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"That is Not the Way to Do It" Queerness, Race, and Citizenship in Rodgers and Hammerstein

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"That is Not the Way to Do It"

Queerness, Race, and Citizenship in Rodgers and Hammerstein

DENNIS SLOAN

This article examines the ways in which Rodgers and Hammerstein's Asia-Pacific musicals – *South Pacific*, *The King And I*, and *Flower Drum Song* – mark characters of color with signs of queerness. It argues that Asian and Pacific characters are placed outside Cold War era ideals of American white heteronormativity in their performances of gender, their marriage practices, and the queer spaces they occupy, in ways that both encourage assimilation and make integration impossible.

In Henry Koster's 1961 film adaptation of *Flower Drum Song*, Madame Liang admonishes her brother-in-law for insisting on an arranged marriage for his son. "That is not the way to do it," she tells him, "You must let them fall in love naturally. American-style." With this brief missive, Madame Liang succinctly summarizes one of the musical's central messages: that to be American is to be both "natural" and right. This message pervades many of Rodgers and Hammerstein's works, but particularly those that Christina Klein has named their trio of "Asia-Pacific musicals": *South Pacific*, *The King and I*, and *Flower Drum Song*.¹ Klein astutely explores the ways in which these musicals describe the relationship between popular US (mis)understandings of Asia and the (ab)use of US military and political power in Asian and Pacific countries during the Cold War. Klein and others have also highlighted the ways in which such representations feminize Asian and Pacific cultures, and especially Asian and Pacific men, in ways that suggest US and

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white supremacy. In this essay, I argue that in addition to feminizing Asian and Pacific cultures and characters, Rodgers and Hammerstein also employ a variety of signs that subtly queer them. Reading these musicals' original libretti against Cold War understandings and organizations of queer identity and practice in the US, along with evolving ideals of an American citizenship rooted in heteronormative masculinity, I argue that these musicals bind non-whiteness and queerness together to suggest that both exist outside the bounds of American identity. Extending Stuart Hecht's suggestion that such musicals provided models for marginalized populations to assimilate into US culture and society,² I argue that they also established both whiteness and heteronormative practice as the primary criteria for that assimilation. Relying on longstanding associations between non-whiteness and queer practices, Rodgers and Hammerstein offered a model for a supposedly ideal brand of American citizenship that eschewed both.

Rodgers and Hammerstein wrote the Asia-Pacific musicals in the aftermath of the second World War and in the shadow of the Cold War that followed. *South Pacific* opened on Broadway in 1949, *The King and I* in 1951, and *Flower Drum Song* in 1958. As Klein notes, this period saw a marked increase in fictional and Orientalist accounts of Asia and the Pacific in US culture, as well as an expansion of US power in Asian and Pacific nations.³ Much as Klein argues that such representations provided a counterpoint for the construction of US Cold War national identity,⁴ Michael Bronsky posits that US identity and ideals of US citizenship (both literal and figurative) have long been built upon a foundation of othering based on both racial and sexual identity.⁵ According to Bronsky, US national identity — “Americanness” — has been defined over the course of five hundred years primarily by both whiteness and a distinct heteronormativity that encompasses gender performance, sex and marriage practices, and family structures. During World War II, for example, homosexuals were banned from the US armed forces and for the first time officially treated as “a threat to national security.”⁶ As Bronsky suggests, this move created a barrier between queerness and the duties and practices by which individuals earned ideal US citizenship.⁷ It was against this backdrop of expanding US power over Asia and the Pacific and the increasing separation of queerness from Americanness that Rodgers and Hammerstein introduced their Asia-Pacific musicals to US audiences.

While Rodgers and Hammerstein's Asia-Pacific musicals have often been cited for their advocacy of tolerance and racial equality, I suggest that they

model assimilation rather than integration through the queering of non-white characters. This modeling is significant, since at least two of these works (*South Pacific* and *The King and I*) continue to be staged in the twenty-first century and since Rodgers and Hammerstein are at the center of what musical theatre scholars regularly identify as the genre's “golden age.” In the pages that follow, I consider Hecht's claim that many musicals (including *South Pacific*) provided instruction for assimilation alongside Klein's ideas regarding US perceptions of Asian and Pacific cultures and Bronsky's work concerning the relationships between race, queerness, and citizenship. I identify ways in which Rodgers and Hammerstein often assign markers of queerness to their non-white characters in ways that place them doubly outside mid-twentieth century ideals of “Americanness.” I find that these markers appear in three forms amongst Asian and Pacific characters and settings: 1) queer performances of gender, 2) queer marriage practices, and 3) the establishment of queer places in which such activities take place. Attending to the intersectionality of race and queerness in these musicals, I argue that in marking non-white characters and cultures as queer, Rodgers and Hammerstein promote an idea of Americanness and access to US citizenship that does not tolerate the integration of diverse identities, but rather requires assimilation into white heteronormativity. In doing so, they demonstrate the ways in which true integration was and remains in many ways unattainable.

