Campy Conclusions: Examining the Subversion of Heteronormative Relationship
Sanctions in American Film Musicals

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Campy Conclusions: Examining the Subversion of Heteronormative Relationship Sanctions in American Film Musicals

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ABSTRACT

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The heteronormative endings that conclude American film musicals can be read as camp or ironic in light of the subversion of hegemonic relationship sanctions that proves consistent throughout the genre. In order to understand the reading of camp into these endings one must examine the ways in which American film musicals subvert hegemonic relationship sanctions. This subversion takes place through the allowance of female agency via musical performance, the abundance of gender play, the presentation of alternative family structures specifically through the glorification of communal living, and the possibility for alternative masculinities. While these endings make the films available to camp readings, this thesis focuses on their ironic function in that they constitute a marked reversal of the films’ subversive tropes.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1: &quot;I can do, without you&quot;: Female Agency through Musical Performance in the American Film Musical</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2: &quot;I would like, if I may, to take you on a strange journey&quot;: Gender Play in the American Film Musical</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3: &quot;The farmer and the cowman should be friends&quot;: The Glorification of Alternative Family Structures in the American Film Musical</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 4: &quot;So, are you as good in bed as you are on that dance floor?&quot;: Masculinity and Male Bodies in the American Film Musical</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Works Cited</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Filmography</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

The heteronormative endings that conclude American film musicals can be read as camp or ironic in light of the subversion of hegemonic relationship sanctions that proves consistent throughout the genre. In order to understand the reading of camp into these endings one must examine the ways in which American film musicals subvert hegemonic relationship sanctions. This subversion takes place through the allowance of female agency via musical performance, the abundance of gender play, the presentation of alternative family structures specifically through the glorification of communal living, and the possibility for alternative masculinities. While these endings make the films available to camp readings, this thesis focuses on their ironic function in that they constitute a marked reversal of the films’ subversive tropes.

American film musicals are clearly ‘campy’ productions. Many of our world’s rules fly out the window as characters begin dancing on ceilings and singing in supermarkets. Musical performances allow characters boundless expression. While this freedom does result in belting out show tunes and tapping during business meetings, it also allows for more important manifestations. Musical characters are less bound by rules of being. Musical men can wear glitter and display vulnerability while musical women can make their own decisions and run the show. In musicals, characters experience some freedom from hegemonic relationship sanctions.

While musicals offer characters new possibilities for expression and gender play, they conclude with traditional heteronormative unions. These endings depict marriages, child-rearing, silent women, and active men. Rick Altman sees the happy conclusions as
enforcing heteronormative restrictions and thus undoing any challenges to the gender system that occurred in the film prior to its ending. Altman states: “The ecstatic, uplifting quality of the musical’s final scene permits no doubt about the permanence both of the couple and of the cultural values which the couple simultaneously guarantees and incarnates.”

What Altman fails to make note of is the enormous discrepancy between these traditional endings and the subversive tropes that exist throughout American film musicals. These endings do not undo the expressive possibilities found in the films but rather exist as a farce of traditional, heteronormative unions in the face of the genre’s subversive qualities. These endings can therefore be read as ironic- as a campy parody of the hegemonic relationship sanctions that the films work against throughout their durations.

Review of Literature: Constituting Camp

Camp exists as a highly contested term both in and out of academic considerations. From an aestheticism to a lifestyle the term continually cross-dresses between definitions and parts of speech. Andy Medhurst likens trying to define camp as attempting to sit in the corner of a circular room. This fluctuating quality of the term may make tracking its trajectory difficult but these variances also translate into utility. Through consistent metamorphosis camp exists as an adaptive and layered term. One can

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1 Altman, Rick. *The American Film Musical*. p. 51
apply the term’s multiple facets in many ways to recognize resistance to marginalization through artistic expression.

Camp has been referred to as a style, aesthetic, taste, sensibility, etc. Labeled as both political and apolitical depending on the historical moment, camp boasts a slippery etymology along with its convoluted definition. Said to derive from both French and Italian, even the origin of the word remains contested. Fabio Cleto describes camp’s history as a “queer” one. The term can slip between all parts of speech, is sometimes capitalized and sometimes not, and “masquerades” around its various uses.³ Lauren Ross aptly describes the term’s multiple roles as “cross-dressing”.⁴

The camp cannon traditionally does not begin in the world of theory but rather in the realm of literature. In 1954 Christopher Isherwood published a novel entitled The World in the Evening in which his characters give serious consideration to camp. The novel’s main character Stephen attempts self-discovery after the end of his marriage through the awakening of his dormant bisexuality.

The consideration of camp occurs during a conversation between the main character Stephen and his friend Charles. Charles inquires if Stephen has heard the term camp and he admits coming across the term in nightclubs. Charles is concerned with “high” camp and considers camping in queer circles an “utterly debased form.”⁵ He considers high camp as a serious consideration and therefore sees the process as “making fun out of” rather than “making fun of” the subject of ridicule. Isherwood’s model clearly

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ties camp and its implementation to an expression reserved for homosexual males. This exclusivity remains one of the many contested issues surrounding the term.

Camp made its academic debut a decade later in Susan Sontag’s, now (in)famous, “Notes on Camp”. Sontag’s highly-stylized essay consists of short notes each of which attempts to illuminate the components of the aestheticism. According to Sontag, camp navigates in an overtly stylized manner and it judges based not on a standard a beauty but by the ability of something to successfully display an implicit degree of artifice. Camp forefronts style over substance and Sontag references works from literature, theatre, and film to define the stylings that constitute camp. Camp transforms the serious into the frivolous and, in Sontag’s opinion, exists as an apolitical means of expression.

In the vein of Isherwood’s novel, Sontag also makes a distinction between ‘types’ of camps. Sontag identifies “deliberate” camp as camp which knows itself to be camp. This type of camp, which can be aligned with Isherwood’s low camp, revolves around a sense of trying too hard whereas pure camp results from a failed seriousness. According to Sontag, naïve or pure camp proves much more successful and enjoyable.

Sontag’s parameters prove confounding since they raise the question of intent. Sontag states that intent to be campy is probably always harmful yet labels an Art Nouveau craftsman’s assertion of his work as camp as pure. It seems that in Sontag’s view the outcome of intent depends more on the proponent of the work than its ‘pure’ or ‘intentional’ quality. Even with the confusion surrounding Sontag’s qualifications, the main criticism regarding the essay involves the insistence of camp’s apolitical nature.

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7 Ibid. 57.
8 Ibid. 58.
Fabio Cleto identifies the assertion of camp’s apolitical quality in Sontag’s work. Cleto holds “Notes on Camp” responsible for defining camp as an apolitical aesthetic taste for vulgar and kitschy middleclass pretentions. Sontag’s apolitical assertion proves outdated in the face of academic considerations of camp that followed “Notes on Camp”. Lauren Ross explains how camp can be read as highly political. Considering camp within the structure of capitalism it can be seen as an elitist taste for the marginal. Sontag claims camp taste is only possible in affluent societies and directly related to snob taste. Ross’s examination clearly ties camp to politics because of its necessity of affluence.

It would seem that since Sontag’s essay is so highly contested it would have fallen out of favor in modern academic considerations. However, there are points within the essay that remain relevant within modern uses of the term which constitutes its position within the term’s cannon. Specifically, Sontag’s consideration of the term’s relationship to gender directly relates to this thesis.

Camp delights in the exaggerated performance of one’s given gender. Camp sees “Being-as-Playing-a Role”. This performative aspect of being correlates to the performative nature of gender which film musicals highlight to subvert normative restrictions. As well as exaggerating one’s given gender, camp also considers working against the grain of one’s sex to be erotic according to Sontag. Sontag’s consideration of camp’s relation to gender performance allows for the essay’s current relevance.

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11 Sontag, Susan. “Notes on Camp.” p. 64.
12 Ibid. 56.
While Sontag’s “Notes on Camp” marks the first major academic definition of camp, the examples of the aestheticism it presents often contradict the parameters it sets. Mark Booth recognizes this discrepancy in Sontag’s essay and works toward a definition of camp that qualifies presenting oneself as being “committed to the marginal with a commitment greater than the marginal merits.” Unlike Sontag, Booth asserts that camp can only exist if the intention behind its production was to produce a camp artifact. However, he allows for a category of camp fads or fancies. Camp fancies are non-marginal works that can be read as camp through their artificiality, stylization, theatricality, naivety, tackiness, poor taste, etc.

Booth uses Christopher Isherwood’s novel *The World in the Evening* to justify his terms. Booth examines Isherwood’s work and concludes that he also allows for camp fancies, or the reading of camp into non-camp objects:

“Perhaps we should pay Isherwood the compliment of believing that when he says that Mozart and the Baroque period are camp, he does not mean what he says. What he may mean is that they may be enjoyed (by some people) in a camp way.”

It is this allowance that Booth both asserts and reads into Isherwood’s work that permits the endings of American film musicals to be read as camp. While not camp artifacts, the heterosexual unions at the end of Hollywood musicals act as camp through their artifice, parody of other mainstream genres, and stark contrast to the rest of the film’s diegetic rules.

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14 Ibid. 67.
Musicals themselves are often read as camp, but the exaggerated, gaudy nature of the film musical exists as a norm. The happy, hegemonic unions that commence at the end of film musicals are breaks from the overindulgent diegeses the films inhabit up until these moments. The stark contrast existing between American film musicals and their endings can then be read as camp as the endings seem outrageously subdued and normalized compared to the rest of the film. In this way, the film’s heterosexual unions are parodies of those existing in other genres as they stand apart from the liberating world of the musical.

The consideration of self-presentation that ties Sontag’s essay to this thesis has been taken up by many theorists considering camp through an academic lens. Gary McMahon, while examining camp in the literary arts, recognizes self-parody as a proponent of camp characterized by an artificial nature of self-presentation. This type of campy self-parody presents the self as being willfully immature and absolved of responsibility. Camp’s shameless insincerity proves successfully provocative but McMahon recognizes another function of the artificiality. Camp works tend to prevent criticism through their ambivalence.15

McMahon provides substantial criteria to assert what he believes camp to be. While no general consensus on the term exists, McMahon’s assertions fall in line with a large number of works on the aestheticism and therefore can serve as a non-argumentative guide to the stylings that constitute camp:

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“[Camp] exposes the masquerade of portrayal...the grandiose pose, precise and public diction, ironic overstatement, which paradoxically scales down the subject yet oversees character, narrative, ideology, and the form itself.”

McMahon describes camp’s themes as both colorful and contrary: the nature of artifice, theatricality, narcissism as a detached perspective, the juxtaposition between the domestic and fantastic, a re-evaluation of the cult of seriousness in criticism, etc. Camp embodies exhibitionism and prefers transparent artifice over trickery and cunningness. This tenet interestingly harkens back to Sontag’s confusing distinction between pure and deliberate camp which centers on intent. McMahon agrees with Sontag that camp emphasizes style over content and prefers facetiousness to seriousness. Lastly, and most obviously, camp prefers exaggeration over simplicity.

The inability to constitute a generally agreed upon definition of the term may seem to render camp useless. Cleto says camp’s walls are erected and then dismantled and moved once its performing ends are accomplished. However, his expression on the term’s unstable nature contains the word “accomplished”. In its plethora of uses and applications from film to fine art to “lower” forms of “camping”, camp accomplishes ends. The term, practice, aestheticism, what-have-you remains useful even amongst the disagreements. Lauren Ross explains that this elusive nature is the very thing that enacts its usefulness. Camp remains a theater or a tool that entertains objects and discourses that

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16 Ibid. 14.
17 Ibid. 6.
18 Ibid. 14.
“fail to adhere to normalized cultural constructions.” Ross points out that camp has been legitimized as a serious academic consideration through the fields of queer studies, feminism, gender studies, film studies, and sociology. Cleto goes so far as to say the aestheticism takes part in a reassessment of culture itself. Camp plays with the hegemonic binary system in the same way “queer thinking” does which, according to Cleto, promotes a sabotage of traditional binaries including masculine/feminine, natural/artificial, and private/public. These binaries allow bourgeois ontological order to arrange and perpetuate itself. Both camp and queer thinking work to undo these normalized notions of social arrangement.

Camp’s application that I find both important and relevant to my project is that of backlash against repression. Many view camp as a response to marginalization and a coping mechanism against normalized heterosexual culture. Esther Newton claims that camp ideology undermines the negativity of being othered. Through humor, camp proprietors are able to laugh at their marginalized positions instead of distressing over their inequality. Incongruity, theatricality, and humor are all aspects of camp and are directly tied to the homosexual experience (the implied universality of shared experience originates from Newton’s work not my own). Newton views camp as a strategy for a situation, the situation being the normalized marginalization of those who identify as queer.

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21 Ibid. 6.
23 Ibid. 15.
25 Ibid. 102.
Richard Dyer sees camp as a sort of self-defense against the “real awfulness” of the gay male condition. Through camp gay men can make fun of themselves in a way that distracts them from their oppression.\textsuperscript{26} Camp elucidates hegemonic ideologies. Through camp these normalized standards are stripped of meaning and the aestheticism demands a consideration of “truths” taken for granted under the ruling ideology.\textsuperscript{27}

Jack Babuscio also sees camp as a way for the gay population to cope with being othered. Babuscio believes that the process of being othered, the repression of the self, fuels the creative energy that leads to camp.\textsuperscript{28} In his view camp becomes a result of oppression rather than simply a reaction. Babuscio clearly positions camp within the “gay sensibility”, a position contested since the onset of camp, and believes that through marginalization those ascribing to this sensibility obtain a heightened awareness of their human condition.\textsuperscript{29} Therefore camp exists as one of the highest forms of expression, a social reaction born from injustice.

Along with Babuscio, Scott Long believes camp to be a byproduct of the oppression faced by male homosexuals. Through parody, gay males can defuse the procedures of oppression.\textsuperscript{30} The reading of camp as a result of gay male oppression falls into a trajectory of reclaiming camp for the gay male population. From the onset of Sontag’s essay, camp has had a complicated relationship with “gayness” and “gay sensibility”. Sontag briefly mentions camp’s origin in male homosexual circles but

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid. 115.
\textsuperscript{28} Babuscio, Jack. “Camp and the Gay Sensibility.” p. 118.
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid.
implies that camp would have still come to be if gay males had not created it.\textsuperscript{31} This seminal essay opened up the consideration of camp and allowed the utilization of camp outside of gay male circles.

Through Sontag’s essay, gay males were marginalized from the very sensibility born from their marginalization. In the decades following Sontag’s essay many, including the theorists mentioned above, worked to reclaim camp as a gay male experience. The obvious problem resulting from this reclamation is the implication of a gay male collective identity. While the establishment of a collective identity, if possible, has not been accomplished, these writers consistently argue that camp is fundamentally related to gay [male] experience.

