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**“A LOSER LIKE ME”: IDENTITY AND AGENCY IN RYAN
MURPHY’S *GLEE***

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*Nobody can tell you
There's only one song worth singing
They may try and sell you
'Cause it hangs them up to see someone like you*

*But you gotta make your own kind of music
Sing your own special song
Make your own kind of music
Even if nobody else sings along*

(Mama Cass Eliot, "Make your own kind of music")

For all the losers, outcasts, in-betweens, and queers out there.

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A television series is the result of a collaborative process. It involves creators, directors, writers, actors, editors and, in the case of *Glee*, singers and musicians (among so many other professionals). I see the process of writing a thesis in a similar way. Even though I am the author of these pages, I would have never reached this point without the collaboration of different people:

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ABSTRACT
**“A LOSER LIKE ME”: IDENTITY AND AGENCY IN RYAN
MURPHY’S *GLEE***

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This study addresses the problem of hegemonic representation on television. The overall objective is to analyze whether and, if so, how the television series *Glee* subverts prejudiced or stereotypical representations, specifically of the characters Kurt (the so-called “gay boy”) and Finn (the stereotypical “football player”). To this end, I propose a textual analysis of specific episodes from the first season of the show. My purpose is to understand the ways in which the series can be read counter-hegemonically despite its reception by mainstream audiences. The study is conducted in the light of Stuart Hall’s concept of cultural identity (1990) towards understanding how these representations deal with the issue of agency as understood by Michel Foucault (1990) and Judith Butler (1993). Based on the analysis of specific episodes, it is possible to note that *Glee* constantly makes use of a simplistic and resolutionist discourse that embraces and celebrates difference, promoting that idea that “we are all different” and, because of that, “we are all special”. At the same time, however, while considering the narrative as a whole, one can identify the ways in which identities are complex, i.e., how different identity categories intersect each other and how they are strongly influenced by different power relations. It is mainly when they perform singing and dancing within the episodes that the characters articulate their reflections on issues of identity, thus developing their agency from within the school repressive system. Moreover, Finn’s and Kurt’s identities can be understood as being queer to the extent that they defy binary and normative categorizations setting them in a constant process of re-signification. The politics of *Glee* is a dynamic and impure one, since it is performative of both conservatism and of agential change. While heteronormative and capitalist notions frame the show, non-normative representations of identity also emerge from the narrative.

Key-words: *Glee*, agency, identity, hegemonic representation.

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RESUMO
“UM PERDEDOR COMO EU”: IDENTIDADE E AGÊNCIA EM
***GLEE*, DE RYAN MURPHY**

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Este estudo aborda o problema da representação hegemônica na televisão. O objetivo principal é analisar se (e, neste caso, como) a série de televisão *Glee* subverte representações preconceituosas e estereotipadas, especialmente com relação aos personagens Kurt (o chamado “menino gay”) e Finn (o estereótipo do “jogador de futebol americano”). Para tanto, proponho uma análise textual de episódios específicos da primeira temporada do programa. O propósito principal é entender as maneiras como o seriado pode ser abordado de maneira contra-hegemônica apesar de sua recepção por públicos hegemônicos. Este estudo é conduzido à luz do conceito de identidade cultural de Stuart Hall (1990) a fim de entender como estas representações lidam com a questão da agência de acordo com Michel Foucault (1990) e Judith Butler (1993). Com base na análise dos episódios, é possível observar que *Glee* faz uso constante de um discurso resolucionista e simplista que aceita e celebra a diferença. A ideia promovida é a de que “somos todos diferentes” e, por conta disso, “somos todos especiais”. Ao mesmo tempo, no entanto, ao considerar a narrativa como um todo, é possível identificar as complexidades identitárias, ou seja, como diferentes categorias de identidade se interseccionam e como elas são influenciadas por diferentes relações de poder. É principalmente através das performances de canto e dança presentes nos episódios que os personagens articulam suas reflexões sobre questões de identidade, desenvolvendo assim a sua agência a partir do sistema opressivo da escola. Além disso, as identidades dos personagens Kurt e Finn podem ser entendidas como *queer* já que desafiam categorizações binárias e normativas em um processo constante de re-significação. Assim, a política de *Glee* é dinâmica e impura, já que é performativa do conservadorismo e, ao mesmo tempo, da mudança agencial. Embora noções capitalistas e heteronormativas moldem o seriado, representações não-normativas de identidade também emergem da narrativa.

Palavras-chave: *Glee*, agência, identidade, representação hegemônica.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: Towards a counter-hegemonic reading of *Glee*

This study addresses the problem of hegemonic representation on television. I understand *representation* here as neither stable nor permanent. It is rather “frequently confusing and always subject to change”. In this sense, “any representation is limited, flawed and interested” (Webb 7), since it fits a particular social, historical and personal perspective. I use the term *hegemonic* here and throughout the thesis to refer to representation and to discourses that mostly occupy a dominant and powerful hierarchical position in society. Hegemonic representation is indeed a problem when so-called minorities¹ are represented in the mass media, if minorities are, by definition, unassimilated to the master narratives² that constitute discourses of knowledge.³ In this sense, difference is assimilated and reduced to familiar codifications so as to appear legible for consumption by wide audiences. However, although such appearances do succeed in serving the business of mass media, they cannot determine or control the meanings they produce. This is because different meanings cannot be reduced or tamed into the codifications by which they are known -- or, more accurately, ignored. More specifically, then, this research is concerned with the problem of hegemonic representation of stereotypical identity constructs in the television series *Glee* (see section 1.3.).

1.1. Identity and the media

The general context of this study is the representation of identity and difference in the media from a Cultural Studies perspective. Cultural Studies is an interdisciplinary area that has strongly influenced the field of media studies through the basic premise that media is “a political

¹ Because I understand the idea of “minority groups” as problematic, I use the term here and throughout my work as defined by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. For them, a minority is not necessarily a group that is minor or inferior (in number or any other way). Despite the fact that there might be more women in the world, for instance, they can still be considered minoritarian if we take into consideration the patriarchal context in which we are inserted. The authors criticize the concept of majority and emphasize that it is through a process of “becoming-minor” that deterritorialization and revolution can occur (18).

² I refer to master narratives as “dominant cultural narratives”. According to Molly Andrews, “[o]ne of the key functions of master narratives is that they offer people a way of identifying what is assumed to be a normative experience” (1).

³ According to Stuart Hall, “[d]iscourses are ways of referring to or constructing knowledge about a particular topic of practice [. . .]” (Representation 6).

social practice”⁴ (Erni 187). While there is no single and finite definition of Cultural Studies, Lawrence Grossberg’s explanation of the area seems to fit well the context for the present research:

Cultural Studies describes how people’s everyday lives are articulated by and with culture. It investigates how people are empowered and disempowered by the particular structures and forces that organize their everyday lives in contradictory ways, and how their (everyday) lives are themselves articulated to and by the trajectories of economic, social, cultural and political power. Cultural studies explores the historical possibilities of transforming people’s lived realities and the relations of power within which those realities are constructed, as it reaffirms the vital contribution of cultural (and intellectual) work to the imagination and realization of such possibilities. (8)

Since the 1970s, there has been a significant number of researchers in this field interested in how identity differences are represented in the media (Erni 198). Some of the questions raised by their studies include: How are identities of different social groups assimilated in the media? How are these assimilations resisted through agency? “What is the relationship within, between, and across different identities, and how are they linked to the categories of agency, power, resistance, and performativity?” and “How do we imagine alternative representations?” (Erni 198).

Bearing in mind that the general context of this research is the study of identity in the media, I shall now shift focus to the specific context, that is, the study of identity in the television series *Glee*. Horace Newcomb and Paul M. Hirsch, two important scholars in the area of television studies, agree that television itself is a cultural forum containing a “multiplicity of meanings”. For them, “[television’s] emphasis is on the process rather than product, on discussion rather than indoctrination, on contradiction and confusion rather than coherence” (506). In this sense, it may be argued that television is a rich source for studying cultural identity in the sense pointed out by Stuart Hall (see theoretical framework). I would like to emphasize that the instability

⁴ For John Nguyet Erni, the idea of media as a political social practice represents a “vibrant concern about the political functions and consequences of media use” (187-88), suggesting that even when associated with emblematically reductive representations it is a locus for agency as I hope to demonstrate.

and non-fixity of identity renders it highly complex despite the apparently reductive effects of mediatic representation and their impact on contemporary society. This may explain why television has recently been drawing a lot of attention from academia. In this context, it is striking that the study of cultural identity representations in the television show *Glee* (which has become very popular in different parts of the world) has been undertaken by only a few researchers, as detailed in the next section.

1.2. Theoretical framework: towards an understanding of identity and agency in *Glee*

This section is organized in three main parts. In the first one, I present the concepts of *identity* and *agency* as defined by Stuart Hall and Judith Butler, respectively. Because this study deals with identity construction on television, in the second part I discuss television and the television series format. At last, I review some of the most recent criticism regarding the issue of identity related to my object of study, that is, the television series *Glee*.

Identity, from a Cultural Studies perspective, is always subjected to change. According to Jen Webb, an individual's identity is a tenuous thing: identity is not something that humans are born with, but something that is developed and that could even be lost (65). For the Cultural Studies theorist Stuart Hall, the postmodern concept of

[i]dentity is not as transparent or unproblematic as we think. Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think, instead, of identity as a 'production', which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation. (Cultural Identity 222)

Besides, Hall explains that, for the postmodern subject, identity becomes "formed and transformed continuously in relation to the ways we are represented or addressed in the cultural systems which surround us" (Cultural Identity 277).⁵

⁵ Donald E. Hall explains that "postmodernism captures the hollowing out and collapse of belief in human 'progress' and other universal truths, ones often associated with the Enlightenment and 'modern' era generally". In this sense, like poststructuralism, it is "associated also with the recognition that such truths are socially constructed [. . .] and politically inflected [. . .]" (133).

Because the postmodern concept of identity is sometimes criticized for its lack of effectiveness when it comes to promoting change, some scholars have developed what has been defined as a “realist” theory of identity. For Linda Martin Alcoff and Satya P. Mohanty, “identity claims cannot only be specious, narrow, and incorrectly described, but they can also be plausibly formulated and accurate”. It is in this sense that our identities are not “mere *descriptions* of who we are but, rather, *causal explanations* of our social locations in a world that is shaped by such locations, by the way they are distributed and hierarchically organized” (6). As a consequence, it is exactly through identity that political structures can be contested. In this way, the realist view of identity moves away from the extremist idea that “there is no identity” without falling back into essentialism. Instead of negating identity categories, it is important then to understand the ways in which they are formed, transformed and interrelated.

Kimberle Crenshaw postulates that in order to understand oppression it is necessary to look at identity from an intersectional perspective. For her, it is not possible to understand how black women are oppressed, for instance, by simply looking at one specific identity category. Instead, we should consider how different identity categories (race, class, gender, and so on) are interrelated and intersected (1243). As we will see, this idea will be relevant for the analysis and the conclusions of this study.

In line with this idea, and following Hall and Foucault, Butler develops the concept of *agency*. In order to understand this concept, though, it is necessary to refer at first to the ideas that she draws on in order to make her formulations. The concept of *interpellation* by Louis Althusser (1971), for instance, is central to Butler’s thought. According to Althusser, we are constantly interpellated (or “hailed”) by ideology, in the sense that we are never totally free. As Hall puts it, following Althusser, the Ideological State Apparatuses, such as religion, education, family, law, politics, communication and culture “function by passing along, passing off as natural and unchallengeable, the fundamental beliefs of a society” (86).⁶

Butler also draws on Michel Foucault and his notions of discourse and power. In “The History of Sexuality”, Volume I, Foucault explains that “[d]iscourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it” (100-01). We will see that this conception of discourse

⁶ See Althusser’s “Ideology and state ideological apparatuses (notes towards an investigation).”

suggests its connection with agency, but for now I want to underline that the subject constituted within discourse is not determined by it. In “The Psychic Life of Power”, Butler explains that, for Foucault,

the subject who is produced through subjection is not produced at an instant and its totality. Instead, it is in the process of being produced, it is repeatedly produced (which is not the same as being produced again and again). It is precisely the possibility of a repetition which does not consolidate the dissociated unity, the subject, but which proliferates effects which undermine the force of normalization. (93)

In other words, it is exactly because our identities are never complete but in constant construction that the possibility for re-signification is always open. In this sense, Foucault’s point is not that discourse turns us into automatons and machines in which meanings are inscribed. It is rather the opposite: interpellation has to be repeatedly reinforced in order for it to function, a fact that opens up the possibility for constructing different meanings and producing – at least slightly – new discourses. This points to the possibility of agency, as we shall see shortly.

Based on the notions of interpellation and discourse, Butler formulates the concept of *performativity*. She argues that gender – and even identity – is constructed through repetition and reiteration. By that, just like Foucault, she does not mean that one can choose consciously her gender or identity. In fact, the idea is that the subject only comes into being through performativity, that is, through repetitions that produce the specific effect of subject constitution. This means that there is no prior subject to performativity (*Bodies that Matter* 7). She argues, then, that “performativity must be understood not as a singular or deliberate ‘act’, but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names” (*Bodies that Matter* 2).

What emerges from performativity is a paradox: it is only within the regimes that we are subjected to that there may exist the possibility of producing new meanings. This paradox is precisely what calls for Foucault’s concept of agency. Butler puts it this way:

[T]he subject who would resist such norms is itself enabled, if not produced, by such norms. Although this constitutive constraint does not foreclose the possibility of agency, it does

locate agency as a reiterative or rearticulatory practice, immanent to power, and not a relation of external opposition to power. (*Bodies that Matter* 15)

In other words, Butler explains that our identities are defined in relation to society's constraints; that is, we can only define ourselves within a limited set of possibilities. At the same time, however, Butler emphasizes that, despite society's constraints, there is always room for agency: "if the subject is culturally constructed, it is nevertheless vested with an agency, usually figured as the capacity for reflexive meditation, that remains intact regardless of its cultural embeddedness" (*Gender Trouble* 182). In this sense, from a poststructuralist perspective agency is the ability to act upon our identities in relation to the discursive possibilities that are culturally available at each given moment.⁷ Expanding on Foucault's notion of poststructuralist agency towards its implications on gender, Butler makes it clear, then, that "[o]n such a model, 'culture' and 'discourse' *mire* the subject, but do not constitute the subject" (*Gender Trouble* 182). Since our identities are constructed through performativity (which has to be constantly reinforced through repetition), "the ideal is never accomplished, it must always be attempted again" (Loxley 124). Agency may arise in this context because the "focus on repetition further permits the suggestion that the norms thus repeated and recited themselves become vulnerable in their repetition". After all, they are not "a law that we are simply condemned to obey; (...) and the spell could be broken" (124).

