that might emerge from collective remembering. For Snediker, however, this correction means that queer studies unnecessarily narrowed the scope of its affective investigations to trauma, loss, and shame (15).

Such a suspicion of positive affect is a hallmark of classical film theory as well, from Frankfurt School critiques of the Culture Industry to psychoanalytic models of spectatorship. Allied to passivity, complacency, and complicity, pleasure seems to mask the material

circumstances and political realities of its audiences and industrial contexts. Laura Mulvey's stated goal in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" is, of course, "a total negation of the ease and plenitude of the narrative fiction film" (16). In Mulvey's influential formation of the male gaze, the desire to look (scopophilia) is split by the instinct to receive sexual stimulation by viewing another person as an object, and the ego's narcissistic desire to identify with the onscreen image. Since "man is reluctant to gaze at his exhibitionist like," these two scopophilic aims must be satiated by different objects. The male protagonist, allied with agency and narrative progress, offers identificatory pleasure to the ego, while the erotic desire to look is displaced onto images of spectacle, typically involving women's bodies (20). Scholars have long critiqued the essentialism of Mulvey's argument; for the purposes of this chapter, I want to examine what it means to desire one's *like* when the criteria for identification is affective, as when queer viewers search for those who feel the way we do, or at least feel similarly. Mulvey's formulation of the desire for identification as a narcissistic impulse leaves little room for discussions of how marginalized audiences engage with narrative film, a question which has found more purchase in reception theory and fan studies than in theories of spectatorship.

What I consider in this chapter, then, is how *Carol* redeploys tropes of voyeurism and surveillance in order to defamiliarize LGBTQ historiographic practices, drawing attention to their elisions while simultaneously making visible structures of intergenerational transfer that require new ways of sensing and perceiving. In making this argument, I am indebted to Nick Davis's deployment of Deleuze and Guattari's *minor art* to describe how a constellation of films in the late 1990s and early 21st century, including films by Haynes, make strange the assumptions that otherwise serve to organize queer cinema by familiar categories of desire and identity:

> Minor artists have a threefold task: *deterritorializing* sense and syntax from their usual frameworks; *politicizing* these renegotiated structures; and endowing them with a *collective* value, less on behalf of existing 'minorities' than for new coalitions they catalyze among the oppressed and invisible, along previously unrecognizable lines. (5)

In casting those searching for their historical/affective *like* as voyeurs, *Carol* performs these tasks, defamiliarizing LGBTQ historicist ways of perceiving lesbianism by demonstrating the affective impasses they create, insisting on the temporal mobility of affect and sensation, and making visible structures of queer lineage that such mobility enables. If, for Fredric Jameson, forms such as the historical novel and the costume film have decreased in cultural prominence and ubiquity "because, in the postmodern age, we no longer tell ourselves our history in that fashion, but also because we no longer experience it that way" (283-4), then *Carol*'s sumptuous period *mise-en-scène* and cinematography do not anchor the film in the stodgy periodization he disavows, but rather work in tandem with the film's historiographic strategies to illustrate ways of experiencing recent pasts subsumed beneath the periodization of LGBTQ historical narratives.

4. "Flung Out of Space": Temporalities of Desire in Post-New Queer Cinema

Carol's aesthetic resistance to mainstream LGBTQ historiographic politics is influenced by Haynes's cinematic coming-of-age within the New Queer Cinema movement of the early 1990s and subsequent developments in queer media. Rich, who coined the term New Queer Cinema and became the movement's most prominent chronicler, lists four elements as bringing it about: "the arrival of AIDS, Reagan, camcorders, and cheap rent" (xvi). The urgency, melancholy, and confrontational politics that emerged in response to political violence and the

overwhelming losses due to HIV/AIDS manifested in an aesthetically adventurous series of independent films and videos by queer filmmakers, including Haynes, Marlon Riggs, Rose Troche, Cheryl Dunye, and Gregg Araki. Writing in 2001, David Pendleton makes a distinction between *gay* or *gay and lesbian* cinema and *queer* cinema in that the former "assume[s] that we all know what a gay man or a lesbian is, and then go about to depict their lives in a more or less realistic manner" (49), while in the latter "homoerotic desire . . . arises out of a situation, often the encounter between two individuals, rather than being presented as an innate part of an individual" (52). Looking back at New Queer Cinema in 2013, Davis cautions that, despite this onscreen unruliness, New Queer Cinema's directors were almost universally gay and lesbian auteurs and that "New Queer Cinema" was more a "journalistic meme" than a "scholarly rubric" (5). While Pendleton seems to occupy Sedgwick's paranoid critical position in placing *gay and lesbian* as temporally dragging behind *queer*, the article's framing of queer historiographic practices that recognize homoerotic desires as socially, historically, and circumstantially situated provides a strong argument for what was new about New Queer Cinema: a sense of contingency, curiosity, and formal/aesthetic daring that allowed the movement to formulate new ways of desiring. In contrast, argues F. Hollis Griffin, the following generation of filmmakers largely settled for an "aesthetics of banality. . . . in which an anodyne politics is made manifest in a routine system of telling stories" (53). Rather than staging political/aesthetic interventions, they aligned with assimilationist politics and used classical Hollywood narrative and continuity editing styles to tell "normative fantasies" of gays and lesbians overcoming obstacles and finding love through individual agency (54). These productions, which became increasingly available for home consumption throughout the early 21st century via LGBT-specific DVD labels like Wolfe Video, television networks like LOGO, and later on streaming services like Netflix, had the

simultaneous effect of displacing cinemas and other sites of collective viewing as a primary site of queer spectatorship—though Rebecca Beirne notes that independent and mainstream distributors alike still adhere to practices of region coding and geoblocking that hinder distribution outside of the United States (136-8). In reviewing the many retrospective pieces on New Queer Cinema, one can easily get the impression that it's been domesticated, gentrified, and now spends quiet evenings at home.

Still, the eulogizing of New Queer Cinema often obscures how its aesthetic and historiographic projects live on in new forms, including productions by New Queer Cinema artists like Haynes. Though his output is not especially large compared to most major Hollywood filmmakers, Haynes's four feature films and one miniseries in the fifteen years from 2002-2017 mark him as the most prolific New Queer Cinema director still working in mainstream film production. In describing the indebtedness of Haynes's films to New Queer Cinema's historiographic practices and identity politics, Davis places them in contrast to Deleuze's *recollection-image*—epitomized by Joseph L. Mankiewicz's *A Letter to Three Wives* (Fox, 1949) and *All About Eve* (Fox, 1950)—in which "films ultimately soften the blow of irrational disorder, recuperating stabilized answers in expository terms, typically through extended flashback" (209). Haynes, in contrast, offers the "disenchanted inquiries" of *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story* (bootleg distribution, 1987), *Safe* (Sony Pictures Classics, 1995), and *Velvet Goldmine*, which "refuse those pat explanations that a recollection-image would supply" (209). Thus, in Haynes' films, historical narrative obfuscates more than it clarifies, and relationships between past and present are hardly linear. In *Carol*, spatial relationships are also bound up in this rejection of the *recollection-image* though a subversion of continuity editing systems in order to dislocate its characters in space and time, particularly the convention that "movies frame narrative space first,

and then frame the characters" (Griffin 65). *Carol* often creates tension through the potential permeability of the cinematic frame, potentially exposing its protagonists' intimacy to surveillance, both from the gazes that police and pathologize women's intimacy in the time and place it depicts, and from those of its viewers, who might similarly presume the right to determine the meanings and possibilities of their intimacy from a supposedly more knowledgeable and tolerant present.

Throughout *Carol*, the framing of encounters between Carol, Therese, and Abby often constrict, isolate, or obscure individual characters. While I agree with Allain Daigle's assertion that these framings "align with Carol and Therese's feelings of isolation rather than re-inscribing a repression of same-sex desire" (201), I argue that the play between onscreen and offscreen space additionally presents the possibility for lesbian intimacy in settings imagined as forbiddingly heterosexual in popular culture retellings of the 1950s. Such play of framing and space is evident in an early scene in which Carol invites Therese to lunch—their first date. The scene begins with a shot of Therese staring out through a frosty, dirty window. The buildings across the street are dully reflected in the glass but the image gives little sense of her location (19:30-7). The framing similarly obscures the interior of the restaurant. The first, tightly-framed interior shot looks down at a booth in the foreground, to which a waiter leads Therese and Carol. Their bodies only appear in sections—their midsections visible over the top of the booth and then their faces shrouded by diffuse light on the left side of the screen—until they take their place in their seats and into the key light. Therese sits with her back to the camera and Carol faces it (19:45-53). The framing of this first shot of a shot-reverse shot pattern that continues uninterrupted throughout the scene creates the sense that the booth is a dangerously permeable space for queer interaction. The framing is initially wide, with Carol and Therese occupying the

corners of the screen in the first two shots of the conversation (19:53-20:02). These framings render the majority of the screen as open, potentially violable space, yet, without an establishing shot, continues to deny the spectator information about what lies beyond their edges (20:02-20:38). As the conversation continues, the framing of Carol becomes more intimate, shifting over the course of two shots from her initial framing to medium shot that shows her from the waist up (20:38-53), then to a medium close-up (21:21-26). Shots facing Therese similarly grow tighter (20:53-21:21). When Therese finally appears in medium close-up, she says "Your perfume; [pause] it's nice" (21:26-30). Just as *Carol* seems to grant us access to their intimacy via conventional cinematic technique, it makes scent, a sense almost always denied to viewers of audio/visual media, and to covert voyeurs, a primary site of that intimacy. For the rest of the scene, as they discuss marriage and Carol cautiously invites Therese to visit her at her home—"There's some pretty country around where I live"—this intimate framing persists (21:30-23:26). The scene culminates in enigmatic dialogue from Carol that serves as a meta-commentary on the temporal unrootedness of Haynes's aesthetic: "What a strange girl you are. . . . flung out of space" (23:07-16).

While the previous scene gradually eliminates the permeable space from the frame to enable an intimate encounter between Carol and Therese, the framing of a later scene between Carol and Abby functions conversely, establishing the women's intimacy in tightly-framed shots before exposing it to surveilling regimes. The scene, which takes place after Harge has sought an injunction to keep Rindy from Carol, begins with a close-up of Carol on the right side of the frame as she recounts finding Rindy's hairbrush underneath her own pillow, a physical trace of her absent daughter. A smoking cigarette in Abby's hand occupies the left side of the frame. A yellowish light comes from the left, gently illuminating Carol's face and making the space on the

right side of the frame darkly indistinct (52:17-47). The reverse shot of Abby maintains this spatial orientation, though shot from a slightly higher angle (52:47-53). This shot-reverse-shot pattern continues as more and more of the space becomes visible: Carol is next seen in a medium shot that encompasses both her and Abby, and Abby's next shot is from a higher angle that reveals the table between them and the wall lamp that provides the scene's soft yellow illumination (52:53-53:12). The same medium shot of Carol follows as Abby, viewed from behind, describes the object of her current affections as a "serious Rita Hayworth redhead." Carol smiles as her lips hover over her martini and says, "You think you got what it takes to handle a redhead?" (53:12-23). It is a moment of intense camaraderie, all the more intimate for its isolation from offscreen space. Then, a tardy establishing shot finally appears, isolating the booth on the right side of the frame, with Abby barely visible to the left of the booth's partition and Carol totally obscured by it. An older man sits at another table on the left of the frame; between them, there is open space dominated by the muddy browns of the bar interior, red checkered curtains, and the drab, cold gray coming through the windows. The surveilling view of this shot, in which Carol's suitcase is visible with her red coat draped over it, foreshadows Carol's pursuit by Harge's private detective (53:23-46). The withholding of the establishing shot enables the women to share this moment of intimacy without allowing conditions beyond the frame to undermine it. When Carol and Abby share intimacy in this space, it is a joyous, momentary eruption of queer pleasure that is perhaps foreshortened, but certainly not made impossible, by the space around them. Like the reference to a perfume the spectator cannot smell, the sudden switch from this intimate framing to an establishing shot that provides a partial and incomplete view of its subjects underscores that the film's surveilling gaze reveals very little about its objects. The shot seems remote and affectively sterile compared to the intimate

framings that precede it. When filtered through the surveilling gaze that dominates *Carol*'s historical *mise-en-scène*, intimacy is obliterated.

This play between what the frame permits us to see and what it conceals is perhaps most apparent in the when Therese and Carol first have sex in a motel room in Waterloo, Iowa. The aesthetics of the scene risk adding yet another entry in a distressingly familiar catalog of film and media depictions of erotics between women: glamorous hetero women stars simulating sex amidst a throbbing score and gauzy visuals, their bodies displayed for maximum spectatorial objectification. The framing and blocking, however, are coy about revealing their bodies, and alternatively offer bodily sensation and ordinariness in the place of erotic spectacle. As they listen to a New Year's Eve broadcast on the radio in their nightclothes, Therese and Carol face a wall mirror in their hotel room—the former sitting, the latter standing behind her, both viewing one another's reflection. Carol places a hand on Therese's shoulder, which Therese grasps. With her free hand, Carol unties her flannel nightgown, though the reflection of her torso is blocked by that of Therese's head (1:15:07-28). Their bodies remain covered by their nightgowns until they are on the bed and Carol undoes Therese's. The camera captures this from a high angle, Therese's head and torso framed somewhere between a medium shot and a medium close-up. “I never looked like that,” Carol says as she touches her (1:15:59-16:14). Crucially, the moment seems to align us with Carol's gaze—not spatially, but in a sense that we are viewing Therese as Carol views her. A succeeding shot, in which the women fully undress, places us at a remove, a kitschy motel lamp on the far left of the frame the only object in the foreground, emphasizing the empty space between the camera and its objects. Their breasts are partially visible, but the blocking places Carol, sitting upright and away from us, between us and Therese, as if shielding her from our gaze (1:16:38-45). Subsequent shots emphasize sensation, showing Carol kissing along

Therese's bare skin, Therese's face reacting with pleasure, and overhead views that mostly show Carol's back. Their bodies remain close, the light diffuse, the framings tight (1:16:45-17:47). Then, her face half-visible behind Therese's head, Carol repeats a variation of an earlier line of dialogue: “My angel. Flung out of space” (1:17:47-57). The score erupts, the kissing intensifies, but the framing remains tight on their heads, moving away only as the image becomes blurry and fades away. As the score dies down and the image goes black, we hear their breathing (1:17:57-18:26).

That the scene ends with just the sounds of their sex foreshadows the end of their flight from Harge. The next morning, it is revealed that these sounds have been captured by a private detective on a recording device in the next room and sent back to New York, where Harge and his lawyers will use them as evidence against Carol in their divorce proceedings. The illicit surveillance of their sex and the non-consensual circulation of the record it produces is a shattering instance of the period's homophobia and misogyny, but the questions of sexuality, consent, and the circulation of LGBTQ experience thus broached haunt well-meaning recovery projects as well. If such projects assume, echoing Castiglia and Reed's critique, that LGBTQ history exists to be redeemed in the present—and that such evidence exists for *us* (however defined) to claim as part of *our* history—then this scene, visually and aurally, foregrounds questions of access and presumptions of ownership. It is not just the cinematic male gaze that asserts the right to gaze upon their bodies, and determine the meanings of the pleasures Carol and Therese find in one another, but also a mode of historicizing that presents this moment as in need of triumphant restoration to the historical narrative. By capturing this scene in tight close-ups and a single, partially-obscured long shot, *Carol* denies viewers unfettered access to view their experiences. When we are permitted to view Therese's body, our view is allied with Carol's,

and the clearest views we get of Therese show her face reacting to pleasure. *Carol*, thus, insists on the affective vibrancy of queer intimacy in the face of an oppressive historical milieu, yet frustrates spectatorial access to that intimacy such that it tantalizes us with missing details unrecoverable as history.

5. Patterns of Behavior: *Carol* and Motherhood

Though the specter of surveillance haunts Carol in public spaces, the most overt instances of surveillance occur in private and semi-private spaces in which her conduct as a wife and mother comes under scrutiny. The first interior shot of the Aird home begins on a doorframe, then pans slowly right to reveal Carol sitting at a dressing table with her back to the camera. Rindy sits in her lap, counting the strokes as Carol draws a brush through her hair. Carol's face is visible in the left and right panes of the three-way vanity mirror but absent in the larger center mirror. Her face is rendered more enigmatic and indistinct by Lachman's grainy cinematography and the shot distance, which suggests clinical observation rather than domestic intimacy. Unlike the surveilling shot of Carol at the beginning of the film, the movement of this shot is arrested when she comes into view, capturing her and Rindy as its objects (16:10-25). Harge's appearance in the mirror interrupts this intimacy between mother and daughter, and disappointment ripples across Carol's face as she turns toward the camera to watch her offscreen daughter embrace him. Carol says simply, "You're early." (16:25-45). Their ensuing conversation takes place downstairs as Rindy colors the pages of a coloring book, sitting next to Harge. Carol sits around the corner of the table and both of the angles that comprise the shot-reverse shot setup of the conversation emphasize the separation between Carol and her daughter. In the shot that faces Carol, she is visibly apart from the other two, the distance between them occupied by the vertical bars of a

radiator that repeatedly divide the image. In the two shots showing Harge's face, Carol is entirely offscreen. He tries to get Carol to agree to go to a party at his parents' home. Carol cooly tells him that she has plans. Rindy offers a clarification: “Mommy wants to give Aunt Abby's [Christmas] present.” Harge looks coldly at Carol, then smiles back at Rindy, stroking her shoulder and back. “You've been seeing a lot of Aunt Abby lately, haven't you Sunshine?” As Rindy verifies this, Harge's eyes dart back to Carol: “With mommy.” This shot ends with a sharp offscreen thud (16:50-17:37).

Suddenly, the next shot reveals the presence of a fourth member of the household. Florence (Ann Reskin), the Aird family housekeeper, has set down a glass dish heavily on a kitchen counter. The camera views her in a distant profile as she throws back her head and a faint smile curls on her lips (17:37-41). When we get Carol's reaction shot, she is staring away from Harge, presumably toward the kitchen. Visibly agitated, she looks down, darts her eyes back at Harge for a moment, then looks down again. Blinking and wincing slightly, she looks back up as she says, “I'll see if I can rearrange with Abby.” The final shot of the sequence is of Carol. Harge and Rindy occupy the extreme left of the frame. On the right, separated from them again by the repeated slash of the radiator bars, Carol smiles painfully, perhaps sarcastically (17:37-51). Though Florence only appears for 0:04 in a scene that lasts 1:56, she haunts the edges of the frame. In this scene, *Carol* again withholds an establishing shot, and Florence's existence is unacknowledged until her aural intrusion. She has no audible lines of dialogue in the entire film; yet, her gaze seems to supervise Carol's contact with Rindy. In a later scene, Carol picks up her sleeping daughter in close-up, kisses her, then moves toward the hall and past Florence, who turns just as the camera brings her into focus. Carol seems to sense Florence's surveilling gaze penetrating her fur coat. She turns back, her eyes animated with something like shame or fear.

She says pointedly, “Good night, Florence,” drops her eyes toward the floor, and slowly turns to take her daughter to bed (30:14-33).

Florence's regulation of heteronormativity within the home is, at least in part, a matter of job security, as her employment relies on the maintenance of the Aird marriage and household. Indeed, the nature of Carol's surveillance is both true to the period and fraught with class dynamics. Lauren Jae Gutterman argues that the lesbian wife—imagined as white, middle class, and conventionally feminine—was an object of fascination and fear in the 1950s and early 1960s because she could operate stealthily to pervert the family from within (475-6). While efforts at policing male sexuality focused on expelling them from public spheres such as federal employment—not to mention men's rooms—efforts to identify lesbians more often focused on re-establishing the “natural” heterosexual order by reforming them into heterosexual wives and mothers (476-7). Ultimately, Carol's deviation from the expectations of her role as a white, wealthy wife and mother becomes sufficient evidence to separate her from her child. After Carol refuses to join his family for the Christmas holiday, Harge seeks full custody of Rindy in their divorce proceedings—and denies Carol access to Rindy via an injunction. Though her lawyer says the “won’t mince words,” he does exactly that: “morality clause,” “Abby Gerhard,” “similar associations,” “evidence of a pattern of behavior” (45:16-48:19). These layers of obfuscation and innuendo reflect the fact that such cases rarely progressed to the courts; Daniel Winunwe Rivers notes that in the mid-twentieth century, “lesbian and gay parents simply understood that if their same-sex sexuality was discovered, there would be little possibility of retaining their custodial or parental rights” (25). When Carol concedes full custody of Rindy to Harge and makes a plea for visitation rights, she leverages what privilege her class position still affords her:

> There was a time when I would have done almost anything—I would have locked myself away to keep Rindy with me. What use am I to her—to us—if I'm living against my own grain? So that's the deal. I can't—I won't negotiate any more. You take it or leave it. But if you leave it, we go to court. And if we go to court, it'll get ugly. And we're not ugly people, Harge. (1:41:55-42:34)

Yet, even the threat of a scandal fails to secure her visitation rights. As she tells Therese during their climactic meeting, she has only seen Rindy "once or twice" (1:46:13-18). It would therefore be quite easy to plug Carol into a historical narrative that imbues her experiences with meaning based on its future redemption. The sacrifices and bravery of parents like Carol—those that refused to live against their grain—mobilizes the gay and lesbian politics that eventually wins increased rights and recognition for gay and lesbian parents.

Yet, Carol says emphatically, "I'm no martyr," perhaps as much to the viewer as to the characters present in the diegetic space of the lawyer's office (1:41:37-40). Indeed, martyrdom seems to be one of the few options available to lesbian mothers in popular media. Suzanna Danuta Walters argues that portrayals of gay and lesbian parents in popular media of the early 21st century, including *Modern Family* (ABC, 2009-present) and *The Kids Are All Right* (Focus Features, 2010), have served as a "sanitizing counterpart to gay sexual liberationist images" offering a "media-friendly version of sexual minority inclusion is predicated on an erasure of feminist and queer critiques of gender normativity and the nuclear family" (919). This discourse also extends to LGBTQ children of cis-hetero parents; for Jason Jacobs, the popular culture fixation on heterosexual parents coming to terms with their child's queerness, exemplified by the television series *Glee* (Fox, 2009-2015), "assumes that unpersecuted gayness will fall easily into the structures and rhythms of straight life rather than charting out new ways of living—other

forms of care, friendship, community, and political alliance" (320). Constitutive of the concept that queerness is inherently assimilable into the rhythms of straight life is a repudiation of the idea that children or young adults might learn something unique from other queers, particularly queer mentors. To make the claim that "we" are "just like you," it seems that LGBTQ portrayals must counter a fear of queer lineages by reassuring viewers that individual queer members can be re-absorbed into existing formations of family and intergenerational transfer. Thus, for Rivers, the separation of children from queer adults is "motivated in part by the fear that children, if exposed to lesbian and gay role models, might come to live similar lives as adults, and by the conviction that this possibility represented the destruction of the normative heterosexual nuclear family and the society built upon it" (3). Even articulations of queer family and community seem trapped within these anti-generational logics. Elizabeth Freeman argues that, "when we imagine practitioners of non-reproductive sex extending their affinities over space, we tend to use the language of community or even nation, which does not distinguish the individual relationships within it"; the indistinct "queer families" thus invoked "collapse into amorphous and generic 'community,' while queer 'descent groups' seem for the most part linguistically inconceivable" ("Queer Belongings" 296-7).

