

“Is This Thing On?”: Staging Gender, Sexuality, and Race via Metatheatricality

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Theatre

Introduction: Queer and BIPOC Representations in Theatre

At the very top of John Cameron Mitchell and Stephen Trask’s 2014 musical *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, Hedwig announces, “I’m moved by the simple fact that this [...] cruelly abridged corpus”—referencing her own genderqueer body—“is at this very moment being supported by the same groaning planks that cradled Brando’s debut and Barrymore’s farewell.”¹ Even the title character of this glam-rock-style musical is shocked to see her queer body on the same stage that is typically reserved for straight, cis, white bodies. Every instance of the staging of gender, sexuality, and race is significant in the face of a white, heteronormative world of theatre. The existence of these performances is essential in the call for the centering of queer and BIPOC voices. But what if the current level and quality of representation of queer and BIPOC bodies in the theatre is ultimately unsatisfactory? How can these performances connect with their audiences in a way that demands their attention and causes them to think critically about the current systems in place? Through the examples of Mitchell and Trask’s *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, Robert O’Hara’s *Bootycandy*, and Young Jean Lee’s *Straight White Men*, I propose that these stagings of gender, sexuality, and race embody the theories of Sara Ahmed’s queer phenomenology and José Esteban Muñoz’s disidentification through metatheatrical devices to achieve active witness to the rebellion inherent in the representation of minoritized identities. With the use of metatheatrical devices such as direct acknowledgement of and interaction with the audience, and the recognition of the performance as a performance, these plays call attention

to themselves as non-normative experiences in the face of the heteronormative as discussed by Ahmed, and act as an embodied example of disidentification as explained by Muñoz.

These three plays explicitly center marginalized bodies and make use of metatheatre to call attention to their representation. *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* features the title character of Hedwig, a genderqueer rock performer from East Germany. Hedwig reenacts moments from her past as she examines the complicated reality of her gender identity, directly provoking the audience along the way. *Bootycandy* is a collection of scenes and characters that explore the intersections of race and queer identities. The Black characters, particularly the Black playwright characters, are repeatedly met with reductive expectations from white characters who seek to invalidate the work of queer BIPOC artists. The characters include the audience in these uncomfortable confrontations, and the script repeatedly utilizes the performance-within-a-performance device, actively experimenting with normative expectations of queer and BIPOC art. *Straight White Men* seemingly features a family of straight, cis, white men that have come together to celebrate Christmas. But the two queer BIPOC characters, Person in Charge 1 and Person in Charge 2, orchestrate the entire performance, explicitly and metatheatrically framing this white story for the audience. Queer phenomenology and disidentification lend particular significance to specific metatheatrical moments in these plays that make visible the potential disruptions that queer and BIPOC perspectives bring to normative storylines.

Forms of Resistance: Theoretical Lenses

Queer Phenomenology, specifically in regards to Ahmed's chapter on sexual orientation, serves as a foundation for thinking about embodied orientation in the space of the world. As she states, "bodies are sexualized through how they inhabit space."² Ahmed considers the term queer to be "a spatial term" that implies "a twisted sexuality that does not follow a 'straight line.'"³

Straight, or heterosexual, then acts as the straight line that queer sexual orientation fails to fall in line with. Ahmed suggests that “heterosexual would be presumed to be neutral.”⁴

Heterosexuality is not simply a different orientation from queer orientation, heterosexual orientation in our current world acts as the assumed normal. The straight, or vertical, orientation of heterosexuality is “normative,” “shaped by the repetition of bodily and social actions over time.”⁵ Because heterosexuality has been continually treated as normal, it has become the fixed vertical X-axis at the center of all possible orientations. Queer bodies take on orientations in all different, non-normative directions. As “sexual orientation” is “integral to the subject, as a matter of its identity,” the way these orientations are related to one another becomes essential to how each body experiences the world.⁶ As Ahmed puts it, sexual orientation would be seen as “involving differences in one’s very relation to the world—that is, in how one ‘faces’ the world or is directed toward it.”⁷ This suggests that experiencing the world through the embodiment of a non-normative orientation is fundamentally different than through a heterosexual, linear orientation. If the normative, heterosexual world is a vertical X-axis, queer orientations exist in all other directions, never quite aligning with the straight, vertical line.

