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# *Reparo Paranoia:* Harry Potter and Queer Reparative Embodiment within TikTok's Collaborative Storytelling and Fandom Communities

By Lusie Cuskey

It has always been clear that theatre and performance aren't tools to magically transform the world we live in into the world we wish it was, but that doesn't keep creators and performers from constantly trying to inch it closer. When I teach queer theatre courses, both my students and I are often struck by the ways in which the challenges and triumphs of both artists and characters from queer theatre history can feel both far away and alarmingly familiar, reporting from a world in which both a great deal and not nearly enough has changed in the years since the works we read were penned. With the work of TikTok's queer storytelling communities, contemporary students have not only access to comparisons previous and current queer artists' feelings, but also to exploring continuity and ruptures in queer artistic forms.

In Split Britches' and Bloolips' 1991 collaboration *Belle Reprieve,* four members of the performance collectives played their deconstructed version of Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*, stepping into their own versions of the canonical work's characters: Paul Shaw as Mitch ("a fairy disguised as a man"), Lois Weaver as Stella ("a woman disguised as a woman"), Peggy Shaw as Stanley ("a butch lesbian"), and Bette Bourne as Blanche ("a man in a dress").[1]

[1] Bette Bourne, Paul Shaw, Peggy Shaw, and Lois Weaver, "Belle Reprieve," in *Split Britches,* ed. Sue Ellen Case (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 150.

The LaMaMa production, as preserved at the Hemispheric institute and in written stage directions, is largely a delirious avant-garde adaptation until the show's climax, during which Bourne and Shaw attempt to play the famous final Stanley and Blanche scene as a moment of realism.[2] As Blanche, Bourne balks, asking if they really have to play *that* scene, and Shaw offers, "If you want to play a woman, the woman in this play gets raped and goes crazy in the end."[3] In realism, *Belle Reprieve* argues, there is no chance for Bourne to wear a pretty dress and play an ingenue, nor for the ingenue to escape unscathed; queer people can't tell realistic stories about people who embody their identities.

I often offer *Belle Reprieve* as a case study in my queer theatre courses both as a way of understanding arguments around the limits of realism and as a window into the early queer theatre scene of New York in the last quarter of the millennium, when venues like La MaMa and the WOW Café initially housed the innovative works of theatre and performance art that would continue to inform the genre of queer theatre. While I've loved the piece since I encountered it in my own undergraduate studies and am always devastated by the tension between wanting to create a supportive world in the art the actors love and the inevitability of the world's intrusion on the artists' creation, I have often found that my students struggle to find a way into the work. This is, in part, simply a function of the (much-needed) diversification of the field of theatre; as instructors and directors are more intentional about not simply repeating the same canon of plays by white men, it becomes less and less possible to assume that students are familiar with *Streetcar*, much less with its position in the theatrical canon. I suspect it is also partly due to a lack of familiarity with performance styles outside of realism given the stylistic homogeneity in

[2] "Belle Reprieve (1991)," Hemispheric Institute, 1991, https://hemisphericinstitute.org/en/hidvl-collections/item/907-britches-belle-reprieve.html.
[3] Bourne, 181.

many of the theatres in the regions where I've taught, as well as the perception that the lives of the artists featured have little to do with those of the undergraduate artists reading and watching their work decades in the future.

Given this consistent disconnect, I was surprised that in the summer of 2020 I found my personal TikTok ForYou page feeling suspiciously familiar. TikTok creators in their early- to mid-twenties were reacting to a round of transphobic statements by *Harry Potter* author J.K. Rowling by cosplaying central characters from the series in a collection of interconnected videos that suggested queer and trans identities for the canon characters under the hashtag #RainbowSorcery, defiantly creating a supportive world in the art the TikTok creators loved and refusing to make room in the creative spaces they controlled for the world to intrude on their creation. As I noticed the parallel in creative impulses between TikTokkers in the early 2020s and artists in the early 1990s, I also noticed parallels in the art: much as avant-garde performance happened (and happens) in creative spaces outside the mainstream available to those who know where to find them, this particular corner of TikTok – intersecting queer TikTok, fandom TikTok, cosplay TikTok, and creators who engage in what I'm referring to as collaborative digital storytelling, generating original narratives through performance – was not widely visible, but accessible only to those whose interests brought them to its niche. Similarly, much as live theatre and performance only *really* happen in the moment (the recording of *Belle Reprieve* is not the experience of watching it live, but a recording of that experience), TikTok's algorithmic allergy to chronology means that only those users who watch collaborative storytelling tags unfold in real time ever get the full experience of the narrative. In "Communicative Forms on TikTok: Perspectives From Digital Ethnography," Andreas Schellewald argues that TikTok is "characterized through its ephemeral nature," which "facilitates meaningful social interaction

through enacting a site of momentary copresence" rather than functioning like longer-form video, television, or other non-live media forms.[4] Finally, while theatre and live performance are often defined by their presentation for a live audience, digital performance occurs in community, too. In the introduction of *LGBTQ Digital Cultures: A Global Perspective,* Pain Paromita lays out a research trajectory that paints social media spaces like TikTok as "networked publics" that function as "primary sites through which communities are forged, questioned, and critiqued."[5]

