

Article

Disrupting Heteronormative Temporality through Queer Dramaturgies: *Fun Home*, *Hadestown* and *A Strange Loop*

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Abstract: This article considers how André De Shields performance in *Hadestown* (2019), and the musicals *Fun Home* (2015) and *A Strange Loop* (2019) can be seen to respond to the present moment and argues that they disrupt heteronormative temporality through queer dramaturgy. It explores musicals that present queer performativity and/or queer dramaturgies, and addresses how they enact queer strategies of resistance through historical materialist critiques of personal biographies. It suggests that to do this, they disrupt the heteronormative dramaturgical time of the musical, and considers how they may enact structural change to the form of the musical. The article carries out a close reading of De Shields' performance practice, and analyses the dramaturgy of *Fun Home* and *A Strange Loop* through drawing on the methodologies of José Muñoz and Elizabeth Freeman. It considers how they make queer labour visible by drawing on post-dramatic strategies, ultimately suggesting that to varying extents, these musicals offer resistance to the heteronormative musical form.

Keywords: queer futurity; musical theatre; dramaturgical analysis; queer dramaturgy; *Fun Home*; *Hadestown*; *A Strange Loop*

1. Introduction

José Muñoz, in his development of queer futurity as a critical methodology, writes that 'Queerness is a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present' (Muñoz 2009, p. 1). This article addresses how three musicals enact this: firstly, De Shields' queer and Black performance practice in *Hadestown*; secondly *Fun Home* (2015), and finally *A Strange Loop* (2019). On 4 May 2020, the Pulitzer Prize board awarded composer, lyricist and librettist Michael R. Jackson the Prize for Drama to *A Strange Loop*, marking only the tenth time a musical had won, and the first time a black writer has won the prize. The musical won five Drama Desk Awards at the 65th annual ceremony June 13, including Outstanding Musical. Jackson took home the awards for Outstanding Book of a Musical and Outstanding Lyrics, Larry Owens won Outstanding Lead Actor in a Musical, and its director, Stephen Brackett, won Outstanding Director of a Musical.

Over the course of writing this article, the quagmire of the present has brought to the forefront once again the racist violence enacted on Black communities and people, in the US and the UK, through both the disproportional deaths through Covid-19, police and state violence, and structural white supremacy. Widespread global protests have taken place in support of the #blacklivesmatter movement; protestors have pulled down statues of slave traders (Edward Colston in Bristol) and Confederate statues (President Jefferson Davis in Richmond, Virginia), indeed some city councils have done the same (Tower Hamlets Council removed a statue of slave trader Robert Milligan, in London). Here, I acknowledge my own position as a white, cis-gendered, bisexual+ British musical theatre academic and writer. In this article, I consider how queer performativity and dramaturgies can enact

queer resistance, and in turn, challenge existing dramaturgies of the musical. Alyson Campbell and Stephen Farrier in their work on queer dramaturgy reflect on moments of performance that offer a suspension of the regular, heterosexual, rules of the social. These moments, they argue, offer a queer audience the possibility of contemplating ‘other ways of being in the world, play[ing] out non-normative identities [to] imagine, rehearse and form new ways of expressing an experience of the world’ (Campbell and Farrier 2016, p. 3). Each of these musicals contain moments that offer queer audiences other ways of being and understanding the past through a consideration of the present moment, enacting queer resistance through the form of the musical.