The 90’s saw a change that opened camp up to more expressive possibilities. The gay male exclusivity that previous theorists tried to establish shifted to the more inclusive concept of the queer. Camp became a queered performance available to any anti-normative individual. Fabio Cleto sees camp as a queer mode of being that can signal different responses based on who enacts it.\textsuperscript{32} The new approach to camp opens the discourse to include expressions outside of a gay male sensibility. Camp is queer and therefore can successfully react to the normative without necessarily having to originate from a gay male experience.

Ascribing to Cleto’s view of a non-exclusive queer camp and earlier ideas about its response to hegemonic restrictions on gender and relationships allows for the reading of camp into the heteronormative endings of American film musicals. A camp reading

\textsuperscript{31} Sontag, Susan. “Notes on Camp.” p. 54.
\textsuperscript{32} Cleto, Fabio. “Queering the Camp.” p. 30.
focuses on the incongruities and dissonances of a text and recognizes its pre-texts namely the codes of heterosexuality. The happy heterosexual unions act as artifice and camp through incongruity- specifically exaggerated simplicity. Through the presence of noticeably silent women, commandeering men, and normative displays of gendered relations the endings of American film musicals exist in contrast to the films’ durations and can therefore be viewed as camp-based commentary on hegemonic relationship sanctions.

Any understanding of camp must take into account what historically has been its target: the cultural basis of sexual and social identities in the masculine-feminine binary naturalizing heterosexuality as the single position of normality. Camp takes an ironic stance toward gender normality, parodying it through an excessively aestheticized, overly theatricalized style that inverts or disrupts the relations of form to content, surface to depth, and also of margin to center.

Since the durations of American film musicals are so extravagant, excessive, and theatrical, their overly subdued endings can be read as ironic. The endings contrast the rest of the films in every way and, through this contrast, offer commentary on the ideologies they are expressing. The musical’s subversive qualities become its message with its normative ending reinforcing these ideals through the implementation of camp.

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33 Cohan, Steven. “Camp Interventions.” p. 103.
34 Ibid.
Chapter Breakdown

In order to recognize the contrast these heteronormative endings contain, one must examine the ways American film musicals consistently subvert hegemonic relationship sanctions. I have identified four characteristics of the American film musical that work against hegemonic ideologies. These subversive features are: the allowance of female agency via musical performance, the abundance of gender play, the presentation of alternative family structures specifically through the glorification of communal living, and the possibility for alternative masculinities.

Chapter one locates the possibility for female agency within musical performance in American film musicals. The chapter asserts that women are consistently denied agency in Hollywood-produced films. I recognize that film musicals are made within patriarchal structures and their narratives often deny female characters agency just like their non-musical Hollywood counterparts. Despite being trapped within male-driven narratives, women in American film musicals possess agency through the trope of musical performance. Within musical performances women are allowed to act and enact through controlling character blocking; changing lyrics, tempos and dance styles; and possessing equal power with male characters.

Chapter two recognizes the American film musical’s subversion of heteronormative relationship sanctions through its allowance of gender play. With the genre’s emphasis on musical performance and spectacle, Hollywood musicals allow for a wider variance in their display of gender than other mainstream Hollywood genres. Gender play encompasses a variety of activities that rail against conservative, hegemonic,
cisnormative gender restrictions. These activities include those labeled gender play, gender bending, gender variance, gender nonconformity, and genderqueer. The performative nature of the genre allows for these instances of gender play by highlighting the performative nature of gender which offers onscreen males and females some freedom from restrictive gender roles.

Chapter three examines Hollywood musicals’ presentation of alternative family structures. Along with alternative structures, the genre also highlights heterosocial relationships and glorifies communal living. The prevalence of alternative family structures within the genre subvert hegemonic relationship sanctions by rejecting traditional familial organizations. The chapter considers the prevalence of communities within the genre and how these communities are established and maintained through the trope of musical performance.

Chapter four considers masculinity and the presentation of male bodies within American film musicals. The genre works against hegemonic masculinity which calls for the subordination of women, the manufacturing of gender, the maintenance of social and health inequality, and the social reproduction of patriarchy. Hollywood musicals still harbor the patriarchal status of their production but the genre’s subversive tendencies allow onscreen males to take up masculinities alternative to the hegemonic strain. Through the examination of classic male musical leads, I establish that musical males hold much more freedom in their gender expression than male characters existing in other Hollywood genres.
This examination undertakes the entire scope of Hollywood-produced film musicals. Live-action film musicals produced and/or distributed by any major Hollywood studio or their subsidiaries from both the classical and post-classical period of Hollywood fall under the study. While my argument claims that any Hollywood musical, or American film musical as I use the terms interchangeably, aligns with my formula, I pull examples from films familiar to avid viewers of the genre.

American film musicals consistently subvert hegemonic relationship sanctions by allowing for female agency, presenting instances of gender play, glorifying alternative family structures, and offering alternative masculinities. By identifying these instances of subversion, Hollywood musicals’ heteronormative endings can be read as ironic through their contrast to the subversive nature of the genre.
CHAPTER 1: “I CAN DO, WITHOUT YOU”: FEMALE AGENCY THROUGH MUSICAL PERFORMANCE IN THE AMERICAN FILM MUSICAL

The heteronormative endings of Hollywood musicals can be read as ironic through the examination of the film musical’s tendency to subvert heteronormative relationship sanctions. One such device of subversion is the musical’s allowance for female agency. Hollywood films consistently deny women agency. While film musicals subvert hegemonic relationship sanctions through implementing gender play and glorifying heterosocial unions, their narratives still deny women the ability to act and female characters become victims of the male-driven narrative thrust. In spite of being swept away by male initiatives, female characters in musicals hold power that their other Hollywood counterparts do not. The trope of musical performance allows for onscreen female agency by allowing female characters to coopt male-driven narratives, control character blocking, and possess equal power with male characters. These moments of performance subvert the heteronormative construction of hegemonic Hollywood films by providing women the power to act that Hollywood narratives consistently deny them. The possibility of female agency through musical performance exists throughout the genre, occurring in Hollywood-produced musicals from both the classical and post-classical eras. The project of locating possibilities for female agency within Hollywood-produced films proves essential, for agency is required to constitute a subject.

To illustrate the musical’s defining trope in action, I’ll compare two Hollywood films produced in the same year; one musical and one non-musical. Comparing Sunset
Blvd and Annie Get Your Gun, both released in 1950, illustrates the musical’s unique ability to allow female characters agency through musical performance.

The classic film noir Sunset Blvd follows the past-her-prime silent film star Norma Desmond (Gloria Swanson). Norma’s wealth and entrapment of a younger male screenwriter would seem to provide her power and agency but, as with other non-musical Hollywood female characters, the narrative consistently denies Norma a voice and the power to control both herself and others.

Both Sunset Blvd and Annie Get Your Gun contain scenes of arguments involving female characters. In Sunset Blvd Norma voices her disgust with sound film while screening a silent film she starred in. Norma and Joe (William Holden) watch the film alone in her large estate. She begins telling Joe how silent stars did not need dialogue because they had “faces”. She remarks, “Have they forgotten what a star looks like?” As she becomes more agitated she stands and addresses the screen directly. With her finger pointed toward the picture she stares defiantly at the screen and exclaims, “I’ll show them, I’ll be up there again so help me!” Despite her affluence and age her protests are never considered. This scene leaves her arguing with an inanimate object. Her opinions are directed toward film executives absent from the scene. She remains trapped in her home, unable to even hold a legitimate argument let alone control the parameters of one. Standing in the flickering light of the projector Norma, a woman no longer useful to men due to her age and senility, holds no power and no ability to act.

While Norma remains trapped within her narrative, musical sequences in Hollywood musicals allow each character participating in an argument to hold an equal
capacity for agency. In the musical *Annie Get Your Gun*, released the same year as *Sunset Blvd*, both male and female characters, through musical performance, are able to actively participate in arguments, control the parameters of arguments, and successfully change the actions of others.

In the “Anything You Can Do (I Can Do Better)” scene from *Annie Get Your Gun*, Annie (Betty Hutton) and Frank (Howard Keel) argue about who is a superior shooter which spirals into a musical competition about who is the superior person. Annie begins the song and Frank falls in with the tempo and style she has set. The song holds a call and response format where one sings a line and the other responds in a similar fashion. The two alternate holding control over the direction of their competition and they respond to one another rather than resist the new parameters presented. For example, in one line Frank sings “Any note you can reach I can go higher.” Annie responds that she can sing the highest and this male-initiated competition leads the two to a sing off where they try to sing as high as they can. Conversely, later in the song Anne sings “Anything you can buy I can buy cheaper/I can buy anything cheaper than you.” Frank responds by haggling with Annie. Both characters possess the power, the agency, to direct the musical competition and set its parameters. Both Annie and Frank respect the direction the other implements and participates accordingly. Unlike Norma in *Sunset Blvd*, the musical performance gives Annie the opportunity to participate in arguments and the ability to set and change the parameters of social interactions.

As with the example above, musical performance allows women to act as agents in mainstream Hollywood musicals. An agent is a living entity, ‘real’ or fictitious, that
has the capacity of agency which is the ability to act within a world. More specifically, agency is the ability to act within a social structure or to be able to enact change under the control of larger social institutions. Agency exists in contrast to deterministic natural forces; it hangs on the understanding that humans hold the capacity to make choices through which they enact change on the world.

The consideration of female agency requires a definition of what constitutes female characters. I reject the essentialist view on gender, an essential characteristic of patriarchy, which discounts the possibility of variation within groups of people. Instead I take a social constructivist approach which focuses on the social learning that takes place because of an individual’s interactions within a group wherein groups construct knowledge for its members. As a result of my aversion to essentialism it becomes a necessity for me to define what I mean by onscreen women/females.

Qualifying onscreen women as onscreen subjects who were biologically born female reduces women to a certain set of physical characteristics that ignores the way the subjects present themselves and the way they are interpreted by viewing audiences as well as other onscreen characters. Therefore by onscreen women/females I am referring to characters coded as female. These characters are perceived as women by the viewing audience as well as onscreen characters in that they occupy the space of women onscreen regardless of their real-world genitalia. To be coded a woman onscreen one must socially occupy the space of a woman and be recognized as a woman through gendered characteristics such as appearance, dress, and mannerisms.
To illustrate the importance of female subjects possessing agency I look to Karl Marx and the revolutionary potential contained within the ability to act. Marx recognizes the human’s ability to enact social change. For him, the force of history is man’s ability to pit oneself against nature in opposition to any extra-human force. Man holds the ability to transform nature and through this process he transforms his own life. This transforming ability contrasts the animal nature of passively which simply adjusts to natural changes.\textsuperscript{35} According to Marx, men make their own history but not under circumstances they have chosen.\textsuperscript{36} The working class is only capable of agency through revolutionary action because of their dominated circumstance. While Marx allows for human agency his focus on collective action ignores the type of minute agency I examine within the film musical. While females being able to change tempos and the subject matter of songs may not rearrange social structures it still exists as a revolutionary act in that women are able to enact change and “do” within these musical situations. As with most ontological studies that examine the nature of being, or all studies for that matter, the fore-fronting of collective action largely ignores women. Marxist emphasis upon class and party as the agencies of radical change does remain relevant, however this focus is also problematic for oppositional theories, particularly feminist theories, interested in possibilities of rendering women, as well as other dominated people, as agents or subjects rather than as objects of an imposed history. Therefore while Marx highlights the importance of agency for subjects to overcome oppression, one must look elsewhere to locate the possibility of female agency. Rather than large, collective movements, minute

\textsuperscript{35} Coser, Lewis A. \textit{Masters of Psychological Thought}. p. 55-57
\textsuperscript{36} Marx, Karl. \textit{The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte}. p. 15.
actions and accomplishments existing in choreographed musical segments allow for this productive female activity.

Marx recognizes the working class’s, or the oppressed’s, capacity for agency but some theorists, such as Michel Foucault and Louis Althusser, appear to deny this capacity within individual subjects. While Althusser recognizes that we believe ourselves to be self-conscious agents it is instead social structures to which he applies agency. The individual agents he does identify participate in the process of establishing ideology. These are the agents of exploitation consisting of capitalists and managers and the agents of repression consisting of soldiers, policemen, and politicians.\(^{37}\) Foucault’s focus on the omnipresence of power would appear to mirror Althusser’s erasure of individual agency. Anthony Giddens observes that Foucault’s history tends to contain no active subjects remarking that it appears to be a history ‘with the agency removed’\(^{38}\). Despite the general avoidance of assigning agency there are some instances where the philosopher recognizes the capacity to act within certain singular agents. These agents mostly exist within the periphery, acting against dominant ideology through subversive or illegal means.\(^{39}\) As I consider female agency an act of subversion in relation to Hollywood films, Foucault’s understanding of agency within the margins helps to illustrate the possibility of agency within musical segments in film musicals.

By recognizing the determining function of social structures while still allowing for a less-pessimistic view, a ‘post-Marxist’ theory of agency absorbs some of the poststructuralist critique of Marx’s original work. Lawrence Grossberg perceives the


\(^{38}\) Cockerham, William C. “Medical Sociology and Sociological Theory.” p. 16.

work of post-Marxist Stuart Hall as offering a ‘non-essentialist theory of agency’. Hall recognizes a fragmented human agent who is both subjected by power and capable of acting against the powers that subject. Grossberg adds that without this articulated subject capable of acting, no resistance by any subject is possible.\textsuperscript{40} It is through this post-Marxist assertion of agency, specifically through the countering of essentialism, that I recognize agency within the musical performances of onscreen women. While these women exist within hegemonic Hollywood films, which perpetuate patriarchy and deny them the ability to act within the narrative, they are able to obtain and implement agency through their musical performances.

Musicals from both the classical and post-classical periods of Hollywood demonstrate these domineering effects of patriarchy on even the campiest narratives. Baz Luhrmann’s \textit{Moulin Rouge!} (2001) exists as a unique post-classical example of a 21st century musical film that garnered adequate success both financially and critically. The narrative action in \textit{Moulin Rouge!} illustrates female agency can be achieved through musical performance in the face of male-driven action. The narrative centers around writer Christian (Ewan McGregor) who works his way into writing a play for the cabaret through his infatuation with one of the courtesans Satine (Nicole Kidman). Satine and Christian have a secret affair as Satine is forcefully engaged to the cabaret’s newest investor. Throughout the narrative Satine is under the control of the investor and the theater’s owner as they manipulate her and force her to break things off with Christian. Satine is also a slave to her illness throughout the film as she suffers from tuberculosis and experiences fainting spells. During the film’s final sequence Satine performs in the

\textsuperscript{40} Morely, Dave and Kuang-Hsing Chen. \textit{Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies}. p. 156.
production Christian wrote. It is in this moment she makes her feelings for Christian known and chooses him over the controlling investor and her loyalty to the Moulin Rouge. She makes this change and asserts her choice by singing the couple’s secret song “Come What May”. The song was not intended to be part of the production so it is Satine’s volition that causes her to sing this song onstage. In this moment Satine illustrates agency through her singing of the secret song and subsequent communicating of her feelings and assertion of her choice. Satine implements agency by independently choosing what song to sing rather than following the male-produced script of the production in which she performs. Choosing one man over another may not seem like a radical example of agency but Satine does not simply choose between suitors. She chooses to stand up to her oppression by the Moulin Rouge’s investor and owner. Up until the film’s ending Satine exists as a pawn moved by others’ lust and greed. Her action therefore proves revolutionary in that she rebukes the organizational structure that has held her captive.