The reluctance of sexual minorities to articulate relationships in generational terms is understandable given the persistence of right-wing libel campaigns associating homosexuality with pedophilia. Caught between a polarized political discourse that presents queer parents and caretakers as bastions of normality or as sexual predators—in reality, these ends are perfectly compatible with one another, given the prevalence of abuse in 'normal' cis-hetero-headed nuclear families—*Carol* does something unexpected: it, at times, seems to have fun with the tropes of lesbian predation and intergenerational erotics. White argues that *Carol*, rather than making an

appeal to contemporary LGBTQ respectability politics, “inscribes lesbianism within a textual and reception history, informed by such dated and delicious tropes as the predatory lesbian and female homosexuality as a perversion of mother/daughter love” (“Sketchy Lesbians” 10-1). Indeed, a fifteen-second shot in which Carol reclines on the living room floor in her stocking feet, wrapping Christmas toys in front of the tree as Therese, framed as if her dutiful daughter, plays “Easy Living” on the piano, seems to revel in this perverse mother/daughter dynamic (35:22-37).

Perhaps no scene flirts with such seductively retrograde tropes more than the one in which Therese and Carol meet. In addition to Therese's relative youth, her job at Frankenberg's subjects her to forms of surveillance and regulation that often function as a kind of class-inflected infantilization. In the break room before work, Therese looks at an employee handbook that condescendingly asks in all-caps along its top margin “ARE YOU FRANKENBERG MATERIAL?” before her bellowing supervisor orders her to the sales floor (7:51-8:10). The next shot looks up at a rows of dolls on store shelves attached to a wall covered in nursery wallpaper. The camera tilts down to reveal Therese near the floor, adjusting inventory on free-standing shelves. The shelves frame her among dolls and boxes in festive Christmas colors. The Santa hat that management has insisted employees wear on the sales floor sits flat on the top shelf, just above her head. Then, she's seen turning on a toy train set and resting her head on the edge of the display that contains it, watching the toy locomotive move through a miniature city play set (8:10-43). Later, just before her first sighting of Carol, her supervisor silently chides her for not wearing her Santa hat, which she apologetically dons. The shot of her putting on the hat comes from just to the left of the supervisor, whose hair obscures the right quarter of the screen and crowds Therese's screen space (9:19-27).

Carol appears eight seconds later in a shot that corresponds with Therese's point-of-view, beginning as a medium close-up of a woman looking sourly at some merchandise in her hands. As the camera pans left with her, the focal length changes dramatically and comes to rest on Carol. With one hand, she plays with the vibrant red scarf tied loosely around her neck. With the other, she holds a pair of gloves. In a reverse shot, Therese stares, now wearing the ridiculous Santa hat and framed by dolls—Mommy's Baby, $8.00—whose disarmingly wide eyes provide an uncanny double to Therese's own. Customers cross back and forth in the distance between them. There is no extra-diegetic noise on the soundtrack, just the murmur and clatter of shoppers and the muffled din of a Christmas song. Carol gazes at the train set, her eyes coming to rest on a red lever on the side of table. Instead of pulling it, Carol begins looking around for a salesperson to assist her. Her eyes look directly at us, presumably locking gazes with Therese. Therese holds the gaze in a five-second medium that shot slowly, almost imperceptibly, zooms in. The reverse shot on Carol holds for less than a second before whipping left to meet the gaze of a customer who calls out "Miss?" Or more precisely, it pans to meet the gaze of the young girl perched in the woman's arms. In the screenplay, the girl is described as "the screaming TODDLER" (8) but in the film, she simply stares at Therese. The girl's stare is somewhat disconcerting in its blankness, recalling the dolls' eyes, and perhaps Therese's own. After asking Therese the location of the restroom, the mother and the girl quickly vacate the frame. It scans Carol's former position but finds three children excitedly exploring the train set. Therese cranes her neck, looking to reestablish contact. Her shoulders, hands, and eyes fall in disappointment (9:27-10:16).

Of course, Carol returns. There is a shot of gloves slapping onto Therese's counter, accompanied by an insistent plop on the soundtrack. Carol is shopping for a doll for her daughter. "What was your favorite doll when you were four?" Carol asks as she fiddles with her

cigarettes. Therese stammers: “Me? Well, I never [pause] not many, to be honest. [pause] I'm sorry, you're not allowed to smoke on the sales floor.” An irritated Carol apologizes: “Shopping makes me nervous.” “That's all right,” Therese replies, “working here makes me nervous.” Carol and Therese share a nervousness, more obviously around the rituals of lesbian cruising, but also around the gendered activity of selecting toys for a young girl in the bastion of bland consumerism and middle class normativity that is the department store. A more relaxed Carol produces a small photo of Rindy from her purse. Therese touches the photo, and Rindy's face. “Oh, she looks like you, around the eyes.” Rindy also looks like Therese, the former's simple childish haircut framing her face in a style not unlike the latter's straight hair and bangs. Carol looks at Therese and then back that photo: “What did you want when you were this age?” She thinks for a second and says with a smile, “A train set!. . . . We just got a new model in last week. . . . you might have seen it on the way in over by the elevators.” Therese is both trying to steer a customer toward a product and also indicating the spot from which Carol first established contact. Therese also redirects Carol from the dolls, for which neither of them seems to have an affinity, toward a less gender-appropriate toy for a young girl in the 1950s. The exchange of the photo of Rindy and their subsequent conspiracy to provide her with a gender-inappropriate toy seems like a nightmare scenario for the writers of pseudo-scientific paperbacks stoking the fears of lesbian familial corruption described by Gutterman, implicating Rindy in the intergenerational transmission of lesbian knowledges. The smiles exchanged by Carol and Therese seem to indicate their pleasure in the clandestine nature of the exchange. When Therese stares too long and there is awkward silence, Carol delivers a line infused with erotic and class tension: “Shall I pay now?” (10:37-53). The moment becomes a pedagogical one: the older, experienced woman teaches the younger, inexperienced one the gendered and classed parameters under which she

can register lesbian desire. After the satisfied customer leaves, Therese realizes that she has left her gloves behind (13:06-10). Therese dutifully mails the gloves back from her home address. Harge certainly thinks he recognizes a ploy—a pattern of behavior, perhaps—when Carol explains to him how she met Therese: “Well, that's bold” (38:43-39:05).

6. Perpetual Sunrises: *Carol* and Lesbian Belonging

But Therese is no waif being led astray by a predatory older woman. If fact, more often than not, *Carol* constructs Therese as a wielder of the gaze, and her looks often structure our own view of Carol. Indeed, Therese at times seems to be a pathological voyeur, watching Carol and studying her, a pattern underscored by her nascent career as a photographer—an invention of Nagy; in Highsmith's novel, she is a scenic designer. One of the most striking instances of Therese's voyeurism seems to unite both of these professions—an immaculately designed and composed shot in which Therese watches Carol and Rindy putting ornaments on the Christmas tree. Rindy and Carol occupy the far background, framed by no less than four individual doorways as Therese views them from across the spacious Aird home (35:07-22). This overkill of framing and distance so overplays the voyeuristic dimensions of this long shot that it seems almost parodic, a reading supported by the fact that it immediately cuts to the aforementioned shot of Therese at the piano, Rindy having been banished to bed and Therese seemingly taking her place as the daughter of the house—a fantasy shattered by Harge's arrival. The ensuing fight takes place in the kitchen, from which Harge catches Therese watching through the relatively narrow, restrictive doorframe. The blocking of this scene is almost an exact reversal of the one in which Therese viewed Rindy and Carol. In the first, the narrow kitchen door allowed Therese a covert vantage point from which to view them; in this later shot, Therese now occupies the open

space of the living room, vulnerable herself to surveillance. As in their first encounter at Frankenberg's, Carol teaches Therese how and when to gaze—she shuts the door (38:24-39:15). As Carol and Harge take their fight out onto their driveway, Therese watches more covertly through curtained windows (40:38-48).

Indeed, from the cab ride away from the Ritz Tower Hotel to the film's final scene as she searches for Carol in the Oak Room at the Plaza Hotel, Therese seems always to be looking. During that cab ride, it is her gazing out the window, eventually seeing the Carol doppelganger, that sparks the shift into memory that occupies the bulk of *Carol*'s running time. Through the darkness and the rain, Therese can only make out certain details: a grey jacket and skirt covered by a fur coat, a scarf on her head under which wavy blonde hair is worn down and cropped above the shoulders. She walks with poise and a sense of ease (5:14-25). While Therese's gaze might be read as an internalization of the culture of surveillance developing around post-war lesbianism, this historicizing view again displaces, not to mention pathologizes, Therese's impulse towards looking. Such a view obscures the fact that Therese learns from Carol, and other women, by observation, entwining pedagogy and erotics. Carol is not the only woman whom Therese observes; later, as she purchases a record of Billie Holliday's version of "Easy Living" for Carol—the song she played on the piano—she catches sight of two women behind her in the record store. The more feminine of the pair gives her the glare. Her butcher companion, noticing that she no longer has her attention, likewise turns to gaze at Therese. Georgia Gibbs' version of Robert Hill and Lester Allen's "Kiss of Fire" (1952) plays in the record store, its lyrics asserting the masochistic joys of giving one's self over to passion: "If I'm a slave, then it's a slave I want to be. Don't pity me." The shot of the women holds for six long seconds (49:45-51). In the reverse shot, Therese looks ambivalent, potentially disavowing these visibly gender variant women. But

she does give them a look up and down, rather than immediately averting her gaze (49:51-3). Like Carol (and her doppelgangers), the women in the record shop represent certain, recognizable types of lesbians that occupy a lesbian historical imaginary. Poor, clueless Richard provides an unintentionally apt punchline; as a sound bridge spanning into the next scene, he asks “Find what you wanted?” (49:53-4).

Richard might as well be giving a direct address to *Carol*'s viewers. If the novel's Therese famously serves as an author surrogate for Patricia Highsmith, Therese in the film serves as something like a queer viewer surrogate. Therese's constant looking evokes queer relationships to popular media, especially primarily visual media such as film and television. As lesbian filmmaker Jan Oxenberg says in Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman's film adaptation of Vito Russo's *The Celluloid Closet* (Sony Pictures Classics, 1995), “We are pathetically starved for images of ourselves.” (4:24-7). Later in the documentary, discussing the deliciously Sapphic Joan Crawford-starring western *Johnny Guitar* (Republic, 1954), Susie Bright adds, “It's amazing how if you're a gay audience and you're accustomed to crumbs, how you will watch an entire movie just to see somebody wear an outfit that you think means that they are homosexual” (31:52-2:05). White argues that female star images “facilitate the construction of lesbian identity through identification with others who share one's preferences” (*UnInvited* 36). This looking for and decoding—or encoding—of evidence of queerness in popular culture, of others like you in both the flesh and the social imaginary, seems to be one of the “hidden corridors and secret modes” whose loss Haynes mourns in this chapter's epigraph. Indeed, the very incorporation of these modes of viewing into a documentary featuring major stars and given a theatrical release by the art house subsidiary of a major media conglomerate would seem to indicate that their time was already nearing its end in the mid-1990s, a time when, White notes, “a number of female

celebrities came out, in effect making their lesbian *audiences* visible" (*UnInivted* 31). In response to this proliferation, LGBT media criticism moved from subtext and toward an analysis of representation (Goltz 15).

Yet, *Carol* suggests a persistent fascination with queer looking—the existence of a searching gaze not satiated by the glut of generic LGBT content critiqued by Griffin, or the politics of visibility. While the film's primary narrative concern is the relationship of Therese and Carol, *Carol*'s searching desire is satiated not by the resolution of a romantic plot, or even of Therese's search for others like herself. A singular focus on the relationship between Carol and Therese obscures their places within a larger network of lesbian women taking care of one another—a network that the surveilling gaze of the film targets as much as lesbian sexual relationships. Even after Carol has broken off contact with Therese and returned to her role as wife and mother, contact between Carol and Abby is fraught with the danger of surveillance. In their final scene together, which takes place upstairs in Carol's house, tight framings and surveilling/obscuring points-of-view predominate, reminiscent of their earlier scene in the bar. As Abby reaches across to touch Carol, light from the windows suddenly illuminate their faces (1:36:26-38:33). Nagy's screenplay:

> CAROL turns and ABBY stands, startled. A look between them: is someone here? Is this trouble? And then the headlights disappear.
>
> CAROL (CONT'D): Who the hell is turning around in my drive?
>
> ABBY: I should go.
>
> CAROL: You don't have to—
>
> ABBY: —I do.

> ABBY squeezes CAROL'S hand—courage. And they start down the stairs together. (103)

Abby's very existence in proximity to Carol and other women, regardless of whether or not their relationship involves sex, becomes evidence of guilt of a crime that remains unarticulated, except through innuendo: patterns of behavior. These patterns, as this chapter argues, threaten to replicate, to generate structures of knowledge transfer and nurturing across time. Thus, *Carol*'s focus on the ephemeral makes visible structures of belonging that don't fit neatly into LGBT family or generational narratives.

This emphasis on ephemeral forms of belonging becomes apparent through a crucial re-orientation of the film's gazes that occurs after Carol and Therese return east after their defeat in Waterloo, Iowa, and begin retracing their journey back to New York. They make love again at Chicago's Drake Hotel, but when Therese wakes up the next morning, Carol has vanished. Abby sits in a chair across the room, cooly smoking a cigarette, illuminated by a single lamp; her sweater, scarf, and skirt match the greens, yellows, whites, and creams of the room's décor. After confirming Carol's departure, Abby implores Therese to prepare for the journey back to New York, opening the curtains to admit "cold, bright sunlight" (Nagy 93). At a roadside diner outside Chicago, Abby hands Therese an envelope containing a farewell message from Carol (1:24:31-27:20). Carol reads the letter in voiceover as Abby and Therese retrace the remaining steps in the journey Therese undertook with Carol, from Chicago back to New York, ending in Therese's apartment.

> Dearest,
>
> There are no accidents and he would have found us one way or another. Everything comes full circle. Be grateful it was sooner rather than later. You'll

> think it harsh of me to say so, but no explanation I offer will satisfy you. Please don't be angry when I tell you that you seek resolutions and explanations because you're young. But you will understand this one day. And when it happens, I want you to imagine me there to greet you, our lives stretched out ahead of us, a perpetual sunrise. But until then, there must be no contact between us. I have much to do, and you, my darling, even more. Please believe that I would do anything to see you happy. So, I do the only thing I can: I release you. (1:27:21-30:37)

Throughout this sequence, their only one together, Abby keeps a watchful eye on Therese—in the diner, in hotel rooms, and in the car, as Abby readjusts the rearview mirror to watch her lying across the backseat. Here, *Carol* restructures the looking that has structured gazes throughout the film into something nurturing. Abby, however, remains aloof to Therese. Her fabulous imperiousness in the hotel room does not give way to stereotypically maternal warmth as their journey continues. Despite the minimal contact between them, Abby still keeps tabs on Therese during the latter's separation from Carol, informing Carol of Therese's rising career at the *New York Times*. The network that unites Therese, Carol, Abby, and potentially others, is not based in concrete relationships or in the case of Abby and Therese, even mutual affection. *Carol*, while gleefully playing with the aforementioned mother/daughter stereotypes, also points to networks of intergenerational lesbian nurturance less easily articulated through familial language. As queer modes of kinship and belonging continue to be assimilated into normative structures of family and generations, *Carol* re-articulates how we *look* for affective connections, nurturance, and structures of intergenerational transfer—envisioned not as a family tree, but as a "perpetual sunrise."

7. Conclusion

The time and place depicted in *Carol* are on the cusp of the emergence of recognizable and public assertions of LGBTQ identity and collectivity. As the fictional Carol and Therese had their affair in the winter and spring of 1952-3, enrollment in the Los Angeles-based Mattachine Society grew steadily in number; by May 1953 this change in membership led to a schism between the organization's leftists, including its founder, Harry Hay, and its largely assimilationist new members (Bronski 179-81). The post-war discourses on normality that precipitated this schism also structured content in *The Ladder* (1956-1972), the San Francisco-based Daughters of Bilitis's influential lesbian publication, such that Elyse Vigiletti argues that it "occasionally reads like a lesbian how-to manual" (61). Yet, Vigiletti argues, *The Ladder* made "this discourse accessible nationwide in a moment of particularly high suspicion of nonconformity, networking a national lesbian community that linked isolated, closeted individuals with small, vibrant communities such as those in Greenwich Village and San Francisco" (47). Likewise, Stephanie Foote argues that both readers of and characters in lesbian pulp fiction of the 1950s "use the reading of novels as a way to understand that they are not alone" (178). Michael Bronski argues that physique magazines served similar functions for men who desired men, quoting letters published in *Physique Pictorial* (1951-1990) that attest to its role in fostering a sense of recognition among readers that other people like them existed (188-90). Less publicly, Susan Stryker notes, transgender correspondence networks formed around early activists such as Virginia Prince and Louise Lawrence (44-7). Nicholas Syrett documents similar networks among queer white men in the Midwest in the mid-20th century who wrote and circulated letters through the mail "to increase their queer contacts and to maintain friendships with other men they already knew" (75).

Carol, then, takes its viewers back to a moment of tremendous possibility, when people throughout the United States created networks of circulation around sexual and gender non-conformity amidst the backdrop of post-World War II normality and the culture of surveillance that enforced it. Looking back at this historical moment, it almost seems as if the various players are gradually becoming aware of that they are in a historical narrative, and begin to act in accordance with one another—continuing to gain momentum through acts of recognition and affinity until the collective uprisings at the Stonewall Inn in New York, Compton's Cafeteria in San Francisco, and places in between that have gained less acknowledgement in the historical record. Kwame Holmes, however, reminds us that records of the gay and lesbian activism of this era are available to LGBTQ historical projects because their largely white, middle-class members had a "greater access to urban land" that meant that they were able to maintain stable residences from which to circulate documents and paraphernalia, and at which these materials persisted long enough to become available to archivists and historians (61-2). Thus, there is a historiographic disjunction between the largely white networks of circulation and identity described above and the profoundly intersectional nature of the uprisings of the late 1960s and early 1970s—instigated and sustained largely by people who occupied many of the categories against which homophile activists appealing to midcentury discourses of normality disassociated: queers of color, working class and homeless queers, sex workers, street queens, and more. The relative abundance and archival orderliness of materials circulated among these white, middle-class networks gives them a historical weight as *evidence* that does not extend to the more ephemeral archives left by queers who fell outside of these categories of privilege. The historical narrative thus produced makes its seem as if queers who fell outside of racial and class norms were themselves an impossibility in the 1950s, and were produced by the chaos of the late 1960s,

rather than being key agents of disrupting a social order in which many white, affluent activists were otherwise complicit.

Such a historiographic configuration raises the specter of reactionary nostalgia in *Carol*'s backward glance, a re-centering of LGBTQ history and social organizing around white gays and lesbians at a time when the accepted historical record locates other sexual and gender non-normative people as existing in an unspecified elsewhere. In focusing on Carol and Therese, *Carol* certainly presents no radical charge against such white, middle class historical narration. Yet, *Carol* draws its viewers' attention to the ephemeral qualities of queer experience for which LGBTQ historical narration, and the archival practices that sustain it, cannot account. In looking back at a moment of emergence, when the identities and formations that structure mainstream LGBTQ politics did not yet exist to be taken for granted, *Carol* does not simply mourn potentials untapped and avenues unexplored, but rather gives vibrancy and contemporary materiality to formations of desire that exceed the stultifying frameworks of historical narrative.

Appropriately, *Carol* denies us a resolution. Therese abandons her Greenwich Village pals and heads uptown to meet Carol and her friends at the Oak Room. She walks assertively past the maître'd and scans the room, much like Jack in the opening scene. Her point-of-view shot scans until she locks on Carol, sitting against a far wall, deep in conversation. In the next shot, the frame begins to encroach on Therese, going from a medium-long shot to a medium close-up as a reprise of Burwell’s theme from the opening credits begins. The return to Therese's point-of-view transpires in slow motion and, in these final moments, *Carol* seems to grant us unfettered access to Therese's psyche. The framing is unsteady, both in Therese's point-of-view shot and the reverse shot of Therese making her way through the crowded dining room. Once Therese enters her reverie, her eyes stay locked on Carol. Burwell's driving theme adds to the

trance-like state. We—and Therese—approach the table together. The shot goes on for nine seconds, and waiters and guests move in between us like Frankenberg's Christmas shoppers before Carol meets our gaze. Therese gazes back as the framing widens; the camera seems to be floating away from her, as if it too were in a trance. In the next shot, Carol stares at us, head cocked, mouth smiling ever-so-slightly. She seems to inhale and exhale deeply. Her lips curl further into a smile (1:52:15-1:54:25). *Carol* finally seems to have finally folded its viewers into its reverie. In *The Price of Salt*, Highsmith gives us something more: ". . . Therese watched the slow smile growing, before her arm lifted suddenly, her hand waved a quick, eager greeting that Therese had never seen before" (257). In *Carol*, the screen cuts to black and the score stops short. *Carol* is over.