Queer Performances of Gender

My readings of queerness in the musicals of Rodgers and Hammerstein rest in part on ideas about the performativity of gender. I model the ways in which I read characters as queer after Stacy Wolf's work in *A Problem Like Maria: Gender and Sexuality in the American Musical*. Though Wolf does not read the actors and characters in her study as literally queer, she relies on Judith Butler's work on the performativity of gender to identify signs — clothing, hairstyles, gestures, relationships, dialogue, behaviors — that might communicate some sense of queerness to the audience member primed and ready to read them as such. In the same way, I argue that characters of color in Rodgers and Hammerstein's musicals often carry signs that might communicate queerness not just to queer audiences, but even to general audiences

in the Cold War era in which the musicals were first produced. Moreover, such characters carry the potential to be read as queer in ways that tie queerness to race and remove it from American citizenship. These ties begin with 1949's *South Pacific* and continue through 1951's *The King and I* and 1958's *Flower Drum Song*.

Bloody Mary is both the most prominent character of color in *South Pacific* and, through a repeatedly performed masculinity, the character most readily read as queer. As the only Tonkinese character with a significant speaking role, she is made to stand in as a representative of the story's non-white South Pacific island population. That she is a woman is also significant, since the musical offers no male characters of color who speak or play any significant role. Thus, the musical's most central (and practically its only) character of color is a woman, buttressing the arguments of scholars like Edward Said, Christina Klein, and David Eng that US cultural representations of "the East" tend to feminize it. I want to take these arguments one step further, however, and argue that, in myriad ways, Rodgers and Hammerstein do not merely feminize their characters of color, they make them queer. Ironically, while they feminize *South Pacific's* Tonkinese characters by making Mary their primary representative, they then queer them by masculinizing her.

The queering of *South Pacific's* Bloody Mary is most apparent in her description and in her appearance. The libretto's stage directions both racialize and masculinize her: she is "small, yellow, with Oriental eyes. She wears black sateen trousers, and a white blouse over which is an old Marine's tunic. [...] Around her neck is a G.I. identification chain from which hangs a silver Marine emblem."⁸ In this brief description, Mary is first identified as "she" and as "Oriental"; the remaining description highlights elements of her masculine attire. She wears pants, a Marine's tunic, and a Marine's identification tags. The group of white "Seabees, sailors, and Marines" that introduce her in song draw further attention to her masculine qualities, singing that "her skin is as tender as DiMaggio's glove."⁹ Next, the men sing about her fondness for chewing betel nuts and her refusal to brush her teeth afterwards; Mary proves them right, proudly displaying her stained teeth.¹⁰ In this introductory scene, which takes less than two pages in the libretto, Rodgers and Hammerstein deftly establish Mary as a masculine female character, suggesting what Wolf would call a "butch," "a lesbian of masculine gender" or "a masculine performance, conveyed by clothing, hair, or gesture pertaining to an erotic style or practice."¹¹ Whether or not Bloody Mary is a lesbian,

attention is directed to the butch aesthetic she performs through her attire and her accessories. Moreover, with her tunic and identification tags, she performs a particular brand of masculinity tied directly to an American male military aesthetic. The sailors further this image with their descriptions of the toughness of her skin, and her disinterest in keeping a clean (read: feminine) appearance. Through her aesthetic, Mary queers traditional American ideas about gender. She does similar work through her actions.

Mary continues to perform masculinity in the role she plays not only in *South Pacific's* narrative, but also in the interracial culture the narrative establishes. Many of her actions, interactions, and relationships would typically have been coded as masculine for 1949 audiences. As a businesswoman and an entrepreneur who sells grass skirts and other cultural items, she exists and functions in the public sphere, a territory still largely dominated by men in the US after their return from World War II. She wheels, deals, commands, and curses, bartering with the sailor Billis and threatening another male customer. Such acts may go unnoticed when performed by a man, but as Halberstam notes, "masculinity . . . becomes legible as masculinity where and when it leaves the white male middle-class body."¹² By assigning to Mary attributes and behaviors that 1949's largely heteronormative US audience might typically have associated with men, Rodgers and Hammerstein emphasize the masculinity such attributes and behaviors suggest. If, as Halberstam argues, masculinity can be "primarily prosthetic," Mary has donned this prosthetic from her first appearance, in the form of both masculine attire and masculine behavior.¹³

Other characters confirm Mary's masculine identity. Practically as soon as the sailors introduce Mary, they immediately lament the lack of women on the island, singing "There is Nothing Like a Dame." Clearly, Mary does not qualify. With her rough skin and her stained teeth and her foul mouth, she is not "a girly, womanly, female, feminine dame."¹⁴ Mary agrees; when the sailors finish the number, the libretto indicates that she continues quietly humming its melody. Each of these moments strengthens her alignment with the sailors and their masculinity.