From news-saturating fears of espionage or deletion to crowd-sourced musical adaptations, TikTok has drawn a great deal of attention in recent years as the strange new social media company making a splash and changing the landscape of online community. This attention has been scholarly as well as popular; for example, Trevor Boffone's edited collection, *TikTok Cultures in the United States,* was published in April 2022, analyzing pockets of the platform from WitchTok to those celebrating and exploring Jewish identity, and I reviewed *Ratatouille: The TikTok Musical* for *PARtake: The Journal of Performance as Research*.[6] As both a performance scholar and a creative artist, I am excited about the avenues TikTok is offering for new kinds of performance and collaboration, and I am not alone in this enthusiasm; a great deal of discourse surrounding the platform centers on its novelty. What I find *most* interesting, however, are the ways in which TikTok users' new ways of communicating and creating remain in conversation with modes of communication, creation, and queer resistance of the past.

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[4] Andreas Schellewald, "Communicative Forms on TikTok: Perspectives From Digital Ethnography," *International Journal of Communication*, 2021, 1437–57.

[5] Pain Paromita, "Introduction," in *LGBTQ Digital Cultures: A Global Perspective*, ed. Pain Paromita (New York and London: Routledge, 2022), 1–7.

[6] Trevor Boffone, ed., *TikTok Cultures in the United States* (London and New York: Routledge, 2022); Lusie Cuskey, "'Not Writing New Rules, Merely Rat-Ifying': Musical Theatre Goes Digital in Ratatouille: The Musical," *PARtake: The Journal of Performance as Research* 4, no. 1 (2021), https://doi.org/10.33011/partake.v4i1.989.

TikTok is, of course, not theatre or live performance…but in its (predominantly queer) collaborative storytelling communities, at least, I would also argue that it's not *not* akin to theatre or live performance, either. In Claudia Skinner's "'Do You Want to Form an Alliance with Me?': Glimpses of Utopia in the Works of Queer Women and Non-Binary Creators on TikTok," Skinner writes, "the conditions of the pandemic necessitate transfigurations of the existing, predominantly in-person, practices involved in creating and sustaining community, and the performance of identity."[7] In the foreword of her edited collection of Split Britches' scripts, Sue Ellen Case articulates the collective's value not just as theatremakers, but as theatremakers who captured something specific and true of the queer (specifically lesbian) community at the time of their creation, often in response to the threat posed by attacks from the right. In this essay, I read the #RainbowSorcery creators as a queer performance community transfigured online due to both the pandemic and the digital age and suggest that they capture something specific and true of their own queer (specifically trans- and trans-allied) community in the face of attack. I offer a case study of the tag's engagement with what I am calling "reparative embodiment" as a provocation for others to consider ways in which TikTok offers opportunities to explore creators who are both engaging with performance tactics of the past and bringing them into a digital age.

**The Clock App**

A detailed accounting of the history of TikTok's rise to social media power and its sociocultural implications is beyond the scope of this article and is already offered elsewhere, but it *is* useful to have a working understanding of TikTok in order to understand much of what is to

[7] Claudia Skinner, "6 'Do You Want to Form an Alliance with Me?': Glimpses of Utopia in the Works of Queer Women and Non-Binary Creators on TikTok," in *TikTok Cultures in the United States*, ed. Trevor Boffone, Routledge Focus on Digital Media and Culture (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2022).

follow.[8] TikTok is a social media app like Facebook, Instagram, or Snapchat, but to simply say it is like its social media competitors is to miss both the novelty of its form and the incredible speed with which it has established itself not just as a place for play for young people, but as a site of development for youth culture and, in so doing, for significant swaths of broader social culture in the United States. In his introduction to *TikTok Cultures in the United States*, Boffone explicates the ways in which TikTok functions as a "formal innovation," noting the "increasingly blurred lines between analog and digital cultures" that have both led to and resulted from TikTok's ability to innovate "cultural exploration."[9] TikTok is interesting not only because it hosts and generates media that is widely popular, particularly among young people, but also because its entirely-user-generated content base means that it doesn't always feel like the result of giant corporations making financially-motivated decisions; in Communication specialist Kailyn Slater's words, it has "an ability to spread knowledge at a level that mimics the interpersonal."[10] Even though TikTok isn't built to foster direct, sustained communication between individuals the way other apps are, it manages to feel as if it is connecting users to like-minded others through its scarily accurate algorithm.[11]

While TikTok is now a social media site used by people of all ages, its core base is still members of Gen Z, and the trends set and spread initially by Zoomers still dominate the platform. In *Renegades: Digital Dance Cultures from TikTok to Dubsmash,* Boffone persuasively argues that TikTok (and related apps) are not simply a complement to young