Female agency exists as revolutionary potential in the face of patriarchy and the systematic silencing and paralyzing of women seen in Hollywood films. However it holds an even more essential function in that agency asserts and qualifies being. To be, to exist as an agent and therefore a subject within a world, one must act.

Being considered an agent relies on one’s ability to control which of her internal states move her, a notion Cheshire Calhoun largely attributes to Harry Frankfurt and the self-control model of agency. Determining which desires one is moved by is how agency
is enacted. Informed by this model, agency is then destroyed or defeated when impulses that one does not authorize move the being rather than reasons originating from the self. These external impulses cause the would-be subject to act against her own judgment. Demoralization or disheartenment of the would-be agent also destroys agency. Through this process, former agents experience a loss of confidence in their capacity to act. Several factors can produce this demoralizing experience, or volitional disability, including: poverty, marginality, cultural dislocation, domestic abuse, unpredictable trauma, etc. These experiences can produce an experience of the “ineffectiveness of one’s instrumental reasoning” resulting in learned helplessness. I find it imperative to note that many of the experiences attributed with this demoralizing power are largely considered female experiences most notably poverty and domestic abuse.

Agential activities include reflecting, deliberating, choosing, and, of course, acting. It is through agency that beings assert their identity. According to British philosopher Richard Wolheim, a person constitutes her identity through the process of living a life. This ‘living a life’ requires agency. This agency requires reflection on conflicts between one’s desires and motives. Human lives are essentially authorial and first-personal in that they cannot be thought of as a series of disconnected events or experiences. To be a person is to exercise narrative capacities, or the ability to create

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42 Ibid.
43 Ibid. 204.
causes that will then become effects. In other words, agency is required to constitute a subject.

Female agency in particular has been met with fear. It seems undetectably squashed in every major art form and this repressed content flows outwardly causing the arts and demi-arts, particularly mainstream film, to be composed primarily by men. In art, as well as politics, women’s agency has been destructively restricted throughout history by “the idea that the coherent identity of the category of ‘woman’ is a theoretical impossibility.” Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrad believe this adherence to essentialism, or the belief in the natural and permanent nature of gender traits, is fundamentally unacceptable and therefore feminists avoid truly constituting women as a category. While tacking universal views and experiences onto women is inconceivably naïve, women are still politically thought of as a collective because of the usefulness of dealing with women as a group at the expense of minimizing difference. In turn, it becomes necessary to void the category of ‘women’ of individual subjects in order to assure patriarchy’s stability.

The erasure of female agency found in Hollywood films may illustrate an even more distressing real world truth, that female agency is difficult to achieve even outside of filmic worlds. Broude and Garrard observe that historically “the more powerfully a woman asserted her agency, the more vigorous was its repression.” Some even posit female subjective agency as a complete impossibility in a male-dominated symbolic

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45 Ibid. 11.
46 Broude, Norma and Mary D. Garrard. “Reclaiming Female Agency.” p. 2
47 Ibid.
48 Ibid. 5.
order. Patriarchy instills a discourse of power in which women have no place or position to speak. With no means of asserting themselves or communicating their internal states women are left agentless, unable to act or enact. Gender expectations within this system also conflict with female ambitions, further paralyzing female action. While I recognize the detrimental effects of patriarchal gender distinctions on female agency, I reject the view that femininity and subjectivity are incompatible and believe women from every position on the gender spectrum can and should possess individual agency.

Not everyone views the possibility of female agency as hopeless under the constraints of patriarchy. Philosopher and theorist Simone de Beauvoir preserves female agency even within paralyzing systems of control. Patriarchal systems, which rely on sexual categories, position women as objects rather than subjects. This positioning denies females freedom. Beauvoir sees women as responsible for this object-position in that they justify their existence through their relations to and with men. Therefore, female surrender of subjectivity is accomplished through a woman implementing her agency. Beauvoir recognizes that the possibility for female action can be constrained by social and bodily forces, but insists that women remain responsible for realizing their own possibilities and freeing themselves from their oppression. While I mostly agree with Beauvoir’s view of the possibility for female agency, I also recognize certain oppressive conditions can completely eliminate the opportunity for agency in particular situations.

While examining the lack of female agency in Hollywood films would constitute an entire study in itself, identifying this lack proves central for noting the possibility for

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49 Ibid.4.
51 Ibid. 44.
female agency through filmed musical performances. I realize the claim appears reductionist in this context since any argument I can make will prove overarching due to its brevity. However I believe that generalizations are based upon trends and majorities and it is therefore acceptable for me to claim that Hollywood film narratives are male-driven where women function as little more than accessories to male-perpetuated action. The detective, cowboy, action hero, and fantasy hero are all traditionally male and largely conjure up male images when referenced. Film genres consisting of paired leads offer little reformation of male-centered initiatives. Romantic comedies focus more on deity/nature intervention than female action and I argue that even in these films men hold the most ‘causal’ power. Similarly Hollywood live-action musicals are often driven my male action even while screen time is split fairly equally. Female characters coopt male-driven narratives through musical performance. These performances allow for female agency even while the narrative does not.

Along with coopting male-driven narratives through performance, onscreen musical women also implement agency by changing the subject matter and tempo of songs they are performing. This power does not solely belong to women but is rather equally available to all onscreen characters. This second possibility of song performance allowing for female agency can be seen in the “Summer Nights” segment of the film Grease (1978). Grease exists within the canon of Hollywood funded musicals that this thesis undertakes. Like Moulin Rouge!, Grease originated in the less-prolific post-classical era of film musicals yet still garnered box-office and critical success.
The editing of the “Summer Nights” sequence in *Grease* places the male and female leads on equal footing visually, which bolsters the female’s possibility for agency. This visual equivalence can be most easily understood through Rick Altman’s examination of the structure of musical film narratives. Altman recognizes a system of simultaneity and similarity in the narrative construction of Hollywood film musicals. Based on a system of parallelism, the musical juxtaposes scenes of the male lead with scenes of the female lead. This back and forth construction aids the film with establishing the lead couple as equals. As each member of the pair is shown in equal increments in similar or parallel situations, she/he is set up as an equal portion of a whole. Altman maintains this construction hides the pair’s similarities in superficial differences in order to make their later union more rewarding. On top of this pay off for the audience the back and forth narrative construction equalizes the two leads by setting them up as similar through analogous scenes.

While Altman discusses separate scenes involving one of the two leads, this same parallelism can be found within singular musical sequences as with the “Summer Nights” sequence in *Grease*. The film allows for female agency through a variation of the property of parallelism that Altman establishes. The musical sequence consists of thirty-one shots. Fifteen are allotted to Danny (John Travolta) and fifteen to Sandy (Olivia Newton-John) with the last shot superimposing Sandy’s face onto a shot of Danny. Here the musical’s tendency toward symmetry and parallelism works to present the two leads

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52 Altman, Rick. The American Film Musical. p. 28-29.
53 Ibid. 29.
as equal in presence and power; which includes the power to enact change and hold
agency.

Both Danny and Sandy are surrounded by same-sex, captivated audiences during
their respective shots. One notable difference between the two sets is the male extras in
the back of Sandy’s cafeteria setting, however her audience remains consistently female.
A difference can be noted in that Danny’s performance is a bit more physical than
Sandy’s as he mostly stands and moves during his shots while she spends some of her
shots sitting on the cafeteria’s tables. Though Danny proves a more physically active
subject, both he and Sandy dictate the actions and movements of their audiences. As
Sandy skips around the cafeteria a line of women follow behind her and Danny’s all-male
audience shuffles back and forth on the bleachers following his lead.

The male lead, Danny, begins the song and therefore sets its tempo and subject
matter. Sandy continues the song in the same fashion causing her performance to seem
controlled by the onscreen male. However, just as Danny initially sets the song’s tempo
Sandy initiates the tempo change around 2:22 into the song. This change begins with the
line, “It turned colder, that’s where it ends.” Not only does the song’s tempo change at
this moment but Sandy also changes the subject and tone of the song. Up until this point
the two sing about their summer romance. The early part of the song is upbeat as they
recount the fun nature of their relationship. At the tempo change the song becomes
reflective. Rather than being joyful, it takes up longing as its subject. The two think back
fondly of their time together and wonder about what has become of their lovers.
This female-initiated tempo change demonstrates both characters possess the power to organize and move their audiences as well as change the song’s tempo and subject. During the song Danny explains the sexual nature of the two’s relationship while Sandy focuses on the romantic aspects. This difference is reconciled following the female-initiated tempo change. The tone of the song becomes sentimental as it ends in a two-shot created by a superimposition of Sandy’s face over a shot of Danny. Together the pair sing, “Summer dreams ripped as the seam/ But oh, those summer nights.” Both characters stand still during this short duet and are shown in close-up, illustrating the equal nature of their affection. The two care equally for one another and hold an equal amount of emotional power over the other. Most importantly they both possess agency within the sequence in that they have the ability to control their own performance as well as the performance of their counterpart.

In addition to the possibility of agency through manipulation of a song’s subject, tempo, or direction, musical segments can also offer female agency through the implementation of shared choreography. While solo choreography offers a place of expression and interpretation, shared choreography gives onscreen women the power to direct the actions of others or change their own course in relation to an onscreen other. While lyrics and musical styles play into these examinations as well, shared choreography within a segment adds even more possibilities for female agency. Shared choreography remains a staple throughout the film musical genre. This trope allows for female agency in one of the most popular classical film musicals, *Singin’ in the Rain* (1952).
Singin’ in the Rain positions the, at the time, unknown Debbie Reynolds alongside musical superstar Gene Kelly. The film’s narrative favors Kelly and his star power. The film allots him more screen time and features him in more musical numbers than Reynolds. Reynolds does not have any solo choreography in the film, however the choreography she shares with the two leading males allows her to possess agency within these musical sequences through solo singing and character blocking.

In the “Good Morning” sequence the three main characters, Don (Gene Kelly), Kathy (Debbie Reynolds) and Cosmo (Donald O’Conor), sing and dance together. The trio realize they have been talking late into the night and that it is, in fact, early morning the following day. Kathy begins the song by singing a cheery “Good morning” and the other two respond. The friends begin their song in the kitchen and then strut together into a large, adjacent room. Kathy steps onto a decorative ottoman so that she is positioned above the men. She remains stationary as they shuffle beneath her. Kathy then sings solo adding a stylized inflection to her lines that contrasts the rest of the song. She sings loudly and trills each time she sings the word “morning”. Kathy also changes the lyrics during this sequence claiming the group has ‘gabbed’ the whole night through rather than ‘talked’. The two men physically respond to her stylized singing, changing the tempo and feel of their tap dancing to match her style. They break into the song singing in unison, “Nothin’ could be grander than to be in Louisiana.”

After her solo, Kathy instigates the next stylistic change as well. She jumps onto the floor and grabs the men’s hands and they stroll together into the next room. Kathy’s singing becomes slower and more drawn out as she sings the line, “When we left the
movie show the future wasn’t bright.” The group takes long, bouncy steps before stopping in front of a stairwell. The three stand in a line facing the camera until Kathy runs to the back of the room and jumps onto a bench. Following her movements, the men run toward her and climb up the banisters on either side of her. Kathy, the onscreen female, initiates this new vertical blocking.

The three then dance in unison up and down the nearby stairs. During the resulting dance sequence, Kathy remains centered and visually featured between the similarly styled men. They each complete solo dances of equal length before again dancing in unison and then collapsing onto a couch in laughter. While possessing lower star quality than the onscreen males, Debbie Reynolds’ character Kathy clearly dictates and conducts at least the first part of the musical segment by presenting the vocal style of each tempo change and leading the blocking of the onscreen males.

Just as Kathy changes other characters’ blocking in *Singin’ in the Rain*, the onscreen female lead in *The King and I* (1956) affects the action of her onscreen male counterpart through musical performance. In the “Shall We Dance” sequence, Anna (Deborah Kerr) begins singing about the way it feels to first dance at a young age. She stares off screen as she reminisces and the King (Yul Brynner) watches her curiously. She begins to dance around the room and the King sits down to observe her. When she notices him watching she stops, saying it is improper to dance alone while a man watches. He says the two should dance together and asks Anna to teach him how. They join hands and Anna counts as they move. She continues to sing and the King joins in with a word every once in a while. With her instruction, the King learns to dance and
they continue around the room. The king then notes that the Englishmen he saw dancing did not hold hands so he moves in to take Anna by the waist. The two dance in one another’s arms and then separate when they become winded. The king then moves toward Anna and says “Come, we go it again.” They begin dancing once again until they are interrupted by a messenger.

Most of the agency exerted in this scene is male-driven. The king is the one who decides to dance, decides to pull Anna closer, and decides to continue dancing after the couple stops. However, Anna also possess agency within the sequence. It is her dancing instruction that allows the King to perform his actions. All of the King’s initiatives in the scene, to begin dancing, to hold Anna close, and to continue dancing, are only possible because of Anna’s instruction. Thus it is Anna’s agency that allows for the King’s agency within the scene.

While all of these examples contain female agency it is imperative to note that the film’s narratives, though slightly less restrictive than other Hollywood genres, still largely deny women the ability to enact change. Therefore it is specifically the utilization of musical sequences that allow for female agency within the American film musical. A clear example of the variation between the film’s narrative and its musical sequences can be seen in *My Fair Lady* (1964).

Throughout *My Fair Lady*, the female lead Eliza Doolittle (Audrey Hepburn) is consistently dominated by men. She begins as a homeless flower seller living on the streets. She must deal with her drunkard father and her only escape from her dire circumstances is through the arrogant linguist Henry Higgins (Rex Harrison). During
their relationship, Henry consistently dictates Eliza’s every move and even most of her words. He tells her how to speak and act, where to go and what to do. She becomes angry with her condition but consistently fails to communicate her discontentment to Henry. He is unreceptive and her speech renders her unable to hold his attention. About two hours and forty minutes into the film Eliza finally communicates her feelings about the way Henry treats her and decides to leave him through a musical sequence.

The song “Without You” describes Eliza’s opinion of Henry’s arrogance and his controlling nature. She stands and meanders around an outdoor terrace while Henry remains seated and inactive. Eliza begins, her singing dubbed by Marni Nixon, “What a fool I was, what a dominated fool to think you were the earth and sky.” In this segment, Eliza fully realizes how mistreated she has been by Henry and this is the first time she successfully communicates this dissent to him. Notably Eliza’s assertion manifests musically. The message of the song comes at the end of the second stanza as Eliza declares, “I can do without you.” The song ends with an arrogant intrusion by Henry claiming he has finally made her into a real woman to which she replies, speaking, “Goodbye Professor Higgins, you shall not be seeing me again.” At the end of the film Eliza decides to return to Henry but this narrative fact does not rob Eliza of the agency she exerts in this musical sequence.