The masculinization of Bloody Mary delivers important information to *South Pacific's* audiences about race, heteronormativity, and Americanness. As the first character of color to appear, and as the primary speaker of color, Mary sets the tone for how the musical's characters of color will be defined. In her attire, her language, and her behavior, she is portrayed as gender

nonnormative, at least according to US standards of the time. Thus, from the moment the audience meets Mary — which is the moment it meets the racial other — it also meets queerness. Through Mary, *South Pacific* places the racial other outside the bounds of both whiteness and heteronormativity. In identifying her as both queer and not white, Rodgers and Hammerstein draw a clear connection between the two identities.

Bronsky argues that such othering, beginning with depictions of Native American sexual practices and continuing through and beyond the barring of homosexuals from military service during World War II, has routinely been used to place those who are “different” . . . outside the legal, social, and moral framework granting full citizenship” in the United States.¹⁵ Bronsky contends that, especially over the first half of the twentieth century, American identity was increasingly defined by heteronormative sexuality and the nuclear family. In the process, the ideal American citizen came to be seen as white, male, heterosexual, and monogamous; any quality or behavior falling outside those bounds and considered nonnormative was typically assigned to nonwhite races and was almost always seen as un-American. In particular, gender nonconformity, known early in the twentieth century as “inversion,” was often linked to political nonconformity and was thus outside the ideals of Americanness: “The conflation of robust maleness, heterosexuality, and whiteness set a standard for citizenship that was the antithesis of the invert.”¹⁶ By the 1940s, when the US began screenings to keep homosexuals out of the military, such inversion (often linked with homosexuality) was treated as a danger to the nation’s welfare. Thus, a character such as *South Pacific*’s Bloody Mary — not white and gender nonconforming — is made doubly un-American. Further, she is not only racially and sexually othered but, in being so, she is politically othered.

On some level, of course, Rodgers and Hammerstein also depict white characters in *South Pacific* in moments of gender nonconformity. These moments, however, are shown to be fleeting and blatantly performatory acts on the part of otherwise heteronormative white characters. Take, for instance, the sailor Luther Billis, who provides much of *South Pacific*’s comic relief. In many ways, both the musical and various analyses of it often pair Bills with Mary as a unit; indeed, he is so easily read as queer in some moments that he could constitute the femme to Mary’s butch. As Wolf further notes, both Billis and Nellie, each of whom swaps gender in *South Pacific*’s show-within-a-show Thanksgiving performance, exhibit moments of queerness in both

dress and gesture.¹⁷ In the presence of such queered white characters, it is perhaps easy to dismiss the significance of queering the racialized other. But the queering of nonwhite characters in *South Pacific* happens for different reasons and has different implications — and these differences have much to do with the traditional structure of musicals and with the inherent messages these musicals convey about racial and queer otherness and about the ideals of American identity.

The conventional centrality of the heterosexual couple in the musical genre, which works metaphorically to advocate integration, is typically only available to white characters in Rodgers and Hammerstein. For white Nellie and for white Billis, the queerness of gender nonconformity does not interrupt the musical’s typical process of heteronormative unification. Rodgers and Hammerstein present their respective performances of butch-femme identity as exactly that: performances. Indeed, for them, queerness consists merely of costumes that they can (and do) put on and take off at will. As Andrea Most points out, the sailor suit that Nellie wears in the Thanksgiving show is “oversize.”¹⁸ While Nellie might try on a butch identity, it ultimately does not fit. Similarly, Most characterizes Billis’s drag as “over-the-top”; it is overt and ridiculous, meant only for play.¹⁹ Moreover, Nellie ends *South Pacific* in a heterosexual union, and though Billis may at times engage in tasks coded as feminine for show and for profit, he asserts his heterosexual maleness through his obvious crush on Nellie. Thus, the queering of these white characters is ultimately undone, their gender conformity and their heteronormativity confirmed. To be white and to be heteronormative, *South Pacific* tells audiences, are the same. Mary, on the other hand, has no love interest. Like white Nellie and white Billis, she wears her masculinity — but she also embodies it through her tough skin, her stained teeth, and her unfeminine behavior, and she is not permitted to abandon it. Unlike the white characters, Mary’s gender nonconformity, prosthetic or not, cannot be removed at will. Because Mary has no partner, real or imagined, and expresses no desire for one, she cannot prove her heteronormativity. Whatever signs of queerness the white characters in *South Pacific* might exhibit, they eventually abandon them and return to their gender conforming practices and heteronormative identities. In this way, they have access to Bronski’s description of Americanness in a way that Mary does not.