[8] See, for example, Jing Zeng, Crystal Abidin, and Mike S. Schafer, "Research Perspectives on TikTok and Its Legacy Apps Introduction," *International Journal of Communication* 15 (2021): 3161–72.
[9] Trevor Boffone, "Introduction: The Rise of TikTok in US Culture," in *TikTok Cultures in the United States*, ed. Trevor Boffone, Routledge Focus on Digital Media and Culture (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2022), pp. 1-14.
[10] Kailyn Slater, "Theorizing Cultures of Oversharing on TikTok," in *LGBTQ Digital Cultures: A Global Perspective*, ed. Pain Paromita (New York and London: Routledge, 2022), 158.
[11] Schellewald, 1440.

people's lives, but a primary venue in which those lives are lived, curated, and examined. Boffone explains that "performing identity online offers new possibilities for young people to legitimize themselves *and* their community," simultaneously offering "identity blueprints" – guidelines for how to live a life that fits into the ideals and performative patterns of communities young people find meaningful – and offering space for young people to craft their own unique identities from and amongst the dizzying diversity of human possibilities on offer.[12]

TikTok's initial guiding gimmick was as a lip-syncing platform. Users are encouraged to record videos to sounds on the app that include songs licensed by music companies, advertiser-promoted sounds, sound clips from film and television uploaded by users, or other user-generated content. One *can* record a video without using the sounds of others, but then one's own audio becomes a sound for other's future use.[13] Users who wish to view TikToks have a few options for doing so:

- TikToks can be searched by hashtag, keyword, or user name;
- TikToks can be viewed by going to the page of one specific user or one specific tag and viewing all TikToks available there;
- Users can view TikToks from people they follow in the "Following" tab;
- Or, most popularly, users can view the TikToks the algorithm has selected for them via the ForYou page, often abbreviated "FYP."

The ForYou page is curated by TikTok's closely guarded algorithm with content the app believes will be of interest to the viewer, guided by intentional viewer input (viewers can like, comment,

[12] Trevor Boffone, *Renegades: Digital Dance Cultures from TikTok to Dubsmash* (New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 2021), 11.

[13] For a deeper exploration of the function of audio in TikTok across a variety of use styles, see Arantxa Vizcaíno-Verdú and Crystal Abidin, "Music Challenge Memes on TikTok: Understanding In-Group Storytelling Videos," *International Journal of Communication*, no. 16 (2022): 883–908.

or share videos they enjoy to spread the videos' reach and tell the app that they want more similar content; conversely, they can hold down a video and select "not interested," further specifying not to show additional videos with that specific sound or from that specific creator in the future). The algorithm generates pockets of TikTok with shared interests, like #BookTok, #WitchTok, and gay TikTok, which is aligned both with actual queer identities and also tends to be a catchall for sort of playful progressivism.[14]

TikTok is touted as queer-friendly and often considered to be a haven for queer and otherwise marginalized creators, but the platform frequently hides the content of these creators (a tactic referred to as shadowbanning, in which a creator's work isn't promoted to the For You page or the following pages of their followers) and does little to prevent their harassment. "Technology," writes Jessica Sage Raucheberg, "is not neutral: it is an extension of dominant political, cultural, and ideological views."[15] Queer TikTok users, then, have the simultaneous pleasures and challenges of cultivating spaces online that offer community and acceptance they can't always find in real life and of cultivating those spaces in essentially hostile terrain, looking for ways to avoid trolls and cyberbullies that harass their public pages and working around an algorithm that tries to prevent them from being seen. These workarounds might look like being diligent about using popular sounds and trends, oversharing in a bid for both relevance and

[14] For overviews of some elements of #BookTok and #WitchTok, see Trevor Boffone and Sarah Jerasa, "Toward a (Queer) Reading Community: BookTok, Teen Readers, and the Rise of TikTok Literacies," *Talking Points* 33, no. 1 (October 2021): 10–16 and Jane Barnette, "Hocus Pocus: WitchTok Education for Baby Witches," in *TikTok Cultures in the United States*, ed. Trevor Boffone, Routledge Focus on Digital Media and Culture (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2022), pp. 97-107.