The first musical I address is André De Shields’ performance in *Hadestown* (2019). The musical by composer, lyricist and librettist, Anaïs Mitchell, explores the Greek myths around Orpheus in the underworld, and does not explicitly engage with LGBTQ+ stories. The musical approaches its inexorable conclusion when, in the moment after the doubting Orpheus has turned to look for Eurydice, she is revealed to have been following him out of hell/Hades all along. Bereft of his lover, Orpheus falls to the floor, leaving Hermes commanding the stage (André De Shields). Silence hangs in the air. Hermes reprises ‘Road to Hell’, with the lyrics now slowed to a crawl; he adds the line, ‘it’s a sad song’, a sombre pause, then he speaks a line of protest and presence, ‘but we sing it anyway’ (Mitchell 2019). In live performance, Hermes/De Shields decisively slams his fist into his other hand on ‘sing’. At this point, the musical has collapsed around Hermes, he is left to reiterate to the audience its central message: that to see the possibility of what could be, in spite of ‘the way that it is’ is an essential act of storytelling, and of humanity.¹ While telling stories against the dark may be a deeply humanistic desire, it has a unique meaning and consequence for oppressed and marginalized communities, and a particular history in Black culture. To imagine better is inherently a resistant act, and as such, we must acknowledge the profound meaning of resistance for oppressed and minoritised communities, and in particular the history of Black resistance and queer intersectional Black resistance against white supremacy and the kyriarchy.

Fun Home, an adaptation of Alison Bechdel’s 2006 graphic autobiography, recounts her childhood and the loss of her father; he was a closeted gay man who killed himself when she was a young woman. Bechdel, a lesbian cartoonist, reflects through her graphic novel on their relationship, and the connection between her own coming out and the trauma of losing her father. Jeanine Tesori composed the musical, and Lisa Kron wrote the lyrics and libretto (drawing on her own lived experiences as a lesbian writer). *Fun Home* premiered off-Broadway at the Public Theatre in 2013, and later transferred to the Circle in the Square Theatre in 2015. The third musical this article addresses, composer, lyricist and librettist Michael R. Jackson’s *A Strange Loop* (2019) opened at Playwrights Horizons Theatre in a co-production with Page 73, to critical acclaim and a twice-extended run. Like *Fun Home*, it reflects a queer experience; in this case, a version of Jackson’s own lived experience as a black queer writer. Jackson described his musical as ‘self-referential as opposed to autobiographical’ (Jackson in Cole 2019). The musical features Usher, played by Larry Owens; Usher, like Jackson, has the burden of a famous name. Usher, like Jackson, is a black queer writer trying to write a musical about being a black queer writer. The strange loop of the title describes not only the musical, but also references Douglas Hofstadter’s (2007) concept of understanding one’s self-identity, and the Liz Phair song of the same name. Both *Fun Home* and *A Strange Loop* sing, to quote *Hadestown*, ‘sad songs’: they present complex and difficult material, and both musicals use queer dramaturgical structures to enact queer resistance.

2. Queer Dramaturgy in Existing Readings of Musical Theatre

Both *Fun Home* and *A Strange Loop* participate in historical materialist critiques of queer pasts, and both musicals challenge the heteronormative dramaturgy of the musical that works towards

¹ The coda at the end of the musical echoes this message in ‘We Raise Our Cups’ sung by Persephone, Eurydice and company.

the completion of a heterosexual love story as a happy-ending. Stacy Wolf, the key theorist in queer and specifically lesbian feminist approaches to the musical, has explored before how queer moments threaten ‘the resolutely heterosexual form of the Broadway musical’ (Wolf 2011, p. 198), noting for example, how duets between two women ‘stall [. . .] heteronormativity’s forward moving chronology’ (ibid., p. 34). Such duets not only resist heteronormative love, but they are even ‘utopian, in their reimagining of a different musical relationship and connection’ (ibid., p. 34). Among this substantial work in reading against the grain, in exploring queer identities in musical theatre, Wolf focuses particularly on reading *Wicked* (2004) as both ‘a feminist and queer musical’ (ibid., p. 6) largely in the relationship between Elphaba and Glinda. Steven Greenwood has built on this work by also reading the character of Fiyero through queer theories of temporality and utopia, arguing that the character ‘disrupts normative narratives from school dances to conventional love stories, demonstrating the ephemerality and instability of these mythical structures’ (Greenwood 2018, p. 306). Queer dramaturgies and queer characters unsettle heterosexual dramaturgy in which a man and a woman meet and overcome obstacles to fall in love. It would be useful to consider the shapes of stories in musical theatre in relationship to their temporality, and indeed Zachary Dorsey has made the argument that the musical as a genre tends towards what he calls the ‘temporal enquiries’ subjunctive mood:

When amplified by speech, song and dance, the various dimensions of the subjunctive enable a musical’s breadth of exclamations and ideologies and doubts and dreams to coalesce, however uneasily. Rather than the neatness of the past, present and future, the subjunctive mood sits adjacent to time and saturates everything with a sense of possibility. (Dorsey 2016, p. 197)

Sarah Taylor Ellis has explored queer temporality, noting the relation to *Rent* (1994), exploring how some of the show’s individual numbers ‘still’ the audience’s experience of the forward moving time of the musical, making the musical both ‘performance and archive: a vitally present invocation to memory’ (Ellis 2011, p. 204). Ellis identifies the crux of the issue: queer musical theatre can simultaneously engage with both theatrical performance and through performative acts disrupt the theatrical.

Across all genres of the form, rock musicals, jukebox musicals and so on, musicals play with expected narrative structures of a story that moves straightforwardly through time in a forward direction, while at the same time moving through a two and a half hour “real time” period of Act One, an interval, and Act Two. Some musicals cover the story of a brief period, perhaps a few weeks as in the case of *Oklahoma!* (1943) which starts with Laurey struggling to decide whether to go to the box social with the scary farmhand or the handsome cowboy, shenanigans occur, and three weeks later, she gets married to the cowboy. Other musicals explicitly play with the amount of expected story time that can fit into a story—Rodgers and Hammerstein’s *Allegro* (1947) covers a 35-year period of its central character’s life. The desire to subvert expectations or tell complex stories have led to many musicals manipulating temporality (see Table 1 for a breakdown of the kinds of ways time may be used). But where this manipulation is occurring to tell a queer story, there are additional layers of performative meaning making happening. Elizabeth Freeman argues that ‘queer time emerged from within, alongside, and beyond [. . .] heterosexually gendered double-time of stasis and progress, intimacy and genealogy’ (Freeman 2010, p. 23). Queer storytelling through the musical may explicitly resist chrononormativity (i.e., straight time), by unsettling the stasis and progress aspects of heteronormative productivity (think of Laurey’s will-she-or-won’t-she about her Curly and the box social debate, she does fall in love with Curly and is married—genealogy may commence).

Table 1. Musicals that play with chronology and time structures.