Ahmed goes on to propose that because straight orientation is widely interpreted as *normal*, and queer orientations are interpreted as *abnormal* in this way, there is a pull to “[correct]’ the slantwise direction of queer desire.”⁸ As an example of this, Ahmed points to sexologist Havelock Ellis and “his model of sexual inversion.”⁹ She explains that Ellis’s “reading of inversion in women” suggests that the “inversion” is “produced by congenital masculinity” as a way of “bringing queer desire back in line” with straight orientation.¹⁰ Ellis’s claim that a queer woman’s attraction to the same sex is actually evidence that she is a man is an attempt to return the queer orientation back to the vertical norm. Her attraction to another woman can only be

explained if she is a man, as men and women are intended to be the object of each others' desires in the normative, straight world.

Overall, Ahmed's theory suggests that queer bodies exist in a world that expects and assumes heterosexuality. The vertical, X-axis acts as the normative, rendering all other orientations non-normative, or inherently queer. Those who embody these queer orientations experience the world through that queer orientation. They also experience the pull of the vertical X-axis, as the heteronormativity of the space that bodies occupy attempts to remedy their twisted orientation, trying to return it to a neutral state. For example, the character Hedwig embodies a queer orientation, as she does not adhere to normative expectations of gender. Hedwig expresses feelings of surprise when she is allowed to occupy a Broadway theater, a space that has typically been reserved to feature normative orientations. Her queer body, which refuses to dilute its queerness, complicates the established norm of the space.

This is where José Esteban Muñoz's *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* comes into play. Disidentification is a strategy of both survival and resistance utilized by queer folx of color and other minoritized groups that works both within and against the systems of the majority. The process of disidentification serves those of "*identities-in-difference*," a term Muñoz borrows from "Third World feminists and radical women of color, especially Chicana theorists."¹¹ Muñoz explains that it is "always laboring to enact permanent structural change while at the same time valuing the importance of local or everyday struggles of resistance."¹² Disidentification is an attempt to fight back against oppressive systems of the majority ideology from within the system itself as opposed to acting entirely independently and outside of it. It acknowledges acts of resistance in whatever manner they are able to manifest.

Muñoz makes a point to note that “disidentification is *not always* an adequate strategy of resistance or survival.”¹³ On some occasions, he says, “queers of color and minority subjects need to follow a conformist path if they hope to survive a hostile public sphere.”¹⁴ This recognition of the prioritization of safety is extremely important for these minoritized groups. I propose that the version of resistance that Muñoz demonstrates with disidentification is a step towards this prioritization all on its own. With its emphasis on supporting resistance big and small from within the majority system, disidentification is prepared to validate whatever resistance is possible and sustainable, prioritizing survival of individuals. While it might seem counterintuitive for resistance to continue to act from within the offending systems, it is not realistic to expect minoritized folx, already at a disadvantaged position, to somehow operate entirely independently as a force against the well-established, majority ideology. This theory gives them permission to take what they need from the majority systems and use it in their fight against those systems. Disidentification seems to recognize and validate the experiences of queer folx of color and other minoritized groups that continue to exist within the systems of a world that explicitly does not support them.

The Additional Force of Metatheatricality

Both of these theories involve the queer and BIPOC voices that are at the center of *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (Hedwig), *Bootycandy* (the Black playwrights), and *Straight White Men* (the People in Charge). Another thing these three plays have in common is the use of metatheatricality. According to *Theatre Histories*, metatheatricality is defined as “theatrical self-reference,” including “production techniques and characters’ comments pointing out that the current activity is a play performance.”¹⁵ In other words, metatheatre refers to acknowledgement by the performance that it *is in fact* a performance. This includes, but is not limited to, breaking

of the fourth wall and plays within the action of the play. Many plays include varying levels of metatheatricality for different purposes and effects. I argue that metatheatricality is employed by these three works as a means of acknowledging the heteronormative X-axis of the world that Ahmed discusses, and as a way of embodying the strategy of disidentification that Muñoz explores. Each of these plays uses elements of metatheatricality to create an active sense of awareness and analysis in the audience as they watch each performance. And this analysis takes different shapes depending on who is in the audience.