[15] Jessica Sage Raucheberg, "#Shadowbanned: Queer, Trans, and Disabled Creator Responses to Algorithmic Oppression on TikTok," in *LGBTQ Digital Cultures: A Global Perspective*, ed. Pain Paromita (New York and London: Routledge, 2022), 197.

validation, or creating educational content that is valuable enough that other LGBTQ people will seek it out and boost the videos.[16]

It is, perhaps, not surprising that the tag this article explores happened not in mainstream gay or queer TikTok, but in a smaller pocket of the app less prone to the nastiness of random trolls. This pocket focuses on digital collaborative storytelling. It has significant overlap with cosplay communities (which may, indeed, be part of why it avoids trolls - #CosplayTikTok is also widely suspected to face algorithmic suppression), but the creators in this space aren't just trying to look like the characters from popular media franchises while lip syncing to canon audios, in essence embodying the characters as scripted. Instead, many creators engage in "OC cosplays" – cosplays of original characters unfurling original narratives in collaboration with other creators' characters through the use of existing audios from widely ranging sources. It is, in effect, that improv game where one can only use lines one's drawn from a hat but played out over weeks and continents with sometimes exquisite craft and specificity in its curation. In these communities, when creators *do* embody "canon" characters, they do so with their own agenda and point of view. Creators use usually non-cannon audios to perform interventions into existing characters, emphasizing characteristics with which the creator resonates to affectively impact viewers or offer an argument, investigating character relationships only glancingly explored in source texts, or course-correcting presumed failures of representation or imagination in canon contexts.

[16] Rochford, Elle and Zachary D. Palmer, "7 Trans TikTok Sharing Information and Forming Community," in *TikTok Cultures in the United States*, ed. Trevor Boffone, Routledge Focus on Digital Media and Culture (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2022), pp. 84-94.

**Fan Behavior**

If this sounds to you like the standard stuff of fan fiction, you're not wrong. Fan fiction has often been thought of as performative. Back in 2014 Francesca Coppa's essay "Writing Bodies in Space: Media Fan Fiction as Theatrical Performance" suggested that fan fiction "is not authoring texts but making productions – relying on the audience's shared extratextual knowledge of sets and wardrobes, of the actors' bodies, smiles, and movements to direct a living theatre in the mind."[17] In other words, Coppa suggests that fan fiction is closer to theatrical directing than conventional writing. Fans have also historically literally directed visual performance through the art form of vidding, splicing clips of canon videos together to make some sort of argument about the canon material – the *Transformative Works and Cultures* journal has a whole issue dedicated to vidding.[18] All of the ways of engaging in fandom, according to Paul Booth, have the capacity to "contribute to ongoing academic dialogues about the dialogues about the nature of identity, the concept of the text, and of issues of community."[19]

I suggest, however, that while TikTok's collaborative storytellers perform in many ways that aligns with other modes of performing fandom and interrogating texts, the fact that they are literally performing with their own bodies and placing their bodies in visual space with the physical bodies of others allows them to perform other labor, as well. In the case study I'm going to spend the rest of this essay examining, I suggest that the embodied nature of the TikTokkers' performance as well as some of the particularities of the performance and collaboration conventions of the platform equip them to engage in a kind of reparative performance, a queer

[17] Francesca Coppa, "11. Writing Bodies in Space: Media Fan Fiction as Theatrical Performance," in *The Fan Fiction Studies Reader*, ed. Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2014), 225.
[18]Francesca Coppa and Julie Levin Russo, eds., "Fan/Remix Video," *Transformative Works and Cultures* 9 (March 15, 2012).
[19] Paul Booth, *Digital Fandom: New Media Studies* (New York: Peter Lang, 2010), 18.

act of healing, joyful defiance that both resonates with historical queer production and perhaps offers access to its conventions for a new generation.

**Reparo Paranoia**

In the wake of yet another round of transphobic statements from *Harry Potter* author J.K. Rowling in early 2020, many fandom spaces erupted; some fan creators swore off engaging with *Harry Potter* content ever again, some half-jokingly attempted to divorce Rowling from the work by attributing its authorship to Gilderoy Lockhart or Daniel Radcliffe or Star Kid – the creators of *A Very Potter Musical* – or a delivery from the sky.[20] In response to these fans in particular, a great deal of discourse proliferated exposing all the ways in which Rowling's transphobic and otherwise socially regressive views permeated the world she'd built on a fundamental level, if not always an obvious textual one; in her contribution to *Harry Potter and the Other: Race, Justice, and Difference in the Wizarding World,* Tolanda Henderson details how "the wizarding world demonstrates and is built on trans-exclusionary concepts," and in the introduction to the same volume Sarah Park Dahlen and Ebony Elizabeth Thomas highlight the ways in which Rowling's disdain for meaningful diversity is present in her writing.[21]

Many of these creators collectively engaged in paranoid readings of the texts, acts of literary criticism that aligned with the paranoid mode of literary criticism Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick outlined in her 2002 chapter "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're so Paranoid,