Although gender nonconformity among characters of color is most legible in *South Pacific*, Rodgers and Hammerstein also make subtle use of it in *The*

King and I and *Flower Drum Song*. As Klein suggests, *The King and I* makes direct connections between gender performance and race. Klein notes that “Anna is partially masculinized as the bearer of Western knowledge and authority, while the King is partially feminized by his ignorance.”²⁰ Although this might seem to suggest that Anna engages in the same kind of gender nonconformity as Bloody Mary, she generally does not. After all, she bears none of the aesthetic or even behavioral markers of American masculinity that Mary does. Rather, I argue that Anna’s masculinization as a bearer of knowledge is explained through her enactment of the feminine roles of mother and schoolteacher. She arrives in Siam not only as mother to her son Louis, but for the express purpose of educating the king’s many children; that she also educates the king is not a result of any signs of masculinity, but of the general sense of Americanness with which Rodgers and Hammerstein imbue her. It helps, of course, that as an Englishwoman, Anna can stand in for American ideals without having to abide strictly by American rules of gender conformity. In this way, she can command authority over the king and his subjects as a teacher. She delegitimizes the king’s masculine agency by taking the role of teacher without having to sacrifice her femininity. In the process, her subtly masculinized role often (though not always) places the king in the role of her feminized counterpart. Eng might characterize Anna’s relationship with the King (and thus Siam) as a form of “racial castration,” a process by which the Asian male is vacated of agency through the process of being feminized, infantilized, and queered. By maintaining her femininity and her whiteness, however, Anna gains access to general ideas of Americanness in a way that the king does not.

Gender conformity and US citizenship are at once most subtly and most explicitly linked in *Flower Drum Song*. Set in San Francisco, *Flower Drum Song* is the only of these three musicals to take place in the US, and the only one to deal exclusively with non-white characters. It is largely through the female characters that the musical explores issues of gender performance and citizenship. In centering its narrative on two heterosexual couples, Rodgers and Hammerstein place Mei Li and Linda in direct comparison to one another. Mei Li, a newly arrived Chinese immigrant, stands in direct contrast to the very comfortably Americanized Linda. Whereas Mei Li personifies American ideas about Chinese tradition, Linda typifies a kind of modernity supposedly tied to Americanness. Additionally, Linda is presented as glamorous, sexy, and ultra-feminine. Unlike *South Pacific*’s Bloody Mary,

who is in no way a “dame,” Linda is “strictly a female female,” as she sings in “I Enjoy Being a Girl.”²¹ Anne Anlin Cheng has tied Linda’s performance of femininity and beauty to a performance of whiteness that was in some ways central to the career of Nancy Kwan, the mixed-race actress who would ultimately play Linda in the film adaptation of *Flower Drum Song*.²²

In opposition, the character of Mei Li presents an androgyny that is both gender nonconformative by US standards on the one hand, and closely tied to her performance of supposed Chineseness on the other. Throughout the musical, she is unable to fully compete with Linda for Ta’s attention. It is only when she sheds her supposedly traditional Chinese clothing and dons an American ball gown that she reads as normatively feminine. It is only in this moment that the Americanized Ta can notice her as a woman. It is only in this moment that Mei Li can succeed in what Linda emphasizes as the desirability of American femininity when she proclaims that she “[wants] to be successful as a girl. The main thing is for a woman to be successful in her gender.”²³ The tailor Chi-Yang echoes the importance of femininity to American normativity when discussing the way the bodice of Mei Li’s dress will accentuate her breasts: “Here it is a symbol,” he says, “like the American eagle.”²⁴ According to the American standards put forth by Rodgers and Hammerstein, Mei Li is largely unsuccessful in her gender until she dons the American dress. It is only then that Ta’s feelings for her truly begin to change and that the possibility of her shift into Americanness becomes possible. For Mei Li, Americanness and participation in US citizenship require the normative performance of gender.

Queer Marriage Practices

The normativity of marriage practices also plays a central role in the conflicts of all three Asia-Pacific musicals. Rodgers and Hammerstein construct the plot of *Flower Drum Song* around evaluating the validity of arranged marriage practices as opposed to the more “natural” and “American” practice of marrying for love. The conflict between monogamy and polygamy is a key (and often underexamined) element of *The King and I*. Finally, *South Pacific*’s central conflict concerns attitudes about interracial marriage. In each of these instances, a nonnormative marriage practice — made queer by its very nonnormativity, according to Halberstam — is assigned to or significantly

involves a racial other. Only those who submit to the more normative marriage practices that define Americanness (marrying for love, monogamy, and same-race marriage) are granted participation in some form of American citizenship. Those who do not conform are not only unable to successfully assimilate, they are frequently not permitted to survive.