Insofar as it brings into legibility the performativity rather than the fixity of identity, postmodern identity construction arguably facilitates political agency, as suggested by bell hook's take on postmodern culture:

Postmodern culture with its decentered subject can be the space where ties are severed or it can provide the occasion for new and varied forms of bonding. To some extent, ruptures, surfaces, contextuality, and a host of other happenings create gaps that make space for oppositional practices which no longer require intellectuals to be confined by narrow separate spheres with no meaningful connection to the world of the everyday. (427)

⁷ Donald E. Hall explains that poststructuralism "signals a [. . .] failure of belief in human ability to manipulate and discover the truths underlying language, ideals which the linguistic movement known as 'structuralism' often articulated or implicitly endorsed" (133).

Agency is also central to the realist view of identity: “if the ultimate struggle is against forms of domination (material and ideological), then what is indispensable is a politics of agency, that is, political action within the many domains of capitalist society” (Sánchez 31). Thus Sánchez argues that “one of our main concerns needs to be exploring the role that a politics of identity can play in generating agency and creating critical spaces from which to resist and contest hegemonic shaping and defining of ‘reality’” (31). It is in this sense that the identity discussion on critical realism is helpful for the project of understanding how agency operates in hegemonic discourses.

Alongside Hall’s theorizations, Butler’s have also become highly useful for studies that focus on identity issues. Her writings have been considered foundational for Queer Studies in its concern with the limits and instability of identity. Indeed, as Ki Namaste postulates, “[q]ueer theory is interested in exploring the borders of sexual identities, communities, and politics”. To this end, it aims at denaturalizing heteronormativity by exposing the various ways in which it is culturally constructed. Since it is not possible to locate oneself outside the constraints of heteronormativity but only to develop agency from within them, queer theorists such as Butler and Namaste suggest that we negotiate those borders: “[w]e can think about the *how* of these boundaries – not merely the fact that they exist, but also how they are created, regulated, and contested” (Namaste 224). Considering the poststructuralist tenet whereby every system is haunted by that which it represses, ironically potentializing it, queer theory’s concern with the limits and instability of identitarian systems has much to gain from a poststructuralist focus on agency. This is Namaste’s point in arguing that poststructuralism can be useful for Queer Studies, since the latter “addresses not only the emergence and development of homosexual communities, but also the intersection of these identities within the broader context of heterosexual hegemony” (228). It is in this sense, of engaging the political possibilities from within systemic constraints, that the concepts of cultural identity and agency developed by Hall and Butler will guide this research towards a counter-hegemonic reading of *Glee* from the poststructuralist perspective of Queer Theory.

Taking into account the fact that our identities are in part shaped culturally by the possibilities offered by the changing discursive formations within which we interact, I shall now focus on the issue of television as a cultural industry. Brian L. Ott explains that television influences our identity formation in two main ways: it “furnishes

consumers with explicit identity models, models of not who to be but *how to be*” and with “the symbolic resources -- the actual cultural bricks -- with which to (re)construct identity” (58). Mirlei Valenzi argues that, by presenting multiple and various programs, television allows the formation of various complex meanings. However, it usually contributes to the maintenance of social values (10). Newcomb and Hirsch, in their article “Television as a Cultural Forum”, state that television is central in the creation of “public thought” (505). Bearing this in mind, and considering that television can be understood as being very complex due to its “multiplicity of meanings” (506), one could argue that, besides promoting social values, it can also be the site in which so-called public thought is challenged.

In considering the history of television, it is possible to observe an increase in the number of narrative programs, that is, mini-series, TV series, movies, soap operas, advertisements, news reports, documentaries, and even reality shows (Valenzi 10). The mainstream US-American television networks have their programs divided into two main periods of time: daily programs and the “prime-time” programs. Most of the prime-time programs are the so-called “TV series”. Divided into episodes, the TV series vary in genres, the sitcom and the drama being the most popular ones (Feuer 561).

According to Renata Pallotini, the TV series format can be defined as a fiction told in episodes. These episodes usually have a relative unity, meaning that they can be seen independently from each other. However, they also have a “total unity”, which can be easily observed if we take into consideration market and production purposes – not to mention the fact that there are permanent characters, the story takes place at a specific period of time, and it revolves around a main problem or theme (such as femininity, social inequality, the power of money, etc.). In this sense, one specific objective unifies the episodes, which are, therefore, the result of this primary function (Pallotini 32).

Having introduced some features of television and the television series format, I turn now specifically to the issue of identity in the television series *Glee*, which constitutes the corpus of this study. Despite the fact that only a few studies have dealt with this particular issue in *Glee*, there are already some insightful considerations that are relevant to my research. In order to discuss such considerations, it is important to emphasize that *Glee* is a musical comedy-drama that relies on music for representation. In this sense, music and the musical contexts are highly pertinent for the proposed research.

In the article “Drama is the Cure for Gossip: Television’s Turn to Theatricality in a Time of Media Transition”, Abigail De Kosnik argues that *Glee* belongs to a number of contemporary television narratives in which theatricality is a central issue. As she explains, in this kind of program “not only do TV characters engage in theatrical performance regularly, but when they perform, they also transform themselves”. According to De Kosnik, the characters “consciously make spectacles of themselves in the eyes of others, and by exposing themselves in this way, they realize and reveal core truths about themselves” (370). This is viewed as problematic by the critic, since she follows theorists such as Butler, for whom there is no such thing as an “authentic self”.

In this sense, De Kosnik argues that *Glee* has a strong “mass appeal” mainly because it promotes the idea that “each of us has a core self that we can know, be completely sure of, and effectively display to others and that exposing that self yields only happy outcomes”. In this sense, many of the contemporary TV shows’ success might be related to the fact that they “offer viewers the fantasy of ‘finding themselves’ through a type of performing that is quick, simple, and effective” (384). For the author, television narratives give viewers a sense of safety which other types of media, like the Internet, fail to provide (384). In sum, De Kosnik critiques television’s promotion of an anti-poststructuralist and essentialist view of identity.

It is important to emphasize the ways in which De Kosnik’s notion of theatricality differs from Butler’s concept of performativity. According to De Kosnik, theatricality (or performing) is a way for the characters to change themselves. The contradiction, however, lies in the fact that, in her view, the characters do not actually construct their identities while performing, but rather access their pre-existing “truths” (which they were not aware of). In this sense, the performances, instead of producing new meanings, would perpetuate the idea of an essence and of an intrinsic identity to each character. This discussion will be very useful for the next chapters, in which the television series will be analyzed in relation to performativity and, specifically, to agency.

In “*Glee* and the Ghosting of the Musical Theatre Canon”, Gelles explains that, besides featuring popular and contemporary songs, *Glee* makes use of songs from the musical genre from Broadway (90). For the author, each song in the show “has a contextual purpose once it has been re-integrated into the story of the episode” (95). This is particularly interesting in the case of the Broadway songs, since they belong to the specific context of the musical theatre narrative in the first place. In this sense, by including these songs in the television series, *Glee*

recontextualizes them, echoing their earlier meanings, making reference to the musicals in which they were inserted, or even creating new and different significances. The show is, then, “reframing the consumption of musical theatre simply by suggesting that the songs can have a life away from their original story”. Besides, the songs can be recontextualized so as to become part of the characters’ different stories (102). Unlike De Kosnik, Gelles considers the processes of reframing, rewriting and rereading the “original story” of musical theatre while appropriating the songs in the context of the characters’ meaning-making processes. My argument is that Gelles’ view can be understood from the perspective of agency. More specifically, I see Gelles’ reading of recontextualization in *Glee* in terms of the poststructuralist project of expanding agency.

Some other studies have focused on how so-called minority groups are portrayed in *Glee*. For Beatriz González de Garay Domínguez, in the article “*Glee*: el éxito de la diferencia”, the television show works in such a way to transform the different and the marginal into the popular (48). Domínguez argues that the show makes use of popular culture (especially popular music) to reflect about identity configuration processes in our society (56). For the author, who draws on Susan Sontag’s *Notes on Camp* (1984), the show presents characteristics related to *camp* aesthetics, making use of exaggeration, irony and artifice.⁸ In her view, the characters can be considered queer to the extent that they are non-conventional and play with the use of labels and identity categories. Even though stereotypes are constantly present in the narrative, she argues that the show itself is conscious of this presence and plays with them. By doing so, the show seems to problematize the notions of stereotypical identities (56).

Stereotypes are indeed problematic because, according to Tunico Amancio, they reflect reductionist or even false thoughts about a person or a specific group (137). The author explains that in television, for instance, stereotypes become fixed and, therefore, help maintain pre-conceived ideas that cannot account for the complex dynamics of life (138). In this sense, they are restrictive and, at the same time, call for reopening. For Butler, “the subject is constituted through the force of exclusion and abjection, one which produces a constitutive outside to the subject, an abjected outside, which is, after all, ‘inside’ the subject as its own founding repudiation” (*Bodies that Matter* 3). She argues, then, that normativity depends on the stereotype, that is, it “requires the

⁸ For more on *camp*, see Fabio Cleto’s *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject*.

simultaneous production of a domain of abject beings, those who are not yet ‘subjects’, but who form the constitutive outside to the domain of the subject” (3).

In the article entitled “I feel like Lady Gaga: A narrativa de um personagem gay em *Glee*”, Ana Camila Esteves and João Eduardo Silva de Araújo discuss the portrayal of Kurt Hummel, one of the characters in the television series. The authors claim that the portrayal of Kurt is subversive in the sense that it is based on artificiality and theatricality, emphasizing the ways in which notions such as the feminine and the masculine are constructed. Besides, despite the fact that the character has a so-called effeminate behavior, he is neither passive nor submissive. This is to say that the show dissociates effeminate behavior from submissiveness, unlike most stereotypical representations of both male homosexual and women characters. The authors also claim that the focus of the narrative is not on the discussion of homosexuality itself, like in many other television series in which homosexual characters go through a long period of self-discovery and acceptance (14). In other words, most of the narrative is not about the difficulties faced by the character while coming out. Rather, the fact that he is homosexual is clear from the beginning of the narrative (14). In this sense, the authors seem to believe that mainstream television programs such as *Glee* can produce moments of rupture in relation to stereotypical and hegemonic discourses. As we shall see later on, this is closely related to the specific aims of this study.

It is not uncommon, however, to come across writings that strongly criticize *Glee* for the ways in which it portrays minority groups. Alice Sheppard, for instance, explains that the series has brought visibility to disability rights and culture; however, the fact that the actor playing Artie (the boy who is in a wheelchair) is not disabled in real life seems to reinforce “the incorrect idea that disabled actors cannot work regularly and reliably, and furthers the prejudicial systems that make it nearly impossible for a disabled person both to train as an actor and/or dancer and to get work” (online, n.p.). Similarly, David Kociemba states that “Artie is crip drag performance of a stereotype written by people who erase the arts, cultures, and histories of people with impairments.” Drawing an analogy with the consistent critique of blackface, Kociemba argues that “*Glee* does not increase the visibility of the disability rights

cause or effectively convey the experiences of disability-based oppression” (1.3).⁹

Rachel E. Dubrofsky argues in her article “Jewishness, Whiteness, and Blackness on *Glee*: Singing to the Tune of Postracism” that the show “perpetuates racism and relies on racist tropes”. For the author, “*Glee* downplays racism, avoids the institutional role and presence of racism, racially aligns Jewishness and whiteness, and whitens blackness” (83). Indeed, all the characters who are defined as Jewish are white. Not only that, but they are also more privileged than the non-white characters. Characters such as Santana, a black teenager, never occupy the central story lines and they are constructed in a stereotypical fashion (Santana is the “angry black woman”, for instance). While it is common for the other characters to sing any type of song, Santana – despite her undeniable vocal potential – predominantly sings songs that were originally performed by black artists. Besides, whenever she sings a solo, it is thanks to Rachel’s (the Jewish girl’s) benevolence. In a way, Dubrofsky explains that Santana’s portrayal reduces her to her racialized identity. At the same time, her oppression seems to be equated with the other characters’ differences: “[o]ppression is made commonplace and normalized, part of the everyday experience of any teenager’s life, with the suggestion that overcoming racialized oppression is akin to overcoming one’s awkward teen years and learning to celebrate one’s uniqueness” (98). This idea can be seen as problematic in the sense that it relies on the discourse of meritocracy, in which the individual is the only responsible for his/her future. The author seems to believe that the show does not account for the complex dynamics of identity, being, therefore, reductionist and simplistic. As we shall see later on, the ways in which the show deals with the question of individual agency that can be developed from within oppressive structures is one of my main concerns in this analysis.

Some bloggers such as Paula Penedo claim that the show in fact promotes tokenism. For her, despite the fact that the show has one of the most diverse casts in US-American television, the main storylines still center around white, heterosexual, and slim characters. She also contends that the story contains some instances that are sexist, as when one of the girls in the *Glee* club talks about the several tasks that she has to do every day and includes “keeping her boyfriend interested in her and physically satisfied” among them (online, n.p.). In sum, these

⁹ For more on the critique of blackface, see Eric W. Lott’s *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*.

different critical texts suggest that the question of representation of stereotypes in *Glee* is still a controversial one, requiring more careful study and discussion.

