

***Glee*: Give Us Something to Sing About Phoebe Bronstein**

Glee goes Gaga: Thoughts on Finn, Camp, and Heteronormative Masculinity

In *Glee*'s "Theatricality" episode each of the *Glee* kids take on a different Lady Gaga-esque look as their own – a look, according to Mr. Schuester/Mathew Morrison, that is supposed to express their own personality and theatricality (a decision that occurs, after the school principal institutes a no-vampire/Goth dress code). After this proposition, Finn/Cory Monteith anxiously declares to Mr. Schuester that he feels that none of the boys, save Kurt/Chris Colfer, will feel comfortable taking on Lady Gaga during the week's assignment, and so as often happens on *Glee* (and perhaps in high school), the girls, which include Kurt, are pitted against the guys. Finn's complaint suggests that he is unable to identify with Lady Gaga because she is by sex a girl, while – per Finn's logic – Kurt's sexuality allows him the flexibility to identify with, and find empowerment in, Gaga. Lady Gaga then stands in as the central conflict to be resolved within the course of the episode, and her changing signification to Finn from shameful to empowering stands as the primary hurdle.

Lady Gaga's entrance into the *Glee* club space emphasizes that this particular space is a campy one – something exemplified by the choice of songs from Journey's "Don't Stop" to Madonna's cannon, and artists like Queen and Lady Gaga. Lady Gaga suggests camp writ large; as Susan Sontag writes in "Notes on Camp", camp is a "love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration" (275). Gaga revels in this exaggerated artifice and unnatural posturing and her costumes are only the tip of this campy iceberg. It is this artifice, exaggeration, and the celebration thereof that is mobilized on *Glee* as the means to teenage reject empowerment. While the *Glee* club space is consistently campy, the use of Gaga, or bands like Queen, suggest that space is also queer.¹

The *Glee* club girls (and Kurt) comfortably and happily express themselves in this queer space, a feat that is indicated through costuming – something which occurs in an earlier episode as well when Kurt briefly attempts heterosexuality replete with a trucker hat. However, Finn's eventual participation, also indicated through costume, appears to function differently than the rest of the *Glee* club, as his refusal and final capitulation are the narrative thrust of the episode. As with many episodes that end with a lesson, my take on this episode's lesson is that Finn's masculinity can only be fully realized once he no longer feels threatened by donning a Gaga-esque costume: a red shower curtain he fashions into a floor length gown and mask. Put another way, his participation in this queer space creates him as a more sympathetic male lead.

Finn then, in this episode, appropriates the queer space of the *Glee* club in order to resist the football brand of masculinity, a version of masculinity that we are to believe comes more naturally to him (and is exemplified in his bully teammates). Thus, while Gaga is mobilized as the central conflict of the episode, queerness (signaled aesthetically throughout the episode) is used, or appropriated, in the service of showcasing Finn's good character. Following this logic then, queer space is valued within the world of the show in that it preserves and supports a heteronormative world. Importantly too, Finn's realization is brought on by Kurt's father's impassioned (and dead on) speech following Finn's angry declaration of he and Kurt's new room as "faggy." It is the intervention of a father figure here, which Finn lacks, that teaches him to be

¹ I am thinking here of Gaga's discussion of her bisexuality in songs like "Bad Romance", or her refusal to answer rumors regarding her sex in the "Telephone" video, and that she also has a large queer fan base.

a more empathetic man, and a better and more sympathetic heterosexual lead. In this moment the nuclear family becomes crucial, as are relationships between father and son, in producing a “good” man.²

I want to end here on a final note considering this episode and Finn’s masculinity within the larger framework of the show and his storyline: the use of the musical as courtship rite, a formula that reinforces traditional gender roles (and potentially imposes limits on any potential critique/resistance to those roles). The resistance to heteronormativity is confined by the musical as courtship rite formula, and so Finn (not Kurt) and Rachel remain the leads.³ While Finn participates in this queer space of the Glee club, even donning the camp aesthetic in the Gaga episode, he does so as a tourist who appropriates that aesthetic and space in service of his character’s development within the framework of the courtship narrative. A discussion of how class and race, and further examination of gender and sexuality (or the show’s place on the Fox network) would be useful here in order to complicate these initial comments, but I hope that these comments can provide a springboard for a larger conversation on how gender, sexuality, race, and class are at work on *Glee*.

Works Cited:

Sontag, Susan. “Notes on ‘Camp.’” *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966. 275-292. Print.

² It seems worth noting here that this episode is particularly concerned with parenting: Rachel and her mother and Puck becoming a father.

³ It seems worth noting here though that Kurt and Mercedes/Amber Riley are among fans (and my) favorite characters in terms of a resistant reading about who the show’s main characters are.