Another musical in which the lead female character is consistently dominated and manipulated is Phantom of the Opera (2004). Throughout the film Christine (Emmy Rossum) possesses little power. She must sacrifice the spotlight to the theater’s headliner Carlotta (Minnie Driver). Her childhood sweetheart consistently pursues her but proves
powerless to protect her. She is left immobile by the death of her father. She constantly
trys to impress him with her theater performance and replace him with commandeering
men. Most overbearing is her seduction and manipulation by the Phantom (Gerard
Butler). Christine is torn between her fear of him and her lust for him.

The couple’s last duet comes toward the end of the musical. The two perform the
opera the Phantom wrote and sing “Past the Point of No Return”. The Phantom attacks
the man planned to play the lead role and surprises everyone by performing it himself.
Most of the performance seems to perpetuate Christine’s conflicted, agentless state. She
is at first frightened by the Phantom’s appearance since she does not expect him to be
performing. She then appears aroused by the Phantom’s touch and seems to fall under his
spell as he sings, only to pull away from him as he attempts to lead her across the stage.
Once Christine starts into the chorus she appears to have chosen the Phantom. The two
join passionately and caress each other while singing in unison. The Phantom then begins
to sing “All I Ask of You” the song Christine and her lover Raoul (Patrick Wilson) share.
Christine looks at him lovingly before betraying him and pulling off his mask- revealing
his deformed face to the audience. In this musical moment Christine enacts her agency.
She makes a conscious decision to betray the Phantom and choose her lover Raul over
him and does so of her own volition by removing the Phantom’s mask.

This male dominance, which occurs in Hollywood film narrative and can be
overcome through musical performance, unfortunately stems from a consistent historical
erasure of women. As built upon throughout this chapter, lack of female agency is not a
Hollywood problem but rather a persistent problem throughout the history of ‘man’kind.
Philosopher and theorist Luce Irigaray explains that general knowledge on women and men’s sexuality has always been theorized within masculine parameters. Every major field of research, from literature to medicine, has consistently been male-dominated. Men therefore have always defined the social status of women.

Women are defined as ‘lacking’ from birth. With our bodies deemed as defective it is no wonder the ability to act often eludes us. Like the Hollywood starlets who argue with screens without ears or the painted objects who are swept away by male heroes and tyrants alike, we seize the musical moments in which we can break away from oppression. While these movements may not come to us in song, Irigaray urges women to be aware of the machines of oppression used to define them. Through these examinations, and I assert through locating possibilities for female agency in domineering Hollywood structures, women can exist.

The musical performances found in Hollywood film musicals allow onscreen female characters to possess agency that is denied to them in the narratives of mainstream American films. This lack of agency even manifests itself within the narratives of Hollywood musicals. Through the implementation of musical sequences, Hollywood musicals break from this regressive erasure of female action. Female characters in these sequences possess agency in several ways including coopting male-driven narratives, manipulating songs’ subjects and tempos, and experiencing empowerment through shared choreography. This phenomenon of musical-allotted agency can be seen in both classical and post-classical film musicals of various styles and subjects. The trope of musical

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55 Ibid. 389.
performance offers the rare and radical possibility for onscreen female agency, a factor alarmingly suppressed in mainstream Hollywood films.
CHAPTER 2: “I WOULD LIKE, IF I MAY, TO TAKE YOU ON A STRANGE JOURNEY”: GENDER PLAY IN THE AMERICAN FILM MUSICAL

In addition to allowing for female agency through musical performance, Hollywood musicals also subvert heteronormative relationship sanctions through their allowance of gender play. Gender play denotes many practices. Here I use it to encompass a number of activities that rail against conservative, hegemonic, cisnormative values. These activities include those labeled gender play, gender bending, gender variance, gender nonconformity, and genderqueer. The genre of American film musicals, with its emphases on musical performance and spectacle, allow for a wider variance in their display of gender than other mainstream Hollywood genres.

Gender play can manifest in the presentation of atypical gender roles. These roles are comprised of behaviors not traditionally associated with a cultural norm. Whereas a cultural gender norm dictates the way a society generally expects men and women to think, look, behave, and act (or not act). As my study focuses on subversion within typically heteronormative relationships, these transgressions can appear as coded females acting male, coded males acting female, females occupying the social space of males and vice versa, the mirroring and equating of onscreen men and women, instances of heterosexual cross-dressers, characters in drag parodying heterosexual relationships, etc. This playing with gender norms, while prevalent throughout the narratives of Hollywood film musicals, is systematically reconciled with the film’s heteronormative endings. These endings exist in contrast to the more fluid gender possibilities found within the musicals’ durations. Rather than undo or cover-up the subversion present in the film,
these endings exist as camp, or farce, in the face of the films’ less stringent relationship sanctions.

This formula of subversion followed by a heteronormative ending exists in the classical musical film *Easter Parade* (1948). Toward the end of the film, Don Hewes (Fred Astaire) and Hannah Brown (Judy Garland) have a fight resulting from Hannah’s jealousy of Don’s former dance partner. While Hannah discusses the feud with a male friend he suggests she go over to Don’s apartment and smooth things out. She remarks that “It’s different with a man…men can….” In the next scene Don, at his apartment, receives Easter presents from Hannah. She stereotypically woos Don in a masculine way by sending him a cake decorated with an endearing message, a bouquet of flowers, and a new top hat filled with a bow-adorned white rabbit. Don is confused by these gifts stating that they must have been sent to the wrong address since he assumes they are meant for a woman. Hannah then arrives. She crosses her arms and states, “Aren’t you ready yet? Just like a man.” She informs Don that the two had a date to walk in the Easter parade and snaps her fingers assertively. She stands back to admire him and circles him before winking, all while maintaining a masculine posture with crossed arms. Hannah then begins singing “Easter Bonnet” to Don beginning with the line, “Never saw you look quite so pretty before.” During the song she looks up and down Don’s body, admiring his appearance. She wraps her arms around him and they sway around the room before she drops to one knee and guides Don to sit on her outstretched leg. He begins to sit and then realizes the masculine nature of the gesture and hops up, unwilling to fully give into his
role as one to be wooed. Hannah then grabs his arms and leads him around a table and out of the apartment, pausing to open the door for him.

The next scene of the film, the final scene, shows the two leads strolling down the avenue arm in arm. In this public place, existing in contrast to the domestic interior of Don’s apartment, Don now leads the couple. He also now sings “Easter Parade” while Hannah remains silent. While singing, Don reaches in his pocket and pulls out an engagement ring before instructing Hannah on which finger to place it. The off-screen chorus then swells, taking over singing the title song, this time they sing “I could write a sonnet about your Easter bonnet/ and of the girl I’m taking to the Easter parade.” This more traditional version contrasts the gender play version in which Hannah exchanges the female subject of the song with a masculine one. The final scene can be read as camp as it appears normalized and subdued, with its traditional heteronormative marriage proposal, compared to the scene filled with gender play and a proactive female character that preceded it. In the final scene, Hannah remains completely silent while she accepts Don’s proposal and allows him to lead the couple and determine their direction contrasting the power and agency she held in the previous scene.

The allowance and prevalence of gender play in the American film musical proves understandable given the theatrical nature of the genre which brings to light the performative nature of gender. The mirroring of gender performance to the staged aspect of the genre allows musical characters more freedom in their gender expression than characters existing in other Hollywood film genres. For Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman, gender is “done” based on a complex of socially guided perceptual,
interactional, and micro-political activities. Gender is a “situated doing” which occurs in specific social situations. The fantastical nature of the film musical somewhat frees its characters from these rigid gender restrictions that dictate performance. While it would be naïve to think a mainstream film genre could completely break from the social bounds of its production, musical characters do possess more freedom in their self-expression.

Gender has been traditionally reduced to a dichotomy, two possibilities that exist as polar opposites to each other: male/masculine and female/feminine. This dichotomy is not only traditionally represented in Hollywood cinema but is actively lauded and reinforced. This widely accepted set of gender norms is based on ‘innate’ behavior patterns believed to be tied to biologically-determined primary sex characteristics. This definition of gender, the traditional preservation of masculine males and feminine females, proves “one-dimensional, relatively static and ethnocentric” and is not supported by “biological, psychological, sociological, or anthropological research.” Rather than predetermined genitalia, it is the asymmetry of life experiences resulting from determining, oppressive patriarchal structures that cause this dichotomy’s prevalence.

Robert Connell refers to these patriarchal-sanctioned roles as hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity. Features of this idealized masculinity include “the subordination of women, the marginalization of gay men, and the celebration of toughness and competiveness.” Emphasized femininity holds contrasting and

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58 Ibid. 5.
complimentary features which allow for the subordination of women. These include compliance with male sexual desires and acceptance of marriage and child-rearing.

Through this construction, hegemonic masculinity ideologically legitimizes the subordination of women. While all men may not enact its domineering ways it remains normative. It requires both men and women to position themselves in relation to its ideals in that it presents the most “honored” way of being male.59

In order to subvert hegemonic masculinity and its resulting emphasized femininity one must work against these deterministic terms that enforce male power and female complacency. This subversion can manifest in countless practices by presenting gender in ways that exist in contrast to these patriarchal norms. I label these presentations as gender play in that they parody, undo, or play with preconceived, stereotypical ideas about what it means to occupy the space of a man or a woman in modern American society.

This highlighting of gender stipulations manifests through cross-dressing or styling onscreen male and female characters similarly. While a less than radical exhibition of gender subversion, cross-dressing does exists to destabilize the hegemonic gender binary by bringing to light to performative nature of gender. Judith Butler identifies the artificiality of gender roles and their ability to be parodied. These moments of explicit gender performance dispel the dominant assertion that gender is natural and inevitable.60

60 Hopkins, Patrick. “Gender Politics and the Cross-Dresser.” p. 91.
Cross-dressing or the equating of male and female characters through styling proves quite ubiquitous in the American film musical. The iconic pairing of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rodgers often uses an equating of style to highlight the similarities between the two performers’ talents. While this decision in costuming surely had more to do with displaying the two’s divine abilities, it also illustrates that their performances need not be marked by the differences in their biological anatomy. Rogers’ and Astaire’s matched abilities are evident in the dance sequence “Bouncing the Blues” from The Barkleys of Broadway (1949), the pairing’s tenth and final film together. In this scene the two rehearse. They are dressed similarly, visually conveying their sameness. They both wear trousers with sashes tied at the waist, button up dress shirts, and small ascots. The only noticeable difference in their costumes is their shoes as Ginger is wearing black oxfords with a slight heel, and Fred is wearing flat, brown and white penny loafers. The two dance side by side performing identical choreography. They both possess cheerful dispositions and perform joyfully throughout the number. The intricacy and exact synchronization of their shared choreography, as well as their similar appearance, posits the two as equals for the duration of the dance. The styling and costuming of the sequence is significant in that Rogers is presented more masculine than in most of her dance scenes wearing trousers and a loose fitting dress shirt. Likewise, Astaire is styled more feminine than his usual suited attire wearing a pink dress shirt, wide ascot, and sash at his waist. The defeminization of Rogers and demasculinization of Astaire bring them to a middle ground of gender coding (in terms of costuming only) that works subversively in the same way Butler reads cross-dressing as subversion, by emphasizing
the absurdity behind restrictions requiring women to dress in one way and men in another.

Not everyone agrees with the reading of cross-dressing as an act of subversion. Honi Haber believes cross-dressing, in fact, romanticizes gender stereotypes and “does nothing to break down the power politics of sex and gender.” Haber feels similarly about transvestism in that a trans* women renders ‘real’ women unnecessary. While the ridiculousness of such a statement is blatant it is important to recognize that the subversive nature of cross-dressing and representation of trans* people is contested. Haber sees nothing inherently subversive in parodic acts and instead believes they perpetuate the stereotypes they are satirizing. While I agree that placing female coded characters in trousers and suit jackets may not radically change one’s perception of gender, I agree with Butler’s assertion that this type of gender presentation brings to light the performative nature of gender restrictions and roles.

Male and female characters dressed similarly or identically during musical performances is a common troupe in Hollywood musicals. In “Where Did You Get That Girl?” from the biographical *Three Little Words* (1950) Fred Astaire and Vera-Ellen dance and sing on a vaudeville stage both dressed in a top hat, white tie, and tails. Both tuxedos are similarly tailored in that they are slim fitting so their fit does not connote a particularly masculine or feminine look on the two performers. In addition to their identical costumes, the two twirl black canes while dancing. Astaire and Vera-Ellen perform identical choreography side by side during this sequence and they sing in unison.

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61 Ibid. 91.
62 Ibid.
throughout. The lyrics are identifiably written from a heteronormative male perspective but are sung by both the male and female performer: “Where did you get that girl? Oh! You lucky devil/Where did you get that girl?....I wish that I had a girl/I'd love 'er I'd love ‘er/Oh goodness how I'd love ‘er/ If you can find another, I'll take her home to mother....”

**Easter Parade** also holds a sequence in which the male and female lead both perform onstage dressed as men. In “We’re a Couple of Swells” Fred Astaire and Judy Garland are both dressed as male hobos. The two wear short wire-y wigs, dirty and patched tuxedo jackets, askew bow ties, broken top hats, and oversized shoes. They dance around in a comic fashion on a vaudeville stage set and sing ironically about their imagined high social status. As with the example from **Three Little Words**, “We’re a Couple of Swells” is written from a heterosexual male perspective but is sung in unison by both the male and female leads. One line states: “We're the favorite lads/ Of girls in the picture ads/ We'd like to tell you who we kissed last night but we can't be cads.”

The examples of women dressed like their male costars in film musicals are endless. However, other variations of cross-dressing also exist. In **White Christmas** (1954) Bob Wallace (Bing Crosby) and Phil Davis (Danny Kaye) parody The Haynes Sisters’ nightclub act. In an attempt to distract law enforcement officers who are looking for the women, Wallace and Davis don blue sashes at their waists and matching ascots. They wear their trousers rolled up to expose their sock garters and wear jeweled butterfly barrettes on their heads. The pair lip sync to the sister’s recorded performance and giggle their way through the women’s choreography including their gesturers with large feather
hand fans. Naturally the song “Sisters” is written from a heterosexual female perspective and the men sync to lines such as “Lord help the mister who comes between me and my sister/ and Lord help the sister who comes between me and my man.” While a comedic segment that relies on the ‘absurdity’ of heterosexual men acting feminine, this sequence does bring to light the exaggerated femininity built into the choreography of the Haynes Sisters’ floor act.

In addition to instances of cross-dressing, film musicals also offer opportunities for gender play through the types of roles they create and present. Self-identified women coded as heterosexual who possess at least some of the behavioral attributes of men constitute examples of ‘gender bending’. These depictions are sometimes regarded as a form of female protest when manifesting under patriarchal structures. Some film musicals allow for female roles that are boyish, assertive, and crass. These pseudo-masculine traits remain un-rectified in the films’ narratives until the final heteronormative ‘camp’ endings, proving there is a place for gender-bending non-feminine women in Hollywood film musicals.