As clarified above, Hall's notion of cultural identity and Butler's notion of agency constitute the conceptual basis for the proposed research. Identity is understood here as being incomplete and always subjected to change (Hall, *Cultural Identity* 222). It is because human beings are normatively constructed that they still have some degree of agency, that is, the ability to act upon their own identities (Butler 182). In this sense, television, which (re)produces different identities, is very influential. It presents a series of meanings, which may even be contradictory, just like our identities. More specifically, television narrative programs – like the television series – have had a strong appeal for their audiences and have become, therefore, an important medium for the study of identity. At the same time that television programs can be understood as a form of interpellation, they can be a channel for challenging assumptions, creating ruptures, and so on. As hooks points out, postmodern culture can be seen as potentializing the creation of new meanings (427).

We have seen that a few studies have suggested that theatricality and music are central to the narrative of *Glee* when it comes to the portrayal of the characters' identities. It is also possible to observe that different readings have resulted from the analysis of the series: Kosnik's study reviewed here understood the program as promoting an essentialist view of identity, while Gelles' understanding of the narrative – especially in terms of the use of songs – seems to potentialize a reading of identity from a poststructuralist perspective. Besides, we have seen other few studies that have focused on how the television series portrays minority groups, and whether as well as how it subverts prejudiced or stereotypical representations. All these studies provide important perspectives to be considered in my analysis of the narrative. Through the specific lens of my research, I hope to contribute to these debates on *Glee* by considering issues that might have been overlooked by these critics. Thus, this review of literature shall guide the study so as to answer the tentative research questions spelled out in the section below.

1.3. “Here's what you missed on *Glee*”: analyzing hegemonic television from a counter-hegemonic perspective

The overall objective of this research is to analyze whether and, if so, how *Glee* subverts prejudiced or stereotypical representations,

specifically of the relationship between the characters Kurt (the so-called “gay boy”) and Finn (the stereotypical “football player”). To this end, I propose a textual analysis of specific episodes from the first season of this television series. My purpose is to understand the ways in which the series can be read counter-hegemonically despite its reception by mainstream audiences. I am aware, therefore, that there is no direct correspondence between a text’s political project and its reception. The study will be conducted in the light of Hall’s concept of cultural identity towards understanding how these representations deal with the issue of agency as understood by Foucault and Butler (see the theoretical framework in the previous section). Since it would be impossible to study all the main characters at length within the specific scope of this study, I will focus my analysis mainly on Finn and Kurt. Both characters are central to the narrative and, despite the fact that they represent two stereotypes that are usually regarded as opposites, they develop a strong relationship throughout the episodes. Finn is particularly interesting because, at least in the beginning of the narrative, he is not a so-called “loser”. His status in the school environment changes once he joins the singing club, though. Kurt, on the other hand, may be described as the stereotypical “gay boy” who is most often disqualified. However, his presence in the *Glee* club is important in the sense that he is the character who constantly seems to challenge gender divisions and frontiers.

Based on the objectives aforementioned, the tentative research questions for the proposed research arise:

- (1) Does Butler’s poststructuralist notion of agency potentialize a counter-hegemonic reading of *Glee*’s stereotypical characterization of Finn and Kurt?
- (2) If so, (how) can this notion of agency contribute to challenge Kosnik’s assumption of essentialist identities in *Glee*?
- (3) What are the performative effects of singing and performing in the show in terms of the identity constructs of the two characters herein analyzed?
- (4) Can the representation of the two characters and of their relationship be understood from a queer perspective? If so, how? What further questions emerge?

In the attempt to discuss such questions, this study will focus on different moments of the first season of the television series *Glee*, which is composed of 22 episodes. Created by Ryan Murphy along with Brad Falchuck and Ian Brennan, the TV series started in 2009 and is now

heading to its sixth and last season. It centers around a group of “misfits” who, after being encouraged by their Spanish teacher, decide to join a singing and performing club at school. The Glee club, a long forgotten tradition that has lost its prestige and its members, is foregrounded as the setting in which these teenagers, who are often bullied, can literally have a voice and perhaps even be heard in the school environment. The first season was aired from May 2009 to June 2010, and it was broadcast in the United States by Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation. The historical context of the show is, then, one in which bullying has been strongly discussed, especially after several cases of teenage depression and even suicide.

The show has also been sold to several other countries and channels, including *Rede Globo de Televisão* in Brazil, which has presented the episodes in their dubbed version in Portuguese. *Glee* is also a big seller: the episodes from its different seasons are available on DVD, and its songs are sold on iTunes as well as in the CD format.

I have chosen to study this television series because of its emphasis on identity issues. It has also been a great hit and, at the same time, it has raised controversial criticism, as I have pointed out above, regarding the portrayal of identity. I will analyze various textual moments throughout the first season, to be selected as they pertain to the research questions above. The first season is also particularly relevant because it introduces the audience to the main characters, including Finn and Kurt, whose construction this study sets out to analyze in terms of its potentiality for a counter-hegemonic reading.

1.4. Why studying *Glee* matters

The significance of the proposed research lies mainly in three aspects. Firstly, it should promote reflection on how television and other influential media may impact the viewers’ identity constructions. Secondly, the research should contribute to the studies on identity held at *Programa de Pós-Graduação em Inglês* at UFSC. Up to this point, several M.A. theses and a few PhD dissertations dealing with the issue of identity in Literature have been defended successfully. However, few studies have focused on television narratives. In fact, one recent M.A. study analyzed a television series from a Queer Studies perspective, while three M.A. studies on television focused on the adaptation of a literary work and one was conducted in the field of Discourse Analysis. Currently, at least one graduate student has been studying a television series from a Feminist perspective. At last, the proposed investigation is significant for my personal interest. Being a big fan of television series

and a Gleek (a term used to refer to fans of *Glee*), I believe that television not only reproduces dominant ideologies: it is also the place for change to be ignited. In this sense, I have decided to investigate whether such a popular show, which has certainly had an influence on me in terms of identity construction, potentializes a challenge to pre-established notions of identity.

1.5. “To be continued...”: about the next episodes (chapters, I mean!)

Having introduced the main theoretical perspectives as well as the corpus for this research, I shall now focus on the analysis of the characters that were selected for the study. In the next chapter, entitled “I’m not afraid of being called a loser”, I will analyze Finn’s identity construction and elaborate on how it can be understood from the perspective of agency. In order to do that, I will use concepts of the realist view of identity while analyzing specific textual moments of the series. In Chapter 3, entitled “I’m proud to be different”, the analysis will focus on Kurt with an emphasis on how resignification and cultural translation can be understood as emerging from his performances. For this purpose, I will develop the concept of performativity as well as discuss camp aesthetics. In the concluding chapter, I will discuss the analysis of both characters so as to understand the ways in which their relationship can be understood from a queer perspective. Finally, I will discuss the general and specific conclusions of this study and present the implications for future research.

CHAPTER II

“I’M NOT AFRAID OF BEING CALLED A LOSER”: The issue of agency in Finn’s identity construction

RACHEL: I’m tired of everyone calling us freaks.

MERCEDES: Well, look at us. We are freaks.

FINN: But we’re all freaks together and we shouldn’t have to hide it.
(Theatricality, *Glee* S01E20)

A story about high school teenagers struggling to define themselves in a competitive and unfair environment does not seem to bring anything new to American television narratives. *Glee*, however, differentiates itself because it centers around a group of so-called losers, that is, teenagers who do not meet the social standards (in terms of beauty, gender, sexuality, ableism¹⁰ and so on) that are constantly reinforced in and by the educational system. These young people can be considered “outsiders” who are often bullied and discriminated against in the school system. Since the main characters in the television series are constructed as outcasts, one may be surprised while observing that Finn Hudson (one of the members of the *Glee* club) is – at least in the beginning of the narrative – a popular football player. The quarterback in the football team, Finn is the stereotypical popular boy – white, athletic, and masculine. However, despite the fact that he is not considered a “loser” like the other kids, he ends up joining the singing club in the pilot episode of the series. Even with the risk of changing his status of a “popular guy”, he steps out of the comfort zone and becomes a member of both the singing club and the football school team. This decision is considered contradictory not only by his peers, but also by his football coach.

Bearing this in mind, this chapter discusses the ways in which Finn’s identity construction – and his irresolution – can be read counter-hegemonically as fostering political agency. In order to do so, I discuss notions such as *social location* and *identification* while analyzing specific scenes of different episodes that pertain to the first season of the series.

¹⁰ Fiona A. Kumari Campbell argues that “we are all, regardless of our subject positions, shaped and formed by the politics of ableism”. The author explains that, from the moment we are born, we are told that disability has to be tolerated but is still “inherently negative” (151).

2.1. Irresolution as Agency

In the pilot episode of *Glee*, the teacher, Will Schuester, after distributing sign-up sheets for the singing club, decides to talk to the football team members about the auditions. His purpose is to find more members for the choir, which has only a few students. His attempts seem to be unsuccessful, since no one takes his proposal seriously. Later, however, Will hears a student singing “I can’t fight this feeling¹¹” while taking a shower. The boy singing is Finn and he has a beautiful voice. However, Will is aware that Finn would not join the Glee club because of his peers’ and his own prejudice against the arts. It is interesting to notice that the lyrics sung by Finn are about a man falling in love with a girl that he has been friends with, which seems to foreshadow Finn’s future relationship with Rachel Berry in the narrative. At the same time, the lines “I can’t fight this feeling any longer / And yet I’m still afraid to let it flow” are ambiguous, for they can also be understood metaphorically as referring to Finn’s initial fear of admitting that he likes singing and of joining the Glee club. At last, this scene can be considered very homoerotic if we consider that Finn only sings in the closeted space of the shower and that Will acts as a kind of voyeur who discovers his talent.

At first, power is used by Will in order to convince Finn to take part in the club. At this point, Finn still does not want to join the choir – in a way, he is forced to do so. Will blackmails Finn by accusing him that marijuana was found in his locker. The teacher then tells him that he will denounce him unless he joins the choir. Because of Will’s blackmailing, Finn reflects about his life. Through his voice-over narration, the viewer learns about his thoughts and his past: after his father died in the war, he felt like he should make “his mom proud” by being an honorable man and son. As a consequence, he decides that it is better to join the Glee club than being accused of possessing drugs, since the latter could harm his possibility of obtaining a scholarship from a renowned university.

Power is abused once again when Finn’s coach tells him to choose between joining the Glee club or the football team. Finn, trying to find a solution, hides the fact that he is part of the choir. His friends from the football team end up discovering the truth, though. They do not understand why he is part of the “flag team”, as Puckerman, one of the

¹¹ “I can’t fight this feeling” is a song by REO Speedwagon, released in 1984 (in the United Kingdom).

football players, puts it¹². As the narrative progresses, and Will's wife tells him that she is pregnant, he decides to leave his job as a teacher to work as an accountant, since he is not in a very good financial condition. When Will tells the Glee club about his decision to leave the school, Finn asks: "Does that mean that I don't have to be in the Glee club anymore?" Then, he tells his friends that he is no longer part of the choir.

Interestingly enough, right after that, Finn realizes that his friends from the football team have different values when they bully Artie, a disabled boy who is also a choir member. Disagreeing with their actions, Finn helps Artie and takes him out of the portable toilet where his friends had locked him. That is when Puckerman asks him why "he is helping out a loser". Finn's reply is revealing:

Don't you get it, man? We're all losers. Everyone in this school. Hell, everyone in this town! Out of all the kids who graduate, maybe half will go to college, and two will leave the state to do it! I'm not afraid of being called a loser because I can accept that's what I am. But I am afraid of turning my back on something that actually made me happy for the first time in my sorry life.

This discourse is indeed problematic if we consider that Finn endorses the meaning of "loser" as defined by an ableist hierarchy which lays blame for exclusion on the person excluded rather than on the systematic asymmetries of access. At the same time, this is the first moment in which Finn acknowledges his will to join the Glee club. Puckerman asks him, then, if he is going to quit the football team to join "homo explosion". Finn answers: "No. I'm doing both. 'Cause you can't win without me and neither can they". Then, Finn becomes a kind of a leader to the Glee club, assigning roles and motivating the other members to continue rehearsing despite the fact that the teacher will no longer (at least at this point in the narrative) be able to help them.

In this context, I argue that Finn decides to defy society's norms by becoming an "in-between". He does not conform to the simplistic definitions of "popular/loser", and his decision to not define himself as solely one or the other, that is, his irresolution, represents a possibility for agency. Even though the term irresolution commonly refers to the

¹² Puckerman uses the term "flag team" (in other words, the "gay team") in order to disqualify the *Glee* club. In this instance, it is possible to observe the ways in which discrimination and prejudice take place in the school environment.

indecision on how to act, in this case it works in the opposite direction: it is the character's irresolution in defining himself according to society's labels that promotes his agency in terms of identity. He acts upon his identity on a conscious level and, despite the consequences that he has to face – since he may become marginalized in the school context – he maintains his position as an in-between. For Homi Bhabha, it is exactly these in-between spaces that “provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself” (2). It is in this sense that I claim that Finn's identity can be considered queer. His “in-betweenness” serves as a way of contesting society's norms and, therefore, allows for different meanings in terms of identity to be constructed.

It is meaningful, therefore, that Finn's deferral of decision (at least when it comes to choosing one of the poles) may be understood as a political act. In acknowledging that he is going to be part of both groups, he is making the claim that the articulation between two poles of what has always been considered opposite (that is, the popular versus the loser) is possible. Not only does he understand the difficulties that the “outcasts” face in the school environment, but he also names himself as one of them. He resignifies “loss” through the refusal of a dominant hierarchy and its privileges – he is also a “loser”, and his privileged position as a “popular football player” serves as a way of struggling against the school's oppressive system. As Gurpreet Singh Johal explains, “[o]ne cannot simply acknowledge one's privilege and continue to do what one has always done. Action is the only way to measure the commitment of the privileged in the attempt to denaturalize their position” (287). In this sense, Finn is aware of his importance in the two groups, since he even affirms that both need him in order to win.