Of the three musicals in question, *Flower Drum Song* offers the clearest model of successful assimilation. That it is the only of these musicals set in the US is part of what makes this both possible and necessary. Mei Li, after all, is an immigrant — the very class of persons Hecht argues musicals were meant to instruct. When the story begins, she is also the least Americanized of its four young lovers. She arrives in San Francisco as a “picture bride,” her marriage to Sammy Fong having been arranged by their parents according to what the musical presents as the dominant Chinese marriage custom. Sammy, however, is in love with the Americanized Linda Low, who performs her femininity by dancing provocatively in the nightclub he owns. Mei Li falls in love with Wang Ta, whom she is nearly contracted to marry in Sammy’s place before Madame Liang interjects. Although Ta believes himself to be in love with Linda for much of the musical, and he while Mei Li are nearly forced to honor their marriage contract, the musical reaches its happy conclusion only when the couples (Mei Li/Wang Ta and Linda/Sammy) are united in matrimony by love rather than by arrangement. In marrying for love, Rodgers and Hammerstein convey, these couples depart from their idea of Chinese marriage practice for something not only more “natural” and thus less queer, but more “American” — or, as Klein would have it, more “white.” Indeed, near the musical’s end, Mei Li resolves its romantic conflict with an idea she takes from an American television program. As an illegal immigrant, she claims, she cannot possibly marry Sammy, for it would be a crime and would bring shame on his mother’s house. Thus, the contract for the arranged marriage is nullified, and the young lovers are free to unite in their more “natural” pairings. Having immigrated to the US, Mei Li finds an American solution to the problem of a queer, nonwhite marriage practice. Thus, she successfully assimilates into an Americanized family and, on some level, into American society and citizenship.

Unlike Mei Li, *The King and I*’s titular King of Siam cannot fully assimilate into Americanness. Unlike *Flower Drum Song*, *The King and I* unfolds not in the US but in a kingdom both geographically and temporally remote. *The King and I* also features no American characters; Hecht has argued, however,

that the British Anna serves “as an American surrogate” who introduces ideas of American normativity into a society depicted as both backwards and confused. This supposed backwardness is demonstrated in part by the polygamous marriage practice by which the king has many wives and innumerable children. The king (and metaphorically, the racial other), enacts queerness through the practice of polygamy, which falls outside the heteronormative American standard of the monogamous romantic couple and the nuclear family. Anna’s function as a teacher, in some respects, is to help Siam assimilate out of the queerness of polygamy and into the heteronormative ideal of monogamy. Klein suggests that Anna protests the king’s polygamy through her refusal to live in the King’s palace and in her insistence on having her own home, as previously arranged, apart from his harem. For Klein, much of the conflict around this issue speaks to Anna’s desire to challenge the King’s views on the position of women.²⁵ In addition to this, I want to suggest that Anna also challenges the King’s polygamous practice as nonnormative. This is perhaps clearest when the two come together just before the musical’s climax to perform “Shall We Dance?”

“Shall We Dance,” which describes the first meeting between a man and a woman exploring their interest in one another, could be read as a love song. Ostensibly, this number offers a metaphor for Anna and the King’s burgeoning romantic feelings for one another. As the song progresses, they dance a polka — first holding hands, and then, at the King’s insistence, with his arm around Anna’s waist, as his English guests have done.²⁶ Klein describes this number as a “culmination of sexual tension between Anna and the King,” noting that in teaching the King to polka, “Anna argues for monogamous marriage, a more egalitarian relation between the sexes.”²⁷ I want to extend Klein’s analysis and suggest that Anna’s argument for monogamy is as much, if not more so, about heteronormativity. When she teaches the King a traditional two-person dance, they begin as equals, holding both sets of hands. When the King stops the dance to remark that she performed it differently with her English partners, Anna consents to let him put his arm around her waist, allowing him to take the traditional male lead. She is teaching the King monogamy, but she is teaching a particular brand of monogamy that is less rooted in gender equality than in a Western ideal of heteronormativity that defines Cold War American identity; the man still retains control and the woman still submits, but the relationship is one-to-one rather than one-to-many.

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In Cold War America, however, the very idea of a romantic relationship between Anna and the King can be read as queer, based solely on its interracial nature. Due in part to laws barring miscegenation, interracial relationships in this period of US history existed firmly outside normative marriage practices and were frequently associated with queerness. Bronsky notes that in American literature written prior to the Cold War era, same-sex relationships were often also interracial. "Sexuality and race are about bodies," he writes, as early as "the nineteenth century, when both of these categories were hotly debated . . . were inextricably bound with one another."²⁸ While same-sex relationships were devalued because they were perceived to subvert gender norms and did not lead to reproduction (the supposed ideal purpose of sexual union), interracial relationships were made criminal through anti-miscegenation laws because they threatened to dilute the purity of the supposedly superior white race. Since both same-sex and interracial unions fell outside the normative American ideal, they were often associated with one another in literature like the novels of Herman Melville. Similarly, the interracial relationship that develops between Anna and the already queered king over the course of *The King and I* also fell outside the bounds of normativity. This lack of adherence to the ideal norm meant that the relationship could not survive the process of assimilation. At the end of the musical, Siam follows Anna's teachings and begins to assimilate to her Western (read: American) ways, but the most prominent figure of Siam's queerness, the king, does not assimilate. He and Anna do not enjoy the romantic union that typically ends the golden age American musical. Although they reunite after a seemingly insurmountable rift erupts between them, and although it is clear that they realize the depth of their mutual romantic feelings, they do not profess their love for one another and they do not become a couple. Instead, Anna agrees to stay in Siam to continue teaching the king's wives and children, and the king dies. Since the heteronormative American ideal also requires whiteness, Anna and king can never enact normativity together. Anna can only enact normativity with a white man. Instead of marrying Anna, the king (and his queerness) must die.