[20] For a comprehensive description and analysis of these events, see Tolanda Henderson, "Chosen Names, Changed Appearances, and Unchallenged Binaries: Trans-Exclusionary Themes in Harry Potter," in *Harry Potter and the Other: Race, Justice, and Difference in the Wizarding World*, ed. Sarah Park Dahlen and Ebony Elizabeth Thomas (Jackson, MI: University Press of Mississippi, 2022), 164–77.
[21] Henderson, 165; Sarah Park Dahlen and Ebony Elizabeth Thomas, "Introduction," in *Harry Potter and the Other: Race, Justice, and Difference in the Wizarding World*, ed. Sarah Park Dahlen and Thomas, Ebony Elizabeth (Jackson, MI: University Press of Mississippi, 2022), 4; see also, for example, Mary Grace Buckley, "Holy House Elves!: Working Through the Problematic Tropes in Harry Potter," Let's Overthink That, July 14, 2020, https://letsoverthinkthat.com/2020/07/14/problematic-tropes-harry-potter/ or Shubhangi Misra, "JK Rowling Has Always Been Tone-Deaf. Just Look at the Harry Potter Universe," The Print, June 10, 2020, https://theprint.in/opinion/pov/jk-rowling-has-always-been-tone-deaf-just-look-at-the-harry-potter-universe/439064/.

You Probably Think This Essay Is About You."[22] (If we're engaging a fandom of a work formed in the socio-cultural milieu of the early 2000s, it seems appropriate to engage theory from the same period, though I would suggest the theory *actually* applies because we're watching the current generation of fans move into a mode of critical thinking about the ways social realities shape created artefacts not unlike the ways the academic fields in which Sedgwick was participating were doing when Sedgwick wrote.) In reading the text for evidence of Rowling's transphobia and other socially regressive views, fans were able to foreclose the possibility of other negative surprises; if they had always already held the *text* in suspicion, they couldn't experience further pain in the form of negative surprises from its author. As with many paranoid readings, these creators focused on exposure, broadly raising awareness of both Rowling's views and their influence on the fictional world she created. I am in no way critiquing the choices of fans who had these reactions to Rowling's statements – Sedgwick noted that "In a world where no one need to be delusional to find evidence of systemic oppression, to theorize out of anything *but* a paranoid critical stance has come to seem naïve, pious, or complacent," and Rowling's words absolutely represented further systemic oppressions of the trans community.[23] Jennifer Duggan's 2021 research on this exact cultural moment with Rowling reflects "Gender minority individuals report that a key factor that increases acts of discrimination and violence in their day-to-day lives is 'behavior by politicians, public figures, [and] community leaders'" like beloved authors.[24] A paranoid position is absolutely defensible.

[22] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're so Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You," in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 123–51.
[23] Sedgwick, 125-126.
[24] Jennifer Duggan, "Transformative Readings: Harry Potter Fan Fiction, Trans/Queer Reader Response, and J.K. Rowling," *Children's Literature in Education*, March 28, 2021.

And yet. Alongside those responses, a group of relatively popular – by the standards of the size of this corner of TikTok – queer creators retaliated by creating #RainbowSorcery, a closed tag (meaning creators who weren't part of the group curating the tag weren't invited to contribute to it) that consisted of assigning Harry Potter characters LGBTQ+ identities as a cheerfully queer act of war, engaging in what I propose is an act of reparative performance. The first TikTok I've been able to trace in this tag is a video from May 14, 2020 created by TheAzrai captioned "We're divorcing JK Rowling & we're taking all the kids. Cedric is transmasc now and he gets to live. I said what I said."[25] In the video, the creator cosplays Cedric Diggory in a Hufflepuff tie and vest to the tune of the final two stanzas of "Days of Summer," the finale to the StarKid musical *A Very Potter Sequel*. Close-up shots of body parts show Cedric getting ready, then – after a challenging eyebrow raise - singing to the camera as he waves a wand and sends sparks of light floating through the air. The video ends with Cedric crossing his arms and lifting his chin towards the viewer. Throughout, the character occasionally glances offscreen, making eye contact with another in-world companion

*Figure 1: @siriussly left and @TheAzrai right.*

[25] Azrai (@TheAzrai), "We're divorcing JK Rowling & we're taking all the kids. Cedric is transmasc now and he gets to live. I said what I said. #harrypotter #cedricdiggory," TikTok, May 14, 2020, https://www.tiktok.com/@theazrai/video/6826867907335556358. A note on TikTok links: TikTok is notorious for rearranging content in ways that break hyperlinks, so it is highly probable that some or all of the links within this essay will eventually become unusable as TikTok rearranges or creators rearrange content. In this essay's original iteration as a conference presentation, I showed the linked TikToks rather than describing them; here, I have included screen captures of stills from the publicly posted videos and descriptions of video content in lieu of being able to ensure all readers will be able to access and view the linked TikToks and in order to ensure that creators retain the ability to remove content from view at their will (rather than downloading and hosting their videos elsewhere).

that was answered when Siriussly added onto the chain on May 24, 2020, writing, "Fleur Delacour is a lesbian now and JK can deal with it" (see Fig. 1).[26]