Not only does Finn acknowledge his importance in the club, but he also realizes the importance that singing has for himself. In this way, Glee serves as an opportunity of self-discovery for him. Moreover, throughout the different episodes, some of the songs he chooses to perform are representative of his own queer and fluid identity, thus allowing the viewers to learn more about him through the lyrics. As Gelles explains (see the theoretical framework in Chapter 1), the songs featured in the show usually reflect themes regarding each character's identity or in relation to the narrative as a whole (94). At the end of the pilot episode, for instance, the members of the Glee club perform the

song “Don’t stop believin’”¹³. Finn is the male lead singer in the presentation, and the song, which becomes an anthem for the television series, seems to provide a hopeful message for the singing club. Despite all the difficulties, they will continue “believing” in themselves and, because of that, they will not give up being part of the choir.

2.2. Critical political agency: identity, social location and identification

Finn’s irresolution can be seen as evidence that our identities are not fully constituted by the systems of representation that constantly interpellate us (see the theoretical framework in Chapter 1). Even though he faces peer pressure and is stigmatized by many other students, he does not let them decide who he is or what he will do. At times, he considers leaving the Glee club, but he always ends up deciding to remain in the group. Finn’s decision seems to be closely aligned with the concept of political agency as understood throughout the previous chapter. Also for Rosaura Sánchez, who discusses identity from a critical realist perspective, “a critical politics of identity can play a part in political organizing and in challenging hegemonic discourses”. She explains that, even though we are always situated “within specific social structures (be they economic, political or cultural)” (33), our identities are not reduced to these locations. Besides, these structures are in constant transformation, so our locations are not fixed either.

In the case of the Glee club, for instance, the characters are located, in terms of class, in a public high school, which depends on investments and fundings in order to exist. The situation is even more critical if we consider that, in the school environment, the arts (such as singing and performing, as in the case of Glee) are not valued. Throughout the entire first season, the characters worry that Glee may end because of the lack of support from the school. Because of that, they need to succeed in the regional and sectional competitions in order to continue having a place to rehearse at school. In this sense, it seems that, if we consider this specific location, there seems to be little room for change or emancipation. However, as Sánchez explains, identity “cannot be reduced to social location or positioning, but it cannot be analyzed in any meaningful way without taking it into account” (35).

This realist view of identity is directly related to the concept of agency. As Linda Martín Alcoff and Satya P. Mohanty explain, for the

¹³ “Don’t stop believin’” is a song by the American rock band Journey that was released in 1981.

realist theory of identity “[s]ocial identities can be mired in distorted ideologies, but they can also be the lenses through which we learn to view our world accurately”. In this view, identities are not simply imposed on us – rather, we can also “create positive and meaningful identities that enable us to better understand and negotiate the social world” (6). In other words, it is possible to rearticulate or to act – performatively – upon those structures that surround us in order to promote meanings that can better account for our identities’ complexities.

Another important concept for understanding identity formation is that of identification, which “designates individuals as part of a whole” (Alcoff, and Mohanty 40). This identification does not necessarily come from the subject: such is the case of Finn, who at first joined the Glee club as a result of having been blackmailed by his teacher. At the same time, he was not considered a loser until the school community recognized him as one. It was only after being discriminated against that he embraced the label. Based on that, it is possible to say that identification “is a discursive process that can serve to signal a group’s isolation, uniqueness, segregation, rejection, subordination, domination, or difference vis-à-vis others” (40). In this sense, the term “loser” is used by the community in order to stigmatize the members of the Glee club. Nevertheless, it is also appropriated by the Glee members themselves. Finn, for instance, recognizes that he is indeed a loser, but highlights that this should not prevent him from doing what he likes. In this way, he re-signifies the term by thus contextualizing it as no longer pejorative.

In *The Queer Art of Failure*, Judith Halberstam argues that the notions of success and failure help reinforce “specific forms of reproductive maturity with wealth accumulation” (2). In this sense, the idea that one needs to succeed, win, or even be popular is part of the capitalist logic which, as she argues, helps to sustain heteronormativity. In order to move away from these capitalist and heteronormative understandings of society, the author proposes a dismantling of these logics: “[u]nder some circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world” (2-3). As I intend to make clear, it is exactly by being a Glee member – and, therefore, a so-called loser – that Finn is able to come up with other forms of being that can better reflect his fluid identity.

Similarly, the show *Glee* has been advertised as “a biting comedy for the underdog in all of us” (see image below). In this sense,

in many posters that promote the series it is possible to see one of the main characters making a hand gesture by extending the thumb and index fingers, resembling an “L”. Not only does this gesture serve as a way of forming the words “Glee” and “loser”, but it also works as a form of identification. The characters themselves do not reproduce this hand gesture in the episodes, but it has served as a way of identifying the series and its fans. In this context, the concept of “loser” is no longer negative. This strategy can be compared to the one of using the term *queer*, which served at first as a form of discrimination against those who did not conform to heteronormativity. Nowadays, however, the term has been re-appropriated and re-signified, and has even been used to identify a field of study concerned with the limits and instability of identity (see the theoretical framework in Chapter 1).

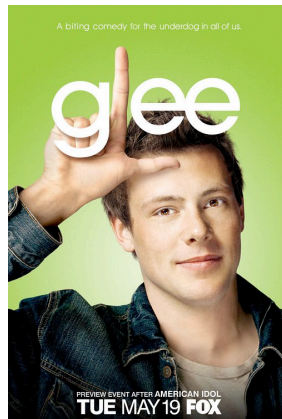


Image 1: Finn making the “L” hand gesture

Bearing in mind Finn’s social location and identification as a Glee member who resignifies the term “loser”, it is possible to understand how his identity formation can be understood as fostering critical political agency. Finn’s in-between position is what allows him to rearticulate his identity so as to develop agency. As Sánchez explains, “identity is always agential”. It also implies “reflexivity, a willing connection to a collectivity, and a recognition of being bound to a group” (41). In this sense, Finn’s identity construction can be understood as a form of mediation “between the individual and the world” (42). As Susan Stanford Friedman points out, identity can be understood as a constant interplay “between agency on the one hand and on the other hand, overdetermination by material and ideological

conditions” (online, n.p.). Besides, “[i]ndividuals belong to multiple communities – sometimes overlapping, sometimes contradictory” (online, n.p.), as in the case of Finn.

2.3. “I see a future where it’s cool to be in Glee club”

Despite the fact that Finn resignifies the term “loser” by embracing it and being part of the Glee club, his peers at school continue discriminating against him. This can be exemplified by the first scene of the episode entitled “Mash-up”, in which the camera follows the image of a hand carrying a slush, that is, a flavored frozen beverage. The slush is very significant in the narrative in the sense that it is used as a tool of bullying against the so-called losers. These beverages are thrown at their faces as a form of humiliation for being “different”. In this specific scene, the slush that the camera focuses on is thrown at Finn (see image 2), who is no longer seen as a popular guy at school.



Image 2: Finn gets a “slush facial”

In the same episode, the teacher decides that the theme for the performances in that week would be “mash-ups”. He explains that mash-ups – that is, the combination of two or more songs into one – exemplify that things that seem to be so different can actually be together. In his own words, “the difference between them is what makes them great”. This can be understood not only as referring to the songs and performances themselves, but also to the characters’ and, more specifically, to Finn’s position. After all, in the same scene Finn even mentions the “combination” of Glee club and football as an example of Will’s point.

However, Finn is bullied not only for being in Glee, but also because he is believed to be the father of Quinn’s baby. Quinn is also a member of the club who, after gaining some weight during her

pregnancy, is expelled from the school cheerleading team. Her status also changes – due to her teenage pregnancy and her participation in *Glee*, she is also labeled as a “loser”. Finn is not the father of her child, but since his character is sometimes constructed as “innocent” or even “dumb” (Quinn even refers to him as possessing a “pea-brain”), he believes Quinn when she tells him that she got pregnant by only being together with him in a bathtub.

This characterization of Finn as being “dumb” is important in the sense that it seems to go against the transgressive project that, as I have been trying to show, is part of the series. By referring to Finn as a “pea-brain”, Quinn is emphasizing the image of the stereotypical football player, who is strong and into sports, but is never smart. I believe, however, that the very same stereotype can be questioned through Finn’s agency. He is smart enough, for instance, to be critical in relation to society’s norms and question his own position in the school environment.

In this sense, different reasons contribute to the ways in which Finn is discriminated against: not only is he part of *Glee*, but he is also believed to be partially responsible for a teenage pregnancy. After throwing the slush at Finn, for instance, Karofsky – who is part of the school hockey team – says: “Now that you’ve joined Lullaby Lee’s and imperminated the queen of the Chastity Ball and dropped below us hockey dudes on the food chain? It’s open season”. He goes even further and says to both Quinn and Finn: “You two don’t have the juice anymore. Welcome to the new world order”. At first, it is interesting to notice that the two teenagers, affected by the bullying, decide that they want to be popular again. Because of that, they look for advice on how to be cool. Emma, the school counselor, reminds them that they should be whoever they are: “and if people don’t like you for that, then I’m sorry... but who needs them?” At this point, it is possible to observe a change in Finn’s attitude – as a teenager, he wants to belong to the school community so as not to suffer prejudice.

Finn is also pressured by his football peers, who start questioning his leadership skills. According to them, because Finn may be “having trouble making good choices” (such as deciding to be part of *Glee*), he may not be the right person to guide the team. At the same time, other dynamics of power influence Finn’s difficult positioning. The football coach, for example, tells him to choose what he considers more important – football or *Glee*. He only requires Finn to do so, however, because he is not happy with the relationship Will Schuester (*Glee*’s coach) has with his girlfriend. By making the boys choose

between football and Glee, he may jeopardize the future of Glee and also affect Will's life. After all, the club only has the minimum number of participants in order to be eligible for the singing competitions and any downsize could prevent it from existing officially at school. In this sense, the club is inserted into a capitalist context of meritocracy, in which winning is almost a question of survival.

After the football coach's ultimatum, Finn does not show up for Glee club practice. All the other boys opt for Glee, but Finn decides to go to the football practice. Noah Puckerman is one of the boys who choose to remain in Glee. Rachel even asks him whether he is making the right decision: "Are you sure about this, Noah? I mean, choosing us over the team means you might get a slush in your face every day". He simply replies: "Bring it". Noah is, in this way, aware of the consequences he may have to face for being part of a club that is discriminated against at school. In other words, he knows what this affiliation may imply for his identity in terms of school standards. At the same time, the fact that he is a member of Glee seems to promote more progressive understandings of his fluidity as a postmodern subject.

After that, a scene that is very similar to the first one in the episode is shown –the camera follows a hand that holds a slush. This time Finn is the one holding the beverage that is probably going to be thrown at one of the "losers". This technique of repetition emphasizes the ways in which Finn is now considered the "Other's other". In the beginning of the episode, he was the otherized and attacked one. Now that he is no longer part of the singing club, he becomes the attacker. His attitude, however, is different: he explains that he cannot do that. Rachel says: "He's made his choice. He doesn't care about us losers anymore". Kurt, on the other hand, grabs Finn's drink and throws it at himself. Then, he explains: "It's called taking one for the team. Now get out of here. And take some time to think whether or not any of your friends on the football team would have done that for you". I would like to emphasize that the use of "you" instead of "us" in this context is relevant because it is an act that reinscribes hierarchy, since Kurt is establishing a clear division between the Glee club and Finn. Besides, it is also important to mention that these experiences with the Glee club members seem to be important for the constant re-construction of Finn's identity. Such reconstruction is, in my view, always part of a double movement: Finn, as a postmodern subject, is overtly contradictory. While his identity construction can be considered transgressive, at times his actions are in fact very conservative (as we shall see shortly).

Will Schuester also has a conversation with Finn about his decision to join the football team. Will tells him that “life is a series of choices, a big combination of moments – little ones that add up to big ones that create who you are”. In a way, Will’s speech can be understood as highlighting that agency has an important role in defining our identities. He also complements his view by saying to Finn that he is letting other people make choices for him: “You’re letting them decide who you’re gonna be”.

Finn’s “loser” identity intersects with various layers of his identity which are sociohistorically privileged – it cannot be ignored, for instance, that he is white, male, straight, masculine, and enjoys middle-class access to education. Because he has occupied an in-between position – as a “loser” who could also be a “winner”, one may argue that he is, to use Paula M. L. Moya’s term, epistemically privileged. For Moya, epistemic privilege “refers to a special advantage with respect to possessing or acquiring knowledge about how fundamental aspects of our society (such as race, class, gender, and sexuality) operate to sustain matrices of power” (80-81). At the same time, however, she acknowledges that being oppressed does not guarantee this greater understanding of the power relations one is part of. In this sense, “an individual’s identity will influence, but not entirely determine, the formation of her cultural identity” (82). For Moya, “identities both condition and are conditioned by the kinds of interpretations people give to the experiences they have” (83). In this sense, Finn is constantly in the process of re-interpreting his experiences, as in the case of quitting Glee club.

This is because, after reflecting about his choices – and after having had a conversation with Will –, Finn talks to his football coach. Once again, he seems to have made new sense of his experiences so as to decide to go back to Glee:

Leaders are supposed to see things that other guys don’t, right? Like they can imagine a future where things are better. (...) I see a future where it’s cool to be in Glee club. Where you can play football and sing and dance and no one gets down on you for it. Where the more different you are the better. I guess what I’m tryin’ to say is... I don’t wanna have to choose between them anymore. It’s not cool.

In this case, Finn seems to be in a position of epistemic privilege, since he begins to realize the ways in which the school environment excludes and discriminates students at various levels. Not only that, but he also assumes the position of an agent who makes conscious decisions based on the knowledge he has acquired from his experiences. This position of epistemic privilege is only possible because Finn questions society's norms. According to Moya, oppositional struggle is "a necessary (although not sufficient) step toward the achievement of an epistemically privileged position" (87). At the same time, Finn's hope that in the future Glee can be considered "cool" can be seen as a way of perpetuating hegemony through the creation of new market niches. This is because this idea of inclusion is simplistic and often serves to oppress *other others* when intersections with race, class, ethnicity, gender or disability are ignored.