Interracial romance is at the center of the conflict in *South Pacific*. As in *The King and I*, it also leads to death. The two primary romantic relationships in *South Pacific* are those between Nellie and Emile and between Lieutenant Cable and Mary's daughter, Liat. While it is tempting to read as interracial the relationship between Nellie and the French plantation owner Emile (and

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Hecht has done so²⁹), I would argue that Emile's Western European identity disqualifies their relationship from such a label. The actual interracial conflict that troubles their union is not between the two of them, but rather in Emile's previous relationship with a Polynesian woman, which has produced two children. Although Emile and Nellie are coupled at the end of the musical, theirs is essentially written as a heteronormative romance between two white adults. The romance between Liat and Cable offers the more direct interracial conflict. Cable, who first believes he cannot marry Liat because their interracial relationship does not fit the heteronormative white American ideal, is often celebrated for the change of heart he experiences in the process of signing the anti-racist song, "You've Got to Be Carefully Taught." It is difficult to ignore, however, that even while Rodgers and Hammerstein write this sentiment into the character and into the musical, they do not let the nonnormative interracial relationship survive. While they insist in *South Pacific* that integration is desirable, they do not suggest that it is possible. By the time the musical ends, no characters of color are shown integrating (or even assimilating) into US culture or society, nor is the interracial relationship moved from the realm of the queer into the realm of the normative. Instead, like the King of Siam, Cable dies. US citizenship remains a white, heteronormative space and the interracial relationship remains ineligible to enter it.

Queer Places

In order for their characters to give queer performances of gender and engage in queer marriage practices — or perhaps as a result of the fact that they do so — it is necessary for Rodgers and Hammerstein to construct legible queer places in each of the Asia-Pacific musicals. According to Halberstam's conception, "queer place refers to the place-making activities within postmodernism in which queer people engage and it also describes the new understandings of space enabled by the production of queer counterpublics."³⁰ By Halberstam's definition, a place can be understood as queer where and when it serves as a site in which queerness is communally enacted. In the Asia-Pacific musicals, Rodgers and Hammerstein establish places as queer when and where they are predominantly populated by people of color.

South Pacific features two queer places — the South Pacific itself, and the island of Bali Ha'i. Bronsky has suggested that the South Pacific would have

been familiar as a potential queer place in American literature by the Cold War era, largely through the widely read novels of Herman Melville. Melville's novels, which are "partially based on his South Pacific whaling shop expeditions, contain passages describing erotic feelings between sailors and island men."³¹ Moreover, the novels feature what Bronsky calls "white heroes" who not only enjoyed a certain amount of "sexual freedom" while in the South Pacific, but who also sought to integrate "their same-sex interracial partners" into "civilization."³² The musical, *South Pacific*, then, relies on existing associations between the South Pacific and queerness previously constructed in US culture. In doing so, it affirms the placement of queerness outside the physical and moral boundaries of American normativity.

Bali Ha'i, on the other hand, stands as a queer place specifically constructed by Rodgers and Hammerstein. Although Bali Ha'i is not the site of any same-sex activity or desire, it offers a place that subverts the white heteronormativity and the nuclear family that form the basis of Cold War American identity. Billis claims that the island is "off limits due to the fact that the French planters have all their young women running around over there" and that the "women dance with just skirts on . . . and everybody gets to know each other pretty well."³³ Operating under a colonialist model in which white men claim ownership of young native women, Bali Ha'i becomes a place of sexual nonnormativity, outside the bounds of the monogamous heterosexual union that the musical makes normative. It is also, primarily, a nonwhite space; while hardly any native islanders appear on the musical's main island, they represent the majority on Bali Ha'i. Indeed, it is on Bali Ha'i that Cable meets, has sex with, and falls in love with Liat. It is in this queer place that they begin their interracial union. On the nonwhite island of Bali Ha'i, even a white, heterosexual American male might depart from normative behavior. Significantly, it is on Bali Ha'i — and only on Bali Ha'i — that the musical makes such interracial romance permissible; because it is nonnormative, however, it cannot survive. The Cable/Liat love affair takes place exclusively in this queer place and they are never seen together elsewhere. Liat only appears on the musical's main island near the end of the second act, when she learns of Cable's death. It is in this white and more normative space that their coupling, made both queer and nonwhite by its interracial nature, must die.