CHAPTER 3: "I JUST DON'T WANT TO BE LIKE YOU AND MOM": *FUN HOME, BEGINNERS*, AND THE CLOSET'S AFFECTIVE AFTERLIVES

> *I do think drawing is a form of touch for me. When you are drawing a figure, you are touching them. You are creating this person's body. You are outlining their face. Their limbs. Their clothes. It is very intimate. And . . . my mother kind of cut me off from touch at an early age, so I wonder. . . . I think maybe I'm trying to compensate in some way with this very tactile physical medium. And ultimately I am trying to touch the people who are reading it, or wanting them to—wanting them to touch me. While they are holding this story about me. It's sort of pathetic.* — *Alison Bechdel* ("Public Conversation" 211)

1. Introduction

During the 69th Tony Awards ceremony, broadcast on CBS from Radio City Music Hall on 7 June 2015, beloved Broadway performer Joel Grey and his daughter, actress Jennifer Grey, introduced "Ring of Keys," a number from that evening's eventual Best Musical winner *Fun Home*. The younger Grey describes the show as a "universally resonant story of a woman reconstructing her past in order to better understand her brilliant and complicated father." Father and daughter perform mock-surprise and bicker as the audience knowingly laughs. "A subject Jennifer knows a little something about," the elder Grey continues ("Fun Home 'Ring of Keys' from 2015 Tony Awards" 0:22-45). The absence of direct references to queerness and the language of universality seem deployed to allay the fears of *Fun Home*'s investors that that it would be pigeon-holed as a "gay show." And yet, *Fun Home*, adapted by Jeanine Tesori (music) and Lisa Kron (lyrics and book) from Alison Bechdel's graphic memoir *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* (2006), is the unmistakably queer story of a lesbian's attempts to reconstruct her

relationship with her long-dead gay father. Joel Grey's presence alongside his daughter seems in some ways an antidote to the melancholy that saturates *Fun Home*. Grey came out publicly as a gay man at the age of 83 in January 2015, and published a column in the *Huffington Post* three days before the ceremony noting the similarities between Bruce Bechdel and himself:

> *Fun Home*'s story, as universal as it is, strikes a uniquely personal chord for me, as a dad who is also a gay man. Just a few months ago, I spoke publicly for the first time about that. And like Alison's father, I grew up in a time when being openly gay was totally unacceptable and truly dangerous. Both of us got married and raised children. But unlike the father in the play, I made a decision, after the end of my 24-year marriage, to reveal my true self to my friends and family, finding only love and acceptance. And, eventually, I was inspired to speak publicly and live a life without secrets. Today, I am living to see the world, and its attitudes, miraculously changing every day. (Grey)

Grey's heartwarming account of his coming out offers an alternate future for Bruce Bechdel in which, rather than being killed by a delivery truck in 1980—presumed by his daughter to be a suicide—he perseveres until a moment when his status as a gay father no longer seems anachronistic. This version of Bruce Bechdel lives not only to come out as a gay man but also to come into proper historical alignment as a gay father.

Yet Bruce Bechdel, as reconstructed by his daughter, and later by Tesori and Kron, resists such easy recuperation. Towards the end of her graphic novel, Bechdel depicts herself circa 1985, sitting on a dock, smoking. The caption above: "There's a certain emotional expedience to claiming him as a tragic victim of homophobia, but that's a problematic line of thought"; then, in a box in the lower right corner of the panel: "For one thing, it makes it harder

for me to blame him" (196). Alison Bechdel's dilemma mirrors the one Kadji Amin identifies in queer scholarship, namely "how to counter the pathologization of denigrated groups without reacting by idealizing them" (6). While Amin's subject, Jean Genet, seduces readers across time because he "embodies the queer romance of the alternative" (2), the figure that Alison Bechdel conjures from the past is located within a dishearteningly unsexy imaginary: American family life in the mid-20th century. Even those fathers who lived lives as out gay men hardly embodied this romance of the alternative; Daniel Winunye Rivers points out that the political organizations created by gay fathers in the 1970s and 80s tended to be less radical than feminist-informed mothers' groups and were therefore influential in building a respectability politics around family and gender that influences LGBTQ politics into the present (111-2). Due in large part to their investments in patriarchal politics and their ensuing legibility within mainstream politics, the white, middle-class, closeted husband and father remains a quintessential figure around whom popular media constructs pre- and post-Stonewall historical narratives.

And yet, the final two chapters of my dissertation build upon my earlier discussion of history and memory by asking how parental narratives, rather than serving as guarantors of normative temporal coherence, can rupture the timelines offered by LGBTQ historical narration. In particular, I examine major works by two American visual artists, Alison Bechdel and Mike Mills, whose works parallel each other in multiple ways. Most strikingly, the most acclaimed works in both of their oeuvres, Bechdel's *Fun Home* and Mills' film *Beginners* (Focus Features, 2010), are autobiographical depictions of adults attempting to recover their dead gay fathers through a combination of history, memory, and the material evidence these men left behind. In addition, Bechdel and Mills follow up their acclaimed father-centric memoirs with works centering on their mothers: Bechdel's graphic memoir *Are You My Mother?* (2012) and Mills'

film *20th Century Women* (A24, 2016). I use these works to structure a two-part analysis: first, I will examine the legacy of the closeted husband and father in popular culture; then, in my next chapter, I will examine the figure of the wife and mother in these narratives.

In this chapter, I analyze how *Fun Home* and *Beginners* use non-linear narratives to historicize the closet in starkly different ways. In *Beginners*, narrative lapses function as caesuras that attempt to cast the closeted father as a historical relic and render his previous emotional investments as inauthentic in contrast to the supposed authenticity of his subsequent life as an out gay man. In contrast, in *Fun Home*, these lapses function like ellipses that find uncomfortable affinities between closeted gay father and openly lesbian daughter. Taken together, these works demonstrate competing ways of reckoning with the closet's affective afterlives, revealing contemporary investments in gay pasts and queer legacies that undermine attempts to contextualize the closet within a linear trajectory from a closeted past to an out future. If *Carol* offers its viewers immersion in a moment of tremendous possibility during the early 1950s in which identities and politics are tantalizingly malleable and anticipatory, *Beginners* and *Fun Home* flash back from a diegetic present in the early-to-mid 2000s to moments in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s—the decades immediately preceding and following Stonewall—when more familiar formations begin to solidify. In attempting to position their spectral fathers within these histories, the autobiographical avatars of Alison Bechdel and Mike Mills find themselves in a series of temporal impasses. To surmount them, Bechdel and Mills must reckon with a different kind of material transformation than the prideful queer monumentality afforded to figures like Harvey Milk; the closeted husband and father becomes a shameful specter that leaves traces that exceed his historical framing. In *Beginners* and *Fun Home*, reckoning with the corporeal and material existences of their fathers culminates in moments of touching that point toward recuperative

ways of engaging with the affective legacies of the closet. Thus, the desire to know their fathers via the accumulation and curation of the material evidence they have left behind gives way to a different kind of material reckoning in which they must come to terms with the limitations of queer archives.

2. "How Do They Relate to the Exhibit?": Gay Dads and Curatorial Children

Lying in the bed of a darkened hospital room, serenaded by the sounds of his heart monitor and the distant ring of a phone in the nurses' station, Hal Fields (Christopher Plummer) turns his flashlight from the magazine he's reading toward an offscreen object. As his flashlight illuminates a vase of flowers, his son Oliver (Ewan McGregor) explains that Hal's boyfriend Andy (Goran Visnjic) brought them. Hal then moves his flashlight so that it points directly at the camera. "Who did that painting?" he asks Oliver. "It's just a painting on the wall," the latter says. Hal's flashlight moves from the reproduction of a generic painting to family photos set up on his bedside tray. "They're just photos, Pop," Oliver explains. "But how do they relate to the exhibit?" asks Hal, before moving the beam of light to another offscreen object: "And that's the water sprinkler thing," Oliver adds. Hal replies: "Well, it's just beautiful. . . . putting the Japanese gardens there" (10:46-12:17). Set in 2003, *Beginners* follows Oliver, an illustrator, as he copes with Hal's death from cancer and embarks on a relationship with Anna (Mélanie Laurent), an actress. Hal, who came out following the death of Oliver's mother Georgia (Mary Page Keller), appears entirely in flashback. *Beginners*' non-linear narrative weaves among memories and scenes from the diegetic present such that Hal's illness does not progress in a linear fashion. It is thus difficult to know how much of Hal's seemingly nonsensical making sense of his hospital surroundings as an exhibit is due to deterioration in his mental condition and

how much of it is ironic commentary. Hal's notion that the banal *mise-en-scène* of his hospital room constitutes an exhibit mobilizes discourses on curation, accuracy, and the ability of artistic forms to capture lived experience that become primary concerns of both *Beginners* and *Fun Home*. Both Bruce Bechdel, a funeral home director and restorer of homes, and Hal Fields, an art museum curator, instill in their artist children a curatorial impulse that affects how they tell the stories of their deceased gay fathers, and which seemingly impedes their attempts to accurately tell these stories.

Alison Bechdel introduces the first chapter of *Fun Home*, "Old Father, Old Artificer," with a reproduction of a photograph. Three black corner fasteners—the bottom right one is missing—locate this photo within a scrapbook, a curated collection of family photos. In it, a young Bruce Bechdel appears in profile, his face turned toward the camera. His hands appear placed on his hips, just below the frame. The hashmarks across his torso intermingle, as if indicating an interplay of body hair, contours, and shadows in the original photo. His side-swept hair is a bit shaggy and a strand is askew, hanging down toward a heavy-lidded eye that seems sultry in the way it meets the camera's gaze. His lips slightly pout (1). He hardly seems to fit the adjective "old" that is placed upon him twice in the caption, except in that his appearance and the medium in which it is captured suggest an earlier era in American masculinity. Here Bechdel appears more like the men and boys he desired, rather than the taciturn figure that appears on the following pages. There, his side-swept hair is tamed and his eyes no longer betray impishness or desire; a stoic affectlessness has come to rest in his facial features (3-4). Throughout *Fun Home*, Hélène Tison argues, "photos of Bruce seem to be of different persons" (357) and "likeness is found exclusively, and consistently, in the cartoon representations of Bruce" (358). The photograph on page one *should* portray something of objective reality to offset the artifice she

decries in her father and that leads her to say that her father's death "was quite possibly his consummate artifice, his masterstroke" (27). Valerie Rohy claims that objects in *Fun Home* are given "small marks of authenticity [such as] the scrapbook corners on the chapter-head photographs [and] the precise reproduction of printed words' original fonts" (342). Indeed, Bechdel begins each chapter with a reproduction of a family photo drawn in a "realistic" style that differs from her self-described "regular cartoony style" ("An Interview with Alison Bechdel" 1009). Bechdel claims to have done so because she "want[s] people to know it is a real photograph of something that actually happened" ("Public Conversation" 210). And yet, the pose and the framing of the original photo, its curation in a family album, and Alison's selection and reproduction of it in another medium add layers upon layers of artifice and subjectivity—her own, her father's, and potentially her mother's—that underscore the competing narratives with which Bechdel must reckon in trying to curate her own memories in a graphic and narrative form. Bechdel thus follows in a tradition identified by Marianne Hirsch of artists who "attempt to use the very instruments of ideology, the camera, the album, and the familial gaze, as modes of questioning, resistance, and contestation" (7).

Bruce Bechdel, as established in Alison Bechdel's graphic memoirs, is a visually, narratively, and categorically unstable figure. Sam McBean argues that *Fun Home* "contributes to queer historiography in part by refusing to settle on one understanding of the truth about Bechdel's father, his sexuality, and the author's relationship to him" (104-5). Similarly, Tison argues that the graphic novel form offers Bechdel a way to "re-member the fragmented, scattered figure of her father" (361). In the first chapter of *Are You My Mother?*, Bechdel depicts herself rehearsing a conversation with her mother, Helen, about the memoir that became *Fun Home*:

> I want to give him a proper funeral. I want to tell the truth.

The **TRUTH?!**

Yeah. His bisexuality, the suicide. You don't mind, do you? (6)

The two things that Alison refers to as "the truth"—her father's sexual orientation and the manner of his death—remain tantalizingly open to interpretation. In referring to Bruce's "bisexuality," and narrating on the next page that her father only "likely jumped in front of" the truck (7), the introduction to *Are You My Mother?* seems to complicate Bechdel's presentation of her father's sexuality and the manner of his death in her previous graphic novel. Yet they depict events that took place chronologically *before* the writing of *Fun Home*. Robin Bernstein claims that Bechdel's two autobiographical graphic novels form a "daisy chain" with her long-running comic *Dykes to Watch Out For* (1983-2008); together, the works "constitute less a series of sequels and more a set of summating 'the making of' revisions" (128). Bechdel began writing *Dykes to Watch Out For*, Bernstein notes, in the aftermath of her father's death, and quotes her as saying "I felt to a certain extent he killed himself because he couldn't come out, so I was determined to be utterly and completely out in my own life" (qtd. in Bernstein 128). Yet, in Bechdel's work, as we see in the above example, her father often seems to elude fixed sexual identities. In *Fun Home*'s first chapter, Alison struggles to define Bruce: her narration tells us that he was a "nelly" (15) with a "dark secret" that made him seem "morally suspect" (16), and that he had "sex with teenage boys" (17). At the conclusion of *Fun Home*, Alison concedes: "Erotic truth is a rather sweeping concept. I shouldn't pretend to know what my father's was" (230).

In fact, both Mills' and Bechdel's attempts to bring historical order to their father's lives are undone by the messiness of both men's lives and identities. If, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues, the seizure of one's "authority to describe and name their own sexual desire. . . . [is]

central to the modern history of homophobic oppression" (*Epistemology of the Closet* 26), then taxonomizing the dead is fraught with the potential for violence. This violence visits many elders while they are still alive, and even formerly out LGBTQ people go back into the closet in order to obtain or maintain access to both institutional and familial forms of elder care (Knauer 6). Unlike Bruce Bechdel, Hal Fields quite clearly comes out, yet the depiction of his coming out in *Beginners* quickly establishes the unreliability of Oliver's memory as an archive of his father's life. The flashback begins as Oliver remembers it: his father sits facing him clad in a purple sweater and says "I'm gay." Oliver then corrects the memory, noting that while he remembers his father wearing a purple sweater, Hal was actually clad in a robe. The image cuts to a shot of Hal from the same angle but in the aforementioned robe. Hal repeats: "I'm gay." Then, Hal appears in a third outfit, a brown sweater that indicates another permutation of memory that Oliver's narration doesn't acknowledge. The other *mise-en-scène* elements remain the same, except for the angle of the sunlight coming through the curtains behind him, indicating these memories occurring at different times of the day. Furthermore, Christopher Plummer reads the line "I want to do something about it" three times, once in each outfit, giving the line different inflections and emotional registers (5:30-6:00).

In this scene and others, *Beginners* makes visible the disjunction between the desire for accuracy in representing the lives of these gay men from the past and the limitations of the curator's imagination. In interviews, Mills is careful to note his proximity to LGBTQ milieus without claiming space within them, noting that in addition to being the straight son of a gay man, he went to art school in New York City in the 1980s and saw in the work of his teachers, friends, and colleagues the "politicized activist reaction to the whole AIDS numbness." The "fear of getting it wrong" about experiences that are not his own led Mills to "stay true to the concrete

things I knew and saw, and not try to overstep my visitation" ("Catching Up with *Beginners* Director Mike Mills"). *Beginners* visualizes Mills' self-conscious distance from LGBTQ milieus in the scenes following the coming out flashback. We see Hal standing as if posing for a photo as his clothing changes to reflect his post-coming out style. We see him posed with his new boyfriend Andy as the latter speaks to the camera as if on home video. We see Hal posed with his new gay priest and his new therapist. We then see photos of various groups that Hal joins: the Prime Timers, "movie night," and Los Angeles Pride (6:00-6:28). The blocking of these shots creates a tableau effect that gives little impression of the vibrancy of these people's experiences or their interactions with each other, instead appearing as if they were photos taken for the gay yearbook. These curiously distant shots serve as a meta-commentary on the fact that Mills restricts his scope due to a sense of duty to honor the experiences of his father and men like him without claiming ownership or authorship.

Both Mills and Bechdel, in part, construct their production methods around their concerns for accuracy. Many of the details in *Beginners*' screenplay emerged from notecards upon which Mills detailed events as they were happening, including such details as the "muzak that was playing in the ICU room while my dad's unconscious" ("Catching Up with *Beginners* Director Mike Mills"). This concern for accuracy in seemingly minute details extended to the film's visuals as well: the fur of the canine actor Cosmo, who played Oliver's dog Arthur, was dyed to look more like that of Bowser, the dog that Mills inherited from his deceased father (Hartenstein). Similarly, Bechdel's well-publicized drawing and writing practices involve her posing as her characters for digital photographs, which she takes via a camera with a self-timer and then recreates in comic form (Rüggeheimer 260). And, like Mills, Bechdel fills her *mise-en-scène* with material traces from reality, such as reproductions of her father's handwriting

(Rüggemeier 263-4). I will address Bechdel's method more fully in chapter four, but for the moment I want to highlight the similarities between the methods that these two artists use to evoke historical gay fathers and the impasses produced by the desire for accuracy across their works.

Alison Bechdel's attempts to recapture her father are complicated by a sense that her father's queerness should produce a sense of identification between them but more often than not fails to do so. Narratively, Bechdel is denied overt recognition from her father: Bruce dies weeks after their fleeting attempt to connect during a car ride that Bechdel depicts in 24 square panels arranged 3 x 4 across two pages. Each panel is nearly identical to the panels that precede and succeed it, with Alison and Bruce facing right and making only slight movements between panels. In none of the 24 panels do they make eye contact. Fumbling for words, Bruce admits that his gift to her of Colette's posthumous 'autobiography' *Earthly Paradise* (in reality a compilation of Colette's personal writing edited by Robert Phelps, 1966) was informed by "some kind of… identification." He then begins describing his first sexual encounters and admits to dressing in girls' clothes. Alison reminds him that she would dress in boys' clothes as a child. Then, the conversation lapses into silence (220-1). The repetition of 24 images showing more or less the same thing produces a sense of stasis rather than progress. For all their attempts at disclosure, father and daughter end up in yet another impasse. In the wake of his death, Alison is left to find less obvious points of affinity. The manners in which they express their queerness seem to simultaneously distinguish each other and unite them: Bechdel describes her father and herself as "inversions of one another" in her attempt to compensate for his femininity through her butch presentation and his attempt to "express something feminine through" her. In this panel, Alison and Bruce lock eyes—not directly, but through an exchange of glances in the

mirror in which they prepare their properly-gendered attire for their roles as wedding guests (98). Here, McBean argues that "Bechdel considers how her father translates his own desires through her girl body and how Alison plays out her own masculinity on his body, demonstrating the kind of crossing that Sedgwick understands to be intrinsic to the term *queer*." (112). And yet this not an egalitarian exchange: Bruce Bechdel exerts paternal authority over his daughter in a way that, in her formulation, expresses his queerness while stifling her own. It is in other mediating surfaces, photographic lenses and the images they capture, that Alison finds connection with Bruce. Holding photos of her father and herself in their early twenties side-by-side—Bechdel reproduces her own hands in the panel—she narrates: "The exterior setting, the pained grin, the flexible wrists, even the angle of shadow falling across our faces—it's about as close as a translation can get" (120). The reader's relationship to these photos replicates the one that Hirsch describes among readers of Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida* (1980) as he describes his reaction to family photos; "Barthes cannot *show* us the photograph because we stand outside the familial networks of looks and thus cannot *see* the picture in the way that Barthes must. . . . Finding and reading the picture, recognizing himself in it, are acts of identity and familiarity for Barthes" (2). We see reproductions of the photos in reproductions of Bechdel's hands and yet we cannot see what Bechdel sees. Bechdel finds queer affinities in these photos due to her simultaneous embeddedness in family networks and queer historical networks that she cannot, for all her focus on accuracy, reproduce for her viewers. While Mills' straightness makes him conscious that the history of gayness he depicts is not his own, Bechdel's shared gayness with her father fails to give her the authority to definitively classify and make legible Bruce Bechdel's sexuality and place in history. Thus, Ann Cvetkovich argues, "they are intertwined in a way that doesn't allow

easy distinctions between perverse and normal sexuality, obsession and art, or preliberation closeted queers and out and proud lesbians and gays" (119).

3. "Confused by All the Chronology": Historical Narratives and Generational Logics

While Alison in the musical ends the opening number by telling the audience that "he was gay. And I was gay" (17), Alison Bechdel cannot define precisely what Bruce Bechdel meant by "identification" during that car ride. To the right of the panel in which Bechdel seems to disavow "erotic truth," another panel shows young Alison with her arms around her father's neck, in close contact, as he teaches her to swim. Her mother sits in a pool chair, reading the newspaper. Young Alison smiles, yet neither parent's face betrays easily-readable emotion. The caption above: "Perhaps my eagerness to claim him as 'gay' in the way that I am 'gay,' as opposed to bisexual or some other category, is just a way of keeping him to myself—a sort of inverted Oedipal Complex" (230). Listening to Bruce's admissions about his early sexual encounters, Alison narrates that she "felt distinctly parental listening to his shamefaced recitation" (221). The blurring of the distinctions between parent and child roles appears throughout *Fun Home*. Kate McCullough argues that "Bechdel interrupts the generational lockstep of familial relations by variously repositioning the temporal relationship of parents and child" (381). In its recursive narrative structure, sometimes clashing visual styles, and its varied archive that often puts history and memory into tension, *Fun Home* depicts "erotic truth" and generational relationships as multitudinous and elusive to the biographer's vocabulary and the cartoonist's pen. McCullough argues that *Fun Home*'s departure from standard coming-out narratives "depends on a representation of a queer temporality that includes simultaneous multiple versions of the past, multiple temporalities within the present, and multiple

simultaneous relationships to a given past moment" (379). Bechdel has characterized *Fun Home* as an attempt to grasp a series of interlinked events:

> I get confused by all the chronology. . . . my father died soon after I came out to the family as a lesbian. It freaked everyone out. My mother [had] told me that my father was gay. Soon after that he was hit by a truck. So the book is all about this sorting out what happened in that strange little knot of sexual coming of age and death and trauma. ("Public Conversation" 210)

According to coming out narratives, Alison's announcement to her family that she is a lesbian should serve as an assertion of individual identity that exceeds the organizing logics of familial time. "I had imagined my confession as an emancipation from my parents," Alison narrates, "but instead I was pulled back into their orbit" (59). Alison's voracious reading of gay and lesbian books from *The Well of Loneliness* (Radclyffe Hall, 1928) to *Word Is Out* (Nancy Adair and Casey Adair, 1978) (74-7) has failed to provide her with a template to respond to the revelation of her father's homosexuality, particularly coming so closely in the aftermath of her own declaration. Bruce Bechdel's subsequent suicide provides a more familiar narrative in two ways: it traffics in the well-worn trope of queer despair resulting in suicide and it also provides the disruption in familial time that Alison's coming-out had failed to produce on its own. "And with my father's death following so hard on the heels of this doleful coming-out party," Alison continues, "I could not help but assume a cause-and-effect relationship" (59). In her foreword to the musical's Samuel French acting edition, Lisa Kron cautions against "link[ing] the scenes in the past to each other, to imply causal connections leading to Bruce's suicide," explaining that it is Alison's "present-tense assembly of memories that we follow" (8).