Finn's attitude ends up being very effective: the football coach cancels some of the team's practices, allowing its members to be part of the Glee club as well. At the end of the episode, the Glee members celebrate Finn's return with slushes, the exact same beverages that are also the symbol for the ways in which they are humiliated at school. In fact, all the Glee members throw their beverages at Will, the teacher. This time, however, this is not an act of humiliation. Rather, it is as if they were making a toast to Finn's return and celebrating the fact that all of them – including their teacher – had something in common and were, therefore, together in the Glee club. It is important to acknowledge, however, that the narrative at the end of this episode can also be considered problematic in the sense that it is one of resolution and closure, as if everything could be easily and simply solved despite social structures.

2.4 "I realize I still have a lot to learn"

Since Finn is not epistemically privileged where his supposed "loser" identity intersects with other sociohistorically privileged layers of his identity, his actions are often conservative at least in the sense that they reinforce heteronormativity as well as the supremacy of masculinity. At times, he is strongly influenced by commonsensical ideas about gender – in the episode named "Theatricality", for instance, Finn discovers that he is going to move to Kurt's house. This is because his mother has been dating Kurt's father and they have decided to live together. Kurt, as we shall see in more detail in the next chapter, is considered the stereotypical gay boy who is into fashion and has a so-called effeminate behavior. After realizing that he will have to share a

room with Kurt in their new house, Finn instantly affirms that he is not “cool with that”. In a way, Finn reproduces discourses that are similar to the ones that other people use to discriminate against him.

Another example of that takes place when Will Schuester proposes that the Glee members prepare performances based on Lady Gaga’s songs. It is important to bear in mind that Lady Gaga, a contemporary pop singer, is often regarded as a symbol of transgression. In Kurt’s words, “she’s boundary-pushing. The most theatrical performer of our generation”. According to Katrin Horn, “Lady Gaga changes her style almost daily from baroque ballet to futuristic domina and back into 80s disco queen” (online, n.p.). For the author, it is “her strategic use of camp – a decidedly queer and countercultural strategy which can be understood as being both constitutive of her appeal to some and as being the basis for her rejection by others” (online, n.p.)¹⁴. It seems that it is exactly because Lady Gaga is considered by many as a symbol of queerness that Finn is contrary to the idea of performing one of her songs: “I don’t wanna do Lady Gaga. And I suspect that, with the exception of Kurt, none of the guys are gonna want to do it either”. Will decides, then, to let the boys choose to perform a song by another singer. Based on that, it is possible to argue that gender normativity still plays an important role in defining their identities. In other words, Finn seems to feel threatened by the idea of performing a song by a singer that is considered, at least to some extent, queer. At this moment, Finn seems to be aligned, at least in terms of narrative point of view, with a conservative audience.

Bearing this in mind, I would like to argue that *Glee* seems to make use of a subtext which performs what Linda Hutcheon calls *complicitous critique*. According to the author, even though we cannot locate ourselves outside ideology, we can reclaim “the right to contest the power of a dominant one, even if from a compromised position”. This, for Hutcheon, is the mark of the postmodern text (22). In this sense, postmodern complicitous critique implies a double movement, in which certain ideologies are reinscribed and reinforced at the same time that they are contested and criticized. The very concept of agency is aligned with that of complicitous critique: it is not possible to act outside the systems that interpellate us, but we can develop agency from within them. In this sense, the objective here is not solely to demonstrate the ways in which *Glee* promotes agency, but rather to bring these moments

¹⁴ For more on *camp*, see Chapter 3.

of rupture to the surface so as to contaminate and destabilize the hegemonic forces that are also constitutive of the series.

As a counterpoint to Finn's resistance in relation to Lady Gaga, the girls and Kurt, dressed in different costumes inspired by the singer, perform her song "Bad Romance".¹⁵ Kurt is bullied because of the ways in which he is dressed. Karofsky, for instance, says: "You dress all freaky and then you rub it in everybody's faces. I don't wanna look at it all day. It's weird".

The other boys, however, decide to perform a song by the American rock band Kiss. They seem to have decided for a performance of a song by a hard rock band in order to reinforce masculinity norms and avoid being associated with practices that can be regarded as queer. In this sense, being queer would still be pejorative in their view. Despite their intention, their performance can be understood as being non-normative as well. This is because they all wear black and white face make-up and tight leather costumes (like the band itself did). So much so that they are bullied – just like Kurt. Besides, the song they perform is "Shout it out loud" (from 1976), which can be understood as being about the importance of "taking a stand". In this sense, the lyrics emphasize that despite what "you've been told", you should "shout it out loud". Even though the song is originally about partying, in this context it could be read as referring to the ways in which people should not let social structures and beliefs define who they are. The lyrics say, for instance: "Don't let them tell you there's too much noise / They're too old to really understand", which can be interpreted as an advice on how not to be influenced by the several interpellations that dictate constrained heteronormative and capitalist ways of being. In this sense, the performance itself, despite its intention, produces a non-normative effect, highlighting the importance of agency in relation to normativity. To a certain extent, their performance can be considered queer as well.

¹⁵ "Bad Romance" is a 2009 song of Lady Gaga's "The Fame Monster".



Image 3: Finn with his Kiss face make-up and Kurt with his Lady Gaga costume

Finn does not seem to be aware of the significance of the performance, though. After all, he continues disliking the idea of sharing a room with Kurt. He tells Kurt that he cannot live there because he is “a dude”. This implies that he is still influenced not only by commonsensical ideas regarding gender, but also sexuality. So much so that he also criticizes Kurt’s flamboyant behavior: “I don’t understand why you always need to make such a big spectacle of yourself. Why can’t you just work harder at blending in?”. Kurt replies saying that this would certainly be easier for Finn. In this sense, Finn fails to realize that Kurt should not have to blend in, just like he should not have to choose between Glee or football. It seems that the binary notions of gender are so embedded in Finn that he cannot realize that they also function as a form of oppression. In “How to Bring your Kids Up Gay”, Eve Sedgwick discusses the portrayal of the hegemonic (masculine) versus the repudiated (feminine) gay male. According to her, it is necessary to interrupt “a tradition of assuming that anyone, male or female, who desires a man must by definition be feminine; and that anyone, male or female, who desires a woman must by the same token be masculine”. She goes on to say that “[t]o begin to theorize gender and sexuality as distinct though intimately entangled axes of analysis has been, indeed, a great advance of recent lesbian and gay thought”. However, the author alerts that doing so may still leave the effeminate boy “in the position of the haunting object – this time the haunting object of gay thought itself” (20). In this sense, Finn is not only criticizing Kurt because he is gay, but also because of his so-called femininity.

Finn even mentions that the objects in the room are “faggy”. Having heard the conversation, Kurt’s father questions Finn about the use of this pejorative term. He explains that by using the term “fag” he

is implying that “being gay is wrong, that it’s some kind of punishable offense”. Actually, it is both *gayness* and its *effeminate* version that are being discriminated against in a misogynist discourse which is also reproduced by masculinist homonormativity. The discussion with Kurt and his father seems to help Finn reconsider and reinterpret his own experiences once more. During Glee club practice, while some of the boys sing a ballad by Kiss (“Beth”, also from 1976) as a homage to Quinn and her baby, Finn seems to sing his lines thinking of Kurt. While he says the words “You say you feel so empty / That our house just ain’t a home / I’m always somewhere else / And you’re always there alone”, he looks at Kurt, who is visibly hurt. Even though the song is not mainly about Finn and Kurt’s relationship, at this specific moment of the performance it refers to the ways in which Finn has not been able to accept Kurt for who he is.

At the end of the episode, when Kurt is about to be bullied – at this time even physically – while affirming that being different is the best thing about him, Finn appears in the scene wearing a red rubber dress, also inspired by a Lady Gaga costume (see image 4). Despite being mocked at by the other students, Finn explains that he has changed his understanding of Kurt: “I wanna thank you, Kurt. I realize I still have a lot to learn. But the reason I’m here right now in a shower curtain is because of you. And I’m not gonna let anyone lay a hand on you”. Finn is not only trying to help Kurt, but he is also showing that he is also queer. Just like Kurt, he dresses a Lady Gaga costume in front of the whole school, implying that he should not have to conform to normativity. He recognizes, then, that Kurt does not need to “blend in” in order to look like everybody else. At the same time, Finn’s action and his speech can be considered patronizing – in this sense, Finn seems to work as a kind of hero who has to save Kurt, the “victim”. Besides, after Finn’s appearance all the Glee club members join Finn and Kurt in their costumes, outnumbering the students who were bullying Kurt, who then leave the scene. In this sense, the other students join the masculine body that Finn represents, whereas they had never joined the effeminate one represented by Kurt. The narrative seems to suggest that it is possible to wear a Lady Gaga-like costume as long as masculinity is not lost. After all, even though Finn wears the costume, his character continues being portrayed as very masculine throughout the series.



Image 4: Finn wears a red rubber dress resembling a Lady Gaga costume

There is, in this sense, a narrative resolution in the end of the episode which seems to confirm the subtext of complicitous critique mentioned earlier. At this point, it is as if everything could be solved with one simple act. If we consider the relative unity of the episodes, we will observe that there is a tendency for solution and closure, as if the characters had gone through an “awakening” moment. At the same time, however, if we take into consideration the total unity of the episodes, we will see that Finn is in a process of constant struggle and re-evaluation of his own actions. Moreover, Finn has to repeatedly act – even discursively – in order to re-signify certain identity claims. Such is the case of the term “loser”: it is through performativity that the characters try to attribute new significance to the concept which is usually pejorative. As we have seen, it is through reiteration that it is possible to produce performative effects and, consequently, promote agency. However, because agency is not guaranteed by (or a direct result of) performativity, the latter can also work to foreclose agency, such as in the case of the Kurt/Finn dynamics. As we have seen, some instances of the show exemplify the ways in which the reiteration of essentialist discourses work against the project of promoting agency.

Finn’s realization that his oppression is in some ways related to Kurt’s can be seen as an example of “solidarity across differences” (Hames-García 120). Drawing on Maria C. Lugones, Michael R. Hames-García explains that it is important to understand how different kinds of oppression are interrelated and should, therefore, be part of a common project of resistance. Like Sánchez, Alcoff and Mohanty, the author has a realist understanding of identity, in which “the expansion of the self can only take place once we allow that groups *constitute* one

another in such a way that their constitution is forever altered, enriched, and expanded” (126).

The Glee club seems to function as a kind of consciousness-raising group, in which its members, united through their differences, are able to reflect about their social location and reinterpret their own experiences. They are able not only to reconsider their identities, but also to construct new meanings to their experiences. This seems to be the case of Finn, for whom joining the Glee club serves as a movement towards transformation. Finn’s decision of being part of Glee can be compared to the act of coming out – in the case of gays and lesbians, for instance –, in which occurs “the development of a new identity based on a reinterpretation of experiences” (Wilkerson 266). In this sense, “this new identity reflects a new and more accurate understanding of who one is in the world and how one can act in the world” (266). In other words, it is exactly this possibility of making sense of one’s experiences that potentializes Finn’s agency (and probably other characters’ as well).

However, as I have tried to demonstrate, *Glee* presents a more complex dynamic of simultaneous oppression and resistance. For instance, the fact that Finn is usually paired up with Rachel in his performances deserves some attention. Finn and Rachel are, in a certain way, representative of the heterosexual love duet which is considered as part of the musical theatre formula in the United States. Stacy Wolf explains that “the ideological project [. . .] in the mid-twentieth century was to use the heterosexual couple’s journey from enemies to lovers to stand in for the unification of problematic differences in American culture” (9). Not only are Finn and Rachel the typical heterosexual couple, but they can also be considered the main characters in the series. After all, their story lines are usually more developed and make use of more screen time in the episodes in comparison to the story lines of the other characters. At the same time, however, despite the fact that there are several instances of love duets involving Finn and Rachel, the experience of being part of Glee for them goes beyond developing a love relationship. It is by being in Glee that Finn is able to reflect about who he is and who he wants to be. Therefore, he is able to act upon his identity in order to construct new experiences. Once again, there seems to be a double movement: on one hand, and to a certain extent, Finn’s identity construction reinforces heteronormative structures and, on the other hand, potentializes political agency. This is because some instances of performances by Finn can be understood as defying this notion of the heterosexual duet. One example of that takes place in the episode entitled “Home”, in which Kurt sings “A House is not a

Home”¹⁶ for the Glee club. In this episode, Finn is still reluctant towards the idea of moving to Kurt’s house. Even though Kurt sings by himself in front of the club, his performance is paralleled with scenes in which Finn sings the same song at home. For the audience, this technique emphasizes the two characters’ connections. It is as if they were actually singing a duet. Besides, even though the lyrics of the original song can be understood as being about a love relationship, in this context they acquire new significance. The two characters, who inhabit liminal spaces, are singing about their necessity of belonging somewhere: “A house is not a home / When there’s no one there to hold you tight”. The lyrics also seem to refer to the two characters’ relationship and the ways in which they have many similarities: “And a house is not a home / When the two of us are far apart”. At times, then, Finn’s performances can be considered queer in the sense that they defy heteronormativity.

It is interesting to note that, once the characters join Glee, the ways in which their identities are complex, fluid and even contradictory become more visible. It is in this sense that their participation in Glee seems to help destabilize stereotypical notions of identity. Besides, the Glee members live a constant struggle in which they try to find some equilibrium between the internal and the external, that is, their senses of themselves and their public identity. This does not mean, however, “that the self can ever achieve perfect coherence” (Alcoff 337). Instead, these teenagers seem to try to overcome the negative effects that the external has over them through expressing their queer identities. Even though Finn is considered a “loser” at school, in the narrative he is empowered, since his identity is not only constructed by the different relations of power that interpellate him, but also – and mainly – by the agency he articulates. However, the characters are also, and simultaneously, mainstreamed within the school environment, reproducing normativity and hierarchy (as much as resistance) among distinct and interlocking layers of identity.

One cannot ignore, in this sense, the ways in which the narrative of the series promotes agency (as in the case of Finn) and, at the same time, is sometimes aligned with hegemonic discourses. The issue of resolution is one example: because the episodes – at least in isolation - usually have a solution that is simple, the narrative can be seen as romantic, idealistic and, therefore, conservative. At these specific moments, it does not seem to account for the complexities

¹⁶ “A House is not a Home” is a 1964 song recorded by Dionne Warwick.

involved in the process of constructing one's identity while being constantly interpellated by social structures.