Rodgers and Hammerstein's use of queer places in *The King and I* and *Flower Drum Song* is at once both broader and subtler than in *South Pacific*. In the former, since the king's polygamy is the law of the land, all of Siam

becomes a queer place that Anna infiltrates with her Western/American ideas of monogamy. So queer are Siam and its polygamy, in fact, that the king must view as nonnormative the monogamous relationship desired by his slave Tuptim and her lover Lun Tha. So backwards is Siam, Rodgers and Hammerstein imply, that it has confused the heteronormativity that rules white America for a punishable crime. The queerness of polygamy is so pervasive in Siam that any hope of assimilation into white heteronormativity requires that the king, who serves as the face of its queerness, must die. Interestingly, however, Siam's polygamy is not traded for monogamy by the musical's end. Although *The King and I* ends with a strong sense that significant change is coming to Siam, Siam and its people remain outside the geographic and sexual boundaries of the US. By the time the last notes sound, Siam has only just begun to strive for a sense of assimilation. Whether or not the Siamese can ever fully achieve it is not clear, but Rodgers and Hammerstein imply that it is in their best interest to try.

In *Flower Drum Song*, Rodgers and Hammerstein conveniently rely on an established queer place. Here, the city of San Francisco functions in two ways: its Chinatown provides a logical setting for a story about a community of Chinese Americans and Chinese immigrants, and it brings with it a history as a queer and nonnormative space within the US. Bronsky describes the city, once labeled "Sodom by the Sea," as "vibrantly nonconformist" even by the middle of the nineteenth century.³⁴ The city's history, also notable for its racial and ethnic diversity, is rich with progressive thinking that, even by the time of *Flower Drum Song*'s Broadway debut, had often pushed against the boundaries of white heteronormativity.

San Francisco provides an ideal setting for what Klein sees as the last in a logical progression of events depicted in Rodgers and Hammerstein's three Asia-Pacific musicals, which she describes as a metaphor for a sort of transracial adoption. In *South Pacific*, Nellie (standing in for the US) struggles with and accepts the presence of transracial children in her life; by the end, she figuratively (if not legally) adopts them. In *The King and I*, Anna (again a surrogate) raises and educates her transracial adoptees. In *Flower Drum Song*, the transracial adoptees land on US soil and assimilate into US society. In doing so, they become, whether literally or metaphorically, what Bronsky would term "citizens." In viewing the three musicals together, the musicals' infantilization of Asian and Pacific characters becomes clear. They are made children who must be adopted and educated by white, American parents.

Klein and Eng have made this point admirably. My purpose here is to broaden this analysis to account for the ways in which these characters are also made to shift from queerness to heteronormativity. Those who cannot make that shift (the king, Siam, Bali Ha'i, the Cable/Liat coupling) cannot assimilate into US citizenship.

Flower Drum Song, the only of the Asia-Pacific musicals to take place in the US, is also the only one that allows for full assimilation and the only one in which no one dies. Rather, San Francisco provides a queer space in which, by virtue of being American, some semblance of white heteronormativity can still be achieved for characters of color. By coming to the US, the characters can be Americanized; put another way, they can be made white. Ta struggles with this transition, but Linda assists him. "I am both" Chinese and American," he confesses, "Sometimes the American half shocks the Oriental half. Sometimes the Oriental half keeps me from showing a girl what's on my mind"; "Let's start working on the American half," Linda replies, and then they kiss.³⁵ As Klein argues, Linda's implication that the pursuit of romantic love is strictly an American trait is part of the work Rodgers and Hammerstein do to make the characters as white as possible so that they may, as Hecht argues, follow the assimilation model of white immigrants. "The equation of Chinese Americans with white European immigrants," she argues, "becomes one of the lessons these works taught."³⁶ Thus, for the Chinese characters in *Flower Drum Song*, American identity is tied up with both race and sexuality/marriage. They are permitted (notably monoracial) heteronormative unions precisely because they are "made white" through their Americanization. As I asserted earlier with regards to Mei Li, it is only through heteronormative, white behavior that this becomes possible for them.

Assimilation and Americanization in *Flower Drum Song*, however, require the queer place that San Francisco provides. San Francisco offers unique opportunities as a setting in that provides a space in which queerness can exist, but that is also unquestionably American. Because it is a queer place, it offers a landing place for the queer and racial embodied by the Chinese immigrant arriving on US soil to fulfill an arranged marriage contract. It is a place where racial and queer otherness can exist; but it is also a place where such otherness can be "corrected." In the queer place that is San Francisco, Mei Li's racial and queer otherness can conceivably exist within the US. But since San Francisco lies within the borders of the US, her otherness can be thrown into relief and challenged. Here, under the influence of America and

its previous converts, she has a chance to adopt white, heteronormative practices and can therefore successfully assimilate.