Metatheatricality and the Active Spectator

One of the elements of metatheatricality used the most across these three pieces is direct acknowledgement of and interaction with the audience. In *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, Hedwig offers a strong example of the use of metatheatricality to inspire active spectatorship in the audience, and to call attention to the presence of a non-normative body on the stage. The performer playing Hedwig acts as the narrator of the story and plays the majority of the roles on stage. After the song “Wig in a Box” there is a stage direction that indicates that Hedwig “*spits liquid into the audience.*” Then she says to the audience, “that was a heavy metal gesture. Want to see a punk rock gesture?” and fills her mouth again. This is followed by “*a threatening pause*” in which the audience likely assumes Hedwig will spit again, when she actually then “*opens her mouth and wets herself*” instead.¹⁶ In this moment Hedwig is playing with the audience, letting *them* know that *she* knows they are there. She also plays off of their reactions to her, teasing them with the second threat of spitting more liquid. In this moment Hedwig breaks the fourth wall both figuratively and literally, making a prop in the show interact with the audience in an unexpected way.

Hedwig has many other moments of interaction with the audience of the musical as well. In several different moments in the script, Hedwig interacts with the same chosen audience member. In the first interaction, Hedwig points to the audience member and says, “Sir, will you keep a look out? If you’re touched by a priest, for God sake, speak up.”¹⁷ Returning to the same audience member later in the show, Hedwig calls out to them, “Anything? Any sign of the Bishop, sir? No?”¹⁸ Another moment of interaction with the audience occurs when the lyrics of the last chorus of “Wig in a Box” are projected, intending to create a sing-a-long moment with the audience. Hedwig is constantly aware of the presence of the audience watching her performance, choosing to include them and provoke them in different ways.

In *Bootycandy*, there is first an acknowledgement of the actual audience in the conference scene. A white Moderator has gathered a “*GROUP OF BLACK PLAYWRIGHTS*” for a panel to discuss their work, but the playwrights are confused as to how they ended up at the conference. In sorting out the confusion, the Moderator says, “Well obviously there’s an audience” and all of the characters “*look at the live audience as if they are seeing them for the first time.*”¹⁹ The characters onstage directly reference the audience again in this scene when the Moderator asks Sutter about the play he wrote, which is about how his mother used to call his penis “Booty Candy”— a portion of this play was the first scene that the audience saw at the beginning of *Bootycandy*. When the Moderator asks Sutter, “...Did [your mom] know you were gay when she called it that?” Sutter “*looks to the audience.*”²⁰ Afterwards the Moderator also shares a look with the audience. The audience is repeatedly addressed and therefore becomes included in the uncomfortable situation that is happening on the stage. The characters on the stage deliberately break the fourth wall, reminding the audience that their reactions are not occurring in isolation from the performance and encouraging active spectatorship.

The most direct interaction with the audience of these three plays is found in *Straight White Men*. Young Jean Lee specifies that the two characters Person in Charge 1 and Person in Charge 2, intended to be played by “transgender or nonbinary performers (preferably of color),” directly engage with the audience from the moment they enter the house.²¹ While “*loud hip hop with sexually explicit lyrics by female rappers*” plays quite loudly over the speakers as the pre-show music, “*the People in Charge interact with audience members, greeting and welcoming them to the theatre.*”²² Assuming a negative, or at least puzzled, reaction from the theatre patrons, Lee also specifies that the People in Charge “*should never apologize for the music or say that it’s not in their power to turn it down.*”²³ In this case, the audience is recognized by the performers even before the *real* performance starts.

Once the play does begin, the People in Charge discuss the pre-show experience with the audience. “We’d like to acknowledge that our pre-show music may have made some of you uncomfortable,” says Person in Charge 2. Person in Charge 1 adds, “and normally when you pay money—especially Broadway money—you can expect to feel comfortable.”²⁴ The audience is an essential part of this performance—their reactions are specifically addressed and incorporated into the performance. The play makes it deliberately challenging to be a passive spectator, going so far as to provoke the audience into interacting with the material.

In all of these cases, the audience is not permitted to sit comfortably behind the fourth wall and quietly watch the show. The audience is acknowledged, whether they are directly spoken to, spit on, or helped to their seat by a performer. Metatheatricality of this level is not the expectation of a typical Western audience seeing a piece of theatre. There is an expectation of realism, complete with a fourth wall. Interaction from the performers onstage might even be associated with negative feelings, such as if a performer were to react to a cell phone going off in

the audience during the show. This interaction from the performers onstage would be shocking and perhaps unwanted altogether. In each of these three plays, the audience is asked to be a more active participant. These performances require the audience to fulfill a different role than what the presumably largely straight, cis, white audience is expecting.