"Because the reader" or, for us, the fan/reader, "has room to realize that the future may be different from the present," Sedgwick writes of engaging a reparative lens, "it is also possible for her to entertain such profoundly painful, profoundly relieving, ethically crucial possibilities as that the past, in turn, could have happened differently from the way it actually did."[27] These creators are imagining a more diverse, inclusive, and just *Harry Potter,* but more importantly, they're imagining a world where that *Harry Potter* would have existed. Scholars often write about queering acts in fan fiction as a way for fan fiction writers to explore something about themselves, but without the risk or challenge or vulnerability of involving their literal bodies. In this instance, though, it *is* the literal bodies of trans and gender nonconforming people subjected to unfair scrutiny and ridicule and sometimes physical threat as a result of Rowling's comments; those comments have material consequences. What does it look like, then, to engage seriously the imagining of a past where trans people and their bodies were given prominent, human stories in *Harry Potter* canon and, more so, to then imagine a future where this fandom is not a vector of harm but of celebration for trans, gender nonconforming, and otherwise queer creators? Engaging reparatively is about finding pleasure important enough not to eschew it in favor of avoiding pain, about committing to "a project of survival [that] undertakes a different range of affects, ambitions, and risks;" these creators offer an example of what it is to engage their queer bodies in reparative acts of reinterpretation.[28] In analyzing the community and play of Queer

[26] Siriussly (@siriussly), "Fleur Delacour is a lesbian now and JK can deal with it. #duet with @theazrai #rainbowsorcery #harrypotter #fleurdelacour," TikTok, May 24, 2020, https://www.tiktok.com/@sirussly/video/6830512800796806406.
[27] Sedgwick, 146.
[28] Sedgwick, 150.

TikTok, Skinner describes queer TikTokkers as "participating in a long lineage of people who are working toward queer utopia," a project in which I suggest these queer digital storytellers are participating.[29] In the remainder of this essay, I want to walk through a few examples of how this unfolds in our case study.

**#RainbowSorcery and Queer Performance**

I was a bit tongue in cheek earlier about the datedness of my theoretical framing, but it *is* shocking how tidily Sedgwick's description of the queer performance of camp maps onto the performances created in TikTok's visual storytelling communities. She references it as "a communal, historically dense exploration of a variety of reparative practices" including

> the prodigal production of alternative historiographies; the 'over'-attachment to fragmentary, marginal, waste, or leftover products; the rich, highly interruptive affective variety; the irrepressible fascination with ventriloquistic experimentation; the disorienting juxtapositions of present with past, and popular with high culture. [30]

In summation, Heather Love offers, a reparative lens is "on the side of multiplicity, surprise, rich divergence, consolation, creativity, and love."[31]

While the Rainbow Sorcery tag is defiant, it is – crucially – not defensive. There's no need felt to justify the queerness of the characters in relation to canon, nor is the central project of the tag an apologetics of queerness, arguing for queer inclusion. In the world the creators offer, as in the corner of TikTok in which they operate, queerness is simply both a lived reality and a site of playful pleasure. Consider, for example, mythicallrose's July 22, 2020 video in which she plays both Pansy Parkinson and Draco Malfoy with the caption "Draco and Pansy are

[29] Skinner.
[30] Sedgwick, 149-150.
[31] Heather Love, "Truth and Consequences: On Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading," *Criticism* 52, no. 2 (Spring 2010): 237.

the ✨dramatic✨ mlm and wlw" – men loving men and women loving women – "solidarity."[32] In the video, Draco and Pansy duet Demi Lovato's "Don't Change a Thing" in simultaneous screens, echoing the TikTok trend of a two people singing the song together backed up against opposite sides of a door as dramatically as possible. Both characters embody their lines of the duet with exaggerated facial expressions and large, sweeping gestures in their own spaces with brief glances towards each other before smiling and seeking more prolonged eye contact as they cross their arms, Draco offering the playful wrist flip associated with queer masculinity (and, in various corners of gay TikTok, as a visual gesture used to self-identify as part of the LGBTQ community more broadly, part of queer creators' many efforts to duck TikTok's frequent suppression of queer content by avoiding actually typing out words that signify queerness).

When the challenges of queerness are referenced, it is with the assumption of a sympathetic audience rather than one where acknowledging vulnerability around one's identity poses a risk. The tag also makes space for multiplicity – mythicallrose's Pansy has videos with a version of Draco played by Luna C. Lunatic as well, and the creators praise each others' divergent imaginings of the same characters in their comments. One June 24, 2020 video of the pair posted by luna.c.lunatic is captioned, "When Pansy came out to Draco he was honored tbh. #rainbowsorcery #dracomalfoy" (see Fig. 2).[33] The tag isn't seeking to replace one totalizing vision of narrative truth for another; there's space for myriad possible character histories that travel diverse affective terrains.

[32] Myth (@mythicallrose), "Draco and Pansy are the ✨dramatic✨ mlm and wlw solidarity #dracomalfoy #pansyparkinson #hp #dracomalfoycosplay #hpcosplay," TikTok, July 22, 2020, https://www.tiktok.com/@mythicallrose/video/6852428059363134726.