Indeed, *Fun Home* plays out in many ways as a battle between competing ways of knowing, feeling, and organizing history and generational logics. *Fun Home*'s sixth chapter, "An Ideal Husband" (151-186), takes place during the summer of 1974 and depicts overlapping personal and national timelines: Alison Bechdel having her first period and attempting to inform her mother, Helen Bechdel's completion of her master's thesis while preparing her performance as Lady Bracknell in a local production of Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895), Bruce Bechdel's Wilde-esque legal troubles after being reported to the police for furnishing alcoholic beverages to a minor with the implicit promise of sex, and the Watergate scandal, culminating in Richard Nixon's resignation and an ensuing crisis in the national political order. Alison Bechdel disavows the significance of these events happening concurrently yet explores the moments when these parallel narratives came into contact throughout the chapter: "The juxtaposition of the last days of childhood with those of Nixon and the end of that larger, national innocence may seem trite. But it was only one of many heavy-handed plot devices to befall my family during those strange, hot months" (155). In its entwining of national, historical, and personal narratives, Cvetkovich places *Fun Home* alongside two earlier and highly-influential graphic novels, Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1993) and Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2003), noting that all three works "explore intergenerational trauma and the role of the child as witness" (111). While the events witnessed by protagonists in these previous works comprise the Holocaust and the Islamic Revolution, Cvetkovich notes that *Fun Home* explores "idiosyncratic or shameful family stories and their incommensurate relation to global politics and historical trauma" (111).

In recreating Bruce Bechdel, Alison Bechdel finds tension between her own memories of her father and how, since his death, men like him have been incorporated into historical

narratives that have more power to imbue his life with meaning than her "idiosyncratic" recollections. Indeed, Alison's attempts to attach her memories to historical narratives produce narrative impasses. In the midst of Alison's recollection of the 1976 Bicentennial celebrations in New York City, she flashes ten years forward, to 1985. "When I try to project what dad's life might have been like if he hadn't died in 1980, I don't get very far," she narrates. In the panel beneath the text, Alison prepares a page of the July 1-14, 1985 issue of the *New York Native*, the controversial and often conspiracy-oriented gay biweekly newspaper. The headline "The Hope of HPA-23" appears beneath a sight that is simultaneously iconic and generic: a forearm with an IV drip lying on a hospital bed. Set off in a box to the right, stark text without an accompanying image: "If he'd lived into those early years of AIDS, I tell myself, I might very well have lost him anyway, and in a more painful, protracted fashion." She then simultaneously flashes back to 1976 and forward to 1987 via the opening page of Randy Shilts' recounting of the Bicentennial weekend in the opening of his AIDS chronicle *And the Band Played On*, wherein "that glorious night" retroactively becomes macabre: a potential site of HIV's introduction into New York City (195). "Or maybe," Bechdel narrates over more images of herself in 1985, "I'm trying to render my senseless personal loss meaningful by linking it, however posthumously, to a more coherent narrative" (196). In this historical impasse, historical narrative only provides meaning to Bruce Bechdel upon his death.

Despite the meticulous curation of historical evidence in *Beginners* and *Fun Home* that contextualizes each man's life, their children cannot recover them in order to redress a feeling of absence. In *Beginners*, "historical consciousness," becomes banal spectacle in the form of graffiti. Accompanying his friend Elliot (Kai Lennox) on a nighttime spray-painting excursion, Oliver dismisses the former's work as "copying something that someone, like, did 30 years ago

in the Bronx." Elliot, a white resident of Los Angeles who has access to artistic labor and relative safety from police brutality should he be caught vandalizing property, responds that his work is part of a "tradition of civil disobedience: something bigger than myself." After Elliot teaches Oliver how to use spray paint, the latter contributes his own designs on various surfaces in Los Angeles: "1983: CHICKEN MCNUGGETS," "1985: BUSH FINDS JESUS," and "2003: BRITNEY SPEARS MOST GOOGLED." Oliver's response to a quizzical Elliot sarcastically redeploys Elliot's own words: "Historical consciousness: something bigger than myself" (32:18-33:42). An earlier moment in the film presages the absurdly unhelpful timeline created via Oliver's graffiti: when Oliver describes the decline of Georgia's mental health in the days before her death, we see a surreal slideshow of images of the American presidents of her lifetime, from Calvin Coolidge to George W. Bush, playing back and forth in sequence, becoming smaller and smaller as they flash with increasing speed until the screen fades to black (5:25-30). Here, even the linearity of presidential succession becomes a nightmarish parade of images that have little to do with the lived experience of the dying woman. This historical timeline with its predictable cycles—save two presidential deaths and one resignation—proves frustratingly coherent in relation to the messiness of Georgia's, Hal's, and Oliver's lives.

Like Alison Bechdel, Oliver Fields experiences a hiccup in generational logics when his father comes out. The presence of septuagenarian Hal Fields in the confessional position to his son upends the well-worn trope of the child coming out to their parents. Of course, the relationship between Hal and Oliver after the former's coming out is not unique to gay parental narratives; aging often reconfigures parent-child relationships such that responsibilities for care usually assigned to parents become the responsibility of the adult child. However, the fact that Oliver's experiences have afforded him closer contact with queer communities than Hal's allows

Oliver to serve almost as an informant for his gay father. And yet, Hal's experiences of homophobia and the closet often make visible aspects of gay life that Oliver's progressive politics obscures. In an early scene, Hal drunkenly calls Oliver after his first foray into a gay bar. Not only does the confessional nature of the phone call mirror that of Hal's coming out, but the conversation also serves to contextualize Hal's experiences by showing where their queer knowledges align and where they do not. Oliver informs Hal that the music to which he was dancing was house music and Hal informs Oliver of how it feels to be an older man in a gay culture that assigns value to youth (17:27-18:11). Later, after Hal explains that the rainbow flag sticker he is giving to Oliver represents gay pride, they bicker back and forth about whether, as Oliver puts it, "everybody knows that." Hal, after insisting twice that they do not, simply goes silent (1:11:47-12:03). Hal's experiences repeatedly challenge Oliver's assumption that his placement in history and progressive politics affords him a more enlightened worldview than his father. As Linda M. Hess puts it: "While Hal works to deconstruct normative narrative, Oliver, as narrator of the film, works to create a continuum from past to present and to provide closure for the audience, thus maintaining a more conventional narrative pattern" (178). Hess points to a flashback in which Hal, with a cannula in his nostrils, reads his rewriting of the death of Jesus Christ to Oliver and his hospice nurse:

> Eventually, Jesus grew old. He could no longer walk far and he could no longer preach in a loud voice. One day, he announced to his apostles that he was departing. The three disciples prayed with him, gave him water, bathed and fed him. After gasping for breath for several days, one morning just as dawn came, Jesus passed away.

Oliver is supportive but incredulous: "You rewrote Jesus's death?" Hal retorts: "It was far too violent. We need new stories" (1:02:33-03:09). Hal's story of coming out and finding affective vibrancy and openness in contrast to his decades of secrecy offers a counternarrative to the figure of the gay male elder posited by Dustin Bradley Goltz as "doomed to a future of sadness, misery, isolation, and perpetual loss" (3). Hess further argues that Hal is also offering an alternative to narratives of gayness dominated by suffering and grievance (176). The flashback immediately preceding Hal's rewriting of Jesus's death shows Hal, his movie night guests, and Oliver watching *The Times of Harvey Milk* (Rob Epstein, 1984) (1:02:20-33), a documentary crucial to establishing Milk as the "monumental" figure discussed in the previous chapter. Hal, for all the ways he embodies a familiar trope of the white, middle class, closeted husband and father, is capable of imagining alternatives to both homophobic and anti-homophobic ways of organizing gay histories that preclude living, breathing, and even fucking gay elders.

4. "The Only Place My Father Could Hide and Have Sex": Geographies of the Closet

Chapter Five of *Fun Home* begins with a dream Alison has two nights before her father's death. In it, Alison runs up a hill near their home in Beech Creek, Pennsylvania, toward a "glorious sunset visible through the trees," beckoning her father to follow. When he finally joins her, the sun has set, the "brilliant colors" have disappeared, and she tells him in a speech bubble: "You **missed** it! God, it was **beautiful**!" (123). Although she concedes that the "condolence-card association of death with a setting sun is maudlin in the extreme" (124), she returns to the metaphor five panels later. In a box that partially obscures a panel reproducing Bruce Bechdel's obituary with seven instances of the name Beech Creek highlighted, Alison narrates: "If only he'd been able to escape the gravitational tug of Beech Creek, I tell myself, his particular sun

might not have set in so precipitate a manner" (125). She then illustrates the historical/industrial developments that brought the settlements isolated between the "tidy ranks of long ridges and cultivated valleys" along the Allegheny Plateau into contact with one other and the world beyond, culminating in a map illustrating the route of I-80 between—and "blasted through"—the ridges (126-7). This violent rupture in the topography, illustrated via a panel showing vehicles on the highway passing by the sheer wall carved out of the ridge with its cross-section of different rock layers nakedly exposed to the elements, positions both Bruce and Alison Bechdel within moments of historical disorientation and possibility. If the topographical isolation of Beech Creek encouraged both geographic fixedness and a narrow field of erotic and kinship possibilities—Alison notes that despite a population of 800, there were 26 Bechdel families listed in the Beech Creek phonebook (126)—the coming of gay identity disrupted temporal stability for Bruce, in both spatial and historical dimensions. In the text above the panel containing Bruce's obituary, Alison writes that "a geographical relocation is usually involved" when she imagines different outcomes for her father (125). In their musical adaptation, Tesori and Kron seize upon this spatial and historical significance in "Maps," wherein present-day Alison sings about her father she composes the aforementioned panels:

> Four miles from our door
> I-80 ran from shore to shore
> On its way from the Castro to Christopher Street
> The road not taken, just four miles from our door. (45)

Here, the literal and figurative "road not taken" proves tantalizing. Alison positions her father as torn between two forces: the gravitational pull of his family's rootedness in Beech Creek and a historical narrative that coerces him into migration toward one of the centers of gay life in the

mid-twentieth century. While his butch lesbian daughter more readily assimilates into this narrative, Bruce Bechdel cannot or will not be pulled into alignment.

This refusal or inability is doubly perplexing because Bruce Bechdel's life story aligns with particular narratives about gay men's lives in the mid-twentieth century. He left his small hometown to go to college, where he joined a fraternity—the homosocial nature of which inspires some speculation on Alison's part (120). He becomes involved in the campus theatre scene, where he meets Alison's future mother, Helen (69). Helen, in turn, exposes him to the bohemian atmosphere of Greenwich Village in the late 1950s (105). He enters a graduate program in English, drops out, then is drafted into the Army (62). As Alison presumes happened during his time in the fraternity, the homosocial atmosphere of the army affords him erotic contact with other men, and he has at least one long-term male lover in the army (71). There is a sense that Bechdel's narrative *should* continue here to include furtive relationships with the gay bohemians of Greenwich Village, some form of coming out, and a future as a gay man. The historical and geographic circumstances have fallen into place that would enable him to do so. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the period of American history overlapping with Alison Bechdel's flashbacks, gay rights activism was part of a larger thaw in Cold War attitudes toward family, marriage, domesticity, and cohabitation (May 222). Bruce Bechdel could have been one of those men who, in John D'Emilio's account, decided to "act on their desires" and migrate to urban centers in the decades following World War II to establish gay identities, subcultures, and politics (472). And yet, he marries Helen while serving in Germany, and during her pregnancy with Alison, they return to Beech Creek upon the death of Bruce's father to take over the family funeral home (32). Alison narrates that this "change in plans was a cruel blow" (33) but his father's death was, after all, an inevitability. Bruce seems tied to a generational logic of

succession that supersedes his own desires or extra-familial identities. The family funeral home itself is a throwback to a pre-industrial era wherein the family was "an independent unit of production" (D'Emilio 469). Even as more possibilities emerge for Bruce Bechdel, he seems hopelessly out of step with the times. By the late 1970s and early 1980s, gay fathers' groups increasingly offered legal and emotional support for their members as they negotiated these seemingly conflicting identities, whereas in the past, gay men with families could, as Rivers puts it, "either live double lives as married gay men or leave their children altogether." (113). And yet, the Bechdel family unravels in 1980 in a traumatic fashion: Alison Bechdel comes out to her parents (58), Helen Bechdel asks for a divorce (27), and Bruce Bechdel is struck by a delivery truck while working in front of a home that he is renovating (28). In a sense, Alison's dream in which her father hesitates and arrives *just* too late is inaccurate; Bruce Bechdel seems out of sync with the historical narratives building around gay men such that it is only upon his death—and subsequent absence—that he can be assimilated into them.

Even though Hal Fields in *Beginners* is located historically and geographically in spaces that Alison Bechdel positions as a potential haven for her father, Hal's narrative compliments Bruce Bechdel's in many ways. Over a photo montage, Oliver narrates that Hal Fields realized that he was gay in 1938 at the age of 13. He met Georgia in high school, served in World War II, and they reunited years later, marrying in 1955. That same year, Hal underwent psychotherapy in order to cure his homosexuality. He and Georgia settled in a home just south of Griffith Park in Los Angeles, not far from where the Mattachine Society was first meeting in Silver Lake (48:58-50:20). Hal was only blocks away from being at the right place at the right time and yet, like Bruce, Hal remains in a heterosexual marriage. Georgia dies in 1999 and Hal comes out six months later at the age of 75 (5:09-35). Flashbacks throughout *Beginners* depict Hal's coming

into public gay life: his first forays into gay public spaces, his romantic, non-monogamous relationship with his younger partner Andy, his presumably platonic, loving relationships with other men, and his death from cancer five years after coming out.

Both *Beginners* and *Fun Home* historically situate the lives of these gay men within periods of American history in which social norms and legal statutes made the closet, as Nancy J. Knauer puts it, "not only a survival mechanism . . . [but] a way of life" (8). "This is the only place my father could hide and have sex in the '50s," Oliver narrates during the photo montage. The streamlined mid-century design of the men's room depicted in the accompanying photo gleams in the sterile glow of the overhead lighting. The almost pristine state of the bathroom somewhat undercuts the implied shamefulness of forbidden, fleeting sexual encounters in public bathrooms. "My father said if you got caught by the vice squad," Oliver narrates over footage of white men being loaded into police vans, "you could lose everything." "This is everything," Oliver concludes as the image cuts from the grainy stock footage to images of American life taken from the pages of period magazines, the garish reds and greens popping in 50s Kodak splendor (49:48-50:00). The depictions of heterosexuality and domesticity in these images, largely culled from advertisements, seem as unrepresentative of lived experiences as the colors produced by 1950s photographic processes. Hess argues that the inclusion of these images demonstrates "how even small details in our everyday surroundings instill and uphold norms of what is worthwhile way of living and what is not" (169). Thus, even as these period images announce their artifice, their very lack of verisimilitude indicates the aspirational and fantastic nature of social norms. These images of whiteness, middle-class domesticity, consumerism, and reproductive futurity point toward the center of the "charmed circle" drawn by Gayle S. Rubin in her influential 1982 article "Thinking Sex" in which she illustrates the "sexual value system" that

polices acceptable—"heterosexual, marital, monogamous, reproductive, and non-commercial"—sexual behavior (13). According to Hess, the juxtaposition of the images of vice squad arrests with these advertisements highlights "what remains invisible and therefore inconceivable as a desirable form of life" (169). And yet, Hess notes, the use of such obviously selective and non-representative images "emphasizes in its own way how selective Oliver's narrative and, in fact, all narratives are and have to be, even when they use historical 'evidence'" (169).

Throughout *Fun Home*, the *mise-en-scène* contains items that contextualize Alison's memories within the overlapping timelines of American and LGBTQ histories, such as an "Anita Bryant Sucks Oranges" placard on the door of the room where the Gay Union meets at Oberlin College (76), and flyers advertising the Public Theatre production of Larry Kramer's play *The Normal Heart* (1985) and an AIDS candlelight vigil (196). On the first page of *Fun Home*'s second chapter, "A Happy Death," Bechdel includes facsimiles of the local Beech Creek newspapers from July 1 and July 3, 1980—the days preceding and following Bruce's death. The headlines position his death amidst larger national narratives: "Heat Wave Death Toll Reaches 88 in Southwest," "Three-Mile Island Study: Workers Face Risk from Damaged Plant," "Reagan Has Reservations About Running with Bush," and "Justices Uphold Hyde Amendment: Curbs on Abortion Stand" (27). While Alison's escape from Beech Creek allows her to encounter objects that conjure the existence of queer community-building and collective resistance, Bruce's relationship to the dawn of the queer 1980s seems far less hopeful. In Alison's search for clues that might make sense of her father's actions, these headlines are as important as the copy of Albert Camus' posthumously-published novel *A Happy Death* (1971) placed "in what might be construed as a deliberate manner" on the same table (27). Bechdel has missed the brief window between Stonewall and the seizing of power by Reagan and the Moral Majority in which he

might have known gay camaraderie before the queer state of emergency that was the 1980s. In revisiting the memory of her father's funeral, Alison imagines shouting at a mourner offering her platitudes: "He **killed himself** because he was a manic-depressive, closeted **fag** and he couldn't face living in this small-minded small town one more **second**" (125). Viewed from the vantage point of *Fun Home*'s creation, Bruce Bechdel in 1980 seems to be at a geographic and historical impasse: remaining in Beech Creek seems intolerable and yet leaving for New York, Los Angeles, or San Francisco places Bechdel in yet another narrative that ends in his doom.

Indeed, a sense that Bruce's death was inevitable pervades *Fun Home*. In retrospect, Alison feels her father's absence long before his demise. Bechdel thus concludes the first chapter:

> It's true that he didn't kill himself until I was twenty. But his absence resonated retroactively, echoing back through all the time I knew him. Maybe it was the converse of the way amputees feel pain in a missing limb. He really *was* there all those years, a flesh-and-blood presence steaming off the wallpaper, digging up the dogwoods, polishing the finials . . . smelling of sawdust and sweat and designer cologne. But I ached as if he were already gone. (23)

Alison Bechdel's description of her father is notable for the way it simultaneously evokes his corporeality and his absence. Her description of his retroactive absence produces yet another generational hiccup in that echoes Kathryn Bond Stockton's description of the queer child as "intensely unavailable to itself in the present tense" and a retroactive creation that appears only after "(parental) plans for one's straight destination have died" (6). Here, strangely, lesbian daughter is cast in a role analogous to that of a grieving straight parent. Indeed, there is something of the disapproving parent in her description of Bruce's "habit of excessive, even

idolatrous sunbathing" (124). Alison's disapproval is also that of a queer from a seemingly more enlightened time in which she can read her father's behavior as that of a relic from the shameful past. His inappropriate sexual object choices (161), his stereotypical obsession with aesthetics (15), and his self-loathing (20) mark him as an immature gay subject who has failed to properly mature. Bruce Bechdel is incompatible with the recognizable figures that populate Alison's memory of NYC Pride 1985: Alison as the young butch, the buff gay who marches in front of her in a too-short Chelsea Gym t-shirt and a pair of briefs, and the two couples that flank them: a lesbian couple, one of whom is pregnant and wearing a "Baster Baby" t-shirt, and an elderly gay couple carrying a sign that says "Together 54 Years" (197). Of course, Alison notes that her very existence is predicated upon his failure to fall into proper historical alignment: "…where would that leave me?" (197). Again, Bechdel arrives at an impasse: imagining a future in which her father resists the gravitational pull of Beech Creek comes with the price of her own negation. Gay father and lesbian daughter seem to be, in the times and places depicted in *Fun Home*, an impossibility. Bruce Bechdel becomes a specter from the past, a sacrifice necessary to enable the generations of out, proud people who follow him.

5. "A Lingering Vibration": Touching, and Being Touched by, the Spectral Father

As *Beginners* and *Fun Home* demonstrate, the closeted father is a specter—or ghost—who, when escaped from his historical quarantine, muddies distinctions between abject pasts and out futures. Carla Freccero reminds us that "the ghost comes back because there is something unfinished" (196). Building upon Jonathan Goldberg's reading of missionary Jean de Léry's *History of a Voyage to the Land of Brazil* (1578), Freccero posits a spectral approach to history that offers "a moment of suspension that resists the retrospectivity of *either* triumphant *or*

melancholic modern narratives of the conquest, of a choice, that is, between the future and death" (207). The closeted father should be archival material of settled history, a relic of what once was and no longer has to be that disappears along with the historical circumstances that produced him. And yet, *Beginners* and *Fun Home* attempt to return to moments of suspension in which their creators can touch their fathers without the retroactive determinations of historical narrative. They let this specter loose in order to, as Carolyn Dinshaw puts it, "make such [queer] histories manifest by juxtaposition, by making entities past and present touch" (12). If there is a desire to, as Elizabeth Freeman puts it, understand history as "not only what hurts but what arouses, kindles, whets, or itches" (*Time Binds* 117), then the reanimation of these closeted fathers as, in Bechdel's words "flesh-and-blood," rescues them from the spectrality afforded them by history. And yet, the ways that Bechdel and Mills are unable to recuperate their fathers demonstrate the ways that these seemingly dead-and-buried men remain spectral, haunting present-day formations of history and identity.