_Annie Get Your Gun_ (1950) is one such musical that features a boyish female lead. In “You Can’t Get a Man with a Gun” Annie (Betty Hutton) sings of how her masculine ways make it impossible for her to find a husband. While the song’s subject plays into the film’s heteronormative agenda, stating that a heterosexual woman must be feminine in order to gain attention from straight men, Annie’s role still plays with conventional notions about gender. In this sequence, Annie’s face is dirty and she appears to be make-up-less. She wears a soiled, tattered dress, ripped hat, and stockings. She

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63 Shaw, Alison and Shirley Ardener. _Changing Sex and Bending Gender_. p. 10.
wears her hair messy and braided into two pigtails. The song describes her shooting ability and displays the confidence she has in her talent: “I'm quick on the trigger with targets not much bigger than a pen point/ I'm number one.” Annie directly addresses the camera during this song and she sings loudly in a whiny tone. Her posture and mannerisms are notably masculine. She hunches her shoulders and swings her fists around while holding a gun throughout the sequence.

A similar sequence exists in *Calamity Jane* (1953). Jane (Doris Day) sings “The Windy City” in a similar fashion to Annie in “You Can’t Get a Man with a Gun”. She sings loudly and projects outwardly. Her posture appears masculine as she taps around the room. She swings her arms back and forth and acts “chummy” with those around her. A notable difference between this and the above sequence is that Jane has a captive all-male audience while Annie performs alone. While Jane is the center of attention in her scene the onscreen males treat her as “one of the guys” rather than a coded female character.

These seemingly tame instances of subversion take on new possibilities in post-classical Hollywood film musicals. Film musicals not only retained their subversions post-60’s but their insurrections became more visible and more pronounced. The subversive trope of cross-dressing becomes the subject for an entire film in the post-classical musical *Victor Victoria* (1982). In the film, Victoria (Julie Andrews) passes as a homosexual male who makes his living as a female impersonator. She fools gay and straight characters alike by covering her non-existent Adam’s apple, wearing men’s clothing, and seldom speaking in public claiming she knows little English. In an
interesting doubling, Victor/Victoria is also a very successful female impersonator. When
King Marchand (James Garner) watches Victor/Victoria perform he is very attracted to
her and is then embarrassed upon finding out she’s a man. King is not completely
convinced that Victoria is male and works to prove she’s a woman, mostly to ‘regain his
manhood’. Once King discovers that Victor is actually a woman the two begin a secret
love affair before eventually going public as a gay male couple. Once again, the end of
the musical undoes the subversion as Victoria comes out dressed like a woman and joins
King at the night club. This ending implies that the couple will live as a heteronormative
pair from then on since King feels uncomfortable with people perceiving him as gay.

As with Victor Victoria, The Rocky Horror Picture Show (1975) takes subversion
as its subject. Aside from simply displaying alternative sexualities onscreen, Rocky has
been said to "transgress" both gender and genre. Through cross-dressing, trans*
characters, and polysexual characters the film openly subverts traditional heteronormative
structures. This seems less than shocking when taking the film's cult status into account.
However, this campy film's production was funded by a major Hollywood studio. The
film's birth in Hollywood proves significant in claiming the subversive possibilities of
mainstream Hollywood film musicals. Many would think Rocky would 'stump' my
project of recognizing subdued heteronormative unions at the end of spectacle-driven
Hollywood film musicals. Surely if any film were to prove me wrong it would be Rocky
and its outlandish, transgressive fun. However, even this cult classic follows my formula
of subversive musicals ending in heteronormative unions. Frank-N-Furter (Tim Curry)
bites the dust and his incestuous alien cohorts blast off into space taking their subversive

64 Badley, Linda. Film, Horror, and the Body Fantastic. p. 93.
ways with them. Brad, Janet, and Dr. Scott remain sprawled out in the mansion's rubble. The film closes on Brad and Janet searching for one another in the fog implying their inevitable union and welcomed return to a heteronormative existence.

Upon examining the above examples I conclude that gender works differently in film musicals. This does not occur in any radical sense, no barriers are being torn down, no structures are overthrown. Yet through subtle plays with the confining/controlling dichotomy, Hollywood film musicals seem to map out their own gender guidelines that are looser than other hegemonic Hollywood genres.

Musicals allow the feminine to permeate their men and hints of the masculine to be adopted by their women. It would seem out of character for a musical male lead to resort to violence as quickly as his generic counterparts. Even in West Side Story’s (1961) depictions of gang violence, dangerous confrontations are represented through dance, resulting in scenes of expression over depictions of brutality. Musical men are expected to be feeling and transparent rather than stoic and guarded. In Singin’ in the Rain (1952) Don Lockwood (Gene Kelly) is a lovable buffoon throughout. In pure Kelly style, the character is in no way concerned with looking ridiculous, foolish, or feminine. He woos Cathy (Debbie Reynolds) by dancing around a sound stage, bathed in pink light, and singing a ballad. In the same way Kelly, as Joe D. Ross, croons and caresses a smitten Jane Falbury (Judy Garland) with the song “You Wonderful You” in Summer Stock (1950). Male musical leads consistently show their tender ‘feminine’ sides when courting their onscreen female counterparts.
Women also function differently in musicals than in other Hollywood genre films in that they possess much more power. As outlined in the first chapter, musical sequences allow for female agency which is consistently denied to them in nonmusical films. Musical performances also offer women a particular social status in some musicals. The possibility of the ‘diva’ within Hollywood musicals allows women to possess power over their surroundings. The character Nadine in *Easter Parade* clearly occupies this cliché diva status. She matches her pet dogs to her coat when going out and expects attention from nearly everyone. In addition to the negative qualities of this stereotype, Nadine’s diva status also offers her control over her life within the diegesis. While Nadine may appear helpless in the film due to her love interest’s continual rejections, she is actually very successful in her independence. Nadine decides to leave her longtime dancing partner Don, against his wishes, in order to pursue her solo career. Through her volition and remarkable talent she becomes the headliner for the Ziegfield follies and enjoys success and critical acclaim.

While by no means groundbreaking in its presentation of gender, the Hollywood film musical does allow for prevalent instances of gender play excluded from other Hollywood genres. Through various implementations of cross-dressing, feminized men and capable women, and the taking on of subversion as subject, film musicals broaden the possibilities of gender, though they still rely on the patriarchal qualifications for such a category. Bing Crosby wearing a butterfly barrette on his head may not do much to usurp the heteronormative conventions set out by Hollywood productions, but it does call attention to these conventions and, in this way, exists as a subversive act.
CHAPTER 3: “THE FARMER AND THE COWMAN SHOULD BE FRIENDS”: THE GLORIFICATION OF ALTERNATIVE FAMILY STRUCTURES IN THE AMERICAN FILM MUSICAL

As seen in the examination of gender play within the American film musical, heteronormativity controls, dictates, and legitimizes accepted gender roles. In the same way heteronormative family structures undermine any non-normative or alternative relational structuring. These hegemonic relationship sanctions offer Hollywood musicals yet another opportunity for subversion. The American film musical achieves this subversion through the presentation of alternative family structures, the highlighting of heterosocial relationships, and the glorification of communal living.

Within the genre of American film musicals, there exists a tradition of glorifying communal living which works against Hollywood’s heteronormative conventions. Rick Altman identifies this trope within films he deems folk musicals. Folk musicals ask the audience to identify with a vision of community rather than specific characters. They achieve this identification through a lack of close-ups, an avoidance of framing single characters, and the absence of show-stopping numbers performed by single characters. The avoidance of singular framing causes entire communities to be crowded into frames. Within the narratives the main characters would not survive without the backing of the members of their community. Claudia Calhoun recognizes the glorification of communal living in film musicals through the film *Oklahoma!* (1955). The film’s narrative argues that a community can only be corrupted by outside forces since the attributes of the community are

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65 Altman, Rick. The American Film Musical. p. 273.
community itself are pure and stable. The community members must only dispel of
intruder Jud to realize the true utopian nature of their cohabitating. As evidenced by the
exclamation point in the film’s title, the film’s community is a site of boundless
happiness once non-community members are done away with.  

Altman also examines *Oklahoma!* for its emphasis on community. The main
characters, and naturally love interests, of the film, Laurey (Shirley Jones) and Curly
(Gordon MacRae), embody the attributes of their separate communities. When the two
come together onscreen, Laurey is joined by her farmer cohorts and ranchers surround
Curly. This configuration leads to a parallel resolution within the film and, according to
Altman, within all folk musicals. The romantic plot is unsurprisingly resolved at the end
of *Oklahoma!* along with the feud between the two communities present in the film.
Indeed, “the famer and the cowman should be friends” and form together to make a super
community of joyous cohabitants.

*Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* (1954) is another folk musical that works in a
similar way to *Oklahoma!* in its glorification of communal living. The film's bizarre plot
highlights the focus on community as a glorified and perfected family structure. Adam
(Howard Keel) is the oldest of seven brothers. He travels into town with the goal of
procuring a wife and convinces Milly (Jane Powell) to marry him. Milly expects the
couple to live alone and is shocked to find that they must live with Adam’s six brothers.
Milly sets out to refine the men and make them worthy of marriage. The brothers become
desperate to find wives and their desperation leads them to kidnap six women after

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reading about The Rape of the Sabine Women. Here the film treats the kidnapping of the women as the correct action in that it establishes the cohabitating community that is lauded within the folk musical. The couples all eventually fall in love and live together in harmony as a community consisting of seven couples rather than a traditional family structure consisting of one. The film presents the community formed by the brothers and their wives as superior to the possibility of one couple living alone. This glorification of communal living exists outside of the subgenre of folk musical and is prevalent throughout the entire genre of American film musicals.

Musical theater has always held a proclivity for communal family structurings. Some consider theater one of the last methods of regaining the phenomenon of community that is quickly vanishing in modern life. Borrowing much from its musical theater predecessor, the film musical also possesses this ability and inclination toward representing utopian-esque communities. This extolling of communal living proves prevalent across the genre existing outside of Altman’s subgenre of folk musicals. Donald Elgan Whittaker III recognizes that having characters sing and dance together is perhaps the most instantaneous way to create onstage communities both implicitly and explicitly.68

In Babes in Arms (1939) a group of children and teenagers form a community out of necessity. Their parents abandoned them to pursue a vaudeville renaissance and the children are left to fend for themselves. Being left as wards of the state the children must put on a show in order to avoid being sent to a work-camp-like school. By banding together and discovering ways to survive, the children form an alternative, communal

family structure in which they all work for the greater good of the group. The traditional nuclear families existing at the beginning of the film dissolve to allow for a utopian communal structure to emerge.

The film musical’s trope of large musical performances allows for the presentation of communal family structures onscreen. The building of community through song can be seen in the "Babes in Arms" sequence from the film *Babes in Arms*. The 'children' march in a group and sing in a call and response fashion. Solo singers mostly lead the song with the ever growing mob of children responding to the soloist’s lines. At first the soloist is a deep-toned male teenager before Mickey Moran (Mickey Rooney) breaks in speaking, “We don’t want to go to country farm!” The eager crowd replies in unison, “No!” Patsy Barton (Judy Garland) then continues the singing until she leads the group to a park in the center of town. As the crowd walks they gather torches and furniture segments. Once at the park the children throw the furniture into piles and start bonfires. All the children, except for four of the film’s leads, hold hands and dance in circles around the giant bonfires. The large group ends the song by crescendoing in unison. The musical’s performative construction establishes, maintains, and lauds the community through the implementation of large musical numbers. These musical numbers glorify communal structuring by presenting these groups as familial and acting in the best interests of their members.

These musical numbers utilizing a large cast can create a sense of community even when the onscreen figures are not linked by the narrative. In *Little Shop of Horrors* (1986) the musical sequence “Skid Row (Downtown)” links the onscreen figures through
their hardships and poverty. While the film’s leads are present and featured in this number, the other inhabitants of Skid Row are also allotted individual voices. A lone woman wandering through an alley initiates the song. The songstresses, who guide the film’s narrative, prompt the woman to continue her story. A man leaning against a building as the woman exits the alley responds to her song singing “And you go…” This sets up the call and response construction that proves central to the film musical’s ability to create communities. The various inhabitants of Skid Row contribute to the song through solos and group singing. They directly respond to the statements of other characters and reveal their shared condition through this call and response construction.

The character blocking in the “Skid Row” sequence also formulates a sense of community within the number. The inhabitants walk the streets slowly. They often stop and stare into the distance at nothing in particular. The characters walk in step with one another as their movements match the beat of the song. Here choreography once again contributes to the formation of community through not only the mirroring of movements to beats but also through the control of movement and non-movement. At several moments in the song all of the onscreen characters stop moving and flex one of their legs in beat with the song as they sing in unison. While this song illustrates the communal experience these characters face when living in inner city poverty, the segment also introduces the two main characters. However their presence does not undo or unravel the community constructed throughout the song’s duration. Seymour (Rick Moranis) introduces himself in the song by singing of his origins as an orphan. He then steps out onto the street and thusly joins the community of Skid Row. His position in this
community is clear through his participation within the musical sequence. He begins singing, “So I live…” and the other inhabitants of Skid Row chime in, “Downtown” from which Seymour continues, “That’s your home address.” Here the community proves able to complete, contribute, and comment on his voice and he holds the same capacity for the voices of others in the community as well. The song ends with all the inhabitants of Skid Row standing still while flexing their legs to the beat of the song. They stare into the sky, into the camera, and their formation, voices, and movements solidify them as a community.

In the example from *Little Shop of Horrors* marginalized or relegated characters are allowed self-expression and acceptance through the formation of onscreen communities. With a focus on community, American film musicals offer possibilities for atypical film characters to possess an unsanctioned place within the narrative. This unsanctioned place exists both figuratively and literally through Frank-N-Furter’s castle in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975). The song “Time Warp” serves to introduce the odd inhabitants of Frank-N-Furter’s home and consequently establishes them as a community. These inhabitants, the Transylvanians, exhibit the communal nature of their lifestyle by performing, dancing, and singing together. Two of the film’s main characters begin the song. Riff Raff (Richard O'Brien) initiates the song and is joined later by Magenta (Patricia Quinn). As the two enter the ballroom the film cuts back to The Criminologist (Charles Gray) who instructs the film audience in how to perform the Time Warp dance. While The Criminologist is separated diegetically from The Transylvanians, existing outside the time and space of the film’s narrative, the musical performance links
him to this community and its odd characters. He begins his instruction, “It’s just a jump to the left.” The Transylvanians then respond, “And a step to the right.” This sets up the call and response construction central to creating onscreen communities within film musicals. The Criminologist, Transylvanians, and main characters all participate in performing the time warp. The only two in the scene who do not participate are Brad (Barry Bostwick) and Janet (Susan Sarandon) who are clearly marked as outsiders to the community. At the end of the number, all of the performers fall to the ballroom’s floor as Brad and Janet attempt to sneak out before running into Frank-N-Furter.