Another point that deserves attention is the one of competition. As I have pointed out, even though the characters embrace the label of "losers", they are still concerned about succeeding and winning the competitions. At times, the narrative explicitly shows that winning is not everything – such is the case of the end of the first season, when the club does not win the regional competitions. The characters realize the importance of the choir for their lives despite the fact that they have not won. Finn, for instance, says that before *Glee* he did not have anyone to look up to. Despite the fact that the show is sometimes conscious of its obsession about winning, it is the competitions themselves that motivate the characters and the narrative. After all, even though they recognize that losing is part of the game, they continue trying to succeed.

On the other hand, because the series deals with the complexities of the characters' identities in relation to the social structures that surround them (as I have tried to demonstrate in the case of Finn), it goes against the idea of positivist thinking, which "insists that success depends upon only working hard" (Halberstam 3). It is in this sense that I believe that Finn's characterization can be read as portraying the ways in which the issue of agency is a complex one, showing that neither are we reduced to our social location nor are we totally free agents. As Slavoj Žižek puts it, "there is no direct, 'natural' correlation between an agent's social position and its tasks in the political struggle" (95). All in all, Finn's identity construction seems to demonstrate the ways in which *Glee* can be considered an example of postmodern contingency while being inserted simultaneously within restraining hegemonic discourses.

CHAPTER III

“I’M PROUD TO BE DIFFERENT”: Performativity in Kurt’s identity construction

KURT: I’m not a box. There are more than four sides of me.
(Laryngitis, *Glee* S01E18)

While analyzing a show like *Glee*, which is known for its several stereotypical representations, it is important to keep in mind that the relation between stereotypes and political effects is not necessarily a direct one. In this sense, a queer reading of stereotypes cannot ignore that the correspondence between stereotypical forms, on the one hand, and their performative effects, on the other, is only straight under the logic of heteronormativity. In other words, even though such stereotypical portrayals may serve the business of mass media, their meanings cannot be controlled. Instead of presuming that stereotypes are directly constitutive of our reality, then, it is necessary to engage the concept of performativity in order to understand the possible performative effects of such representations.

As we have seen, Butler makes it clear that it is not possible to locate oneself outside the systems of representation one is inserted in. However, she emphasizes that the fact that identity is an effect is what opens up the possibility for agency (*Gender Trouble* 201). Agency, then, “is to be located within the possibility of a variation on that repetition (*Gender Trouble* 198). In other words, subversion and deconstruction may occur through repetition and performativity, as we – at least slightly – change the essentialist meanings that have pervaded our society. As Butler points out, construction and agency are not opposed: construction “is the necessary scene of agency, the very terms in which agency is articulated and becomes culturally intelligible” (*Gender Trouble* 201).

Butler also explains that, besides unveiling the ways in which the terms of gender become institutionalized and naturalized, it is also important “to trace the moments where the binary system of gender is disputed or challenged, where the coherence of the categories are put into question, and where the very social life of gender turns out to be malleable and transformable” (*Undoing Gender* 216). Bearing this in mind, in this chapter I will analyze Kurt’s characterization and the ways in which his identity construction can be understood from the perspective of performativity, opening up the possibility, therefore, for agency. In focusing on some of the characters’ performances in the *Glee* club, especially the ones by or including Kurt, I intend to understand

whether and, if so, how the use of popular and Broadway songs in *Glee* can be understood to question the pre-established binary notions of gender.

3.1. “Defying Gravity”: Gender Trouble in *Glee*

Kurt Hummel can be considered the stereotypical gay boy in the narrative: he is into fashion and he has a so-called effeminate behavior. His presence in the Glee club is very significant in the sense that he is the character who constantly seems to challenge gender divisions and frontiers. This is extremely relevant if we take into consideration that gender segregation, which starts in childhood, is usually reinforced by the school environment. According to Penelope Eckert and Sally McConnell-Ginet, “[i]n the US, gender difference and heterosexuality are deeply embedded (and intertwined) in the institution of adolescence and in the formal institution of the high school that houses the age group”. The contests for prom and homecoming king and queen, for example, “emphasize the importance of heterosexual alliances, elevating such alliances to institutional status” (27).

In the book *“Dude, You’re a Fag: Masculinity and Sexuality in High School”*, C.J. Pascoe explains the ways in which it is important to dislodge the connection between masculinity and biological location. After all, it is through the assumption that there is a direct relation between both that stereotypes (such as the one of the effeminate gay boy) are constructed. As the author explains, “[d]islodging masculinity from a biological location is a productive way to highlight the social constructedness of masculinity and may even expose a latent sexism within the sociological literature in its assumption that masculinity, as a powerful social identity, is only the domain of men” (12) – and, by the same token, that femininity is only the domain of women. Drawing on Butler, Pascoe argues that “gendered beings are created through processes of repeated invocation and repudiation”. It is in this sense that “[t]he abject identity must be constantly named to remind individuals of its power” (14). Besides, the abject must be repeatedly repudiated so that the status of the so-called mainstream or normal can be maintained.

The stereotype of the effeminate gay boy is thus a significant example of the abject within masculinist culture. Regarding the institutionalization of abjection, Pascoe agrees with Eckert and McConnell-Ginet in stating that “[h]eteronormative practices, those that affirm that boy-girl pairings are natural and preferable to same-sex pairings, are entrenched in official and unofficial school rules, school rituals, and pedagogical practices”. The concept of a “fag identity” (or

of the gay boy) is “continually used to discipline boys into heterosexually masculine positions” (22). This is extended, albeit in transgressive form, to the enforcing of homosexually masculine and feminine positions as well, replicating gender polarity where it appears to have been challenged. The environment of the school is one in which adolescents are constantly trying to affirm their identities – that is when many boys engage in what Pascoe calls “masculinizing practices”. These rituals depend on the repudiation of the abject which, in the male key, is othered as “feminine” and “non-heterosexual”.

As we have seen in the previous chapter, *Glee* does not move away from the masculinist framework at the root of heteronormativity but, instead, calls for problematizing that framework from within. As we shall see, some of the performances by Kurt, for instance, aim at defying the school’s heteronormative order. One example of this takes place in the fourth episode from season one, entitled “Preggers”. Directed and written by Brad Falchuck (one of the co-creators of the show), this episode is mainly about Kurt’s attempts to make his father proud of him. Despite the fact that Kurt’s homosexuality seems to be evident from the beginning of the narrative (especially because of the show’s reliance on a stereotypical portrayal¹⁷), this does not seem to be openly acknowledged by his father. After being seen by his father while dancing with two girl friends to Beyoncé’s hit “Single Ladies”, Kurt decides that he should join the football team in order for his father to be happy. In this episode, unlike in the rest of the narrative (including the following seasons), Kurt seems to be hesitating in relation to defining himself as being homosexual, since he even tells Finn that he is not gay.

Even though at first he wants to join the football team in order to “fit in” by conforming to the straight norm of gender regulation, what happens afterwards is quite different. In order to be accepted into the football team, he has to “audition”. He wants to have some music playing in order to concentrate on the game. Although Finn advises him not to do so (since it would be “gay”), Kurt replies saying that “he will do it his way”. As a result, he is very successful in the practice and ends up being accepted into the team. Because the football team has not won any matches lately, there is a need to think of new strategies for the upcoming game. As a new team member, Kurt suggests that they use dancing as an element of surprise. At first, the members are hesitant

¹⁷ As I have mentioned earlier, Kurt is portrayed as a boy with flamboyant behavior. He is into arts, performing, fashion and he is constantly making references to Broadway musicals or to so-called “diva” artists. It is in this sense that I argue that his portrayal is the stereotypical representation of an effeminate gay boy.

(they do not want to become a “gay team”), but the football coach, who is willing to do whatever it takes for them to have a good outcome in the competition, decides to ask for Will’s help. Will Schuester is the mentor of the Glee club and he explains to the team the ways in which athletes are in fact performers, just like singers and dancers. In this sense, Will starts to deconstruct the idea that the arts and the sports are opposites. However, legibility here stems from convenience rather than from awareness and solidarity. It is only because the inclusion of arts into sports is profitable that this idea of opposition is deconstructed by Will.

It seems that agency occurs here through *complicitous critique* (Hutcheon 22): while Kurt attempts to conform to regulatory masculinity through the reinforcement of the patriarchal root of heteronormativity, the attempt becomes agentially performative as he occupies masculinist space with male femininity instead. This could be compared to Finn’s dressing like Lady Gaga (see section 2.4 in the previous chapter) without losing his masculinity. Whereas Finn’s transgression is celebrated in and of itself, on the other hand the disempowered version (that is, Kurt’s version, which must necessarily deal with misogyny) is conditionally accepted, let alone celebrated, only as it serves the team through profit. The axis of class is, in this sense, very important – after all, the performance is only incorporated in the game in order to achieve success and victory.

In order to prepare for the next game, Kurt teaches his peers how to dance to “Single Ladies”. The choice for this song is also particularly interesting. Beyoncé’s “Single Ladies”, which was released in 2008, has become a pop hit. The lyrics are basically about a girl’s complaint that her male partner is not actually committed to the relationship and, as a consequence, does not ask her to marry him. This is clear in the chorus, which repeatedly says: “If you like it, then you should have put a ring on it”. The video clip and the dance of the song are also relevant: Beyoncé and two other dancers are wearing high heels and tight clothes while shaking their legs and hips. There is also a constant hand-twirl movement, which aims at calling attention to the dancers’ hand and ring fingers (see Image 5). In this sense, the song and the dance can be understood as being inserted into a heteronormative framework, emphasizing heterosexual marriage and normative female beauty and subordination. As we shall see shortly, it is important to bear

in mind this “original”¹⁸ context of the song and its meanings in order to understand its use in *Glee*.



Image 5: Beyoncé’s video clip of “Single Ladies”

In the *Glee* narrative, the football players, overwhelmed by the crowd at the day of the competition, do not want to dance in front of the audience afraid of becoming “jokes”. Finn tells them that “they are already jokes” and that the “Put a ring on it” strategy would be a way for them to reverse this situation. When they are about to lose the game, they decide to make use of the strategy. They all dance to the sound of “Single Ladies”, leaving the other players mesmerized (see Image 6). The audience is supportive and even follows the players’ moves. In the sequence, Kurt is able to make the points necessary for his team to win and the game comes to an end.



Image 6: The football team dances to the sound of “Single Ladies”

¹⁸ I use quotation marks here because the term “original” can be considered problematic from a postmodern perspective. After all, is there such a thing as the original? In this context, however, I simply use the term to qualify the performance that *Glee* is making reference to through reiteration and resignification.

It is interesting to notice that, although Kurt was at first trying to conform to the gender norms imposed by the school environment, his presence in the football team had different effects. After all, the football players, which generally stand for the stereotypical strong men, danced to a song whose lyrics and choreography are often associated – at least from a heteronormative perspective - with femininity. It is important to emphasize, then, that the characters did not become “jokes”, as one would usually expect. At the same time, however, they did not become jokes exactly because they were successful – the queerness was only accepted, then, because it was profitable. In this sense, it can be argued that the performance did not destabilize the heteronormative matrix. Rather, the football players have merely been assimilated into the normativity of the state’s regulation and prizing of heterosexual stability.

Barrie Gelles explains in her article “*Glee* and the Ghosting of the Musical Theatre Canon” that the songs incorporated in the show acquire new meanings once they are recontextualized (95). In this sense, the show reframes, rewrites and rereads the “original story” of the songs while appropriating them in the context of the characters’ meaning-making processes. This reiterative aspect is exactly what allows the performances to have political effects that promote gender trouble. It is also important to mention, then, that at the end of the episode Kurt says that he has realized that he “can be anything”. At this moment, there seems to occur a type of idealization since, in fact, he cannot be anything. As the narrative as a whole shows, the social structures are always restrictive. However, at some specific moments the show makes use of hopeful discourses that seem to emphasize that it is only up to the subject to decide who s/he is. These discourses can be debunked based on the narrative itself – as we have seen, the characters are always struggling against the normative and oppressive school system. At the end of this episode, three football players decide to join the Glee club. In this sense, the performance itself seems to have had real effects on the ways the students defined themselves in the school environment. Nevertheless, as we have seen in the last chapter, the fact that the narrative seems to bring a type of closure – all is well at the end – can be viewed as problematic.

The use of Beyoncé’s song is echoed later on in the third season, in the episode entitled “Goodbye”. Burt Hummel, Kurt’s father, dances to the same song as a graduation present and homage to his son (see Image 7). At a first glance, one could argue that the performance is

queer if we consider that Kurt's father is a stereotypical heterosexual man. The scene of Burt's performance is paralleled with flash backs of Kurt dancing with his two girl friends, which is the passage from the first season mentioned earlier. This paralleling technique works as to emphasize the ways in which Burt has become understanding and proud of his son. After all, Burt wants to show Kurt that he is happy about him. One might ask, however, whether Burt's performance can be seen as a form of unqueering queerness, in the sense that queer acts are assimilated without threatening heteronormativity. In fact, just as much as Burt is queering his heterosexuality by dancing to Beyoncé's song, he is also mainstreaming it, assimilating it, and emptying it of its transgressive force. In other words, his performance does not queer the heteronormative matrix, just like the one by the football team.



Image 7: Burt dances to “Single Ladies”

Another performance by Kurt that is worth investigating takes place in the ninth episode of the first season, named “Wheels” (directed by Paris Barclay and written by Ryan Murphy). As the Glee club is preparing for the sectional competition, Will suggests that they sing a song from Broadway. The song is “Defying Gravity” from the musical *Wicked*. Will simply names Rachel Berry to be the solo singer, since she is a girl with the appropriate voice to achieve the required notes. Kurt, however, is very fond of the musical and of this song specifically. Besides, he also has the vocal range necessary to sing it. When he tells Will that he would like to perform it, the teacher argues that this song is meant to be sung by a girl, like in the musical.