If Bruce Bechdel is a specter, he is a strangely corporeal one. From the opening photograph in *Fun Home*, Bruce Bechdel's body threatens to exceed the bounds of normative masculinity. His "unwholesome interest in the decorative arts" (31) already marks him as an incongruous presence in Beech Creek. Bruce Bechdel's aesthetic ambitions manifest in teaching high school English (7), directing funerals and preparing bodies for display and burial (44), and in his "monomaniacal" restoration of the Bechdel's family's home (4), the meticulous interiors of which, Alison narrates, were "designed to conceal" her father's shame (20). "Historical restoration wasn't his job," she writes. "It was his passion. And I mean passion in every sense of the word" (7). In a panel beneath these words, Bruce Bechdel appears in the foreground wearing only shoes and a pair of cutoff jean shorts—the same outfit Alison Bechdel depicts him as

wearing when struck by the truck (28)—carrying what appears to be a porch column over his shoulder. The house appears as a black silhouette behind him, curiously lacking dimension. Three words appear in a text box within the panel: "Libidinal. Manic. Martyred" (7). As with Alison's comment about Bruce's sunbathing, these words cheekily play with pathologizing views of homosexuality by casting the column as, simultaneously, an absurdly phallic object through which he sublimates his sexual desire, a symbol of his self-destructive drives, and a cross to bear. And yet, Alison Bechdel's deployment of these pathologizing discourses does not entirely debunk them. She instead finds uncomfortable resonances between them and her experiences with her father. Bruce's self-loathing, and the aesthetic labor through which he seems to have sublimated it implicates the entire family. Alison writes that Bruce saw his children as "extensions of his own body, like precision robot arms" (13) in his "curatorial onslaught" (14) that turned the family home into an elaborate exhibit. The distracting effect of the house's many adornments, mirrors, and tableaus proved confusing for visitors (20), a condition to which Bechdel draws a parallel in her family's state of "constant tension" brought on by her father's rages. In the panel below this caption, she illustrates Bruce Bechdel throwing a dinner plate onto the kitchen floor. The impact spot is denoted by an arrow attached to a text box that reads "Permanent linoleum scar" (21). Indeed, the damage to the linoleum from this incident appears in a panel in *Are You My Mother?* that takes place seven years after Bruce's death, as Alison helps Helen pack up their home in anticipation of selling it. "Gouge from a plate dad threw" a text box points out (263), mundanely cataloging the damage left behind by Bruce Bechdel even after his demise. This constant state of tension—most spectacularly manifested in the bodily excesses that erupt from Bruce Bechdel—threatens to undo the very curation through which his daughter claims he sublimated his own shame.

Whereas Bruce Bechdel's body is a part of the *mise-en-scène* of the Bechdel home, Hal Fields' access to aesthetic labor outside of the home absents him from Oliver's memories of domestic life. The aesthetic and affective vibrancy of the scenes from Hal's post-coming-out life, embodied in Christopher Plummer's Academy Award-winning performance, contrasts with the brief images we get of Hal during Oliver's childhood. Hal appears briefly, silently, in silhouette, perfunctorily kissing Georgia in a sequence of three goodbyes that appears at the beginning and toward the end of the film (8:25-33, 1:19:30-8). The film's flashback sequences are largely concerned with Oliver's interactions with Georgia, a subject I will address in the following chapter. However, what is important here is that Oliver is unable to address the absence of his father pre-coming out. In a later scene in *Beginners*, as Oliver sits with his father, Hal remarks: "You always wanted to hold my hand when you were little. I couldn't, you know. I was afraid it would look funny." Hal and Oliver sit together on the bed in Hal's living room on which he will die shortly thereafter. Both of Oliver's hands cup Hal's right hand. Hal tells Oliver that his father was never close with him. "God, I hope I wasn't like that," Hal says. Oliver admits that he can barely remember Hal when he was a child. Hal: "I guess I was at work." There is a cut to young Oliver and Georgia at the museum, but Hal is nowhere in the frame (1:23-35-24:03). Hal's corporeal absence in these flashback scenes imbues this late scene of father and son touching with a sense of catharsis and mourning.

Hal's explanation for this lack of closeness casts the generational transmission of masculinity as a source of loss while framing his relationship with his son as part of the legacy of the pervert. Georgia and Hal marry in 1955 when, according to Elaine Tyler May, family stability was seen as the antidote to internal subversion by the Soviet Union. The pervert became a kind of catch-all category composed of gendered and sexual behaviors seen as incompatible

with the image of American masculinity as virile, able-bodied, and properly oriented toward reproduction (94). The belief that gay and lesbian parents were more likely than heterosexual parents to molest their children influenced the outcome of custody cases through the 1970s (Rivers 59). Thus, for members of Hal's generation, pedophilia and same-sex desire congealed under this definition that was mobile enough that it could be reconstituted according to the needs of the immediate political moment yet sticky enough to retain its past shameful associations in the public consciousness. In the constitution of the pervert, we see an illustration of Sedgwick's claim that definitions of normative concepts are themselves unstable and that "contests for discursive power can be specified as competitions for the material or rhetorical leverage required to set the terms of, and to profit in some way from, the operations of such an incoherence of definition" (*Epistemology of the Closet* 11). It is only after the pervert has lost his discursive power, and subsequently his hold on the American psyche, that *Beginners* can conceive of Hal Fields as a corporeal presence both as a father and as a gay man. It is only after the death of the pervert that Hal and Oliver can touch.

Oliver's catharsis through a literal narrative event of touching is predicated on a previous corporeal absence that Alison Bechdel is not afforded. Whereas Alison in *Fun Home* dwells in liminal spaces between the closet and disclosure, certainty and unknowability, Oliver in *Beginners* invests so fully in a model of outness as authenticity that it turns Hal Fields into a specter until the moment of his coming out. Hess claims that Hal's and Georgia's perfunctory kisses in Oliver's flashbacks "lead the audience to share the impression that the marriage itself is a mere performance" (168). When Hal criticizes Oliver for a series of failed relationships, Oliver replies simply: "I just don't want to be like you and mom" (8:18-22). Indeed, Oliver reads the development of his relationship with Anna alongside his memories of his father's relationship

with Andy. As Oliver and Anna walk down the hallway of her hotel after their first night together, they first hold hands and then move in for a tender kiss. As Oliver leaves the hotel, he first flashes back to their first kiss the night before, then back even further to four different times that Hal and Andy kissed (25:07-26:02). Later in *Beginners*, as we see a memory of Oliver watching Hal and Andy lying together, Oliver tells Anna in voiceover: "For the first time, I saw him really in love" (1:03:09-21). *Beginners* resolves Oliver's dilemma of not wanting to be like his parents by having Hal's relationship with Andy offer Oliver a model for his own relationship with Anna. And yet, in order to celebrate Hal Fields' life as an out gay man, *Beginners* temporally quarantines the closeted Hal such that it invalidates his past affective investments. And, in absenting Hal's body from Oliver's memories such that the viewer never even clearly sees his face—it is not immediately clear to the viewer whether or not the actor playing Hal in flashback is Christopher Plummer—there is not clear visual link between Hal in the past and present. Thus, the Hal that touches both Oliver and Andy both is and is not the same Hal that appears, albeit briefly, in Oliver's flashbacks to the 1970s. Like Bruce Bechdel, Hal Fields is both present and not present in his child's memories. Just as Bruce Bechdel's death reverberates backwards, Hal's coming out alters Oliver's memories of him. Like Stockton's queer child, the closeted husband and father in *Beginners* is a retrospective creation. Pre-coming out Hal Fields must be artificial and distant in order to prop up the narrative of coming out as an entrance into one's authentic self.

In creating a gulf between these different historical permutations of Hal Fields, *Beginners* similarly absents Hal Fields—and his body—from the queer 1980s. In 1985, the same year that Alison Bechdel depicts herself in a gay New York City milieu in which she cannot imagine her father existing, Cindy Patton writes *Sex and Germs* in which she documents the political

response to AIDS as the crisis unfolds. In Patton's account, the pervasive stigma surrounding those living with AIDS builds upon existing discourses around disease, class, race, sexuality, and other categories of social organization such that mainstream responses to the crisis emphasized that "*difference* causes diseases which the power to leap social barriers" (58). Reagan's America responded to the threat posed by AIDS, Patton argues, by imploring individuals to "conform to rigid, traditional standards in order to protect the health of the whole society" (58). The language Patton uses echoes that of Elaine Tyler May's description of the pervert. The body of the AIDS carrier, and thus potentially the body of any man who has sex with men, became so thoroughly vilified as a threat to internal security—of the nation and of the body itself—that a widespread belief emerged that AIDS was transmitted by a germ (51). Mere proximity, rather than the exchange of bodily fluids, is posited as a method of transmission. The suspicion of bodily contact and promiscuity thus produced in both gay and straight mainstream politics culminates, as Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner document in 1998, in the gentrification of public spaces for sexual and erotic contact including the "tearooms" imagined by Oliver as the only place his father could have sex in the 1950s (560). *Beginners* links Hal's corporeal absence in the 1950s and the 1980s to the notion that perversion was contagious, and that contact was fraught with the danger of transmission. Thus, Hal's bodily contacts with his son, his lover, and others becomes imbued with a recuperative effect.

Alison Bechdel seems embarrassed by the recuperative potential of touch in the epigraph that opens this chapter. And yet, as Rebecca Scherr argues, "in invoking touch . . . Bechdel is not only trying to touch and thus recapture her father by repeatedly drawing his body, she is also touching us; we are also absorbed into the author's reach" (47). These various dimensions and directions of touch manifest in what Bechdel has called *Fun Home*'s "centerfold" ("An Interview

with Alison Bechdel" 1006): a reproduction of an out-of-focus photo taken by her father of their then-seventeen-year-old baby sitter and handyman Roy lying on a hotel room bed. As in the panel in which she holds photos of her father and herself side-by-side (120), Bechdel foregrounds touch by reproducing her own fingers holding the photograph. Bechdel found the original photograph soon after her father's death in an envelope labeled "Family" that contained photos from a family vacation taken during the summer of 1969. Bechdel finds the photo beautiful in its "ethereal, painterly quality" and wonders "Why am I not properly outraged?" (100-1). Cvetkovich notes that the photo "combines the conventions of pornography and the high-culture nude" (115). Given the tight binding of the paperback version of *Fun Home* and the photo's location in the very center of the book—a literal centerfold—one must bend the book's spine with some force to see it in its entirety, to peer past the suggestive caesura in the image caused by placing the line where the pages turn inward directly across Roy's hips. Such force leaves permanent indentations in the book itself, a tangible trace of the reader's prurient gaze upon a reproduction of a real photo of a teenage boy that implicates the reader in the same lascivious looking that uncomfortably unites father and daughter. "Perhaps I identify too well with my father's illicit awe," Bechdel concedes (101).

Indeed, Bechdel claims that her discovery of the photo inspired her to write *Fun Home* ("An Interview with Alison Bechdel" 1005), characterizing it as "a stunning glimpse into my father's hidden life, this life that was apparently running parallel to our regular everyday existence" (1006). Bechdel and her two brothers, she notes, must have been in the hotel room adjoining the one in which the photo was taken (100). Bechdel links this notion of parallel experiences to her fascination with newspapers: "I like that these other stories are running off the margins. I guess I like that my story is just one of many millions of possible stories." ("Public

Conversation" 204). Bechdel notes another parallel in the information her father attempted to omit from the photo: a blot of blue ink that fails to conceal the year "[19]69" printed on the photo's border along with the month "Aug" (101). Alison remembers the culmination of this trip, when she, Roy, her father, and her brothers drove into New York City to pick up her mother who had been staying with a college friend in Greenwich Village (102-3):

> I have a hallucinogenic memory of a throbbing welter of people in a large circle. It must have been Washington Square Park. Maybe I was experiencing a contact high from the LSD trips no doubt swirling around us. Or perhaps it was a contact high of a different sort. It had only been a few weeks since the Stonewall Riots, I realize now. And while I acknowledge the absurdity of claiming a connection to that mythologized flashpoint . . . might not a lingering vibration, a quantum particle of rebellion, still have hung in the humectant air? (104)

Four panels accompany the narration above, the first two showing Alison's "hallucinogenic" view of Washington Square Park and her fleeting glance at a lesbian among the counterculture throng. The final two panels show Roy carrying Bechdel's youngest sibling on his shoulders, the other two children following, past the façade of the Stonewall Inn. Bruce is absent. In the first panel, the bar is only recognizable to those familiar with its appearance circa 1969. In the second panel, the point-of-view moves across the street and a car occupies the foreground. Behind it, we see Roy and the Bechdel children walking past the bar, the "EWALL INN" of its 1969 sign now visible. In the window is a message that was invisible in the previous panel: "We homosexuals plead with our people to help maintain peaceful and quiet conduct on the streets of The Village. — Mattachine." In the first panel, the window is indistinctly drawn; in the second, it appears almost like a uniform black slate, the message from the Mattachine Society appearing in white

against a solid black backdrop, impossibly legible. Passing the window, not gazing upon the message, young Alison kicks a beer can (104).

Young Alison's encounter with Stonewall comes just after, in both narrative and chronological terms, Bruce's capturing the illicit photo of Roy. The time and location of the Roy photo, with all its pre-Stonewall shame and inappropriateness of subject, runs parallel to Stonewall in ways that are both tangible—the dates on the edge of the photo that Bruce Bechdel attempts to obliterate—and intangible—"a lingering vibration." Vibrations do not simply reverberate in a single, linear direction. The inconsistent appearance of the message from the Mattachine Society invokes the elusiveness of distinctions between memories of original events and retrospective memories. Is Bechdel placing us in her memory of the original moment by not showing these words until she herself became aware of their existence? Have artifacts from photographs of a post-uprising Stonewall Inn reverberated throughout her memory, blurring temporal distinctions between the memories of being at Stonewall and her later research? Is the appearance of the Mattachine message a conscious attempt to merge her "idiosyncratic" memories with documented evidence of how Stonewall appeared in the weeks following the demonstrations? The message has an unreal appearance, despite the fact that it draws—like so much else in *Fun Home*—directly from archival evidence. Like Bruce Bechdel's body in *Fun Home*, it is an apparition built from material that, despite diligent curation, cannot be concretely traced to singular temporal origins.

6. Conclusion

Indeed, vibrations, apparitions, specters, and hauntings do not operate in a linear fashion: the past extending merely into the present. One of *Fun Home*'s most celebrated sequences

depicts a moment in which Bruce Bechdel's past and Alison Bechdel's future converge during a business trip the two of them take to Philadelphia in the family funeral home's hearse. "In the city, in a luncheonette . . ." Bechdel narrates, we saw a most unsettling sight" (117). Alison sees a butch delivery driver, heavyset, with close-cropped curly hair, wearing a flannel shirt and pants. "I didn't know there were women who wore men's clothes and had men's haircuts," she writes, "but like a traveler in a foreign country who runs into someone from home—someone they've never spoken to, but know by sight—I recognized her with a surge of joy" (118). The butch is simultaneously a time traveler—a visitor from one of many futures available to Alison—and a quintessential figure of 1950s lesbianism—the heyday of butch/femme culture. "Dad recognized her too." "Is **that** what you want to look like?" Bruce Bechdel asks his daughter (118). "No," she replies, her authorial avatar forty years in the future adding, "What else could I say?" "But the vision of the truck-driving bulldyke sustained me through the years . . . as perhaps it haunted my father." Bechdel pairs those last six words with an image of father and daughter re-entering the family hearse (119). McCullough elaborates on the multiple temporalities that this moment occupies for gay father, lesbian daughter—both as her "four or five"-year-old self and as narrator—and Bechdel's readers:

> The cumulative effect of the image and words here produces two simultaneous but temporally differentiated relationships to a shared present moment. The bull dyke is understood by Bruce, the narrator, and the reader as a proleptic appearance of Alison's future, as well as an analeptic resurgence of Bruce's past: she is a figure who simultaneously enacts a pre-Stonewall model of female queerness and a utopian promise of Alison's queer futurity. (386)

The butch is also, I would add to McCullough's analysis, another parental figure—one that indicates possibilities and lineages for Alison emerging outside the nuclear family. Simultaneously, she indicates the existence of a queer lineage for contemporary audiences; like the lesbians in the record shop in *Carol*, she points toward legible models of historical queerness which generations leading up to the present have had the option of embodying, adapting, or disavowing.

In the musical, Tesori and Kron relocate Alison's sighting of the butch to a place much closer to home. Bruce and Alison sit in a diner whose staff they know by name as Bruce reads a local paper and comments on the news. He tells her to put back the barrette she's removed: "It keeps the hair out of your eyes." "So would a crew cut," she replies. Bruce snaps back: "If I see you without it again I'll wale you" (56). In the Tony Awards performance, in the place of Bruce's threat to instill femininity in his daughter through physical assault, Bruce merely says "Don't take it out again" (1:27-42). Playing Bruce and Small Alison, Michael Cerveris, who would win a Tony later that evening, and eleven-year-old Sydney Lucas begin the scene at a table on an extended, catwalk-like apron that stretches far into the orchestra. Far back, on the apron of the stage proper, Beth Malone narrates as Adult Alison, hunched over her drawing table, creating the very panels that we watch unfold before her in song. Adult Alison watches her young self intensely. As her narration ends, Small Alison's song begins:

Someone just came in the door

Like no one I ever saw before

I feel—

I feel—

I don't know where you came from

I wish I did, I feel so dumb

I feel—

The precocious Alison has no vocabulary to express what she's feeling; thus, she turns instead to description in the song's chorus:

Your swagger and your bearing

and the just-right clothes you're wearing

Your short hair and your dungarees and your lace up boots

and your keys, oh, your ring of keys (56)

Despite the vivid details, something is missing: the butch. She is a point on the horizon to which Small Alison affixes her gaze and sings, but there is no representation of her onstage. Mouth agape, Small Alison follows the unseen butch with her gaze, turning away from the audience and toward another camera. She sings directly into the camera, her gaze transferring from the butch to the viewer of the broadcast (2:56-3:02).

I thought it was supposed to be wrong

but you seem okay with being strong

I want—

You're so—

It's probably conceited to say

But I think we're alike in a certain way

I, um— (56-7)

As Small Alison reprises the chorus, the camera switches briefly to a two-shot. Small Alison is in the foreground but the image centers on Adult Alison (3:26-34). The reintroduction of Beth Malone's butch portrayal re-inscribes the description of the truck driver onto Alison's present-

day self, a literal representation of what McCullogh describes as a "proleptic appearance of Alison's future." Small Alison gazes into the future and tries to see herself as Adult Alison likewise gazes back. Hindsight allows Adult Alison to gaze directly upon Small Alison, but Small Alison's gaze remains transfixed on some point on the horizon. What is lost here is the simultaneous "analeptic resurgence of Bruce's past" indicated by the truck driver's embodiment of pre-Stonewall modes of gender presentation. "Ring of Keys" evokes a temporal exchange between concrete moments in the past and present, sidelining Bruce in order to center on the affective and temporal relationships between Small Alison and Adult Alison. Alison's burgeoning sense of identity and the knowledge that she will grow into the authorial avatar onstage are not undercut here by Bruce's explicit disavowal of the butch truck driver. That the song chosen to represent *Fun Home* on the Tony telecast emphasizes Alison's self-discovery over Bruce's less inspirational affective journey is in keeping with the show's marketing strategies. Employees at SpotCo, the show's marketing agency, joked that they had taken on the task of selling a "lesbian suicide musical" to a broad audience; a major component of their campaign involved branding the show's advertisements and marketing materials with a bright color scheme (Mattila). After the musical's Broadway debut, Mariner Books added the musical's brightly-colored logo to the front cover of the graphic novel, its bright yellows, blues, and reds clashing with the greens, blues, and grays of the original cover design. The marketing, however misrepresentative it may be of the overall story, seemed to work and *Fun Home* the musical became a lucrative property. *Fun Home* recouped its investment despite playing at the Circle in the Square Theatre, one of Broadway's smallest houses (Viagas) and managed a respectable run of 583 performances from April 2015 to September 2016 ("Fun Home," *IBDB*). The show

furthermore managed to recoup on its national tour (Gans) which included 32 stops from October 2016 through December 2017 ("Fun Home (tour)").

After the reprise of the chorus, Small Alison continues:

> *Do you feel my heart saying hi?*
>
> *In this whole luncheonette why am I the only one*
>
> *Who sees you're beautiful—*
>
> No.
>
> *I mean… handsome*

Despite whatever compromises *Fun Home*'s adaptors made to attract Broadway and national tour audiences, the subject matter of "Ring of Keys"—a child's formative experiences of identification with a queer adult—remains under-explored in popular culture. If *Fun Home* works through the closet's affective afterlives, it also points to the necessity of seeking out alternative models of nurturing and parenting in the face of inadequate families of origin. And if Small Alison's experiences of queerness and gender non-conformity come with the threat of paternal violence, the butch truck driver indicates alternative visions of queerness. This thrilling realization inspires a third, soaring, joyous reprise of the chorus. Like Hal Fields rewriting the story of Jesus's death, Small Alison begins to understand the need for "new stories." As I will explicate in the following chapter, telling these new stories have required a decentering of men like Bruce Bechdel and Hal Fields; *Fun Home* and *Beginners*' reckoning with the ghost of the closeted father allows Bechdel and Mills to explore how the overwhelming shadow left by these men obscures other familial legacies, particularly those relating to their mothers. Making Bruce less integral to "Ring of Keys" than he is to the comic panels that inspired it enables Small Alison to deliver her final, assertive lyrics to the unseen truck driver whose abstraction allows

her to stand in for the multitudinous influences that will shape Small Alison into her present-day avatar upstage:

I know you

I know you

I know you (57)

CHAPTER 4: "I DON'T NEED A BOOK TO KNOW ABOUT MYSELF": RESISTANT WIVES AND MOTHERS IN *ARE YOU MY MOTHER?*, *20TH CENTURY WOMEN*, AND *GRACE AND FRANKIE*

> *Since we are all far more various sexually than we are supposed to be, often, in fact, younger men become aware of me sexually. Their response is similar to what it is when they find themselves attracted to a homosexual: they turn those feelings into hostility and put me down. . . . I am bitter and frustrated and wasted, but don't you pretend for a minute as you look at me, forty-three, fat, and looking exactly my age, that I am not as alive as you are and that I do not suffer from the category into which you are forcing me. — Zoe Moss* ("It Hurts to Be Alive and Obsolete" 174-5)

1. Introduction

20th Century Women (A24, 2016) begins with Roger Neill's pulsing musical score and an overhead shot of crashing blue-green waves. After a few moments, the caption "Santa Barbara, 1979" appears onscreen. There is an overhead shot of the city in its Southern California splendor. Then, there is an abrupt cut to a Ford Galaxy on fire in a supermarket parking lot (0:26-58). In an interview on National Public Radio's *Fresh Air*, director Mike Mills explains the significance of this image to host Terry Gross:

> I really wanted to make a story about sort of, like, a fatherless home, which even though I had a dad and he was home, it was sort of a fatherless home in terms of real emotional connection. He just wasn't there. . . . The late '70s is kind of, like, the beginning of the end of Detroit, the beginning of the end of the big car. And cars and Detroit and industrial America, it's all kind of masculine—masculinity.