In the same way a group performance in *Chicago* (2002) unites the incarcerated women, allowing them self-expression, acceptance, and support through the musical construction of community. In “Cell Block Tango” the women relate their stories to their new block mate while approving of each other’s past criminal actions. The scene begins with Roxie Hart (Renée Zellweger) alone in her cell. The other women are chanting their respective story code words in succession: Pop, Six, Squish, Ah ah, Cicero, Lipschiz. Each word stands for the story of how each woman came to reside in the prison. Roxie’s cell opens and she steps out and sits to watch the other women perform their stories. The announcer sets the scene introducing the community members, “And now the six merry murderess...in their rendition of the Cell Block Tango.”

Each woman is shown in a medium shot behind bars stating her word. The six women then sing together, “He had it comin’. He had it comin’. He only had himself to blame./ If you’d have been there. If you had seen it.” Then Velma (Catherine Zeta-Jones) finishes the line alone as she points an accusing finger at Roxie, “I bet you you would
have done the same.” The women then come out from behind the bars one by one and recount their stories of murder. As each woman sings/tells her story the other women stay behind the bars and sing the chorus lowly, “He had it comin’…” After each individual story, the women sing the chorus in unison. One by one the women join the tango in front of the jail cells after their stories have been told.

One of the women exists outside of this community of murderess. The Hungarian woman’s solo is marked in contrast to the others in that the other women do not continue singing the chorus as she relates her story. The musical and dance style also change during her sequence. Narratively, this woman is set apart from the others by her innocence. Unlike the other murderesses she is not guilty of the crime she is charged. This difference is clearly marked in the segment. She is not afforded the background singing which constructs a call and response that the other women are a part of. The disparateness of choreography and musical style between her segment and the other women’s also marks her exclusion from the community. This exclusion clearly illustrates the way the community is established and reinforced in this sequence through call and response, singing in unison, complimentary and identical choreography, and identical dance and musical styles among the other murderesses.

After the last woman tells her story, the stage opens up and more women join the chorus. Convicted women in burlesque-esque lingerie fill the large stage. They perform identical choreography and sing a round, heightening the call and response construction present earlier in the number. The dance sequence ends with the stage full of inmates singing in unison, “I bet you you would have done the same.” The song then fades out
with the original six women once again voicing their ‘words’ in succession. Through this final segment of the song all of the female inmates are absorbed into the community and, through her observation, so is Roxie.

As with The Babes, inhabitants of Skid Row, the Transylvanians, and the Murderesses, the glorification of communal living, aside from existing as an alternative family structure, can subvert societal norms by providing marginalized or ostracized characters with opportunities for acceptance and self-expression. The communal aspect of film musicals also subverts heteronormativity by creating a plethora of heterosocial bonds within the genre. These platonic relationships rail against the traditional expectations of sexual union within the Hollywood film. Cohabiting heterosexuals form intimate non-sexual relationships within American film musicals. Altman recognizes the prevalence of homosocial and heterosocial matches within film musicals. He sees these pairings acting as a series of “wrong matches” until the main heterosexual couple finally unite at the end of the film. In An American in Paris (1951), Gene Kelly dances with boys, men, and old women before he ever goes cheek to cheek with his leading lady, Leslie Caron.69 Again, I read this “proper” heterosexual union as camp in the face of the gender play and non-hegemonic matches that come before it.

Hollywood musicals offer more possibilities for heterosocial relationships than their generic counterparts. A heterosocial relationship, or a relationship based on nonsexual attraction to a person of a different sex, may not seem a radically subversive trope. However when the perpetuating nature of male homosocial bonds is examined it is

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clear heterosocial structurings offer new potentialities for understanding and defining
gender.

Homosocial bonds, or nonsexual friendships between members of the same sex, are largely encouraged and celebrated in Hollywood films with the belief that these groupings mimic real-life trends. While this configuration may seem harmless these homosocial relationships continually establish and perpetuate hegemonic masculinity. Homosociality promotes clear gender distinctions between men and women. In this way these groupings endorse the gender binary and highlight regimented differences between individuals coded as male and those coded as female.

Aside from complacency with strict gender binaries, homosocial configurations are thought to contribute to the maintenance of hegemonic masculinity by implementing subtle mechanisms of control which encourage traits associated with hegemonic masculinity and demean those in line with non-hegemonic masculine identities. Sharon R. Bird recognizes this process of control as being achieved in three ways: through emotional detachment, competiveness, and the sexual objectification of women. Young men form exclusive groups by which they develop their gender identities in relation to what they are not, these groups rely on the lauding of competitive individuality, and they are maintained through the notion that male individuality is not only different from that of women but as better than that of women (Bird 121).  

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Homosocial bonds, like the ones encouraged in American society, can be found throughout Hollywood films, even within the genre of musicals. By examining these bonds in the musical *West Side Story* (1961) one can see the way these sanctioned formations perpetuate and encourage hegemonic masculinity. The Puerto Rican community in the film is visibly segregated between male and female members. The two groups do cohabitate and interact but they are divided ideologically and socially by gender. In “America” the two groups come together to debate the merits of their new home. Through this debate their gender roles and distinctions are clearly drawn. During the number the women describe the reasons they like living in America and the men give a case as to why they want to return to Puerto Rico. The disagreement divides them into sub-communities and the specific arguments from the women and men reinforce hegemonic masculinity.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, hegemonic masculinity, and its byproduct emphasized femininity, includes the subordination of women and the celebration of toughness and competiveness in men. It also holds complimentary features for women which allow for their subordination. It requires both men and women to position themselves in relation to its ideals in that it presents the most “honored” way of being male.

In the sequence “America”, the women voice their support for living in the country but this support is very specifically materialistically driven. The women sing, “Everything free in America,” while the men respond, “For a small fee in America.”

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Here, the call and response structure does solidify the Puerto Rican immigrants as a community as was its function in the previous examples; however it holds a secondary function in this sequence. Through the call and response, the male community members become the voice of reason for the female members. The women sing about the luxuries available to them through capitalism, “Buying on credit is so nice….I have my own washing machine.” The men continually voice the ‘realities’ of their situation after the women’s praises. The women sing, “Industry boom in America,” and the men respond “Twelve in a room in America.” The men are portrayed as more aware of their social hardships and the inequalities they face in the new country while the women are pacified with new material goods. One woman sings, “I’ll get a terrace apartment,” while a man responds, “Better get rid of your accent.” As a group the women sing, “Life is alright in America,” and the men respond, “If you’re all-white in America.” The men here are clearly marked as having to suffer social injustices while the women are exempt from these hardships and get to enjoy increased economic freedom. The women are not only portrayed as unaware of their community’s hardships but as uninterested and indifferent toward them. The men begin listing some faults of the country such as, “Organized crime in America.” The women scoff at each item on the list and some pretend to yawn at the mention of the hardships.

The “America” sequence from *West Side Story* reinforces hegemonic masculinity through its portrayal of the female community members as materialistic and the male members as rational. This configuration is directly a result of the homosocial formation within the community. Similar ideologies bond the male members to other male members
and female members to other female members. This rigid formation highlights the women’s emphasized femininity and the ‘appropriateness’ of their subjugation and portrays the men as rational which reinforces their dominant role.

While the homosocial bonds in *West Side Story* perpetuate hegemonic masculinity, film musicals offer the possibility of heterosocial groupings that work to undo this rigid structuring. *Rent* (2005) serves as a clear example of a heterosocial group living and functioning as a family. Many numbers in the film highlight the interdependence, love, and support existing between the group of adult men and women. The group’s function as family is clearly defined in the scene following Angel’s (Wilson Jermaine Heredia) funeral. The group is fighting. They bicker amongst themselves and side against one another. Tom (Jesse L. Martin), Angel’s significant other, asks the others to stop arguing for his sake as he grieves the loss of Angel. He sings, “I can’t believe this family must die.” Here all the members of the group recognize their heterosocial formation as a family. The group reconciles at the film’s end as they watch the film Mark (Anthony Rapp) made about bohemian life in New York City and the threat of HIV/AIDS. Together the group sings an amalgamation of the songs introduced in the support group. They embrace one another and sing at first in unison and then in complimentary but different harmonies. Toward the end of the song half the group sings, “No day but today,” and the other half sings, “I’d die without you.” The song ends with the entire group singing in unison, “No day but today.” The singing in unison and simultaneous singing that end the song reestablishes the heterosocial family group/community that was fractured earlier in the film’s narrative.
Another heterosocial community exists in Rent through the support group to which Tom and Angel belong. The group, made up of HIV positive male and female members, meets to establish a community to garner support. The sessions consist of an individual telling their story through song and the other members join in singing. While Mark is not HIV positive he sits in and films the sessions. He also joins in singing along with the members. In one of the sessions a male member stands up and sings, “Will I lose my dignity, will someone care?/Will I wake tomorrow from this nightmare?” The other male members of the group stand and repeat this line. Mark, who is standing out of the circle filming, joins the song. The female group members then stand and sing in a round. The group members continue singing as Roger (Adam Pascal) enters the room and joins the song. In another session a group member explains, speaking, how he found out his T-cells were low the day before. The group leader asks him how he’s feeling. He responds speaking and then starts singing. He begins singing alone but halfway through his phrase another group member joins in and finishes his thought. Then all the group members stand and sing in unison, “There’s only us, there’s only this/ Forget regret, for life is yours to miss/No other road, no other way/No day but today.” Through this groups’ singing and Mark’s film, which is screened by the main family unit at the end of Rent, the film portrays HIV positive New Yorkers as a heterosocial community.

Both the formation of communities and possibility for heterosocial bonds in Hollywood musicals create many instances of platonic love or platonic domestic relationships. Here I mean platonic in the modern sense of the word meaning a love-based non-sexual relationship rather than its original definition of redirecting one’s focus
from the beloved to the divine. The American film musical is able to present platonic relationships between cohabiting male and female heterosexuals which subverts the norm of sexual relations between cohabitating men and women.

One such platonic cohabitating structure can be found in *My Fair Lady* (1964). As mentioned in the first chapter, the narrative of the film continually subjugates the female lead. The lead male, Henry (Rex Harrison) acts as the film’s superior and dictates almost every action Eliza (Audrey Hepburn) takes. Eliza is able to work against the narrative’s male domination and assert her agency through musical performance. Despite the unequal power and control between the two leads the film presents their relationship as amicable toward the end of the narrative. Eliza becomes fed up with Henry’s treatment of her and leaves. He sings the mournful “I’ve grown accustomed to her face” as he longs for Eliza’s return. Up until this solo in the film, it is possible to read the two’s bond as a sexual union, despite the age difference between the characters. However, the scene at Henry’s mother’s house in which Eliza asserts her agency eradicates this hypothesis. Eliza scolds Henry for his poor treatment of her saying, “And I come to, came to care for you, not to want you to make love to me, and not forgetting the difference between us, but more friendly-like.” This scene illustrates the platonic love the couple shares making their decision to cohabitate subversive from the standpoint of Hollywood film.

An intimate platonic friendship can also be found in *Mary Poppins* (1964). While the leads in this film do not cohabitate, it is hinted that their friendship is long-running. Bert’s (Dick Van Dyke) and Mary’s (Julie Andrews) relationship is characterized as intimate through the fact Bert knows about Mary’s magical powers and keeps her
abilities a secret. While they are presented as close and supportive of one another the relationship remains non-sexual, the two function as close friends rather than lovers. Bert sings “Jolly Holliday” in which he explains his love for Mary and her affable qualities. Mary breaks into the song and equally lauds Bert. While Bert affirms his love of Mary, the song remains friendly and fun rather than romantic. This platonic bond between the two is highlighted by the way other men treat Mary, particularly in the “Chim Chim Cher-ee” segment. The chimney sweeps, all male, join Bert in praising Mary and listing her positive attributes. Through this segment one sees that Bert’s affectionate way of speaking of Mary is usual when it comes to the few people who know Mary on a personal level. This fact does not downplay the intimate quality of Bert’s and Mary’s platonic relationship but it does illustrate that his affectionate language does not imply a sexual union between the two.

The presentation of alternative family structures allows the American film musical yet another possibility to subvert heteronormative relationship sanctions. The genre glorifies communal living by presenting this familial structuring as utopian. Communities are established through musical numbers specifically through a call and response construction. Platonic heterosexual relationships and the possibility for heterosocial unions also aid the genre in this mode of subversion.
CHAPTER 4: “SO, ARE YOU AS GOOD IN BED AS YOU ARE ON THAT DANCE FLOOR?”: MASCULINITY AND MALE BODIES IN THE AMERICAN FILM MUSICAL

One final way Hollywood musicals subvert heteronormativity is through the presentation of alternative masculinities. Musical males possess more freedom in their gender expression than other generic counterparts. These masculinities exist as alternatives to the hegemonic Hollywood strain. Along with the ability to express variations of masculinity musical males also reclaim traditionally masculine spaces and allow for the equating of men and women. American film musicals present male bodies as spectacle and many plots posit hegemonic masculinity as the downfall of male characters.

Hollywood masculinities have morphed and shifted based on who is in the White House, who is bombing who, and the ever-changing economic prowess of the United States. It may be overreaching to label Hollywood masculinity as one rigid set of characteristics, stances, and ideologies. However throughout the different crises facing American masculinity there rests a prevailing ideology behind all the various masculine reactions American cinema has taken.

As mentioned in several previous chapters, hegemonic masculinity works to perpetuate and maintain patriarchal social order by legitimizing the subordination of women. Hegemonic masculinity revolves in the cycle of patriarchal social order which insures the maintenance of male power. This cycle includes the manufacturing and
socialization of gender, social and health inequality, and the social reproduction of
patriarchy. This reproduction of patriarchy is what Hollywood films hold in common,
regardless of their era (i.e. Reagan, Clinton).

I do not suggest that American film musicals exist outside this order or radically
challenge the hegemonic masculinity that maintains it. Alas, these films are products of
the system and exist to maintain male dominance in the same way as other generic
pictures. Just as with the western, action film, or romantic comedy, musicals establish the
normalcy and appropriateness of male dominance and female subordination.

While musical films in their entirety exist within the system of patriarchy their
theatrical nature allows for instances of subverting hegemonic masculinity through the
allowances they provide male characters. As with my discussion on female agency, I
must qualify how I define characters as male and female. I reject the essentialist view on
gender that relies solely on biological factors. By onscreen men or males I refer to
characters coded as male. These characters are perceived as men by the viewing audience
as well as other onscreen characters. Coded males occupy the social space of men and,
most importantly, their position within social hierarchies. They are recognized through
gendered characteristics such as appearance, dress, and mannerisms.

As with the allowance of female agency, alternative masculinities are possible
through musical performance within Hollywood musicals. These alternative masculinities
can be seen through individual performances as well as embodied by certain performers
such as Gene Kelly, Fred Astaire, and John Travolta. These three actors perform their
masculinities in different ways but each example exists as a variation on hegemonic masculinity.