If a night of realism—with the fourth wall entirely intact, and the audience rendered an invisible fly on the wall—is the expected experience for a theatre audience, these plays that stage gender, sexuality, and race with the use of metatheatres do not fall in line with that expectation. With the Western tendency towards realism, and the repetition of this practice, it has been rendered the standard norm of a night of theatre. If realism can be considered the normative, X-axis for Western theatre, like Ahmed's normative straight orientation of queer phenomenology, I suggest that the incorporation of metatheatricality renders a production queer in its relationship to normative realism. More importantly, another expectation, rendered normative by its intense repetition, is the staging of cis, white, heterosexual characters and stories. In this way, plays like *Hedwig*, *Bootycandy*, and *Straight White Men* that opt to feature BIPOC and queer folk—queer in both sexuality and gender—are definitely queer in their orientation in the space of the theatre in comparison to cis, straight, white normative theatre.

Metatheatricality becomes an essential step in the acknowledgement of the queer orientation of these plays in response to the white, heteronormative theatre world. Because of the expectations of the standard normative audience that attends a play, the audience might not understand how to interact with this work. They might recognize that something about the performance is different from the norm, but they might not be entirely sure as to what it is. And in regards to Ahmed's discussion of the normative desire to straighten out a queer orientation, bringing it back in line with the vertical, an audience might find themselves attempting to

straighten out the work to their normative understanding of the theatre. In this case, they are not stretching themselves to be a more analytical audience member, seeing the statement that is being made in the staging of gender, sexuality, and race, but reducing it down to a smaller variation on the vertical norm. Following Ahmed, those in a queer orientation experience the world differently than those in normative orientations. A normative audience that expects a normative experience is not primed to recognize the non-normative orientation of a play that centers queer and BIPOC voices. When the audience is allowed to remain a silent observer they are not prepared to do the critical thinking that, I argue, is required of a cis, straight, white audience when bearing witness to these performances. With their own normative life experiences they do not see the world in the same way that these queer and BIPOC stories see and experience the world. This is an opportunity for normative individuals to witness representation of queer orientations by bodies that live these queer orientations every day.

Metatheatre is there to help the performance capture the audience's attention and guide them through the work. Hedwig asks the audience what their response is to a confident genderqueer character on the stage, spitting in their faces to keep them from reducing this queer act of resistance back towards the normative world of theatre. The characters in *Bootycandy* look to the audience in an uncomfortable conversation about sexuality and race, requiring the audience to consider what they think about the situation, and perhaps contemplate what reactions they assume are expected of them, both by the production and by fellow audience members. *Straight White Men* creates a provocative pre-show experience for the audience, challenging their expectations of what an audience experience is and can be. Metatheatre becomes an essential part of ensuring that an audience truly thinks about the theatre they consume.

The call for the audience to become an active spectator in each of these plays also keys the audience into the utilization of Muñoz's disidentification in each piece. Each of these stagings of sexuality, gender, and race is an act both within and against the dominant ideology of the normative cis, straight, white theatre that has been identified. Performing in theaters—designated theatrical spaces that serve to uphold the norms of the theatre world—is an act both within and against the system. The mere existence of queer and BIPOC bodies on the stage is an act of resistance. To act in complete outside opposition would require queer and BIPOC folx to find their stages elsewhere and to be entirely unwilling to participate in the existing tradition of theatre. This would not only be unfair to ask but, I argue, would render their acts of resistance not nearly as effective in creating significant change, unable to reach the large audiences that already attend the theatre. It becomes most effective to utilize the resources and social positioning of the theatre to stage these stories. The existing majority ideology of the theatre is a system in which these identities-in-difference can perform both within and against, identifying what elements of the system can still support them and using them in their act against the system.