> And so I just sort of unconsciously, intuitively was like, OK, the car is men: the car is dad. . . . And it's sort of starting the film with dad's funeral, in a way, by this car accidentally catching on fire in the parking lot. (27:10-28:08)

Mills' description of his father's "funeral" is startling given that just one year after the events of *20th Century Women*, *Fun Home*'s Bruce Bechdel steps in front of a Sunbeam Bread truck. The homophobic legacies of violence, suicide, and the separation of LGBTQ parents from their children make this symbolic immolation of the closeted father a potentially fraught gesture. And yet, given the shadow cast by Mills' closeted father it seems necessary to remove him completely before telling his mother's story. Given that his mother's death in both real life and *Beginners* sets in motion his father's coming out, this symbolic funeral marks a definitive departure from the narrative timeline established by Mills' previous autobiographical work. If, as I contend in the previous chapter, it is only after the death of the pervert than Hal and Oliver can touch, it is only after the death of his wife that Hal can explore his homosexuality. Georgia's death marks the end of an era of compulsory heterosexuality for Hal. After making contact with the specter of his closeted father in *Beginners*, Mills explores in *20th Century Women* the ramifications of his father's absence. Mills notes that even though *Beginners* focuses on his relationship with his father, "the real person of my life, the real person who shaped me is my mom, and she's equally as filmic of a soul" (11:40-50). Indeed, *20th Century Women* tells us, his mother's presence was far more influential on him than the seemingly more politically exigent story of his father.

Similarly, Alison Bechdel turns to her mother in *Are You My Mother?* (2012) as a follow-up to *Fun Home*. If the question of why Bruce Bechdel remained in Beech Creek is puzzling, Bechdel notes in *Fun Home*, the question of "why my cultured mother, who had studied acting in New York City would live there cheek by jowl with his family is more puzzling still" (31). And

yet, Alison Bechdel's focus on the legacy of her father mostly displaces such questions about Helen Bechdel, a fact that Alison Bechdel acknowledges by referring to *Fun Home* as "the dad book" in *Are You My Mother?* (65). The color washes of Bechdel's "dad" and "mom" graphic novels present them as gendered objects: *Fun Home* has a bluish-green tint while *Are You My Mother?* has a pinkish-red hue. Reactions to *Are You My Mother?*, Heather Love alleges, were similarly gendered: "many [readers] have reacted to the book with an emotion often directed at mothers: rageful disappointment" ("The Mom Problem"). As Bechdel reminds readers of *Fun Home*, "the bar is lower for fathers than for mothers" (22). While the stories of Mills' and Bechdel's closeted fathers seem to have a social significance that transcends the immediate circumstances of each man's life, the stories of their mothers seem relegated to the realm of the quotidian and domestic. This view often relegates wives and mothers to mere stand-ins for compulsory heterosexuality, products of their time who prevent the temporal flourishing of men who in later decades would be able to come out and live openly as gay men. However, reading together Mike Mills' and Alison Bechdel's semi-autobiographical accounts of their relationships with their parents produces several unexpected continuities; the most striking is that in order to tell their mothers' stories, each has to remove from the picture–perhaps even *kill off*–their gay father.

My final chapter moves to a figure regarded as tangential in coming out discourses: the ostensibly heterosexual partner. In both *Beginners* and *Fun Home*, the figure of the wife and mother stands in between gay father and child, disrupting *Beginners*' attempts to read these men's experiences through a lens that prioritizes political narratives of emergence and *Fun Home*'s attempts to find affinity based upon shared queerness. In turning from their fathers to their mothers in *20th Century Women* and *Are You My Mother?*, Bechdel and Mills experience

difficulty in placing them within the feminist and queer discourses that shaped their own understandings of the eras through which their mothers lived. In many ways, both women prove frustratingly representative of their time and place. However, Bechdel and Mills work around the "rageful disappointment" this impasse might inspire. In examining their mothers' resistance to the narratives offered by feminist and queer historiographies, Bechdel and Mills must find alternative ways of reaching across time to make contact with their mothers. In doing so, they find healing through acts of rewriting and reconceptualizing the intergenerational traumas that affect both their mothers and themselves. This chapter concludes by examining the streaming series *Grace and Frankie* (Netflix, 2015-present) which makes its gay men secondary characters in order to focus on how coming out narratives elide the experiences of their ex-wives. In particular, the show's first season foregrounds the grieving and anger of its protagonists while their ex-husbands attempt to recuperate their long-standing infidelity through triumphant gay historical narratives that celebrate their love and their coming out. While pre-coming out partners often figure as stand-ins for compulsory heterosexuality, *20th Century Women*, *Are You My Mother?*, and *Grace and Frankie* allow us to see them as figures who are often overlooked in gay men's historical narratives. These works ask us to take seriously the cost of compulsory heterosexuality not just for LGBTQ-identified people. They return to the wife and mother, and to the "rageful disappointment" she inspires, in order to reveal scars of intergenerational traumas that triumphant LGBTQ historical narratives cannot heal.

2. Placing Mothers; or, My Son Is a Teenage Art Fag

While the historical investigations of *Fun Home* and *Beginners* seek to understand the lives of the gay, white, middle-class husbands and fathers who came of age in America in the

years preceding and following World War II, they only occasionally examine the historical circumstances that determined the possibilities available to their wives. Though placing Georgia within her historical milieu is a concern of *Beginners*, its focus on Hal and Oliver's relationship often displaces her. In the montage that recalls his parents' marriage, Oliver places his mother in historical context—at least initially. "This is what it looks like when Anna tells me about being Jewish in 2003," Oliver narrates over a shot of the two of them walking on a trail. Oliver informs us that his mother turned in her "Jewish badge" upon marriage, when his father likewise turned in his "gay badge" (48:55-49:07). Over a montage of period photographs, Oliver tells us that his mother did not know she was Jewish until she was thirteen and that her father tried to hide their Judaism. A photo of Adolf Hitler as *Time*'s 1938 Man of the Year adds chilling historical context for his decision. "This is the swim team that asked her to leave once they discovered that she was Jewish," Oliver narrates as a red arrow picks out a teenaged Georgia in a team photo. "This is what pretty looked like in 1938," Oliver tells us over glossy images of WASP-y women in various poses (49:07-32). Then the montage switches to his father's childhood and the series of images and narration I analyze in the previous chapter. Upon Hal and Georgia's marriage, Hal's homosexuality becomes the main story. If Oliver's retelling historically quarantines the closeted husband and father, it similarly locates Georgia's experiences of American anti-Semitism and patriarchy in the past. However, Georgia's death, the narrative event that enables Hal's coming-out, prevents the kind of direct engagement that Hal's coming-out allows both Hal and his son to perform in regards to the closet and American masculinity.

And yet, Oliver's flashbacks establish Georgia as inhibited by her husband's middle-class WASP lifestyle. In one, Oliver complains that the record playing in their home, Jelly Roll Morton's "Sweet Jazz Music," is "old." Georgia replies: "It's black." "Black music's the

deepest," Georgia tells her son, "because they suffered the most—them and the Jews." When Oliver asks if he's Jewish, she tells him he's "a quarter" and that she is "half." Hal, Georgia says, is "none" and therefore "he has the least emotions" (35:44-36:42). In the next scene, a security guard gently encourages Georgia to leave Hal's museum for "interacting" with the art. (36:48-37:20). Georgia's rebellion against gendered, racial, and classed norms of her husband's middle-class life presents her as chafing against the restrictions of her time and place. Mills describes his mother as "a woman who doesn't want to fall into the limitations of womanhood that were offered to her generation" ("Mike Mills Grapples" 18:07-28). And yet, Georgia's language regarding race, inheritance, and homosexuality place her solidly within mid-twentieth century discourses. A scene late in *Beginners* in which Hal stuns Oliver by revealing that Georgia knew of Hal's homosexuality before their marriage most tellingly illustrates Georgia's embeddedness within the discourses of her time and place. "Look, I liked my life," Hal defensively tells his son. "The museum, our house: that's what I wanted." "And mom," Oliver pointedly adds, "you wanted mom too, right?" (1:12:51-1:13-01). As Oliver angrily gets up from the table, Hal explains that, when he explained that his homosexuality might be an impediment to their marriage, Georgia said, "That doesn't matter. I'll fix that." Hal remembers his reply: "Oh God. I'll try anything." (1:13:10-50). As reported by Hal, Georgia's words indicate a viewpoint that seems so hopelessly naïve that it flirts with camp. Indeed, her comment echoes Neely O'Hara's (Patty Duke) retort in *Valley of the Dolls* (Fox, 1967) when her first husband (Martin Milner) uses "fag" to describe Neely's eventual second husband, fashion designer Ted Casablanca (Alexander Davion). Neely gives the immortal reply: "Ted Casablanca is not a fag! And I'm the dame that can prove it" (59:26-39). Both Georgia's assertion that she can "fix" Hal and his intense self-loathing seem hopelessly of their time, and yet together, Linda M. Hess argues, they

illustrate that both parents' "reasons for agreeing to the marriage show how the discourses of the time shaped their thinking" (174). This realization offers Oliver a complicated and ultimately compassionate relationship to both parents.

20th Century Women affords Mills much more opportunity to explore his mother's historical milieu. For this second movie, Mills retains the last name Fields for his semi-autobiographical family yet changes the characters' first names as if to signal the movie's departure from the universe depicted in *Beginners*. Georgia becomes Dorothea (Annette Bening) and Oliver becomes Jamie (Lucas Jade Zumann). Hal is absent and never mentioned by name—nor is his sexuality. The specter of the closeted father now gone, Mills can focus on his mother's story. Dorothea Fields was born in 1924 and came of age during the Depression. Jamie's narration of her early life is accompanied by generic footage of 1920s and 30s street scenes. "When she was my age," Jamie narrates, "people drove in sad cars to sad houses with old phones, no money or food, no televisions." Dorothea left school at the age of 16 when World War II broke out. She dreamt of being an Air Force pilot, but the war ended before she completed flight school. After the war, she became the first woman draftsperson at the Continental Can Company. "Then she met my dad," Jamie says, "and then I came, and then they got divorced." The period of Mike Mills' parents' lives that so dominates *Beginners* comes and goes in one sentence of narration. "But people from her time never admit anything went wrong," Jamie concludes (9:46-10:34). In 1979, Dorothea Fields runs a boarding house in Santa Barbara, California, in which she lives with 15-year-old Jamie. Their tenants are Abbie (Greta Gerwig), a photographer who has returned home to Santa Barbara from New York after being diagnosed with cervical cancer, and William (Billy Crudup) a mechanic and handyman who has fled a hippie commune. Julie (Elle Fanning), Jamie's best friend, often sleeps over in Jamie's bed,

though she insists that the relationship remain platonic. Together, the five of them form a loose affective and caretaking unit. Dorothea's non-conventional living arrangement, employment in a profession dominated by men, and lack of a husband mark her as non-normative in certain ways: "Some of the guys thought you were a lesbian," a co-worker blurts out after asking her on a date (52:07-9).

However, like Georgia, many of Dorothea's attitudes align with normative ideas about gender, sexuality, and child-rearing. "I just didn't think I could do it by myself," she tells Jamie when he asks why she enlisted the help of Abbie and Julie to raise him rather than relying on her own strengths (1:43:29-31). When asking Abbie and Julie to help with Jamie—William is a poor candidate, she notes, because he and Jamie have nothing in common—Dorothea asks them: "How do you be a good man? What does that even mean nowadays?" (20:23-8). In *Beginners*, adult Oliver answers a similar question by modeling his own behavior on that of his father after the latter comes out. In *20th Century Women*, the question is far more open-ended. Abbie offers Jamie books from a class she took on feminism, including *Our Bodies, Our Selves* (1973) and *Sisterhood Is Powerful* (edited by Robin Morgan, 1970). Jamie immediately starts reading. When an acquaintance at a skate park brags that he brought his girlfriend to orgasm three times during one sexual encounter, Jamie explains that she was most likely faking her orgasms and deploys his newfound knowledge to explain the importance of clitoral stimulation. Jamie's anatomical knowledge, coupled with his love of Talking Heads, induces this acquaintance to call him an "art fag" and beat him on the skate ramp. That night, his attacker vandalizes Dorothea's car with black spray paint. On one side: ART FAG. One the other: BLACK FLAG. Dorothea, whose musical tastes reflect her upbringing during the Depression, is as mystified by the reference to hardcore punk band Black Flag as she is by "art fag." "The punk scene is very divisive," Abbie

tries to explain. “You’re all so advanced, aren’t you,” says an exasperated Dorothea (1:04:33-8:08). The movie presents this generation gap in a somewhat clichéd fashion: through the sonic clash of Dorothea’s music—Benny Goodman, Louis Armstrong, and Rudy Vallee—with Jamie’s—Talking Heads, Siouxsie and the Banshees, and DEVO.

And yet, Dorothea’s responses to her “advanced” son betray an ambivalent relationship to the emerging feminist discourses that were then being deployed to narrate the lives of women of her generation. In Abbie’s copy of *Sisterhood Is Powerful*, Jamie finds the essay “It Hurts to Be Alive and Obsolete: The Ageing Woman,” published under the pseudonym Zoe Moss. Jamie begins reading it alone in his bedroom, his voice narrating on the soundtrack. As he reads, we see various shots of Dorothea at home and at work. Finally, his recitation ends with him sitting on his mother’s bed as she listens at her desk, her face visible in the wall-mounted mirror. “I’m supposed to fulfill my small functions and vanish,” Jamie concludes. Dorothea, visibly uncomfortable, asks, “Well, what do you think of all that?” “I don’t know,” Jamie says. “Maybe I’m a feminist.” After a sharp intake of breath, Dorothea replies, “You think that’s me. . . . So you think you know me better because you read that? I. . . I don’t need a book to know about myself” (1:23:58-26:35). Shortly thereafter, Dorothea tells Abbie, “This stuff with, you know, the women’s movement I respect but it’s just, it’s complicated and I think it’s too much for him.” (1:26:45-54). Dorothea’s ambivalence toward feminist discourse comes to a head during a dinner party at which Dorothea asks Jamie to wake up a hunched over Abbie, who replies “No, stop it. I’m menstruating.” Dorothea chastises her for mentioning her period. To Dorothea’s growing displeasure, Abbie begins insisting that guests say “menstruation” while making eye contact with her. As the conversation continues, Julie shares the story of her first period: “I never told my mom about it, but she never asked so it didn’t matter.” She then tells the story of how she lost her

virginity and describes having "fairly painful sex in his van." Dorothea, who shows her displeasure throughout the conversation both verbally and physically, abruptly dismisses her guests at the conclusion of Julie's story with "let's call it a night." When the guests have left, Jamie explodes at her: "Mom, I'm dealing with everything right now. You are dealing with nothing" (1:29:51-33:40). While Dorothea chafes against the restrictions placed upon her as a woman in the time and place in which she lives, she resists the familiar feminist tropes through which her existence might become part of a larger historical narrative. And in turn, Jamie displays an outburst of "rageful disappointment."

Helen Bechdel is similarly resistant to recuperation through feminist approaches. In many ways, she seems like a familiar queer-antagonistic, conservative foil to her lesbian daughter. In *Are You My Mother?*, Alison Bechdel recalls a story Helen told to her of her days as a working actress when an older costumer whom she admired admitted to having a crush on another actress. Helen claims that this revelation, the mere suggestion of lesbianism, threw her into a deep depression (110-1). She tells her daughter this story years after Alison's coming out and with full knowledge of her daughter's own sexuality. In a scene set years later, Helen asks Alison if she's familiar with the right-wing lesbian journalist Norah Vincent. "They were talking about abortion," Helen says, "and she said fetuses are more endangered than gays right now." Alison replies: "Yeah, great. The only way gay people get mainstream airtime is if they're spouting some conservative horseshit" (123-4). Alison then reveals that Helen protested the fourth anniversary of Roe v. Wade in Washington, DC when Alison was sixteen. "I was deeply impressed by her quiet, principled act," Alison admits (125). This act, however, is unlikely to inspire the readers who made *Fun Home* a success. "The negative reviews of Bechdel's second

memoir," Love alleges, "seem to reflect readers' strong investment in the first" ("The Mom Problem").

Indeed, *Are You My Mother?* has not equaled *Fun Home*'s critical and commercial success, nor the interest the earlier graphic novel created among literature scholars. Approaches to *Fun Home* have understandably focused on its gay and lesbian characters given its importance within a growing canon of LGBTQ fiction. Kate McCullough argues, however, that these readings have often sidelined Helen Bechdel. McCullough points to a moment in *Fun Home* in which Alison Bechdel imagines her parents in a 1950s Greenwich Village milieu after Helen reveals to Alison that she and Bruce were once regular patrons at the legendary speakeasy Chumley's (106). Over a panel showing herself reading Ann Bannon's *Women in the Shadows* (1959) in a subway car in the 1980s, Alison Bechdel recalls her own fascination with 1950s lesbianism and lesbian pulp fiction (107). Alison asks in the next caption, "Would I have had the guts to be one of those Eisenhower butches?" In the following caption: "Or would I have married and sought succor from my high school students?" Helen Bechdel herself appears only from behind in the panels that accompany these last two captions, which depict Bruce gazing upon a butch outside the entrance to Chumley's as she walks by dragging on a cigarette (108). Alison Bechdel seems to identify simultaneously with the butch and with her father. Alison imagining herself in her father's circumstances, like the revelation of Georgia's knowledge of Hal's homosexuality, creates a compassionate link across time. And yet, though Helen's memories enable Alison to construct these panels, Helen is "marginal to the scene in conjunction with the representation of the vulnerability of the butch body in the Eisenhower era" (385). Thus, we see Helen Bechdel's tense position within the narratives constructed by her daughter. She is not easily allied with either the parent whose secrets set *Fun Home* in motion or with her lesbian

daughter. And yet, much of *Fun Home*'s narrative, particularly in its reconstruction of events that predate Alison's own memories, relies on Helen's own memories or material evidence to which she grants Alison access. Alison's difficulty in placing Helen within *Fun Home*'s historical milieu indicates the ways that gay and lesbian histories have rarely accommodated figures like Helen on their own terms. And yet, if these panels "depict the vulnerability and danger of 1950s queer life," McCullough argues that they also depict "its cost not simply to queers but also to heterosexual women like Helen" (385). If throughout Alison Bechdel's work Helen is often depicted as queer-antagonistic, the Chumley's panels add another dimension to her historical placement. McCullough argues that the Chumley's panels produce "the possibility of a future relation to the mother that recognizes Helen's ignorance and her loss" (385). Indeed, her simultaneous presence and absence in these panels recalls other moments in *Fun Home*, such as the moment when her husband glances at a teenage choir boy in church (17) and when another teenage boy pats Bruce on the back and says "Sorry" after Bruce's hearing for providing him liquor (180). In both panels, Helen is present but Alison Bechdel draws her mother's eyes as inscrutable black dots, betraying little of her relationship to the events she may or may not be witnessing. *Fun Home*'s historical method, it seems, can reveal little of what Helen experienced.

3. "It Was My Experience Too": Resistant Subjects and Relational Autobiographies

Alison Bechdel thus signals an important departure from *Fun Home* by claiming that *Are You My Mother?* is a memoir in which she is "trying to figure out my mother" ("Public Conversation" 204). Mike Mills likewise explains his project in *20th Century Women*: "since I was a kid, since I was 5, I've been trying to figure out my mom." ("Mike Mills Grapples" 2:56-3:02). A major difference, however, between Alison Bechdel and Mike Mills' attempts to "figure

out" their mothers is that Bechdel's mother was still alive during the writing and circulation of these memoirs while Mike Mills' mother, Jan Dowd Mills, died at the age of 75 in 1999 (Pfefferman). In the NPR interview, Mills expresses the notion that dead parents linger on after their deaths such that imagined conversations with them take on an "experiential" dimension. Thus, Mills said to his deceased mother, "I get to do this. I'm your son. It was my experience too" (37:06-23). Mills' assertion to his dead mother that her story is, in part, his story echoes critical evaluations of Bechdel's work, particularly Anne Rüggemeier's classification of *Are You My Mother?* as a "relational autobiography" in that it combines autobiography with a biography of others, calling into question Enlightenment ideals of autonomy and instead emphasizing relationality (260). Indeed, Bechdel explains in an interview that she wanted to "write about the problem of the self and the relationship with the other" ("Public Conversation" 203). Thus, much of the graphic novel depicts Bechdel working through her relationship with her mother in therapy sessions and in her own readings of psychoanalytic texts by Sigmund Freud, Alice Miller, and D.W. Winnicott. Tammy Clewell notes that both critical and popular reviews of *Are You My Mother?* harshly critique Bechdel's focus on psychoanalysis (51-2). "There's a bit too much therapy in *Are You My Mother?*" writes Laura Miller in the *Guardian*. "Psychology boils away the particulars of individual experience to arrive at abstract generalities" (Miller). Whereas each chapter in *Fun Home* begins with the tangible evidence of family photo, each chapter in *Are You My Mother?* begins with Alison recounting a dream, the gutters and edges of the pages set off in black to differentiate them from the white-guttered pages of her main narrative. For all of the untidiness of Bruce and Alison's relationship, the twin revelations of their sexualities and Bruce's subsequent suicide provide *Fun Home* with a relatively obvious fulcrum around which

to center its investigation. On the other hand, Bechdel wonders early in *Are You My Mother?* if "perhaps the real problem with this memoir about my mother is that it has no beginning" (6).

And, as Bechdel notes in the graphic memoir's conclusion, the story is not yet over (284). Helen Fontana Bechdel, Heather Love notes, was "significantly, very much alive" when Bechdel published both of her graphic memoirs ("The Mom Problem"). She died on 14 May 2013 ("Helen Fontana Bechdel"), just over one year after the 1 May 2012 publication of *Are You My Mother?* and the same month that *Fun Home*'s musical adaptation had its last workshop (Pogrebin). Throughout *Are You My Mother?*, Bechdel depicts her mother's reluctant participation in the generation of both of Bechdel's memoirs. "She felt betrayed—quite justifiably so," Bechdel noted in an interview, "that I was using things she told me in confidence about my father" ("An Interview with Alison Bechdel" 1006). But, Bechdel notes, her mother kept providing evidence (1007). In her analysis of *Fun Home*, Rebecca Scherr argues that "there is a certain intimacy established with readers in violating the familial pact" (51); "we perhaps trust Bechdel more because of her willingness to betray these people, as the reader is in turn framed as a kind of confidante, pulled into the web of revelations and connections yet still separate from it" (50). Helen Bechdel's position outside of the network of circulation created among Alison Bechdel and her readers via this betrayal mirrors her uncomfortable position within LGBTQ narratives. She is a key participant, and her experiences provide much of the raw material that builds *Fun Home*—yet she is often reduced to a mere stand-in for compulsory heterosexuality. The revelation of her secrets, the conversation around *Fun Home* seems to suggest, is necessary to get at the more imperative story of her closeted husband and thus her betrayal by her daughter does not deserve the same ethical considerations afforded to disclosures about gay men like Bruce and lesbians like Alison.