Given Will's justification, it becomes important to consider the meanings of this song in the Broadway musical context. As Gelles explains, in the musical *Wicked* this song is performed by the character Elpheba,

[who] has been pressured to suppress that which made her different in an effort to be accepted. Now, she realises that she must fully embrace her true identity and nature, and what is more, use that which makes her different to change the very world from which she has hidden her gifts. The song is empowering and uplifting; by the end of the number her magical powers are at their strongest and she flies. This song is a declaration of self, of intent, of promise, and of a future of fearless existence. (96)

Gelles' reading of the song in the musical context is indeed essentialist insofar as she affirms that the character must embrace her "nature". Nevertheless, as we shall see, the effects that the performance in *Glee* promotes are entirely different.

Because teacher Will did not want to give Kurt the chance to sing "Defying Gravity", Burt goes to the school and talks to the principal. As he says, he does not want to have his son being discriminated, even if he is, in his own words, "as queer as a three-dollar bill". As a result of Kurt's father's intervention, Will installs a competition between Kurt and Rachel in order to choose the best singer for the performance at Sectionals. The audition of the two characters is combined into just one scene. The two performances are paralleled so as to emphasize their contrast: while Rachel can reach all the notes and can perform in a way that very much resembles the original musical context of the song (her character is very theatrical-like and uses facial expressions that are considered exaggerated), Kurt's performance seems to be more related to the ways in which he has been struggling in relation to his identity. This is because the lyrics have a lot to do with his queer identity and the problems that he has been facing. Literally, he has been trying to "defy gravity" in the sense that he has tried to go against the gender norms. Also, he is "through with playing by the rules / of someone else's game". After all, he is "through accepting limits". In this sense, the lyrics, while being sung by Kurt, acquire a different personal significance. As Gelles explains, "the song has been reintegrated and is now about Kurt, a young boy who wants so terribly to be through accepting the heteronormative limits he feels constrained by" (97).

Kurt, however, ends up missing one of the most important notes of the song during his solo. The interesting aspect is that he does that on

purpose. Before the audition, his father told him that he had received a harassing phone call by an anonymous person who called Kurt a “fag”. Because of that, Kurt decided that singing a so-called girl’s song during Sectionals in front of several people could make the situation worse. In a way, he gives up by missing the note as a form of protecting his father. Kurt emphasizes, however, that he is not going “to hide in the closet”, and says that “he is proud of who he is”. He concludes by saying that he loves his father “more than he loves being a star”. His decision to miss the note is relevant in the sense that he is the one who had to sacrifice his singing (which, in this case, could even be understood as his “coming out”) for his father. In this sense, he gives in to normalcy¹⁹.

At the same time, even though Kurt gives up on the idea of singing at Sectionals, this does not invalidate the political effects of his performance while competing against Rachel. After all, he appropriates a song which is considered “female” and makes it about himself. Besides, the fact that he insists on performing “Defying Gravity” makes the school reconsider the assumption that this is a girl’s song, so much so that they decide to give him the opportunity to sing it.

In this light, such performances seem to promote gender trouble in the sense that they queer practices that were binarily gendered in their earlier contexts, expanding the legibility of what can be sung, thought, and lived. As Butler explains, “[t]he possibilities of gender transformation are to be found precisely in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a failure to repeat, a de-formity, or a parodic repetition that exposes the phantasmatic effect of abiding identity as a politically tenuous construction” (*Gender Trouble* 192). In this sense, besides the fact that the show presents us with gender stereotypes, it also challenges them, mainly through performances such as the instances analyzed here. The agential effect of the performances is achieved because, at the same time that they are reiterations, displacement takes place. Since it is not possible to “defy gravity” by simply rejecting it, the show makes use of popular songs in order to resignify them.

This analysis corroborates with Esteves’ and Araújo’s argument that the portrayal of Kurt is indeed subversive, whereas I also acknowledge its normative allegiances. In the article: “I feel like Lady Gaga: A narrativa de um personagem gay em *Glee*”, they claim that

¹⁹ According to Lennard J. Davis, the concept of normalcy permeates our contemporary lives: “it is part of a notion of progress, of industrialization, and of ideological consolidation of the power of the bourgeoisie”. For the author, “[t]he implications of the hegemony of normalcy are profound and extend into the very heart of cultural production” (15).

Kurt's portrayal is based on artificiality and theatricality²⁰, emphasizing how femininity and masculinity are constructed notions. Additionally, they argue that at the same time that the character may have a so-called effeminate behavior, he is not passive. In a way, then, effeminate behavior is not associated with submissiveness, unlike in most stereotypical representations of both male homosexual and women characters (14). My argument is that the performances are central to this queer construction of the character, since it is mainly through them that boundaries are negotiated and questioned.

Moreover, it is not only Kurt who questions such binary notions of gender. Even though I focused my analysis on one specific character, there are performances by or including other characters that may be considered as promoting gender trouble. Such is the case of the song "What It Feels Like For a Girl", which is featured in the fifteenth episode of the first season. Originally sung by Madonna, it can be understood as a critique of the ways in which being a girl – or looking and behaving like one – is considered negative in our society. The effects of the performance in *Glee* are potentialized because the song, unlike in its original context, is sung by boys. It is Finn, the football player who is also a member of the Glee club, who says: "Girls can wear jeans / and cut their hair short / wear shirts and boots / 'cause it's okay to be a boy". Artie, another member of the club, complements: "But for a boy to look like a girl is degrading / because you think that being a girl is degrading". Besides that, during the chorus all the boys sing the following words: "Do you know what it feels like in this world for a girl?". In this sense, even though the meaning of the song remains basically the same (it is still a critique of misogyny in the context of heteronormativity), its effects are potentialized due to the fact that it is the boys themselves who sing it, recognizing the ways in which privilege must be acknowledged rather than naturalized, and problematized rather than forgotten. In this episode the boys end up reflecting about their own misogynist behavior towards the girls. Singing the song is, in this sense, a form of acknowledging that. In this same scene, Kurt – who is also part of the group of boys singing the

²⁰ The authors do not provide a specific reference for the term, but I understand theatricality here as referring to theater performance, which usually requires exaggerated expressions and is usually marked by drama. According to Josette Féral and Ronald P. Bermingham, "[t]heatricality produces spectacular events for the spectator; it establishes a relationship that differs from the quotidian." For them, it is "the construction of a fiction", and the "imbrication of fiction and representation in an 'other' space in which the observer and the observed are brought face to face" (105).

lyrics – says that he agrees that the girls have not been respected lately. It is interesting to notice that in order to give credibility to his words, he says that he is “an honorary girl”. In a way, this emphasizes the ways in which Kurt defines himself as being fluid and queer. While putting themselves in the girls’ shoes is a difficult task for most boys (in the episode, it takes a long time until they recognize that they should treat the girls better), for Kurt this transitioning is easier.

In this sense, some of Kurt’s performances seem to produce political effects in the sense that they challenge the school’s heteronormative order. One might argue that agential performativity, due to its focus on the individual, may not promote change at the institutional level. For instance, despite the fact that Kurt is constantly blurring the binary boundaries of gender, the heteronormative structure at his school is still present. However, without a doubt, these instances of gender trouble produce important effects in terms of the counter-hegemonic meanings produced by the narrative. In this sense, even though *Glee* makes use of stereotypes, it has political effects because it challenges pre-established binary notions of gender. The characters are still bullied throughout the episodes, but this underlines the need for their agency as performed. Besides, since the personal is political, gender instability may well have pervasive effects on the heteronormative constitution of various axes of power.

De Ridder, Dhaenens, and Bauwel argue that the production of a stereotypical identity – however homogenizing it might be – can serve counter-hegemonic political purposes. In this sense, certain identities should be represented and brought into visibility (despite the fact that these representations might be reductive) at the same time that they are subverted and deconstructed so as to create “awareness of norms, discourse and hegemony” (197). This awareness can be potentialized through those moments of disruption, which may even be intertwined, as in the case of *Glee*, with hegemonic discourses of heteronormativity. In other words, hegemonic and counter-hegemonic discourses are not mutually exclusive – rather, as we have seen, they appear and function in more complex ways in relation to each other.

3.2. “You have to be true to who you are”

While on the one hand the show promotes the characters’ agency through performativity, on the other hand there is a constant reiteration by the characters of an essentialist discourse in terms of identity. At times there seems to exist a need to construct a coherent narrative of the self. In the episode entitled “Laryngitis”, for example,

Will gives the students the assignment to sing a solo that would reflect “who they are”. At this point, Kurt is not very happy about his relationship with his father. In fact, he has been jealous because his father has been bonding with Finn, who is also into sports and other activities that can be considered stereotypically heterosexual and male. Kurt even tells Sue Sylvester, the coach of the school’s cheerleading team, that his dad is “the most important thing in the world to him” and that he is “afraid that he might be losing him because of his sexuality”. Because of that, Kurt starts dressing differently and he tries to date a girl in order to impress his father.

As for the week’s assignment, Kurt sings a John Mellencamp song. The song, “Pink Houses”²¹, can be read as being about the challenges of living in the US: “Oh but ain’t that America / for you and me”. This is considered a strange choice for him because he usually sings lyrics that can be considered queer – or that at least acquire a queer significance through his performance. This is not the case, since according to his peers the song does not seem to relate to him or his life. In other words, they do not understand how Kurt could sing a song that, at least from their point of view, is not about his “identity” or the struggles he faces in the school environment. Because of that, his peers tell him that he “should be true to who he really is”. Even though this makes sense in this context since Kurt has been trying to change in order to be accepted by his father (in other words, he is trying to fit the heteronormative framework), this discourse can be read as emphasizing that there is such a thing as a “true self” to every individual. This idea is very recurrent in the series and, as we have seen, this seems to be De Kosnick’s main critique of the show. However, as I have tried to demonstrate, even though this essentializing discourse pervades the episodes, the narrative and most performances that are part of the stories portray identity as an effect of construction, challenging essentialism.

It is through the performances and the songs that the characters seek to construct their fluid identities. In the same episode, Burt tells his son, Kurt, that “he is free to be whoever he is” and that “he is good either way”. By that he means that Kurt should not try to force a specific behavior to be accepted. After that, Kurt starts singing “Rose’s Turn”, which is a song from the musical *Gypsy*. Sung by Rose, a character who wanted to be a performer but can only make her dream come true through her daughters, this song is about “unrequited dreams, of feelings of failure, of mourning the life that wasn’t” (Gelles 100). It is also “a

²¹ “Pink Houses” was released in 1983.

song of admitting one's true identity and no longer suppressing one's sense of self" (101). For Kurt, this song is about the ways in which he feels disconnected from his father. Besides, as I have argued, it is about his attempt to change in order to be accepted – a problematic exchange, for sure. He only sings part of the song, and the lyrics are slightly changed at certain moments: "I dreamed it for you dad / It wasn't for me dad / And if it wasn't for me / Then where would you be / Miss Rachel Berry". As Gelles explains, "[w]hen Kurt sings the song, he is standing in a hallway filled with people, but feeling very much alone. He begins to sing, out-of-the-blue, in a defeated and saddened manner, moving through the hallway, into the auditorium, and eventually on the stage" (100). At the end of his performance, his dad is watching and applauds him. His father then explains that he does not need to change – in his own words: "Your job is to be yourself and my job is to love you no matter what". It is important to note that Kurt's discourse is one of sacrifice, since he suppresses his own dreams for his father's. Besides, Burt's discourse about Kurt can be seen as condescending, since he claims that he will love and accept his son "no matter what", implying obstacles rather than pleasure.

In this sense, the two performances allow Kurt to experiment with his identity. Even though he tries, he cannot relate to the first performance. The second one, however, is much more honest and reflects the ways in which he has been feeling. After that, Kurt decides to stop trying to do things he does not like or identify with. In other words, he decides not to sacrifice himself for others anymore.

3.3. Going Gaga: Camp Aesthetics in *Glee*

In "Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender and The End of Normal", J. Jack Halberstam uses the image of the pop icon Lady Gaga to propose "a politics that brings together meditations on fame and visibility with a lashing critique of the fixity of roles for males and females" (26). For Halberstam,

The excessive training that we give to boys and girls to transform them from anarchic, ungendered blobs into gender automatons, then is (a) dangerous, and (b) not necessary, and (c) not actually consistent with lived reality. And as some girls grow up to become anorexics and some boys grow up to be bullies, many girls grow up to be overachieving micromanagers, and many boys

grow up to be underachieving slackers, yet we still refuse to give up on the models of masculinity and femininity that have been established as ordinary and normal and good. And we spend very little time, relatively speaking, attending to the problems with this model of heterosexuality and figuring out how to fix them. (31)

Because of that, Gaga feminism is about “stepping off the beaten path, making detours around the usual, and distorting the everyday ideologies that go by the name of ‘truth’ or ‘common sense’” (162). Halberstam explains, though, that he does not mean that Lady Gaga is a feminist herself. Even her songs are sometimes heteronormative. However, she is a symbol of transgression with performances that are filled with excess and that defy the concept of normalcy. The author recognizes that Gaga is “situated very self-consciously at the heart of new forms of consumer capitalism” (10). At the same time, the fact that her performances are constituted by “crazy, unreadable appearances of wild genders; and social experimentation” (10) makes her a suitable symbol for a kind of feminism that proposes “gaga as a practice, a performance, and as part of a long tradition of feminism on the verge of a social breakdown” (11).

In this sense, Gaga Feminism is about creating ruptures from heteronormativity in order to promote different significations that can better account for the complex dynamics of social life. Even though Halberstam does not explicitly explain how this rupture can be performed, he points out some examples in popular culture that defy social norms. I see *Glee* and, more specifically, Kurt, as very similar to the ways in which Halberstam understands Lady Gaga’s performances. After all, not only does Kurt blur gender boundaries, but he is also very excessive and exaggerated. Even though he is bullied, he is very empowered in the narrative – mainly because of his performances. His actions are also very interesting: despite the fact that he is in a normative school environment, in which girls and boys are usually separated (such as in Physical Education classes or in sports in general), he questions this division by participating in different gender groups at different times. In the episode entitled “Vitamin D”, for example, Will installs a competition between girls and boys because he feels that the students have been unmotivated. Will insists that Kurt should remain in the boys’ group, despite his will to join the girls. Kurt, however, ends up helping the girls in their performance by telling them that the boys have been

using drugs (the so-called “Vitamin D”) in order to have a better performance. At the end of “Mash-up”, Kurt enters the girls’ bathroom after being bullied with a slush (which was thrown at his face). As we have seen, there are other instances in which Kurt takes part of male groups, such as when he joins the football team and ends up performing along with the other players. In “Theatricality”, while performing a Lady Gaga song, Kurt is the one who says the line “I’m a freak, baby” (see Image 8). His actions are usually unexpected and go against the binary notion of gender. Besides, due to his performances and his style, Kurt seems to be the character who “finds inspiration in the silly and the marginal, the childish and the outlandish” (Halberstam 21).