Elements of metatheatre then help to confirm with the audience that they are witnessing an act of theatrical disidentification. While the characters of *Hedwig*, *Bootycandy*, and *Straight White Men* challenge their normative audiences, they also make a point to metatheatrically draw attention to that challenge—it is all by design. Metatheatre provides an avenue for the performance to include the audience in the resistance via participation and critical thinking about the normative expectations of the theatre. It asks the audience to actively witness the resistance, thereby providing it a form of validation. Without metatheatre, if the resistance goes unnoticed, it loses some of its power. The process of disidentification, as I am suggesting its usage in this instance, requires that the audience be changed by it, allowing their normative expectations and

practices to be challenged. As a result, these acts of disidentification might begin to be incorporated and accepted into the theatre world, supporting the queer and BIPOC voices behind them. The majority ideology can be shifted to consider and include those it currently leaves behind. If the audience neglects to recognize the work being done within and against the theatre to dismantle the oppressive systems at hand, they have done the work a disservice. The use of metatheatre is an attempt to avoid this oversight.

The Function of the Recognition of Performance

Another feature of metatheatre present in these three works is recognition of the performance as a performance, and plays within the plays. *Hedwig* offers many examples, one of which is present in the script even before the beginning of the first act. The author's note at the beginning of the script suggests that the use of metatheatre was at the forefront of the creators' minds. In the note, John Cameron Mitchell and Stephen Trask describe the following script as "at best, a record of a single evening of a single production of *Hedwig*."²⁵ They also add that this version of the script "reflects that [the show] was performing on Broadway at the Belasco Theatre" and that subsequent productions of *Hedwig* "should be site specific so that the character of Hedwig is actually performing in and commenting on the space the production is occupying."²⁶ This suggests that the spoken dialogue of the musical, and perhaps the interactions with the audience, change depending on the individual performance and where it takes place. *Hedwig* also makes reference to the technical aspects of the performance that would otherwise be ignored by a non-metatheatrical performance. After "Origin of Love," which utilizes a scrim for projections, the scrim "*rises*" in order to be struck from the stage. As it flies out, Hedwig says, "Thank you. I do love a good scrim job."²⁷ This is both a sexual joke that I need not spell out and

a direct recognition of the workings of the theatre that create Hedwig's performance within the musical.

Bootycandy first recognizes itself as a performance in the same conference scene referenced earlier. The Moderator continues to ask Sutter about his works, including a piece he had done “just recently... right here on this very stage as a matter of fact,” as the Moderator says.²⁸ This is in reference to Sutter's piece titled “Mug,” which was performed in the scene before the conference scene. This begins to reveal that the other scenes of *Bootycandy* are different pieces written by the group of Black playwrights attending the fabricated conference of this very scene. The white Moderator continues to ask the Black playwrights ignorant questions, such as “What does that have to do with race?”—this is in response to descriptions of theatrical works that do not fall in line with a white audience's expectations of work created by Black artists.²⁹ Other scenes include moments that the actors are “*out of character*”³⁰ and actors' direct references to the “Stage Manager's Actual Name.”³¹ O'Hara waits until the conference scene to introduce the recognition of the plays within the play, and the piece continues to derail into blatant, sometimes comical, moments of self-awareness.

As part of the centering of queer and BIPOC bodies, the People in Charge in *Straight White Men* orchestrate the show. At the beginning of the main plot of the show, the People in Charge “*guide and position*” the white male characters as if they are “*action figure[s]*.”³² In each transition between scenes, the People in Charge return to repose the actors and manipulate the props on the set. At the very end of the show, they reenter the stage to cue the blackout that ends the show. In this piece, the queer BIPOC characters control the show in a way that acknowledges that the plot, involving the family of straight, white men, is a performance. The People in Charge

set the stage, including the actors themselves, and then allow the performance to proceed. The People in Charge oversee the implementation of this metatheatrical device.

In regards to the lens of queer phenomenology, this aspect of metatheatre serves to strengthen the audience's recognition of the normative functions of theatre and how they are being dismantled by these performances. Hedwig's recognition of her own position as performer in the eyes of an audience strengthens her representation. She tells the story of her life entirely through her own perspective, including embodying other people, sharing her experience of these relationships. Her embodied orientation becomes the center of this performance. In this way she has established complete control of how her embodied experience of a queer orientation will be represented. A similar phenomenon takes place in *Straight White Men* when the People in Charge, the characters that are embodied by those with queer orientations, frame the representation of the normative bodies onstage. They maintain control of the space, establishing that this performance does not serve to represent the theatrical norm without a purpose or without critical examination.