Heather Love's argument suggests that a key component of *Are You My Mother?*'s hostile reception stems from its attempts to redress this oversight and repair the bonds between Alison and Helen Bechdel. Thus, *Are You My Mother?* documents precisely how Alison Bechdel betrayed her mother and her mother's reaction to this betrayal. "I must confess I have taken to transcribing what she says," Alison Bechdel narrates. "I don't think she knows I'm doing it, which makes it a bit unethical," she continues over a panel showing Alison's transcription of the conversation taking place across the last two pages. A seemingly representative conversation, perhaps cobbled together from bits of separate conversations, is shown to be an almost literal reproduction of an original phone call produced directly from this record (11). As befitting Bechdel's obsession with accuracy and curation, Bechdel records these conversations to "capture her [mother's] voice, her precise wording, her deadpan humor," particular traits that Bechdel does not think she could re-create on her own (12). Bechdel confesses above a panel of her face in which she stares intently at the screen and merely replies "uh huh" to her mother that "I'm trying so hard to get down what she's saying that I'm not really listening properly" (12). Lisa Diedrich observes that Alison's focus on note-taking "creates a gap between the form and content of her mother's words—a gap that Bechdel closes by drawing her mother's words, which return Bechdel to them, refocusing and extending her somatic attention to the shape, as well as to the meaning" (196). The reader, in effect, witnesses the process through which Alison Bechdel is able to make meaning from her mother's words and the experiences they convey. And unlike *Fun Home*, wherein Helen seems to be outside of the network of circulation created between Bechdel and her readers, *Are You My Mother?* contains instances of Helen Bechdel reading and commenting upon drafts of both graphic novels as Alison Bechdel produces them. "I recently sent mom the first four chapter of this book," Alison writes at the end of *Are You My Mother?*

(284). Thus, between composing the panels and publishing them, Alison Bechdel contradicts her earlier statement that "I don't think she knows I'm doing it, which makes it a bit unethical" (11) by bringing Helen Bechdel, somewhat uneasily, into her readerly address. Like Mills, Bechdel asserts that her mother's story is commingled with her own and *Are You My Mother?* demonstrates the fraught negotiations between Helen and Alison over who gets to tell these stories.

Indeed, as Rüggemeier's classification as a "relational autobiography" implies, *Are You My Mother?* questions the relationships between memory and the self. Rüggemeier points to a panel sequence in *Are You My Mother?* in which Bechdel documents the aftermath of a difficult phone conversation with her mother that occurred in the mid-1980s after Alison has moved to Manhattan and is beginning to publish *Dykes to Watch Out For*. A large panel depicts Bechdel at a desk in her apartment, her hand on a red push button phone receiver, her torso bent, her face appearing as if in mid-cry (229). Four pages later, Bechdel returns to this image in a two-panel sequence. In the first, captioned "the day I hung up the phone on mom was the last time she made me cry," Alison is crying, leaning forward in anguish, grasping the phone receiver. But this is an older Alison, wearing glasses and different clothes. Her hand is on a phone receiver but the push button phone itself has been replaced by a pile of books. In the next panel, captioned "Things got easier after that," our perspective is from the same angle but further back, encompassing more of the scene. A Canon digital camera is in the foreground, its timer beeping, revealing the previous panel to be a photograph that is itself a re-enactment of a moment from Alison's life decades prior. Alison's anguish is a performance from memory filtered through multiple levels of mediation. The jack at the end of the curly phone cord sits on the floor, revealing the receiver to be a non-functioning prop (233). The panels work together to illustrate

Bechdel's process; Bechdel poses as each character for each panel, takes a photo via a self-timer, then reproduces each photo as a hand-drawn panel. Bechdel "thereby creates a relational space between her past selves and her present memory selves by using her own body to perform scenes from her autobiographical memory" (260). And yet, these levels of mediation, Rüggemeier argues, remind us that "there is no direct access to autobiographical memory" (260). On the page that follows the two-panel sequence, Bechdel notes that her performances in these photos are an extension of her mother's acting career. "She has transmitted some of that drive to me," Bechdel writes (234). Earlier in *Are You My Mother?*, Bechdel reproduces a letter her mother wrote to her in the early 1980s after Alison had written her attempting to interpret a dream she had. "Why do you and I do that?" Helen writes about their shared propensity for analysis. "Patterns are my existence," Helen continues. "Everything has significance. Everything must fit." Present-day Alison writes, "to be enlisted with her in it thrills me. . . . I am carrying on her mission." (31). Rüggemeier argues that these performances in which Bechdel poses as her mother and father, and also Bechdel's reproductions of material traces of her father such as his handwriting, "generate an intergenerational experience" in which her body occupyies a territory between the subjective and the objective (263-4).

In *20th Century Women*, narration functions similarly to Bechdel's use of her body. *20th Century Women*'s narration is looser in point-of-view than *Beginners*'; while the latter consists solely of Oliver's present-day narration, the former slips across characters and time. The first sequence of narration takes place as Dorothea and Jamie watch the Ford Galaxy burn. "We drove Jamie home from the hospital in that car," says Dorothea. There is a cut to an infant in an incubator. The narration switches to Jamie: "My mom was 40 when she had me. Everyone told her she was too old to be a mother." The narration thus switches back and forth. Both narrators

recall Dorothea's first conversation with Jamie despite the fact that the latter could have no actual memory of the event. Dorothea narrates that she told the newborn Jamie that he would "fall in love, have his own children, have passions have meaning, have his mom and dad." There is a cut from Jamie in the incubator to the teenaged Jamie who narrates. After the divorce, he tells us, his father moved "back east" and left them the Ford Galaxy. "He calls on birthdays and Christmas." Dorothea takes over: "Since then, it's just been us." Mills presents the images accompanying this narration in a style familiar to viewers of *Beginners*: as Dorothea recalls telling her son of the vastness of the universe, there is a photo of the cosmos, and to place Jamie's boyhood in popular culture/historical context, there is footage of US president Gerald Ford's infamous tumble as he exited Air Force One in December 1975 (01:11-2:29). However, the temporal locations from which the characters narrate events do not remain so stably tied to particular historical moments. Later in the movie, Dorothea tells us: "It's 1979. I'm 55 years old, and in 1999, I will die of cancer from the smoking." Of Jamie, Julie, and Abbie, she says: "They don't know this is the end of punk. They don't know that Reagan is coming, It's impossible to imagine that kids will stop dreaming about nuclear wars and have nightmares about the weather. It's impossible to imagine HIV, what will happen with skateboard tricks, the internet . . ." Her narration is accompanied by pictures of things to come: at first, we see images of Reagan's face and the HIV virus under a microscope, followed by stock footage of nuclear blasts transitioning into a computer-generated cityscape sinking beneath the waves (1:00:15-1:04). Here, Mills composes narration for Dorothea that emanates simultaneously from 1979 and 2016, and perhaps 1999 as Dorothea's life ends. Dorothea herself cannot possibly know of Reagan, HIV, or the internet from the vantage point of 1979. And yet, through this narration, in which Jamie and Dorothea speak together, Mills asserts that these were/will be his experiences too. Alison

Bechdel writes that her documenting and recreating Helen Bechdel's phone conversations are, in essence, "composing" her (14). In the narration of *20th Century Women*, Mike Mills similarly composes his mother in a way that entwines their voices and calls into question boundaries between the subjective and the objective.

This narration in which their voices build the story together unites Mills and his mother despite the fact that, as in *Are You My Mother?*, the protagonist's mother resists his attempts to understand her. "Do you think you're happy?" Jamie asks. "Like, as happy as you thought you'd be when you were my age?" Dorothea is unsettled. "Seriously?" she says. "You don't ask people questions like that. . . . especially your mom" (13:02-20). Later, after Dorothea tries to get Jamie to explain why he participated in a playground stunt that sent him to the emergency room, Jamie explodes: "Why are you fine being so sad and alone?" Dorothea stammers, "You don't say that to me" (18:08-54). In the movie's climax, their relationship seems to reach a new level of openness. Jamie asks her, "Were you and dad ever in love?" "Sure," she begins haltingly, "or, um, maybe I was just . . . I felt I was supposed to be in love. Or I was scared I'd never be in love. So I . . . I . . . I just picked the best solution at the time" (1:46:00-43). The moment is roughly analogous to the revelation of Georgia and Hal's pre-marriage conversation in *Beginners*. Compassion replaces some of Jamie's "rageful disappointment" toward his mother upon his further understanding how the possibilities available to her influenced her decisions. In the movie's final scene before its closing montage, Dorothea drives the family car—a replacement for the one aflame in the movie's opening—while Jamie holds onto the passenger side door as he skateboards alongside. "I thought that was just the beginning of a new relationship with her where she'd really tell me stuff," Jamie narrates, "but maybe it was never really like that again" (1:48:25-42). In some ways, Dorothea's disclosure leads to more disappointment; the promise of

a more open relationship between them turns out to be an aberrant moment in their relationship. However, Jamie's "maybe" suggests more possibilities. Rather than remain in the temporality of "rageful disappointment," *20th Century Women*, particularly in its narration, lingers in moments of possibility in which Jamie and Dorothea enact new ways of relating to one another.

4. "Don't You Come Back Here": Rewriting Intergenerational Trauma

Ultimately, *20th Century Women* and *Are You My Mother?* seek out ways of relating to mothers outside of the rageful norms to which mothers have been consigned. Part of Jamie's rage at his mother concerns her smoking. "Why do you smoke yourself to death?" Jamie asks Dorothea during a fight in which he asserts that she "doesn't talk" (18:24-5). Jamie's anger about her smoking is thus directly tied to her placement in a generation whose members "never admit anything went wrong." In an early montage, Jamie tells us that Dorothea "smokes Salems because they're healthier; she wears Birkenstocks because they're contemporary," narration that is accompanied by still images of the cigarettes and the sandals (12:03-8). Cigarettes are not simply a bad habit, Jamie's narration suggests, but an essential—and deadly—part of Dorothea's milieu. Of course, the words "I will die of cancer from the smoking" eventually appear in Dorothea's narration. When Julie later asks Dorothea for a cigarette, she refuses saying that they "are really bad for you." Julie points out that Dorothea is smoking. "When I started they weren't bad for you," Dorothea says, "they were stylish, sort of edgy, so it's different for me" (53:47-59). Dorothea's excuse conjures romantic and seductive images of smoking from films of the 1930s and 40s. Indeed, Dorothea and Jamie watch *Casablanca* (Warner Bros., 1942) together and she later admits to Jamie a desire to "marry Humphrey Bogart in my next life" (1:47:15-8). Bogart himself famously died of smoking-related esophageal cancer in 1957 ("Humphrey Bogart"). If

understanding Dorothea's historical milieu helps Jamie/Mills establish a more compassionate relationship to his mother, then these references help place Dorothea's smoking in the context of the options available to her generation. Coming to terms with Dorothea's smoking and its role in her death is part of *20th Century Women*'s larger project of coming to terms with intergenerational trauma. Jamie's eventual loss of Dorothea to cancer is not simply the result of Dorothea's habits but also a product of her generational placement.

Though the title *20th Century Women* suggests a wider scope than the happenings in a single home in 1979, the generational placement of the women in Dorothea's house is a major preoccupation of the narrative. Like Dorothea's lung cancer, Abbie's cervical cancer is a result of her generational placement. Jamie accompanies her to an appointment in which she finds out that a recent surgery was successful, and that the cancer had been removed. However, the doctor tells her, due to the surgery she has "an incompetent cervix" and her pregnancies will likely end in miscarriage or premature birth (40:56-41:45). Abbie, an intertitle informs us several minutes later, was born in 1955 (48:50). In a flashback to a doctor's appointment following Abbie's diagnosis, a doctor asks her mother Gail (Thea Gill) if she took the estrogen replacement drug D.E.S. (diethylstilbestrol) while pregnant with Abbie. Gail says that her doctor had prescribed the drug after she had suffered two miscarriages. In voiceover, as the image switches to a banal stock photo of a pill, Abbie tells us "D.E.S. was a fertility medication. Doctors prescribed it to women. Later they found out that the daughters of the women who took it got cervical cancer." In the next shot, Abbie and her mother leave the appointment. Abbie says, "I didn't know that you had miscarriages." Her mother does not respond. "When her mom found out it was because she took that drug," Jamie narrates, "she wouldn't talk about it. And everything Abbie did made her mad so Abbie looked for another place to live. And she started renting the room upstairs"

(50:11-51:02). Gail's reaction, or lack thereof, adds additional context to Dorothea's discomfort with Abbie and Julie's frank discussions of menstruation and sex. These brief scenes between Abbie and her mother illustrate the shame and the emotional toll exacted by the prohibition of frank discussions of bodies among women. Alison Bechdel, born five years after Abbie, recalls taking baths with her two brothers as a child. Her mother frankly discusses the penises, foreskins, and scrotums of her brothers, but refers to Alison's vulva as her "tee-tee place." When Alison presses her for the correct term, Helen says that she needs to look it up. During a subsequent bath, when her brothers are not present, Helen reports that her research has yielded the term "vagina." In Helen's tone, Alison writes, "I understood why the term was not in common usage" (*Are You My Mother?*168-9).

To counter this legacy of shame, *20th Century Women* constructs a recuperative history for Dorothea, Abbie, and Julie. It concludes with each of the principal characters speaking in the future tense. "In March of 1999," Dorothea narrates over an image of cigarette smoke on a black background, "I'll start to feel tired and confused." By the time she will see a doctor, the cancer will have metastasized, and she will deteriorate rapidly (1:48-44-1:49:13). Abbie will take Julie to Planned Parenthood and help her obtain birth control pills. "I will go to NYU and lose touch with Jamie and Dorothea," Julie narrates. She will fall in love with a man named Nicholas, move to Paris, and "will choose not to have children" (1:49:13-48). Abbie will stay in Santa Barbara and marry a man named Dave two years later. She will have two children despite the doctors' warnings. We last see Abbie posed with her family in front of their home in a tableau reminiscent of *Beginners* (1:49:13-50:21). Jamie tells us what happened to Dorothea between 1979 and 1999: "My mom will meet Jim in 1983. They will stay a couple until she dies. On her birthday each year, he will buy her a trip on a biplane." He then resumes his own story: "Years

after she's gone, I will finally get married and have a son. I will try to explain to him what his grandmother was like . . . but it will be impossible." *20th Century Women* ends with Dorothea aloft in the biplane, exuberant. It transitions into its end credits sequence with a reminder of Dorothea's Depression upbringing: Rudy Vallee's 1931 recording of the Herman Hupfield standard "As Time Goes By," not the more iconic 1942 Dooley Wilson version in *Casablanca* (1:50:48-1:51:57). Julie, the youngest of the women, takes control of her reproductive health in a way that women of Dorothea's generation were denied. Abbie defies medical personnel whose failure to ensure women's well-being caused her cancer in the first place. Dorothea finds the intimacy she could not attain from her closeted husband. And yet, if Alison Bechdel doesn't know where to begin, neither does Mike Mills. In a way, his father's story, with its pre- and post-coming out timeline, was easier to tell. Telling his mother's story, he concedes, is "impossible." In one of the final scenes of *20th Century Women*, Dorothea tells Jamie, "I don't want you to end up in the same place as me" (1:43:06-31). Like Alison Bechdel, Mike Mills is carrying on his mother's mission: he brings his mother with him into a space in which the legacy of intergenerational trauma does not delimit the possibilities available to them.

In *Are You My Mother?*, Bechdel similarly recuperates her mother. In a panel depicting her infancy, Bechdel narrates that her parents lived with Bruce's parents at the family funeral home in a "tense arrangement." In the foreground, Helen is trying to breastfeed a crying Alison in the kitchen. Helen breastfed Alison, Bechdel tells us, "over the objections of everyone around her." Bruce's mother stands near the stove, looking off into space; she looks neither at Helen nor at the scene unfolding in the next room. In the background, seen and heard through a doorway, Bruce's father berates him: "Three goddam solid bronze caskets? You'd let that salesman talk you into anything, you dumbshit" (59). The language that Bruce's father uses to insult his son, a

masculine outburst of aggression at his son's un-masculine aesthetic interests, morphs into the language Bruce uses to verbally abuse his wife. If Bruce is a "dumbshit," Helen is a "crazy bitch." Although much changes between the time of Helen and Bruce's courtship and Alison's childhood, his propensity for calling her a "crazy bitch" spans the length of their marriage (*Fun Home* 70-2). In linking the verbal abuse Bruce suffered at the hands of his father to that Bruce later hurls at his wife, the panel positions Helen within the lineage of trauma handed down from father to son. The gendered nature of their argument and the linking of Bruce's aesthetic interests to his homosexuality in *Fun Home* places Helen—the ostensibly straight wife and mother—within a lineage of masculine, homophobic violence.

The resistance to Helen's breastfeeding among Bruce's family, and a doctor's dehumanizing comment that Helen is "not a good cow" when he recommends that she switch to bottle feeding (60), presents Alison's early physical separation from her mother as a product of contemporary attitudes toward childrearing. Whereas Bechdel claims that her discovery of the photo of Roy was the genesis for *Fun Home*, she claims that the discovery of a series of photos of her and her mother when she was three months old was the catalyst for *Are You My Mother?* (207). Bechdel discovered the photos "scattered about in different albums and boxes" and could not locate a negative to ascertain their chronological relationships to one another (31-2). Like the Roy photo, the series of photos of Alison with her mother receives a two-page spread. This spread, however, is much more cluttered. The five photos are arranged, in Bechdel's words, "according to my own narrative." Pens, brushes, and erasers crowd the table along with a triangular drawing ruler, Bechdel's discarded glasses, and a jar of Gerber's baby food—presumably for reference. "Mom is making faces and presumably sounds at me," Bechdel writes in the captions. "In each shot, I reflect her expression and the shape of her mouth with uncanny

precision." Bechdel includes an excerpt from D.W. Winnicott's *The Ordinary Devoted Mother and Her Baby* (1949) in which he explains that "*ordinarily* the woman enters into a phase, a phase from which she *ordinarily* recovers in the weeks and months after the baby's birth, in which to a large extent she is the baby and the baby is her." "In my arrangement of these photos," Bechdel writes, "the rapport between mom and me builds until I shriek with joy." In the final photo of Bechdel's sequence, Helen is still facing baby Alison, but the latter has turned a fearful eye toward the camera. "Then the moment is shattered as I notice the man with the camera. At three months, I had seen enough of my father's rages to be wary of him" (32-33). Bechdel concludes: "The picture of me looking at the camera feels like a picture of the end of my childhood" (35). In this spread and the aforementioned panel, the shattering of her connection with her mother—which Bechdel feels acutely into adulthood—Bechdel traces to her father, his father, and a male medical establishment that regards Helen as a "cow." "I have . . . been trying to heal my mother for as long as I can remember," Alison realizes in response to a comment from her therapist (83). Like Mills' rewriting of intergenerational trauma via narration in *20th Century Women*, Bechdel recuperates her relationship with her mother through an act of arranging her own narrative—one that allies her with her mother in their shared experiences of violence. "Whatever it was I wanted from my mother," Alison concludes, "was simply not there to be had" (228).

While Helen Bechdel remains a supporting character in the drama between Bruce and Alison in Jeanine Tesori and Lisa Kron's musical adaptation of *Fun Home*, the musical seems influenced by *Are You My Mother?* in its depiction of her. The show was workshopped beginning in 2009 and finally premiered at the Public Theatre in October 2013 ("Fun Home," *Lortel Archives*), over a year after *Are You My Mother?*'s publication. The lyrics to "Welcome to

Our House on Maple Avenue," the number that introduces the various family members who occupy Adult Alison's memories, consist largely of statements beginning with "he wants" referring to Bruce's curatorial ambitions: "He wants the Hepplewhite suite chairs back in the parlor. . ." (13). Four times during the song, Helen—twice joined by her children—merely sings "He wants—" three consecutive times (13-7). Bruce's manic desire for the appearance of perfection spills onto the rest of his family. Helen anxiously sings:

What are we missing?

What have we left out?

When he comes down here what's in store? (15)

"I lived in constant fear that something was going to happen," Helen Bechdel tells her daughter in *Are You My Mother?* (251). Lisa Kron's book offers audiences several moments to reflect on the confusion and hurt experienced by Helen Bechdel in response to her husband's infidelities and rages, and the potential danger they posed to her family. Later, when Roy appears in the house, Helen tries to get her husband to explain why a teenaged stranger is in their home with their children:

HELEN: Who is that? Why is he here?

BRUCE: I hired him.

HELEN: To do what?

BRUCE: To help me out. (28)

Bruce continues to offer evasive answers to her questions:

BRUCE: What difference does it make?

HELEN: I- I- I just—

BRUCE: Arnie recommended him, okay?

HELEN: Okay, I'm just, I'm trying to get a sense of // of—

BRUCE: Chrissakes! I know him. He was my student a few years back. Okay? What, do you think I'm bringing some bum around? Is that the bug up your ass? Christ. (28-9)

As Bruce seduces his former student, Helen moves to another part of the house and begins to play the piano. As "Helen's Etude" begins, Adult Alison remarks "It's like a 1950s lesbian pulp novel. Their tawdry love can only flourish in the shadows" (30). And yet, the scene unfolding in the Bechdel home is hardly one that can be joyously recuperated by triumphant LGBTQ historical narratives. Roy asks Bruce if his wife is the one playing the piano. "Don't worry about her," Bruce callously replies (31). Helen begins to hum along to her own piano playing, which disturbingly provides romantic underscoring to the scene of underage seduction in the next room. She pauses for a moment, as if to intervene. Then, she sings:

Maybe not right now

Maybe not right now

La la la. . . (31)

The apex of Helen's arc in the musical takes place when Alison returns home in the wake of her coming out—and the revelation of her father's homosexuality. Bechdel's graphic novel depicts two such visits. During one of them, all five members of the family sit down to dinner. The panel's point-of-view is perpendicular to the table, with Bruce and Helen appearing at extreme opposite ends of the wide panel, separated by their children; no one at the table seems to communicate with one another. "Some crucial part of the structure seemed to be missing," Alison remarks in the accompanying caption, "like it dreams I would have later where termites had eaten through all the floor joists" (216). "The potential nightmare of this disintegration,"

writes Robin Lyndenberg, "is mitigated by the fact that it opens up the possibility of escape from a labyrinth of repression, both architectural and emotional, that had seemed inescapable to her as a child" (65). Heather Love argues that "Bechdel suggests that the silences and isolation in her family led her to adopt a strategy of cool aesthetic distance" and that *Fun Home*, "with its tight structure and high-culture allusions embodies such an approach" ("The Mom Problem"). Indeed, a large panel in *Fun Home* depicts the whole house as "artist colony" in which each member is "absorbed in our separate pursuits" (134). After this dinner, Bruce and his sons splinter off. "Mom took me into her confidence," Alison narrates after they've gone (216). The understatement of Bechdel's caption underscores the failure of communication between Helen and Alison throughout *Fun Home* and the severity of the revelations Helen shares with her daughter about Bruce's routine infidelities, shoplifting, and lying (216). "Shocking as all this was to hear," Alison tells us, "it was the first time my mother had spoken to me as another adult" (217). "You've done enough," Alison tells her mother. "You should go" (217). If the metaphorical destruction of their home and the artifice it represents frees Alison and kills Bruce, where does Helen go? Does she die too in its rubble—her demise mere collateral damage for a larger story of gay and lesbian emergence to which she is intimately connected through her husband and daughter but to which she is considered a tangential figure at best?