[33] Luna (@luna.c.lunatic), "When Pansy came out to Draco he was honored tbh. Also I'd perish for Myth's Pansy. #rainbowsorcery #dracomalfoy," TikTok, June 24, 2020, https://www.tiktok.com/@luna.c.lunatic/video/6841948502205943046.


*Figure 2: @luna.c.lunatic left, @mythicallrose right.*


*Figure 3: @luna.c.lunatic left, @TheAzrai right.*

On one hand, for example, is a light, teen romance-movie-style subplot in which Draco Malfoy and Cedric Diggory have a run-in on the quidditch pitch. The first video in the sequence is from June 24, 2020: over a section of AronChupa's "A Little Swing" (a popular TikTok audio at the time), Draco and Cedric are in their own spaces on the Quidditch pitch, Draco fixing his hair while Cedric listens to other characters offscreen saying, "He said WHAT?" "I know, horrible!" Cedric and Draco each lift their wands as if to duel (the convention, in this video, is that by facing the camera the characters are facing each other) when an authority figure says, "BOYS! Wands down at once!!" Both drop their wands, then Draco winks at Cedric and Cedric punches him on the percussive moment after the line "show her a little swing," with Azrai swinging at the camera and Luna C. Lunatic acting the impact (see Fig. 3).[34] Over the course of several videos, Cedric and Draco come to an accord in detention and sneak around seeing each other romantically until a relationship is formally declared in a July 16, 2020 video in which

[34] Luna (@luna.c.lunatic), "#duet with @theazrai Draco's first encounter with Cedric... Could have gone better. #rainbowsorcery #dracomalfoy," TikTok, June 24, 2020, https://www.tiktok.com/@luna.c.lunatic/video/6841969781130792197.

Cedric and Draco appear in some secret, prismatic-light-tinted space to the tune of a Bitter Kids cover of Panic! At the Disco's "Nine in the Afternoon" before Cedric turns to Draco and formally asks him out through the song, Draco's face registering surprise and then pleasure as both actors slowly glide towards the camera in a manner that creates the effect of the camera zooming in on the interaction (see Fig. 4).[35]

On the opposite end of the frothy Cedric-and-Draco plot in the tag, mythicallrose and queerelfclub offer an alternative vision of Draco Malfoy's romantic life by imagining mythicallrose's Draco Malfoy as an adult years later struggling in a relationship with queerelfclub's adult Harry Potter. The January 19, 2021 video offers an example of both the sort


*Figure 5: @TheAzrai left, @luna.c.lunatic right.*


*Figure 4: @queerelfclub left, @mythicallrose right.*

[35] Azrai (@theazrai), "#duet with @luna.c.lunatic After meeting in secret for a while... Cedric asks Draco out. #rainbowsorcery #cedricdiggory #dracomalfoy #harrypotterau," TikTok, July 16, 2020, https://www.tiktok.com/@theazrai/video/6850222405714021638.

of irreverence for linear time and prizing of affective variety referenced above. The video opens with Harry seeking eye contact as Draco avoids eye contact and Harry offers the lyrics to part of Leanna Firestone's "Burnt Out," a song initially released on TikTok that imagines a sort of alternative Beauty and the Beast narrative in which, instead of proving the romantic partner's non-monstrous worthiness through their love, the singer affirms that their romantic partner *is* a monster and ends the relationship. Draco is in tears throughout, solely listening aside from one moment of attempted interjection as Harry pushes through the diatribe. Both seek eye contact as Harry concludes, "I love you, but I'm done" (see Fig. 5).[36]

Engaging reparatively doesn't mean avoiding negative affective experiences; it means letting oneself be vulnerable enough to experience them, and indeed there is clearly a kind of pleasure in making space for negative affective experiences – in this instance, for example, mythicallrose initially posted her video with the caption "#au" – alternate universe – "where Draco knows everything they said was true, but it doesn't help how much it hurts when it's not just him thinking it" and QueerElfClub chose to make the scene about a relationship between Harry and Draco with his duet. Mythicallrose commented "Hey! Ouch!" and QueerElfClub replied, "We really said Spain but the S is silent."[37]

[36] Sawyer Vega (@queerelfclub), "#duet with @mythicallrose you can't fix everyone, and that's a hard lesson to learn #harrypotter#rainbowsorcery," TikTok, January 19, 2021, https://www.tiktok.com/@queerelfclub/video/6919498170535775494.
[37] Vega.