The metatheatrical recognition of the performance as a performance is another way in which these pieces act both within and against the normative theatre world, embodying Muñoz's disidentification. In *Hedwig*, the script asks the performers to directly reference the theatre they are performing in. This is a direct acknowledgement of the system. The overt queerness and the glam-rock-show nature of *Hedwig* go against this very system. When Hedwig shows she is aware of the technology of the stage as a facet of her performance, she takes even more ownership of her performance. She is using the facilities of this very theatre to fuel her performance of resistance. When the performers acknowledge the act of the performance during

the performance itself, they are inviting the audience to actively witness and consider the disidentification happening on the stage in front of them.

Straight White Men's use of the metatheatrical performance-within-the-performance device serves as a unique example of including voices of normative theatre to support the process of disidentification. The main plot of *Straight White Men* puts a group of exactly that—straight, cis, white men—on the stage for the majority of the show. Those of the identities-in-difference interact with the show at the very beginning, the very end, and the transitions in between the scenes. But their interaction is specific, ensuring that they are still at the center of the piece. They quite literally control the white bodies in the space, setting them up before each scene. They have a hand in the staged representation of these bodies. As a contrast to the metatheatrical moments that involve the People in Charge, the only metatheatrical element utilized in the story of the family of straight, white men is the intermittent intervention of the People in Charge. The rest of the plot about the white bodies on the stage exists in a mode of realism, complete with a fourth wall. The inclusion of metatheatrical paired with the queer and BIPOC bodies that interject into the white story help the audience to receive the story within a frame of resistance, considering the significance of the orchestration of white bodies by queer and BIPOC bodies. *Straight White Men* utilizes the most normative theatrical bodies to highlight the presence of disidentification within the work.

When *Bootycandy* begins to reference itself, crediting scenes in the play as work of the Black playwright characters also within the world of the play, it is able to open a conversation about how queer and BIPOC artists are expected to embody and stage resistance. The white Moderator represents this expectation on the stage, asking the group of Black playwrights why their work does not fall under the stereotypes that are expected of Black artists. Creating work

that deals with race, gender, and sexuality in the way that a normative audience expects is the only way the Moderator knows to receive any type of resistance. Because this specific brand of representation—the Black playwright creating work that first and foremost deals with their Blackness for a *woke* white audience—has been repeated and accepted by the majority, this version of representation then also becomes an oppressive system that requires disidentification to break through it. By first presenting the work that does not meet the expectation of a cis, straight, white audience as they walk into a show by a queer, Black playwright, and then creating the space for a conversation about these expectations about that work within the play itself, *Bootycandy* becomes an excellent example of disidentification in practice. With this nuance, *Bootycandy* is also acting within and against the majority ideology of the representation of queer and BIPOC voices that has come to exist. It calls for critical analysis of the system that already sees itself as having made room for this representation. Putting queer and BIPOC bodies onstage will continue to be an act of resistance via disidentification all on its own, but the use of metatheatre in this instance allows room for an even more nuanced conversation on what systems are being dismantled from within.

Variations in the Process: Disruptions and Reinforcements

The third component I wish to consider is when there are variations within this process. These variations may either serve as a reinforcement or a disruption to the effectiveness of the use of metatheatre in pieces of theatre such as these. Turning first to an example of reinforcement, *Straight White Men* presents a unique variation of recognition of and interaction with its audience. Thus far, I have suggested this device purely as a way for these pieces to interact with the cis, straight, white audience. But *Straight White Men* also specifically recognizes the identities-in-difference in the audience. When the People in Charge begin to

address the audience after the loud pre-show, they distinguish between the experiences of these different groups of audience members. They recognize that the normative audience may feel “uncomfortable.”³³ They go on to add that “for those of [the audience] that liked the music,” the pre-show experience was “set up” to “cater to [their] experience” and they congratulate those audience members on their “moment of privilege.”³⁴

In this case, the interaction with the audience is more nuanced. It serves to prime two different groups for the performance. It acknowledges the normative audience, revealing to them that the pre-show experience was *intended* to provoke them, and sets them up to actively consider the following events of the night. But it also acknowledges the identities-in-difference, validating to them that this is a safe space, and that this experience is intended to be entirely different from what they usually experience as a non-normative body in the normative theatre world. As Ahmed puts it, heterosexuality, and therefore the normative vertical X-axis of the world, “is something that we are oriented around, even if it disappears from view.”³⁵ This pre-show experience, and metatheatrical debrief afterwards, reverses the roles of these orientations in this theatrical space. The normative audience now gets a taste, albeit a small taste, of how the queer and BIPOC audience feels when they enter other spaces in the world. This metatheatrical acknowledgement of the audience serves to bring the vertical back into view for the normative audience, as it has likely disappeared from their view, and reorients the space around queer orientation instead. This example of the use of metatheatre strengthens the relationship between the performance and the audience.