Tesori and Kron's adaptation telescopes Alison's visits home into a single visit that takes place just prior to Bruce's death. Kron's book also places details of Bruce and Helen's marriage that Alison recounts in other parts of the graphic novel into a linear account coming directly from Helen:

> You know, shortly after we were married we took a drive from Germany where we were living to Paris. He wanted me to meet an Army buddy of his. We had a

> beautiful drive. And then, just outside of Paris, he just went crazy. Just started screaming at me. Why couldn't I read a simple fucking map? I was a stupid, worthless bitch. I was dumbfounded. I was terrified—it came out of nowhere as far as I knew. Of course, I learned later that this man had been your father's lover. (63)

Thus, Helen begins her only solo in the musical, "Days and Days." The lyrics begin as a halting reprise of "Welcome to Our House on Maple Avenue"; this time, however, there is no underscoring to accompany Helen's voice ("Days and Days").

> *Welcome to our house on Maple Avenue*
> *See how we polish and we shine*
> *We rearrange and redesign*
> *Everything is balanced and . . . and . . .*

Instead of repeating the lies that have sustained her home and marriage, Helen falters. And instead of listing once again her husband's desires, Helen tells her own story:

> *Days and days and days, that's how it happens*
> *Days and days and days*
> *Made of lunches and car rides and shirts and socks*
> *And grades and piano and no one clocks*
> *The day you disappear* (63-4)

In many ways, the story Helen Bechdel tells is familiar, one of a woman subsumed beneath the monotony of maintaining a home, marriage, and family. But the details that follow illustrate the unique toll of her marriage. Helen recounts the "posing and bragging and fits of rage" and the underage boys with whom her husband has cheated on her. Then, the song enters a reverie in

which Helen recounts their romance, concluding with her memory of Bruce telling her that she understood "how the world made him ache." "But no," Helen sings twice, resisting her reverie and returning to the realities of the present (64). Then, Tesori's music from "Welcome to Our House on Maple Avenue" returns along with its now-ironic lyrics. Helen finally completes the line "everything is balanced and serene" as John Clancy's percussive orchestrations reinforce the toll of Helen's quotidian labors to maintain the illusion of their marriage and family ("Days and Days"). The end of "Days and Days" echoes Dorothea Fields' reply to Jamie: "I don't want you to end up in the same place as me." In the *Fun Home*'s first chapter, Alison narrates that Helen made it "clear that my brothers and I would not repeat [our parents'] mistake" of living in Beech Creek (31). Helen's general order for her children to disperse becomes much more personal in the conclusion to "Days and Days":

> *Don't you come back here*
>
> *I didn't raise you*
>
> *To give away your days*
>
> *Like me.* (64)

If "Ring of Keys" is the show's big emotional number that depicts the joy of queer discovery, "Days and Days" is its converse. Alison's story of emergence serves as a counterbalance to the tragedy of Bruce Bechdel's self-loathing and suicide. And yet, "Days and Days" refuses to let Bruce Bechdel off the hook. Following *Are You My Mother?* and its consideration of Helen Bechdel, *Fun Home*'s musical adaptation locates her within damaging homophobic legacies and illustrates how that her pain has been ignored by narratives focusing solely on LGBTQ people.

5. Conclusion

The first episode of the Netflix series *Grace and Frankie* (2015-present), "The End," begins with Frankie Bergstein (Lily Tomlin) sitting alone in a high-end San Diego restaurant. Grace Hanson (Jane Fonda), the wife of her husband's law partner, soon arrives. The vulgar, New Age-y Frankie and the pantsuit-wearing retired cosmetics mogul Grace have a chilly rapport. Their husbands, Sol (Sam Waterston) and Robert (Martin Sheen) arrive. Soon, the men divulge that they intend to divorce their wives. "Who is she?" asks an outraged Grace. "Oh, it's not what you think," Robert replies. "It's a he," he offers, as if this fact absolves him of responsibility for his infidelity. The "he" is, in fact, Sol (3:59-4:05). Robert reveals that the affair has been going on for twenty years, approximately half of the forty years each couple has been married. Frankie asks why they chose this moment to reveal their affair, rather than "any time over the last two decades." The men reveal that they intend to get married. "Because we can do that now," Robert adds. "I know," shoots back Frankie, his fiancée's current wife, "I hosted that fundraiser!" (4:26-47). The ensuing series follows the begrudging friendship that develops between Grace and Frankie as they navigate life as septuagenarian divorcées while living together in the La Jolla, California beach house that their ex-husbands purchased ostensibly as a vacation home for the two couples, but that also served as a location for the men's affair.

Though *Grace and Frankie* has largely been greeted with positive notices, reservation about the show's handling of its gay characters emerged in the wake of its 8 May 2015 debut. At *Salon*, Sonia Saraiya critiques the "worrying flippancy" with which *Grace and Frankie* addressed the struggles faced by Robert and Sol (Saraiya). Saraiya argues that "the show's sympathies are so heavily slanted towards Grace (Fonda) and Frankie (Tomlin) that it's hard to see the positivity in Sol and Robert's decision" (Saraiya). Citing Saraiya, Kevin O'Keeffe at *Mic*

claims that "by including gay themes, *Grace and Frankie* has taken on the responsibility of being a queer show" (O'Keeffe). Saraiya and O'Keeffe seem to be deploying criteria similar to Steven Capsuto, who includes in his history of "gay and lesbian images" in television only characters "who express feeling of attraction for people of their own sex" (9). Saraiya and O'Keeffe's assertions echo the critics cited by McCullough who ignore content in *Fun Home* not specifically relating to its gay and lesbian characters. However, *Grace and Frankie* makes its gay characters secondary in order to show how the experiences of their wives have been elided by triumphant gay narratives. In the first episode, Sol feels guilt about their infidelity: "I devastated someone I love very much." Robert's reply: "I'm done feeling guilty about who I am." Then, they kiss for the first time onscreen ("The End" 25:27-26:01). Robert's reply deploys language that evokes a prideful reclamation of his own sexuality after living as a heterosexual man for decades. And yet, it also recalls the callousness of Bruce's "Don't worry about her," in its disregard for the pain of his wife. When Grace says that Robert and Sol's transition out of their heterosexual marriages is "so easy for them," she is not merely being callous ("The Funeral" 7:58-8:00); in these early episodes, Robert and Sol deploy the language of coming out to avoid reckoning with the pain their coming out has caused their wives. In the third episode, "The Dinner," Sol and Robert invite to dinner Frankie and Sol's sons Nwabudike (Baron Vaughn) and Coyote (Ethan Embry) and Grace and Robert's daughters Mallory (Brooklyn Decker) and Brianna (June Diane Raphael). The dinner takes place in Robert and Sol's home, the same house in which Robert lived with Grace. In the kitchen, Nwabudike asks Brianna, "Would you be cool with it if they had been cheating with women for the last twenty years?" (23:18-22). In the same episode, as the men adjust to their new, relatively comfortable lives, their soon-to-be-ex-wives acutely experience the intersections of ageism and misogyny. Grace's daughter Brianna, to whom she

left her cosmetics company, has decided to take Grace's aging face off of her cosmetics products while Frankie applies for an art teacher position at a retirement home only to be mistaken for a prospective resident by a condescending administrator. Later, both women are ignored at a supermarket as the male cashier fawns over a younger woman. Grace's response echoes Zoe Moss in 1970: "I refuse to be irrelevant" (27:48-51).

These tensions between Grace and Frankie and their ex-husbands come to a head in a two-episode arc that ends season one and begins season two. In the season one finale, "The Vows," which takes place after the couples finalize their divorces, Frankie and Sol are overcome with emotion while cleaning out their former home and end up having sex (16:22-17:47). The first episode of season two, "The Wish," takes place in the aftermath. Sol returns home to tell Robert of his infidelity only to discover Robert slumped over a table, having suffered a heart attack. As they wait in a hospital waiting room to hear about Robert's fate, Sol takes Frankie aside to attempt to address what has happened between them. Sol, wracked with guilt, says that he "really fucked up" by having sex with Frankie. Frankie replies: "This was the fuck-up? Not your twenty-year affair? Not all the lies you told me? One night with a woman you spent forty years with in the house where we raised our children? That's the fuck-up? That's fucked up" (13:24-55). Grace similarly addresses Robert as he prepares for surgery:

> You're not gonna die. And you know why? Because I am not going to let you. You are not getting off the hook that easy, Mister. At first, I wasn't allowed to get angry with you because you're gay. And now I'm not allowed to because you're sick. I have forty years of anger built up. And it would be really shitty if you died before I got to say everything that I need to say to you. (25:25-26:06)

It is easy to understand Saraiya and O'Keefe's objections to dialogue such as this, which features a heterosexual woman criticizing a gay man's decision to come out. However, Frankie's rebuke to Sol and Grace's similar comments to Robert illustrate how the wealthy, white gay men to whom they were married have an entire historical narrative at their disposal through which they can justify their infidelity. There is no such narrative for Grace and Frankie. And for these characters to chart their own courses over subsequent seasons, they must first work through the hurt that, as Grace notes, they are not even allowed to articulate. If the gay father made a comeback in popular culture in the decade preceding *Grace and Frankie*'s debut, the show makes a case that this focus has obscured other figures whose experiences are tied to LGBTQ history but who are illegible within it.

Perhaps more than any other figure in this dissertation, the ostensibly heterosexual wife and mother demonstrates the potential of the family as a vehicle for intergenerational queer transmission. As Siobhan B. Somerville argues, "queer" is a contested term, used sometimes to refer to specific identity groups—often as shorthand for terms such as "LGBT" or "gay and lesbian"—and at other times to refer to political/theoretical projects that seeks to deconstruct such orderly categories based around sexual difference (203). Queer is an especially versatile word. It can be a noun. In a letter written during his persecution of Oscar Wilde, the infamous Marquess of Queensbury railed against, among other things, "Snob Queers" (Foldy 22). It can be an adjective. When gay barrister Melville Farr (Dirk Bogarde) challenges the blackmailers who are responsible for the suicide of his young lover in Basil Dearden's *Victim* (Rank, 1961), the phrase "FARR IS QUEER" appears in white paint on his garage door (1:16:19). Queer can also be a verb. "What does it mean to queer a space?" asks E. Patrick Johnson in his performance piece *Strange Fruit* (99). Within these various uses, we see the tension outlined by Somerville.

The noun and adjective uses seem to be mere description while the verb "queer" seems to indicate action, and perhaps agency. Queer families, as I outline in my introduction, are often conceived in starkly binary terms that follow this logic. A family of origin may happen to contain queer people or relationships, but the families of choice described by Weston are the results of agency, creations of queer ingenuity. Occupying a liminal space between these models, the ostensibly heterosexual wife and mother is neither queer by description nor by deed. While perhaps not a queer (noun), her proximity to queerness, on an intimate, familial level, makes her a queer (adjective) figure whose experiences and how they reverberate through their lives and their children's lives queer (verb) familial legacies. She demonstrates how queerness within families is not limited to the presence of LGBTQ individuals, nor to the agential creation of LGBTQ people. If Mike Mills can assert that his mother's history is also his own, Jan Dowd—through her onscreen surrogates Georgia and Dorothea—can likewise assert her place within LGBTQ history.

CODA

During June 2019, the international non-profit organization InterPride held the sixth WorldPride celebration. Having previously taken place in Rome, Jerusalem, London, Toronto, and Madrid between 2000 and 2017, WorldPride celebrations occur in conjunction with the host city's annual Pride festivities and are designed to draw huge, multinational crowds. The rationale for choosing New York City for the first American-hosted WorldPride was evident in the event's official title: *Stonewall 50—WorldPride NYC 2019*. An estimated 5 million people attended the festivities commemorating the anniversary of a queer uprising sparked by a police raid on the Stonewall Inn; New York City mayor and then-presidential hopeful Bill de Blasio praised the "extraordinary efforts by NYPD to keep people safe" during the celebrations (Allen). The irony was indeed palpable, and the timing of the event was fraught. The anniversary fell two-and-a-half years into the presidency of Donald Trump, who took office amidst a global populist movement that elevated right-wing politicians across the globe, including Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro and Italy's Matteo Salvini. Throughout the years preceding the anniversary, an even larger-scale catastrophe loomed large; each week seemed to bring new news of an imminent climate change-related catastrophe. Faced with an increasingly bleak future, the sense of historical triumph that undergirds progressive narratives seemed to be stretched to the breaking point. The overall mood in June 2019 was decidedly grim, and one didn't have to be Lee Edelman to contemplate *No Future*.

Despite these existential threats and the dismayingly neoliberal slant of the most high-profile celebrations, the 50th anniversary of Stonewall provided a moment for reflection about the generations of LGBTQ people emerging after Stonewall and their potential futures. In a *New York Times* article published on 18 June 2019 Jamal Jordan asked, "As queerness starts to carry

less and less stigma, will it be easier for young L.G.B.T.Q. people to imagine a life where they actually grow old?" Jordan interviewed five queer elders and their mentees for the piece, including the *Precious* (Lionsgate, 2009) filmmaker and *Empire* (Fox, 2015-present) showrunner Lee Daniels. In the article, Jordan quotes Daniels as saying that in his youth, "older gay men took care of younger gay men, because that was their job. They realized no one else was going to take that on. But something happened. Now there's a disconnect" (Jordan). Despite the overall hopeful tone of the piece, Daniels' comments refer to a culture of mentorship in LGBTQ communities partially obliterated by the deaths of so many elders and potential mentors in the HIV/AIDS crisis of the 1980s and 1990s. In a contemporary context, the very lessening of stigma that Jordan cites might also contribute to this dearth of mentorship; perhaps fewer LGBTQ people seek out specifically queer forms of mentorship. The long decline of the gay bar and other spaces for LGBTQ face-to-face socializing have certainly changed how different generations of LGBTQ people come into contact.

And yet, LGBTQ people keep looking back and thinking of their queer predecessors in generational and familial terms. In recent decades, queer and trans activists have sought to recover the figures of Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera, both participants during the Stonewall demonstrations who were later co-founders of the short-lived political collective Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR). When Johnson died under mysterious circumstances in 1992—determined to be a suicide by the NYPD—her death went unnoticed by the press. It was only in 2018 as part of their "Overlooked" series that the *New York Times* published an obituary for Johnson, which hailed her as a "transgender pioneer and activist who was a fixture of Greenwich Village street life" (Chan). Her obituary finally appeared after Johnson received widespread attention in LGBTQ circles, and the story of her life and

mysterious death appeared in David France's documentary *The Death and Life of Marsha P. Johnson* (Netflix, 2017). Simultaneously, many memes and articles circulated claiming that she instigated the Stonewall uprising by, as the expression goes, "throwing the first brick." Johnson has thus become a kind of *de facto* mother of the movement, a new figure from whom to trace a lineage of LGBTQ rights activism that is too often treated as the offspring of patriarchal, cisgender white gay men. Chrysanthemum Tran argues, however, that such a simplistic narrative fails to do justice to the complicated, intersectional nature of Stonewall and the LGBTQ activism of which it was just one, albeit historically important, manifestation:

> It is said that these riots began when a patron "threw the first brick" at a police officer in response to the unjust raid. While the LGBTQ+ community celebrates activist Marsha P. Johnson by crediting her with the throwing of said brick, the jury is out as to the historical accuracy of this claim. And by crediting a movement and a riot to a singular person, we mythologize Johnson's personal legacy in favor of a digestible narrative, and actively erase the labor of countless LGBTQ+ people who put their lives on the line for our collective liberation. (Tran)

While emphasizing collectivity over individual actors, Tran notes that "historical accounts suggest that it was Stormé DeLarverie, a Black biracial butch lesbian and drag king" whose resistance to police brutality—in the form of a "first punch" rather than a "first brick"—served to galvanize other participants into direct action (Tran). Charles Kaiser quotes DeLarverie as follows: "The cop hit me, and I hit him back. The cops got what they gave" (Kaiser).

Until recently, DeLarverie was the most likely person to be identified as the thrower of the first punch at Stonewall. Her 2014 *New York Times* obituary summarized her as "a singer,

cross-dresser and bouncer who may or may not have thrown the first punch at the 1969 uprising at the Stonewall Inn in Greenwich Village, but who was indisputably one of the first and most assertive members of the modern gay rights movement" (Yardley). As her obituary implies, Stonewall was important, but it was hardly the central event of DeLarverie's life or her relationship to LGBTQ history. DeLarverie rose to prominence in the 1950s as the master of ceremonies and only drag king in the *Jewel Box Revue*, a popular travelling variety show whose cast consisted almost exclusively of drag queens. Later, DeLarverie transitioned into being a bouncer at lesbian bars in New York City. "For decades," her obituary notes, "she was a self-appointed guardian of lesbians in the Village" (Yardley). In 1987, Michelle Parkerson directed *Stormé: Lady of the Jewel Box*, a 21-minute documentary consisting largely of conversations with DeLarverie. At one point, during a scene featuring DeLarverie reminiscing with fellow Jewel Box drag performer Robin Rogers, the conversation turns to *La Cage aux Folles*, the Tony-winning musical with a book by Harvey Fierstein and a score by Jerry Herman, which ran from 21 August 1983 to 15 November 1987 at Broadway's Palace Theatre and has since become an often-revived classic. Costume designer Theoni V. Aldredge received her third Tony Award for *La Cage*, and her work contributed greatly to the appeal of the show, which managed to lure in Reagan-era audiences to a show that featured a gay couple—one of them a drag queen—as protagonists, a cross-dressing chorus, and clueless conservative politicians as foils. "When I saw the wardrobe coming out from *La Cage*," says DeLarverie, "and then I saw the pictures that we have in the book, I just sorta smiled" (4:44-52). DeLarverie wryly smiles at the way that popular culture draws its energies and its profits from past permutations of queerness while denying credit to its disavowed objects of reference or the artists who created them.

32 years after *La Cage aux Folles* beat out Stephen Sondheim and James Lapine's *Sunday in the Park with George* (1984) for the Tony Awards for Best Musical, Best Book of a Musical, and Best Original Score, *Fun Home* took home the same awards. And like *Fun Home*, *La Cage*'s queer content presented problems for those trying to market it for a mainstream audience. On the 1984 Tony Awards telecast (CBS), the uncredited and unacknowledged legacy of Stormé DeLarverie and the *Jewel Box Revue* was on full display for those in-the-know as the show's chorus members tapped, twirled, and kicked about the stage in Aldredge's costumes (0:57-4:00) George Hearn, however, performed *La Cage*'s signature ballad "I Am What I Am" in a tuxedo standing in front of a black and white caricature of Zaza, the drag queen alter ego of his *La Cage* character Albin in whose costume Hearn performed the number at the Palace ("La Cage aux Folles 1984 Tony Awards" 4:00-6:28). 32 years later, both on the Tony broadcast and at the Circle in the Square Theatre, Sydney Lucas sang "Ring of Keys" to a butch who never appears. Like the spectral butch in *Fun Home*, Stormé's legacy is ubiquitous and yet her butch identity and modes of presentation seem as obsolete as Zoe Moss claims to be in "It Hurts to Be Alive and Obsolete."

Clearly, some figures are more legible than others through generational logics and the familial lexicon through which these logics are usually articulated. If Kennedy Davenport can perform Little Richard's outlandish masculinity despite the performance not crossing binary gender lines, could a drag queen perform as Stormé DeLarverie and still be legible as a drag performer? Perhaps the methods of citation and intergenerational transmission practiced among the queens on *RuPaul's Drag Race* and their viewers are ill-equipped to transmit such non-spectacular performances of gender and sexuality. Likewise, the overwhelming whiteness and middle-class milieus of the 1950s melodrama allow for Carol, Therese, and Abby to become

legible through archaic forms of popular cinema in a manner that is unlikely to be afforded to DeLarverie. Despite her well-documented caretaking role in various LGBTQ communities in New York City for approximately a half-century—precisely the kind of mentoring work whose loss Lee Daniels' laments to Jamal Jordan—DeLarverie's reputation seems impervious to recuperation through parental language. Rather than seeing her as a mother or father, DeLarverie seems to be an embarrassing elder aunt whose outmoded practices and presentations render her illegible in a contemporary queer lexicon. Perhaps DeLarverie is a casualty of what Jack Halberstam called the "border war" (288) between trans men and butch lesbians over the meanings of butchness after the more widespread adoption of transgender as both an identity category and a mode of comprehending historical experiences of gender difference. And perhaps, like Therese, many contemporary queers give the butch a quick once-over, and then discreetly turn away.

And yet, my dissertation has demonstrated a persistence of outmoded forms and formations of queerness even amidst a contemporary moment characterized by new media formations and an ensuing multiplicity of representations. This focus on the outmoded is not simply a manifestation of nostalgia or a reactionary turn away from the contemporary moment that posits the past as pristine and untroubled. Instead, it finds pleasures in unexpected continuities and sites of identification and affinity across time. The media I analyze in this dissertation return to the site of the family to trouble distinctions between the cognitive and the affective, the past and the present, the domestic and the public, the subcultural and the mainstream, and the individual subject and the kinship networks in which they are embedded. They configure queerness not so much as a specific individual or even group phenomenon, but as a variety of experiences and sensations that implicate subjects as much by proximity as by

practices or identities. The contemporary queer media landscape the inspired Villarejo's question, "Where is queer television, now?" has the potential to reconfigure prevailing notions about family, kinship, lineages, and their temporal relationships. Within such a media environment, there exists the potential to encompass Stormé DeLarverie, Marsha P. Johnson, and Sylvia Rivera not just as individual actors in a battle for individual rights but instead as parts of larger queer formations the converged in and around the Stonewall Inn in the summer of 1969—and whose reverberations extend across time in unpredictable ways that could potentially invigorate a decidedly grim present.

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