Gene Kelly embodies a ‘boy-like’ masculinity. The naivety and exuberance he displays in his films undoes the hard, unfeeling masculinity traditionally lauded in Hollywood films. Kelli Marshall recognizes the dual nature of Kelly’s masculinity. She claims Kelly fits the conventions of traditional American masculinity through his athleticism, dress and blatant heterosexuality. However it is Kelly’s variation on these norms that provide an alternative onscreen masculinity. His image challenges conventional representations of masculinity through feminine or boy-like costumes and non-female dance partners such as children, inanimate objects, and male cartoon characters. Marshall labels Kelly’s layered masculinity as a more accurate depiction of heterosexual masculinity than representations found in non-musical Hollywood films.

From playful to sexy and physical to refined, Kelly’s masculinity exists as a refreshing alternative to the hegemonic masculinity embodied by most onscreen males.

What I qualify as a boy-like masculinity, Steven Cohan labels a camp masculinity existing in the performances of Gene Kelly. Particularly in Kelly’s pre-<i>Singin’ in the Rain</i> films of the 1940’s his masculinity continually challenged the hegemonic norm. Cohan states that Kelly’s roles hold hints of gender/sexual ambiguity and his dance has a camp affect. Cohan explains the anxiety brought on by Kelly’s alternative masculinity: “The Kelly image embodied a provocative disjunction of gendered and sexualized

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75 Ibid.
understandings of masculinity, which in turn produced an indecipherable picture of what it meant to dance ‘in the right way’.  

Kelly’s childish exuberance can be seen throughout his work. These bouts of self-expression typically occur after a romantic encounter with a woman highlighting Kelly’s characters’ naivety. One of these performances occurs in An American in Paris (1951). In the “Tra La La” sequence Jerry Mulligan (Gene Kelly) enters a room as his friend Adam Cook (Oscar Levant) grumpily plays the piano. Adam continually tells Jerry to get lost as Jerry gleefully sings “Tra la la”. Jerry then begins the song, “This time it’s really love/Tra la la la.” He then leans down and kisses Adam on the head. This act of affection toward a male passes unquestioned as Jerry climbs onto the piano and continues singing. He lies across the piano and props his head on his hands as he sings with his face only inches from Adam’s. Adam attempts to interject and dampen Jerry’s spirit. He sings, “Is there a dowry? …Nothing good can happen from it.” Jerry completely ignores Adam’s interjections and continues his joyful song. As Jerry stands on the piano and tap dances he holds out his shirt tails in a curtsy and the effeminate gesture remains unquestioned by his friend. Jerry’s gestures turn infantile as he jumps on top of the piano, lies on his back, and kicks his feet in the air. Kelly makes funny faces throughout the performance and incorporates dress up into the routine as he places a too large hat on his head. He holds his arms out in front of him pretending the hat blocks his vision. Jerry continually glances at Adam during the sequence making sure the other onscreen male enjoys his performance. Toward the end of the number Jerry begins kicking the doorframe and trotting around the space. Through this action and his repeated climbing on the piano

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77 Ibid. 183.
Kelly turns the performance space into his playground. The number ends with Jerry playing the piano with Adam and the two sing in tandem. Kelly’s boisterous boyhood brings the other onscreen character into his world of play. This play aesthetic and uninhibited emotional expression creates Kelly’s boy-like masculinity which exists as an alternative to the hegemonic hyper-masculinity prevalent in Hollywood films.

Many musical leading men turn film sets into playgrounds by dancing with inanimate objects. Even the elegant Fred Astaire twirls around hat stands and toy drums. However, Gene Kelly’s play takes on a slightly different meaning. While Astaire’s play also exists as a form of self-expression, Kelly’s play feels more organic, fueled by child-like wonder rather than merely an expression of joy.

One of Kelly’s most famous solo dances occurs in Summer Stock (1950). The sequence is affectionately referred to as “The Newspaper Dance”. Kelly’s character in this film is Joe D. Ross but the audience is clearly meant to see Kelly in this sequence as it exists dietetically separated from the rest of the film. This disconnect is partially due to the extra-filmic fact the sequence was filmed after primary filming was completed. Kelly’s character meanders around an empty stage while whistling. Deep in thought and slightly confused he pauses when he walks over a creaky floorboard. He begins testing out the board and looking at it curiously before tapping around and using the noise from the loose board to punctuate his movements. Then while walking backward he kicks a discarded newspaper. He begins scooting the newspaper around with his foot once again exuding curiosity and examining the noise. He then starts tapping on top of the paper and whistling. Some soft non-diegetic music joins in as his playful nature overcomes him.
The character is no longer preoccupied as he dances joyfully around the space. He dances up and down a stand, rips newspaper along with the music, and wears a happy, self-satisfied expression. Dress up once again plays a role in the sequence as Kelly holds a newspaper up as a matador’s cape and the music changes in style to reflect this role play. The sequence ends with Kelly picking up a piece of the discarded newspaper and reading it as he whistles and exits the stage, stepping on the creaky floorboard as he leaves.

Kelly’s youthful charm exists in opposition to the strong, unfeeling masculinity encouraged by nonmusical Hollywood films. His films present his playfulness as an ideal form of masculinity rather than an alternative to the hegemonic strain. Through their performative nature, film musicals are capable of incorporating alternative masculinities into their narratives and present them as an acceptable or even ideal way of being masculine. While Gene Kelly embodies a boyish masculinity, leading musical man Fred Astaire possesses an elegant aura that can be described as a feminine masculinity. While Astaire’s persona possesses more maturity than Kelly’s, his characters are still prone to moments of uninhibited self-expression most often brought about by declarations of heterosexual love. These joy-filled, full body expressions work against the notion existing in hegemonic masculinity that men are the more rational sex and it is women who tend to be overtaken by their emotions.

Astaire’s most famous solo dance arguably occurs in Royal Wedding (1951). In the sequence “You’re All the World to Me” Astaire appears to dance on the walls and ceiling of a room through the use of a rotating film set. Astaire sings in voiceover as he longingly stares at a framed picture of a woman. He then begins singing directly to the
picture within the scene. The song turns instrumental and Astaire begins dancing around the room. He jumps and climbs on the room’s chairs manipulating the scene’s props to illustrate his emotion in the same way Gene Kelly does in the scene from An American in Paris. Astaire’s exuberance goes further as he manipulates the laws of nature by dancing up the walls and onto the ceiling. While Astaire’s dance is every bit as joyful as Kelly’s it cannot be classified as childish. Astaire’s movements are long, smooth, and precise unlike Kelly’s rough and rumble style. This emotive grace allows Astaire’s style to be classified as feminine. Rather than filling the screen with his stature or imposing masculinity, Astaire commands attention through his smooth movements and emotional openness. As with Kelly’s boyish masculinity, Astaire’s feminine masculinity is presented as ideal within the film rather than as an alternative to a preferred way to be masculine. While musical films allow for more possibilities when it comes to the expression of masculinity it remains important to note that these films are still produced under the patriarchal order and while they subvert the system of hegemonic masculinity, they do not completely undo it. For instance, in Astaire’s dancing duets he still, for the most part, controls the movements of his female partners.

Astaire’s feminine masculinity is also aided by the onscreen equating between him and his female leads, most clearly in his multiple pairings with Ginger Rogers. The two performers are presented as equal and visually similar within their musical sequences. This equating, made possible by the stars’ matching talents, presents the actors as gender-similar. Rogers is often styled more masculine in their pairings than most female leads and Astaire performs in a more feminine fashion than other male
Hollywood performers. These variations on gender push the two performers toward a middle ground on the gender spectrum which highlights the less rigid masculinity allowed in American film musicals.

Astaire’s and Rogers’ matching talents are evident in all of their dance duets. An impressive example of their equal talent occurs in their shared choreography in “Let’s Call the Whole Thing Off” from the 1937 film *Shall We Dance*. Being the couple’s seventh picture together, it would be conceivable to assume the depth of their talent would no longer amaze audiences. However, this roller skating tap dance number found a place in history as one of the couple’s most iconic duets and serves as an example of their equal aptitudes and the way in which they share power within their musical performances.

Ironically, the dance sequence that best illustrates the stars’ matching abilities involves a song about the onscreen couple’s differences. “Let’s Call the Whole Thing Off”, written by George Gershwin and Ira Gershwin, talks of a couple who long to stay together despite their different language preferences. The discrepancies in the characters’ pronunciations indicate their varied backgrounds and highlight class distinctions. Astaire’s character is a ballet dancer while Rogers’ character is a tap dancer. In the film, art hierarchies place the tradition of ballet over that of tap making this reconciling song necessary for the couple to overcome their differing backgrounds. The second stanza of the song reads, “You like potato and I like potahto/ You like tomato and I like tomahto/ Potato, potahto/ Tomato, tomahto/ Let’s call the whole thing off/ But oh, if we call the whole thing off/ Then we must part/ and oh, if we ever part, then that might break my
heart.” The couple alternates singing the verses before skating together solidifying their mutual desire to stay in the relationship.

After the playful musical exchange, the couple, who were joking about their inability to roller skate in the prior scene, perform a light-hearted and complicated tap dance routine while wearing roller skates. They perform the number on a circular concrete area with no other figures present in the scene. The couple begins seated, they alternate tapping rhythms, trying to improve on the other’s pattern, they then tap in unison and skate off to the performance area. They dance/skate around the outer rim of the circular area arm-in-arm before assuming a traditional ballroom dancing posture. The skating motion of the dance causes difficulty in deciphering who leads the pair. They then stop and tap identical choreography side by side before Rogers grabs Astaire’s hand and leads him during the next pass around the circular space. The two skate side by side, without touching, and perform identical steps. They then skate into a medium shot. After this, an edit places the two in a long shot and they skate with increasing speed around the area before striking an arabesque posture and collapsing onto the surrounding grass.

“Let’s Call the Whole Thing Off” exists as a unique example of the pair’s work because of the difficulty added by performing the routine in roller skates. However, this number is one of dozens that illustrate the matching talent between Astaire and Rogers and the nature of their shared choreography. As with all of the couple’s routines, Rogers is not in any way an article to Astaire’s dancing. Their equal star power prevents one from stealing a sequence from the other. The difficulty of the steps assigned to Astaire and Rogers is identical and while Astaire does lead Rogers in some instances of
alignment, Rogers does the same to Astaire in others. Astaire clearly and willingly shares
the spotlight and control of the performance with Rogers in their shared sequences.
Through this pairing, Astaire relinquishes the hegemonic masculinity that requires his
dominance over the onscreen female. Both characters possess agency within their duets.
The sequences allow Rogers freedom in her expression thus subverting the rigid
patriarchy established through hegemonic masculinity.

While Rogers’ and Astaire’s pairing does offer some interesting examples of
shared choreography that is equally balanced in terms of difficulty, intricacy, and power
dynamics, not every instance of their onscreen union is magically subversive. There still
exist plenty of instances of Astaire seducing or wooing a reluctant Rogers into his arms
through domineering dance moves. However, there are several variations within the
Astaire/Rogers formula of seduction that give the later a little more power denied to her
non-musical contemporaries.

Arlene Croce labels “Night and Day” from The Gay Divorcee (1934) a ‘dance of
seduction’. Indeed, this number results in Rogers’ character, Mimi, abandoning her
reservations and falling in love with Astaire’s character, however Rogers possesses a
more determining position than the starring female in a traditional pasodoble. John
Mueller maps out the sequence’s choreography highlighting the instances when Rodgers’
character makes clear decisions regarding her reception of Astaire.

Mueller points out three ‘choreographic devices’ that lead to the successful
seduction. He mentions the architectural qualities of the performance space, highlighting
the off-screen possibilities for escape available to Rogers as she attempts to resist

78 Croce, Arlene. The Fred Astaire & Ginger Rogers Book. p. 33.
Astaire’s advances. The next device is a scuffling pattern performed by Astaire that works as a mating dance. Rogers is at first unresponsive to this movement and eventually responds and surrenders by repeating it. The third device involves Rogers’ style of dance. She first appears stiff, then self-absorbed, and then flows easily into a partnership with Astaire. Observing these devices causes the sequence to seem a formulaic scene of seduction, where the woman first resists before an overbearing male forces her into compliance. In one instance, Rogers attempts to leave the scene and is conventionally pulled back by Astaire who she then shoves across the room. After this action, Rogers is left freed from Astaire’s physicality and could easily exit the scene. Though instead of continuing to exit stage left she goes to stand on a balcony indicating she is no longer interested in escaping.

Aside from possessing some autonomy in her seduction, Rogers is positioned as an equal within this scene even though Astaire remains the orchestrator of the sequence. As illustrated in Mueller’s analysis, Astaire’s character uses a short, shuffling dance move as he attempts to seduce Rogers’ character. When Rogers decides to indulge in this passion play, she repeats the step, first unconsciously and then resolutely. The dance step becomes a language from which Rogers is not excluded. Possessing equivalent talent as Astaire, Rogers understands and communicates through the language of dance in the same way as Astaire. This use of language based on skill posits the two leads as equals. Astaire’s character is aware of Rogers’ character’s ability to understand his dance and participate in it with him. While he is being persistent, Rogers possesses the ability to

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80 Ibid. 32.
decide whether or not she will participate in the dance and she possess the skill necessary
to understand the motions and be able to replicate them in a way that will communicate
what she intends.

As mentioned in the first chapter, female characters in Hollywood musicals
possess agency through musical performance. This sequence illustrates Rogers
implementing her agency by choosing to give in to Astaire’s advances but it also
highlights Astaire’s alternative masculinity through his use of dancing and declaration of
emotions to woo Rogers rather than through the use of physical force or coercion.
Astaire consistently shares agency with Rogers within their duets highlighting the
cooperative nature of his characters’ masculinity. While Astaire’s characters are clearly
coded as heterosexual males they are considerably more likely to value the volition of
their female counterparts than the constraints of hegemonic masculinity allow. The
comparable nature between Astaire’s and Rogers’ characters can be seen in the sequence
“Isn’t This a Lovely Day (To Be Caught in the Rain)?” from Top Hat (1935). Through
the choreography of Hermes Pan and Astaire the famous leads play with gender roles.

Steven Cohan examines the unusual power dynamic illustrated in this sequence. Rodgers
and Astaire perfectly match one another’s steps throughout the number, even mimicking
hand gestures. Their movements during this sequence make them comparable, not
sexually differentiated. Cohan also points out the fact Rodgers wears pants in this scene,
since her character has been out riding, causing even the two’s appearances to be similar.
At the end of the dance, Astaire spins Rodgers around him in a predictable masculine
ballroom dance move; this would seem to erase the equality previously witnessed in the
number. However, Rodgers simply responds by effortlessly performing the same move on him. The dance ends with a handshake as opposed to a passionate kiss, though Cohan emphasizes that this gesture of equality does little to dispel the erotic charge within the number.  