An example of a disruption to the effectiveness of the use of metatheatre can be found in *Hedwig*. In the original production of *Hedwig*, co-creator John Cameron Mitchell played the role of *Hedwig*. In the original Broadway cast, the role was performed by Neil Patrick Harris. While

both performers are queer figures, they each bring something different to the role. Neil Patrick Harris has become synonymous with homonormativity—Ellen Degeneres is the other name that often comes up when this term is mentioned. Homonormativity refers to queer individuals who openly express their queerness but live a fairly heteronormative experience in all other facets of life. Neil Patrick Harris is a white man with a husband and two children. He is successful and wealthy, and his queerness is generally embraced by the public. I propose that because of the metatheatrical nature of *Hedwig*, especially in regards to the recognition of the performance as a performance, Neil Patrick Harris is ghosted by his own reputation while in the role of Hedwig. Though ghosting is not necessarily explicitly an element of metatheatricality, I argue it plays into the active spectatorship of a piece of theatre.

Neil Patrick Harris's reputation disrupts the embodiment of resistance against the conventions of normative theatre and the strategy of disidentification. Because of Neil Patrick Harris's homonormativity, it becomes far too easy for a normative audience to straighten out the queerness of *Hedwig*, attempting to bring it back to the vertical in the way that Ahmed calls attention to. Harris's orientation in the space of the theatre—and the world—does not represent an extreme variation from the norm. Because of this, the process of disidentification becomes muddled. The performance is not the act of resistance that it could be. Neil Patrick Harris, at least partially, represents the majority ideology of the system that the piece is trying to work, yes, within, but also against. Neil Patrick Harris is such a well-known figure that his performances cannot easily be separated from him as a person. His performance becomes more about Neil Patrick Harris's embodiment of the ridiculousness of Hedwig as opposed to his embodiment of Hedwig as an act of representation of queer orientations and identities-in-difference. His presence in the role of Hedwig makes the work too easy for the normative audience to swallow.

Conclusion: It Should Be Hard to Swallow

Hedwig and the Angry Inch, *Bootycandy*, and *Straight White Men* are all examples of the staging of gender, sexuality, and race in the face of a cis, straight, white theatre world. They represent and embody the queer orientations of queer phenomenology for straight, normative audiences. They act as a vessel for queer and BIPOC folx to practice disidentification, working both within and against the conventions of the theatre. The use of metatheatre in all three pieces strengthens the embodiment of these theories and their effectiveness with an audience. When that process is disrupted with homonormativity, it dilutes the resistance of the piece and it begins to collapse back into normativity. The goal is not for these pieces of theatre to be easy for an audience to watch. They must be present spectators, actively consuming and considering this work. When active spectatorship is achieved, the established norms can be genuinely questioned. The call for more—and better—representation of queer and BIPOC bodies can be heard and responded to. The Black playwrights in *Bootycandy* say it best. The Moderator asks, “What are you hoping the audience comes away with after seeing your work?” Sutter replies, “I think the Audience should Choke.” “It wasn’t easy to write it and it shouldn’t be easy to experience it,” says Writer 2. Writer 1 adds, “After you choke on something [...] [y]ou can FEEL its presence in the space it went through.”³⁶ Queer and BIPOC voices are demanding better than the current quality of representation in the theatre—they are here to speak up, metatheatrically highlighting their embodiment of these theories of resistance, to inspire change in the audiences and the system at large. If these performances are successful, they will not be swallowed easily, leaving their presence known in the throat of the straight, white, cis theatre.

Notes

1. John Cameron Mitchell and Stephen Trask, *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, Broadway Edition (New York: Overlook Duckworth, 2014), 19.
2. Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 67.
3. Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 67.
4. Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 69.
5. Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 66.
6. Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 69.
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