Rodgers and Hammerstein's Asia-Pacific musicals construct and make use of queer places in multiple ways. In *South Pacific* and the *King and I*, queer places are located firmly outside the US and are the site of both racial and queer otherness that cannot successfully assimilate and therefore cannot adopt American identity and earn US citizenship. In *Flower Drum Song*, the queer place provided by San Francisco offers a space in which characters can succeed in their assimilation, so long as they adopt white and heteronormative practices. In all cases, queer places are portrayed as belonging to people of color. Whether Tonkinese, Polynesian, Siamese, or Chinese, queer places are the domain of the racial other. Such spaces and the practices and identities they support are regularly questioned and challenged. Ultimately, they must be either assimilated or abandoned.

Conclusion

Rodgers and Hammerstein's works have long been considered the bedrock of the integrated American musical. They captured not only the form that would come to define nearly all musicals for at least twenty years, but significant facets and markers of US culture, as well. *South Pacific* and *The King and I*, both lauded for their advocacy of racial equality and integration, have both seen twenty-first century Broadway productions and are regularly produced on tour and in regional professional, academic, and community theatres. While less frequently produced, *Flower Drum Song* has also been revived (in revised form) on Broadway in the new millennium. Although each of these musicals revolves around depictions of Asian and Pacific characters and cultures, because they rely heavily on American interpretations rooted in the supremacy of white normativity, they constitute quintessential artifacts of American culture and perspectives before, during, and even after the Cold War.

As scholars and artists continue to engage and interrogate works of US theatre, recognizing the ways in which dominant culture and ideologies have made use of minoritized peoples and identities to advance a national image and ideals of US citizenship rooted in white heteronormative supremacy become increasingly important. I have sought here to engage

an intersectional approach that illuminates not just how Rodgers and Hammerstein have dealt with race or how they have utilized suggestions of queerness in their musicals, but how they have done both in tandem. What becomes clear is that the Asia-Pacific musicals use race and queerness both together and against one another other; that is to say that, in these musicals, at least, Rodgers and Hammerstein have bound nonwhiteness and queerness together with a shared perception of undesirability, while also using each to indict the other as un-American. In the process, they have encouraged a kind of assimilation that is only possible through the adoption of the white, heteronormative identity and practices that have historically defined US citizenship. As study and production of these properties continue — as it inevitably will — it is my hope that scholars and artists will continue to engage, interrogate, and challenge such representations. ♦

Notes

1. Christina Klein, *Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination, 1945-1961* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 194.
2. Stuart J. Hecht, *Transposing Broadway: Jews, Assimilation, and the American Musical* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011).
3. *Ibid.*, 2-5.
4. *Ibid.*, 9.
5. Michael Bronsky, *A Queer History of the United States*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011), 23.
6. *Ibid.*, 159.
7. *Ibid.*, 166.
8. Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II, *South Pacific*, in *Six Plays by Rodgers and Hammerstein* (New York: Modern Library, 1959), 282.
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*, 283.
11. Stacy Wolf, *A Problem Like Maria: Gender and Sexuality in the American Musical* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 94.
12. J. Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 2.
13. *Ibid.*, 3.
14. Rodgers and Hammerstein, *South Pacific*, 292.
15. Bronsky, 23.
16. *Ibid.*, 132.
17. Wolf, 59-60.
18. Andrea Most, "'You've Got to be Carefully Taught': The Politics of Race in Rodgers and Hammerstein's *South Pacific*," *Theatre Journal* 52.3 (October 2000), 321.
19. *Ibid.*, 322-323.
20. Klein, 214.
21. Hammerstein, et. al. *Flower Drum Song*. New York: R&H Theatricals, 1959, 18.
22. Anne Anlin Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 46.

23. Hammerstein, Oscar II, et. al., *Flower Drum Song*, 16.
24. *Ibid.*, 28.
25. Klein, 208-210.
26. Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II, *The King and I*, in *Six Plays by Rodgers and Hammerstein* (New York: Modern Library, 1959), 437.
27. Klein, 208.
28. Bronsky, 57.
29. Hecht, 26. Hecht reads Emile as nonwhite in part based on the casting of Italian opera singer Ezio Pinza. While I believe Hecht makes a convincing case, I am here concerned with the libretto, which only describes Emile as "French."
30. Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*, 6.
31. Bronsky, 58.
32. Bronsky, 60.
33. Rodgers and Hammerstein, *South Pacific*, 296.
34. Bronsky, 46.
35. Rodgers and Hammerstein, *Flower Drum Song*, 33.
36. Klein, 229.

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