Kay Young examines the sequence, pointing out its repetition which she asserts as a fundamental device of the romantic comedy. Through Young’s examination, it is apparent how Rogers is set up as Astaire’s equal through the use of this repetitive device. After Astaire sings the sequence’s title song he whistles the first stanza and circles around in front of Rogers beckoning her to join him. She remains seated but whistles the song’s second stanza before standing to join Astaire in the performance space of the gazebo. The two perform identical steps side by side, a configuration that occurs again and again throughout their pairing. Rogers mimics Astaire’s gestures by maintaining a rigid posture and placing her left hand in her pocket followed by her right. Astaire and Rogers both use a bouncing gait throughout this sequence illustrating that not only is Rogers participating in gender play through her gestures and posture but Astaire is also participating through his fluidity and strolling style. Young sees Rodgers mimicking not as a “trope of deprecation to the imitated Astaire” but as an assertion of the fact whatever Astaire can do Rogers can also do. Rogers is not in the gazebo to be passively entertained but to be an active participate in the couple’s play.

Rogers and Astaire take turns initiating movements during this sequence as with most of their duets. Astaire sets the tempo for the routine as he is the first to move and

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Rogers falls in mimicking his steps. The couple then turns to face the back of the gazebo and Rogers taps several beats independently of Astaire. He looks with curiosity at her feet and then the two dance simultaneously and synchronously in the new rhythm she has introduced. Young also recognizes this equal exchange within the number observing that the couple alternates who leads a step and who follows, sometimes initiating and sometimes imitating. Young views tap itself as less gendered than other forms of Western performance since “androgynous noise-making and motions” are valued over differentiated movements. She views this sequence as presenting equalizing talent and desire:

...there is a fullness of force Astaire uses in his partnering with Rogers. This is as much about co-partnered sex as it is about strength. He throws her around him and she sturdily continues; what they create between them is not about modifying energy or treating the other as less than one's equal in force, presence or passion.

Aside from dancing with female partners, Astaire’s proclivity for dancing with inanimate objects has been exhaustively mentioned and often analyzed as a form of masturbation before the movie-going audience. While both Astaire and Kelly dance with objects during their solo numbers, these moments, depending on the objects present, can accomplish more than exhibitionism. In Carefree (1938) Astaire, playing psychoanalyst Tony Flagg, performs a tap routine while playing golf. He dances around with a club before teeing off numerous balls, all while tapping and performing for Amanda Cooper (Ginger Rogers) who he believes to be watching him. This performance serves as a

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83 Ibid. 269
84 Ibid.
reclamation of a hyper-hetero male pastime. Bringing tap and flair onto the golf course challenges the refined masculinity often associated with the sport. Positioning the dancing Astaire in the place of business men and influential WASPs highlights the charade of white hetero males in the same way drag can bring to light the performative nature of gender. This device occurs several times throughout Astaire’s work as in *Royal Wedding* (1951) where he turns a workout room into a performance space and workout equipment into dance partners.

Similarly to Fred Astaire’s and Gene Kelly’s alternative masculinities, John Travolta exists as a post-classical example of a male musical lead not fully participating in hegemonic masculinity. Travolta, like the two classical leads, openly invites the sexualization of his body onscreen. He presents his form to be looked at and allows the camera to gaze at him in ways that are unusual for male Hollywood leads. While I would personally categorize *Saturday Night Fever* (1977) and *Staying Alive* (1983) as dance films instead of musicals they are traditionally marketed as the latter and with the blurred line between the two genres I am comfortable with using the films as examples within this work, especially considering Travolta’s appearances in other bona-fide musicals.

In the opening of *Saturday Night Fever*, Travolta is introduced by his dancing shoes. Male bodies are consistently fragmented within the film musical and presented as objects of desire. This shot construction is often used in films starring Fred Astaire. In *The Band Wagon* (1953) the opening credits roll over an image of a top hat, gloves, and a cane, clothing that became an extension of Astaire’s body over the course of his career. Similarly, *Top Hat’s* (1935) title is superimposed over Astaire’s iconic hat and both he
and Ginger Rogers are visually introduced as pairs of dancing feet. The identical construction found in the opening scene of *Saturday Night Fever* indicate that the post-classical male musical lead holds the same position of spectacle as his classical predecessors.

Within film musicals, male bodies are presented as spectacle in both the classical and post-classical eras. This role of spectacle can be seen through the presentation of male musical leads as ‘the show’. Steven Cohan recognizes Fred Astaire being presented as ‘the show’ in his final solo number in *Silk Stockings* (1957) in which a shot of Cyd Charisse looking longingly precedes Astaire’s performance. Through this point-of-view construction the film presents Charisse as the spectator and Astaire as the spectacle.

An identical construction exists in *Easter Parade* (1948) as Don (Fred Astaire) performs “Stepping Out With My Baby” The acrobatic dance plays in slow motion emphasizing the complexity of the number. During the dance the scene cuts to a shot of Hannah (Judy Garland) watching from offstage. She clasps her hands together and shakes her head, marveling at his talent. As with many of his solo numbers, the scene positions Astaire as the object being gazed upon by a female character.

In *Saturday Night Fever*, John Travolta mirrors these classical examples as his disco performances present him as ‘the show’. During the “You Should Be Dancing” sequence, Tony (John Travolta) dances alone on the disco’s dance floor surrounded by a captivated audience. The scene begins with Tony dancing with a partner. He soon breaks away and begins dancing around the floor as patrons remark, “Give the kid some room he’s taking over again.” Others respond, “Alright”, “Hey, go” and “Go!” The club-goers

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85 Cohan, Steven. “Feminizing the Song-and-Dance Man.” p. 94.
are clearly excited by Tony’s performances. Everyone moves off of the dance floor in order to watch Tony dance. They clap, sway, and cheer as he performs. Interspersed within the performance are close-ups of audience members singing, smiling, and clapping which sets up the same construction used to present Astaire as ‘the show’ in previous examples. The presentation of Travolta as ‘the show’ exists throughout his film musical career: his ‘strut’ in *Staying Alive* (1983), “Summer Nights” in *Grease* (1978), and “You Can’t Stop the Beat” in *Hairspray* (2007).

While classical male musical leads do much to exist outside of traditional masculinities, post-classical male musical leads also display alternatives to hegemonic masculinity. Male musical leads tend to be more emotional, expressive, and cooperative than male leads existing in other Hollywood genres. Hollywood’s post-classical era clearly holds more possibilities for alternative characters. As seen through Dr. Frank-N-Furter in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975) and the Master of Ceremonies in *Cabaret* (1972) post-classical Hollywood musicals open the door for male characters existing outside the realm of hegemonic masculinity. These starkly subversive characters obviously present examples of alternative masculinities but even more traditional heterosexual male characters work against hegemonic masculinity in post-classical Hollywood musicals.

Hegemonic masculinity becomes a downfall of these post-classical male leads. In *The Sound of Music* (1965) Captain Von Trapp’s (Christopher Plummer) character flaw is his rigid views on what it means to be a man and run a household. He utilizes his military know-how in his treatment of his children and staff. This hyper-masculine control pushes
him from his children and does not allow him to make significant bonds with those he sees as lacking strength. As with most films, a traditional heterosexual union corrects this character flaw. However it remains unique that the adherence to hegemonic masculinity is set out as a problem within the film.

Domineering masculinity exists as a problem in *My Fair Lady* (1964) as well. While the sexuality of Henry Higgins (Rex Harrison) has been questioned his masculinity can be labeled as hegemonic because of his superiority and lack of respect for women. He continually subjugates Eliza (Audrey Hepburn) throughout the film and believes it his right to dictate her every movement. This domineering nature causes Henry to lose Eliza as a companion, though this consequence is undone by Eliza’s return at the end of the film-reinforcing my observation of happy heterosexual conclusions being read as camp in light of the subversion existing throughout Hollywood musicals.

While atrociously miss-cast, the 2012 adaptation of *Les Misérables* also presents a masculinity that can be thought of as non-hegemonic. The male roles in *Les Misérables* are by no means overtly subversive. The film exists in a world of male-dominance. However, nuances of the character Jean Valjean (Hugh Jackman) paint his masculinity in opposition to that of Javert (Russell Crowe). Following the death of Fantine (Anne Hathaway) Jean Valjean elects to take her daughter as his own. When he arrives to collect the daughter he says that he speaks for her mother. He offers his voice as a conduit for the powerless Fantine, allowing the voiceless woman a medium for expression through his gender and affluence. Jean Valjean tells the child he will be both mother and father to her. While the film does not cover the girl’s maturation it seems that Valjean takes on this
dual role enthusiastically and does not feel emasculated by the gendered terms. He consistently shows mercy while Javert’s unyielding adherence to patriarchy becomes his downfall. Jean Valjean becomes saintly through his duel nature as both father and mother.

The examples of alternative masculinities in Hollywood musicals are endless. Classical male leads possess variations existing outside of hegemonic masculinity. Fred Astaire’s feminine flair and Gene Kelly’s perpetual boyhood set them outside of the hyper-masculine nature of non-musical Hollywood characters. Hollywood musicals consistently present the male body as spectacle, working in contrast to films in other mainstream genres. Post-classical film musicals prove generally less restrictive in terms of masculinity. Alternative lifestyles and androgyny are prevalent and applauded in many post-classical musical films. Even in films with more traditional male roles, musical men are able to possess masculinities which contrast the hegemonic strain.
CONCLUSION

The endings of American film musicals consistently counter the subversive nature of the genre. Hollywood musicals subvert hegemonic relationship sanctions by allowing for female agency, containing instances of gender play, glorifying alternative family structures, and providing alternative masculinities. Despite these subversive aspects the films conclude with heteronormative unions. Through their incongruous nature the heteronormative endings can be read as campy conclusions, existing as ironic in the face of the genre’s subversive tropes.

The term incongruous appears frequently in considerations of camp. Steven Cohan uses the term when examining camp aesthetics in MGM musicals and Esther Newton explains that “the camp” figure uses incongruity to achieve a higher synthesis of limiting binaries.86 87 To adorn a camp lens is to delight in the incongruous; to be aware of things existing outside of harmony. Newton states: “Camp usually depends on the perception or creation of incongruous juxtapositions.”88 “Incongruous” aptly describes the heteronormative endings found in American film musicals. They appear disjointed next to the exuberant nature of the films’ diegeses. Heteronormative endings simply do not belong within the worlds of subversion created by Hollywood musicals.

Constituting these heteronormative endings as camp requires an examination of how American film musicals subvert hegemonic relationship sanctions. One such subversive aspect is the allowance of female agency. Female characters in film musicals

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88 Ibid. 46-47.
possess agency through the trope of musical performance. By controlling character blocking, changing tempos, and altering lyrical styles, musical women can act and enact. As discussed in the first chapter Cathy possesses agency through her musical performance and shared choreography with her male counterparts in *Singin in the Rain*. Cathy dictates the blocking of all three characters within the “Good Morning” sequence and initiates each tempo change and style variation. While Cathy holds power within the musical sequence the film’s ending robs her of her agency.

At the end of *Singin’ in the Rain*, the film studio traps Cathy in a contract which requires her to continue singing behind the scenes without receiving credit. The film’s two male leads decide to reveal Cathy’s talent by parting the curtain behind which she sings. She has no choice in the decision to reveal her identity and runs from the stage embarrassed. Just before exiting the theater she turns and suddenly forgives Don for his betrayal. The two sing together and embrace. The film then cuts to the pair kissing under their shared movie poster.

In this final scene Cathy does not play a part in the action. She becomes trapped in a contract which robs her of the ability to make decisions. She also remains excluded from the men’s plans to reveal her identity. In this important moment which begins Cathy’s career as a movie star, she exists as a pawn. This helpless position contrasts the orchestrating role she holds during her musical performance with the two male leads. The film’s final scene proves ironic though Cathy’s lack of power. An incongruity exists between the expectations of Cathy’s social position based on the agency she possesses earlier in the film and her immobile state in the final scene.
Hollywood musicals also subvert heteronormative relationship sanctions through instances of gender play. Musical characters prove less restricted in their performance of gender than those from other Hollywood genres. The genre allows for variation within displays of gender and, through musical performance and spectacle, blatantly disregards cisnormative values. Chapter two examines gender play within *Easter Parade* and illustrates the incongruous nature of the film’s final scene.

In the next to last scene of *Easter Parade*, Hannah woos Don by assuming the role of a male suitor. She sends him feminine presents including a bow-adorned hat, serenades him while complementing his appearance using feminine adjectives, and leads him around the room before pulling him onto her knee. The female-initiated gender play disappears in the film’s final scene. Ironically, the once proactive Hannah remains silent during the sequence as Don sings, leads the couple, and proposes. He even instructs Hannah to place the ring on her left hand as she silently accepts his proposal.

The presentation of alternative family structures and glorification of communal living also aid American film musicals in their subversion of hegemonic relationship sanctions. Through large-scale musical productions, shared choreography, and call-and-response construction film musicals establish and laud onscreen communities. While *Oklahoma!* glorifies the blending of two communities its ending presents the concluding heterosexual union as the most important family structure. A community is also established at the beginning of *Little Shop of Horrors* through the “Skid Row (Downtown)” sequence. However the community gives way to a heteronormative family structure at the film’s end.
The theatrical version of *Little Shop of Horrors* concludes with Audrey and Seymour embracing in the rubble after killing Audrey II. They then run toward an idealistic house. Both are dressed in wedding clothes during this final shot. This ending presents the two as a stand-alone family unit despite the community created earlier in the film through the call-and-response construction of “Skid Row (Downtown)”.

Lastly, American film musicals subvert heteronormative relationship sanctions by allowing and presenting alternative masculinities. Male musical characters have the capacity to possess masculinities that counter the hegemonic strain. Musical men hold more freedom in their gender expression and work against hegemonic masculinity’s tenant of subjugating women.

As mentioned in Chapter four, Fred Astaire parodies a traditional male pastime in *Carefree*. Astaire’s character, Tony, dances and frolics around a golf course. He uses golf equipment as props and parades around as his love interest looks on. Tony appears uninhibited in this scene. He joyfully skirts around the traditionally masculine space bringing light to the ridiculousness of its rigid class-defined rules. During the film’s final scene Tony holds much less freedom in his gender expression. After his love interest, Amanda, gets punched in the face, Tony highjacks her subconscious and convinces her of his love. In the final scene the two walk down the aisle as Amanda wears a wedding dress and a black eye. At the film’s end Tony proves domineering as he continually robs Amanda of her free will by using hypnosis to alter her subconscious. The last scene could not be more heteronormative with its pristine wedding and Amanda’s injury serving as a
reminder of her subjugated position. This scene can clearly be read as satire through its heavy-handed heteronormativity and contrast to the film’s subversive aspects.

These heteronormative endings exist in contrast to the subversion found throughout American film musicals. This contrasting nature, exemplified through the outrageously subdued quality of these endings, allow the heteronormative unions to be read ironically. The hegemonic ideals presented in the films’ endings, through their incongruous nature, act as farce and satire. The normalized endings appear preposterous when compared to the extravagant and subversive nature of the genre. The heteronormative endings in American film musicals do not undo the consistent subversive aspects found within the genre. Rather, they reinforce these subversive ideals through the implementation of camp.
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