Image 8: Kurt performs Lady Gaga’s “Bad Romance” along with the girls

Kurt’s excess and exaggeration can be read as a type of camp performance. As Susan Sontag explains, “the essence of Camp is its love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration” (1). For the author, “the most refined form of sexual attractiveness (as well as the most refined form of sexual pleasure) consists in going against the grain of one’s sex” (4). Camp is about irony – it values aesthetics over content. Besides, in Camp there are no distinctions such as good taste versus bad taste and high culture and mass culture. Even though Sontag claims that “Camp sensibility is disengaged, depoliticized – or at least apolitical” (2), other scholars have argued quite the contrary. Katrin Horn explains that this view is “completely ignorant of camp’s roots in minority culture” (online n.p.). Because of that, Sontag was criticized by queer scholars “who rediscovered camp as a politically useful strategy for criticizing oppression and for pointing to the hypocrisy of American society in the 1980’s (. . .)” (Horn online n.p.).

Horn explains that *feminist camp* allows for a critique of sex and gender roles. This seems to be the case of camp aesthetics in the context of *Glee*. However, the audience needs to be able to perceive the subversive effect of camp performativity. Otherwise, there will only be a replication of stereotypes. As Horn states, “Camp, like other forms of parody, is often accused of perpetuating stereotypes at the same time that it is trying to subvert them” (online n.p.). However, as I have mentioned previously, there is no direct relation between a specific representation and its political effects. In other words, there are no guarantees. As I have tried to demonstrate, stereotypes and subversive discourses are not always apart from each other – meanings are complex and that is why it is important to look for instances of disruption in popular culture. It is in this sense that Horn calls for the necessity of engaging in the understanding of hegemonic discourses:

instead of viewing this dependency on hegemonic discourses as a weakness of camp, I want to suggest that it is actually its strongest feature. By incorporating them, camp performances serve as constant reminders of how powerful and ubiquitous dominant discourses and texts are, while simultaneously pointing out their gaps and incongruities, thereby undermining their claim to totality and truth. (online n.p.)

Thus one can argue that at the same time that *Glee* reinforces hegemonic discourses by presuming a guaranteed queer outcome of its counter-hegemonic politics (and thus leaving their hegemonic effects unmarked at the intersections of identity), it also contradicts that very presumption through agential performativity. Kurt’s performances, for instance, make use of pop songs and show tunes, which are recontextualized and, therefore, acquire new (and even queer) meanings. Besides, because Kurt’s characterization defies the binary notions of gender, the instability and the artificiality of gender norms are evidenced. It is through performativity – that is, through a repetition with difference – that Kurt is able to express his fluid identity and to be a powerful character (an agent) who is “proud to be different” and who recognizes that this is “the best thing about him”.

CHAPTER IV
FINAL REMARKS: “What if...?”

“What if girls stopped wearing pink, boys started wearing skirts, women stopped competing with other women, and men stopped grabbing their crotches in public?”

“What if we stopped and recognized the multiple ways in which men and women, boys and girls, exceed and fall short of the definitions that give those categories heft and longevity?”

(J. Jack Halberstam, *Gaga Feminism*)

As we have seen in the analysis from the two previous chapters, it is possible to note that *Glee* constantly makes use of a resolutionist discourse that embraces and celebrates difference while evading its normative effect in the same breath. The idea is that “we are all different”, and that is what makes each one of us “special”. At the same time, however, while considering the narrative as a whole, one can identify the ways in which identities are complex, i.e., how different identity categories intersect each other and how they are strongly influenced by different power relations. It is possible to observe, for instance, the differences between Finn and Kurt: even though they are both “losers”, they occupy different identity positions. Consequently, they are oppressed (and even privileged) in different ways. We have observed, for instance, that even though most of Finn’s performances seem to promote agential change, in fact they do not destabilize the heteronormative framework of the show. After all, his masculinity is never threatened. Kurt’s promotion of gender trouble, on the other hand, is only accepted when it is profitable, i.e., when it serves the business of the capitalist ideal of succeeding and winning.

I believe that a realist view of identity, as my analysis has led me to understand, is called for in order to challenge De Kosnik’s assumption of essentialist identities in *Glee* (see the theoretical framework in Chapter 1). The realist conceptualization of identity and agency to which I am referring is one that moves away from the opposition between essentialism and postmodernism. As Moya explains, essentialist conceptions “have been unable to explain the internal heterogeneity of groups, the multiple and sometimes contradictory constitution of individuals, and the possibility of change – both cultural and at the level of individual personal identity”. On the other hand,

“postmodernist conceptions – which tend to deny that identities either refer to or are causally influenced by the social world – have been unable to evaluate the legitimacy or illegitimacy of different identity claims” (10-11). Because of that, the author proposes what she calls the postpositivist realist theory of identity, which “shows how identities can be both real and constructed: how they can be politically and epistemically significant, on the one hand, and variable, nonessential, and radically historical, on the other”. In this sense, for realist scholars, “humans can develop reliable knowledge about their world and about how and where they fit into that world” (11). This is exactly the view of agency in this study – as the analysis has shown, it can be understood as the ability to act upon our identities in relation to the discursive possibilities that are culturally available at each given moment (see Chapter 1). It seems to me that De Kosnik sees *Glee* as essentialist because she tries to position the show in one of the two extremes: essentialism and postmodernism. However, as we have seen, *Glee*, while being part of mainstream television and containing simplistic discourses, also presents moments that disrupt heteronormativity. Because of that, even though it portrays several stereotypical characters, it can be read counter-hegemonically, since its disruptions serve so as to challenge the very same stereotypes. Besides, despite the fact that the show presents an essentialist discourse on identity, the analysis of the narrative has actually made visible the ways in which the characters’ identities are constructed and constantly reiterated through performativity. In this sense, contrary to De Kosnik’s view, the narrative can be read as challenging essentialism.

Moreover, the analysis shows that both heteronormativity and its disruption are imbricated in other discourses of oppression, resistance, and change. This corroborates with Brent C. Talbot’s & Margaux B. Millman’s claim that power, identity, and agency are the three primary discourses present in the narrative of *Glee*, “often intersecting and conflicting with one another to create new discourses” (6). Besides, the study suggests the importance of recognizing the multiple positionalities while studying identity. Jin Haritaworn explains that “[t]he call to positionality urges us to reflect on where we stand, to define our speaking positions and how they relate to others, especially those whom we claim speak for”. For the author, this kind of queer methodology avoids “colonizing and appropriative instances of ‘queering from above’” (2). In other words, it is important to take into consideration how different layers of identity intersect each other in order to avoid queering from a place of privilege.

The study also indicates that De Kosnik does not take into account the issue of performativity. The author does not see the performances in the show as being capable of producing agential and political effects. The study has shown, in this sense, that it is mainly through the performances that the characters are able to reflect about their own identities. The arts – singing and dancing – are the main tools that allow them to develop agency from within the school repressive system.

I have also pointed out that Finn and Kurt's identities can be understood as queer in the sense that they are constantly renegotiated, showing the ways in which heteronormativity is culturally constructed and suggesting, therefore, that it can be destabilized. I would like to emphasize that not only are they queer, but their relationship can be understood as being queer as well. The characters become friends throughout the episodes and their differences unite them. The fact that they are both male characters – one heterosexual and the other homosexual – is also significant. In fact, the entire Glee club seems to function as a type of support group, in which the so-called outcasts help each other. They develop what Hames-García refers to as “solidarity across differences” (120) – they are interpellated by the repressive heteronormative system in different ways, but the fact that they are all excluded is what brings them together. Besides, they are empowered through their performances, which allow them to have at least a certain degree of agency.

This research does not negate the claims by scholars such as Sheppard, Kociemba, Dubrofsky, and Penedo (see the review of the critical history on *Glee* in Chapter 1) that heteronormativity and problematic and stereotypical representations of identity pervade *Glee*. Rather, it confirms the idea that heteronormative and capitalist notions do frame the show. However, the representations also produce non-normative meanings, such as the instances analyzed in the previous chapters. This argument furthers Newcomb & Hirsch's claim that television contains a multiplicity of meanings. This is not to fall into the relativism for which poststructuralism is often criticized (Alcoff and Mohanty, 2006). On the contrary, it is to underline the urgency of reading critically in order to engage the contradictions as well as the critical potential of identity intersections in *Glee*.

The context of the show is also worthy of attention when we reflect about its identity representations. *Glee* has been a success during a period in which several cases of teenage bullying, depression, and even suicide have been reported by the media. Recent research with

Glee viewers has shown that teenagers who watch the series perceive the narrative as having a positive effect on their identity formations. Alice Marwick, Mary L. Gray, and Mike Ananny, while studying fan responses to the series, came to the conclusion that the “plots and characters offered ample fodder to imagine what it might be like to come out to a parent or ask someone out on a date”. At the same time, it “played a key role as a symbolic object”, since “watching *Glee* or ‘liking’ it on Facebook signaled one’s status as supportive, inclusive, and even potentially LGBT-identifying” (11). In this sense, the fans seem to recognize the ways in which the show has made non-normative identities visible. While the participants of another study conducted by Michaela D. E. Meyer and Megan M. Wood confirmed that *Glee* differentiates itself from other shows in terms of its portrayal of sexuality and identity, they “perceived that non-viewing others would stigmatize male viewers as gay or queer, regardless of their own identities” (444). In their view, “[t]he musical aspect combined with the visible presence of queer characters marks the overall narrative as queer” (444). In this line, the show seems to be usually associated – at least in common sense – with an LGBT-identifying audience. Some of the participants even confessed that they kept the fact that they watched the show a secret in order to avoid stigmatization (443). In a larger context, then, homophobia still plays an important role in the ways in which the show is understood by mainstream audiences.

It is important to mention that even though the show may contain representations that disrupt heteronormativity, there are no guarantees that this subversive aspect will be perceived by the audience. In this sense, the result could be a simple replication of stereotypes. This is because the ways in which the show will be understood also depend on the positionalities of its readers.

The politics of *Glee* is, in this sense, a dynamic and impure one – it is performative of both conservatism and of agential change. Even though it is not possible to dissociate ourselves from the overarching systems of representation that surround us (such as patriarchy and heteronormativity), we can still re-signify those systems so as to produce new meanings from within them. As the analysis demonstrates, it is only this transgressive move which is highlighted by *Glee*’s characters. However, ideally these meanings should be able to destabilize these systems of representation, rearticulating them so as to promote agency that can go beyond the level of monolithic identity to encompass the overlapping and often conflicting axes of hierarchy that make up identity. We may ask, then: what are the problems of these

dynamic politics? How can we potentialize the agential meanings produced by the narrative? How can counter-hegemonic discourses (that are triggered by hegemonic discourses) work to destabilize the very same hegemony? Even though this research does not provide an answer to all these questions, it suggests that, as Haritaworn puts it, “an empirical project which takes seriously the question of positionality can enable us to directly ‘touch/interact/connect’ with our subjects, in ways that are less exploitative, less objectifying, and more politically relevant” (3). In this sense, a project that aims at queering hegemonic discourses cannot ignore the several intersections of identity that, as we have seen, are a central part of the dynamic politics of *Glee*.

4.1. Indications for Further Research

It is important to highlight that this study only took into consideration two characters of the series. I believe, then, that the show is much more complex and, therefore, studies encompassing other characters and conducted from different theoretical perspectives are called for. Besides, this study focused solely on the first season of the series. It would be interesting to analyze the characters’ identities, including Finn’s and Kurt’s, throughout the next seasons as well. Also, because *Glee* is part of mainstream television, it would be important to look more closely at the show from the perspective of its reception. After all, how and by whom has the show been seen? What have people talked about in social media in relation to *Glee*’s use of stereotypes? How do Gleeks define their relation to the series? Has the show helped them to overcome obstacles or even to develop agency in relation to their identities?

4.2. *Glee* and me (or “Making my own kind of music”)

My motivation for studying *Glee* was the empowerment it gave me as an individual. As I grew up, I usually felt that I did not belong anywhere. Having been raised in a small town and coming from a very humble family, there were few options available in terms of who I could be. As a child and a teenager, sometimes I wished I could play with the girls. Sometimes I wished I could just sing and dance without being ashamed of it. Even though I only came across *Glee* recently, it dialogued with me at a personal level. After all, I believe *Glee*’s narrative defies, at least to a certain point, heteronormative forces present in our society.

As a scholar and as a teacher, I sometimes wonder how different our lives could be in a society that was not ruled by

heteronormativity. This makes me think of questions similar to the ones posed by Halberstam (quoted in the epigraph of this chapter). I know that we cannot simply erase the structures present in our society, but I believe that we can develop a more understanding view of them in order to think of a wider range of possibilities in terms of identity. I may not have been able to join a *Glee* club, but the fact that I went to the university, where I could study about Literature, Culture Studies, and Education allowed me to get to know myself better. Maybe it is through these pages and through my practices as a teacher that I have been able to become an agent of my own identity. As a language teacher who understands that words are never neutral, I try to create possibilities for the students to engage in critical reflections so as to question the already established forces in our society. I have made use of my knowledge regarding Cultural Studies in my practice as a teacher, especially because I strongly believe that this area should not be apart from Education. If we want to think of a world where people can “go gaga” and that can better account for our identities’ complexities, this reflection should have the classroom as its starting point. It is about time we expanded such discussions to places other than the academia and, more specifically, the Humanities’ programs. What if *Glee* and other forms of mass media could be the medium through which this critical reflection could be promoted among children, teenagers and adults?

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