There is a deliberate instability to identity in these works, a queer slippage between creator and character – for example, TheAzrai is also a transmasculine person who has posted publicly about his transition, and most creators in the tag publicly identify as queer in some way. The filming techniques creators use sometimes works to destabilize space; Merl0t and QueerElfClub offered a plot of Dean and Seamus falling in love that plays with the convention of the frame as separating characters and creators and uses it as a tool instead for suggesting physical intimacy. In the May 5, 2020 video, queerelfclub's Dean sings Stephen Sondheim's "By the Sea" to merl0t's Seamus. The creators engage the convention that the characters are facing each other when facing the camera, and as queerelfclub pulls his hands to one side and kisses offscreen, merl0t pulls merl0t's face so the kissed cheek is offscreen at the moment of contact, creating the visual story of contact occurring (see Fig. 6).[38]

*Figure 6: @merl0t left, @queerelfclub right.*

**Conclusion**

Using their own bodies in performance and a variety of fragmentary audio sources, the creators of the #RainbowSorcery tag not only shape a fictional world but pull in elements of the real world – commercial songs, user-generated songs, and in some places canon and fanon audio – to support their creation. They encourage each other's performance and receive praise and encouragement from viewers and fans in comment threads full of wide-eyed emojis and

[38] Jack Merlot (@merl0t), "oh my god they were roommates @queerelfclub #seamusfinnigan #deanthomas #harrypotter #rainbowsorcery," TikTok, May 5, 2020, https://www.tiktok.com/@...merlot/video/6829767441787227398.

exclamation marks. This is not theatre; unlike TikTok theatre offerings like the *Ratatouille* musical that are cheekily metatheatrical and attempt to use the framing of TikTok to recreate theatre conventions, the #RainbowSorcery creators are clearly engaging with the camera as a camera, though also not in ways that align with mainstream film conventions.[39] This is also, however, not an example of TikTok's unaware poaching of theatrical audio and source material as Boffone lays out in "From *Heathers* to *Six*: Stealth Musicals and the TikTok Broadway Archive," in which he notes the popularity of musical theatre audios on the app in a way that is unconnected to their source materials.[40]

Boffone positions creators engaging with that theatrical material as "participatory spectators," users who, "influenced by interactions with media forms, ha[ve] learned to advance theatrical narratives beyond the threshold of the theatre space into their own private space."[41] I argue, however, that the TikTokkers in this tag are not participatory spectators, but creators; not engaging in an act of reception, but of iteration. It is not a coincidence that the tag's creators sample theatre audios at high rates, nor that their videos parallel to more traditional performance traditions and have clear senses of narrative. Most of the users in this tag come from a performance background. QueerElfClub has a BFA in theatre; several creators are actors; Luna C. Lunatic makes proper films with their roommate – a Hermione Granger cosplayer in the tag named MeganKahlia – who teaches in a university film program in Australia and with whom they created a short film called "Rainbow Sorcery: Redemption" from the tag imagining a

[39] For a deeper dive into the theatrical conventions employed in the *Ratatouille* musical, see Cuskey and Christian Lewis, "Ratatouille: The TikTok Musical by Lucy Moss (Review)," *Theatre Journal* 73, no. 3 (September 2021): 432–33.
[40] Trevor Boffone, "From Heathers to Six: Stealth Musicals and the TikTok Broadway Archive," *Studies in Musical Theatre* 15, no. 3 (2021): 175–89.
[41] Boffone 178, quoting Amy Peterson Jensen.

meeting between Hermione and Draco years after the book's events.[42] TheAzrai had a pre-pandemic career in LARP and other immersive performance methodologies. While much of the writing about TikTok positions its user base as young people performing extensions of themselves in acts of discovery, I suggest that these creators are making art on purpose, offering not just an example of one way to make creation out of oppression but visions of ways in which short-form video content can be a robust form of narrative creation that offers something different from traditional film, traditional theatre, and some pandemic attempts to "theatre-ize" digital performance.

In many ways, their offerings feel like the queer performances of performance collectives and solo performers from the 80s and 90s, an intentional departure from the creative world of its moment, self-referential and nonlinear and intertextual and playful and dedicated to taking up space in a world that would still prefer shrinkage, now in a cozy corner of the internet instead of a tiny theatre. Sedgwick says that "What we can best learn from [reparative] practices are, perhaps, the many ways selves and communities succeed in extracting sustenance from the objects of a culture – even of a culture whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain them."[43] Like the theatre, as Boffone offers, "the public space of TikTok bolsters the status quo while also remaining a space of resistance and disruption. TikTok is filled with joy, escapism, pleasure, education, and community-building, even if the platform bolsters systemic racism, classism, ableism, and the like."[44] I look forward to seeing how students are able to parse these older works when they are able to see the ways in which the queer creators of their own generation are still operating from a similar methodological playbook, and I look forward to

[42] Lunakahlia, "Rainbow Sorcery: Redemption," YouTube Video, 2:29, July 26, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p74AfDajvCo.
[43] Sedgwick, 150.
[44] Boffone, "Introduction."

seeing what digital natives will do with these modes of digital creation now that live performance is an option once more and they can select what narratives belong on a stage and which might really live best, like so much of life, in their phones. #RainbowSorcery and the other collaborative storytellers of TikTok offer valuable practices for thinking about performances of queer hope in the digital era.

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