Type	Examples Include:	Structure/Relation to Time
Biographical musicals (long time periods)	<i>Evergreen</i> (1930); <i>Allegro</i> (1947); <i>Pacific Overtures</i> (1976); <i>Les Misérables</i> (1985); <i>Bring in 'da Noise, Bring in 'da Funk</i> (1995); <i>The Color Purple</i> (2005); <i>Road Show</i> (2008); <i>The Fortress of Solitude</i> (2015); <i>Hamilton</i> (2016)	Tend to cover large time-periods telling a life story of a real or fictional person, or of a community. They frequently skip forwards to cover an extensive lifetime or period, to tell a complex history (or tell the whole story backwards).
Short flashback(s) used	<i>Sweeney Todd</i> (1979); <i>Nine</i> (1982); <i>A Class Act</i> (2000)	A single scene which reveals a back-story—as exposition within a longer plot; or multiple flashbacks, though this technique is much harder in live action than in film.
Single or double time jump	<i>Showboat</i> (1927); <i>Of Thee I Sing</i> (1931); <i>A Tree Grows in Brooklyn</i> (1951); <i>Mack and Mabel</i> (1974); <i>The Phantom of the Opera</i> (1986); <i>Passion</i> (1994); <i>Grey Gardens</i> (2006); <i>Wicked</i> (2003)	May move forwards once, often over the interval to show us the characters progression; may start at a certain point, flash back, and slowly move towards original starting point.
Multiple time jumps	<i>Love Life</i> (1948); <i>Hello Again</i> (1993); <i>Miss Saigon</i> (1989)	<i>Love Life</i> covers a vast period of American history (150 years) but does so as if one couple have been married for that period, jumping forward in time with each scene to the present day. Other musicals may move outside of chronology, or move forward and backwards multiple times.
No clear chronology or non-linear	<i>Company</i> (1970); <i>A Strange Loop</i> (2019); <i>1600 Pennsylvania Avenue</i> (1976)	Events in the musical might happen in a single moment with fragments of scenes that are like memories; or in no discernible timeline, or events structured around bookended opening and ending scenes.
Time travel or time loops	<i>Brigadoon</i> (1947); <i>The View Upstairs</i> (2019); <i>Big</i> (1996); <i>Groundhog Day</i> (2019)	Characters find ways to transport into a different time-period, the musical takes place across their present and another period. Characters may be stuck in time-periods: some characters (e.g., Merlyn in <i>Camelot</i> may have knowledge of future events) but do not strictly time travel.
Multiple time periods occurring at the same time	<i>Follies</i> (1971); <i>The Rink</i> (1984); <i>Sunday in the Park with George</i> (1984) <i>Assassins</i> (1991); <i>First Lady Suite</i> (1993); <i>Big Fish</i> (2013); <i>Apartment 40C</i> (2014); <i>Fun Home</i> (2016); <i>Pieces of String</i> (2019);	Past and present versions of the same person who do not interact, only the audience can see; characters from across multiple time-periods who can 'magically' interact from one another.
Parallel timelines	<i>The Last 5 Years</i> (2001); <i>Our House</i> (2002); <i>If/Then</i> (2014)	Sometimes two separate timelines, 'what if' scenario; two characters on different timelines.
Compressed time	<i>The Sound of Music</i> (1959); <i>Once On This Island</i> (1990)	During a single song we see more time pass than has in the show, compressing a journey or even many years (perhaps to show us the effect the musical has had on the future)

3. *Hadestown* (2019): Queer Performative Practice

In Jill Dolan's model of the utopian performative (Dolan 2001), and her approach to utopian theatre, she considers the 'small but profound moments in which performance calls the attention of the audience in a way that lifts everyone slightly above the present' (Dolan 2005, p. 6). These 'small but profound moments' can be seen in each of the musicals I am addressing as part of queer resistant strategies, whether in the performance of individuals or in the entire dramaturgical structure of the musical. Although unlike the other case studies, *Hadestown* is not concerned with LGBTQ+ love

stories or identities, De Shields has asserted his queer performance practice in interviews about the musical, and touched on the idea of queer time. His performance demonstrates how performances of resistance come from intersectionality and overlapping systems of oppression: De Shields has noted that his presence is, as a black queer man, both as the role and performative. This moment troubles the straightforward division of dramatic musical world and performative practice outside of it is crucial to understanding *A Strange Loop*, as I will return to later in the article. De Shields presents the most crucial ‘small moment’ in the musical, in the speaking of ‘we sing it anyway’ as Black queer resistance.

The performance of Hermes collides with and is inseparable from the presence and meaning of De Shields on stage, with his history of performance practice, and his identity as a black queer performer and activist. As a legendary Broadway performer, De Shields has been described variously as ‘something akin to the king of the American theatre’ (Solís 2019) and ‘a Broadway deity’ (Holdren 2019): almost astonishingly, he won his first Tony Award (for Best Supporting Actor) for this performance, and a Grammy Award as Principal Soloist on the cast album. While multiple performers have previously played Hermes, De Shields’ unique presence has become overwhelmingly associated with the role, he has said ‘I now know that I created Hermes. Other folks have played the role, but I invested my DNA’ (in Vultaggio 2019). De Shields has noted his own presence as a gay man through and with the character of Hermes:

In the opening song of *Hadestown*, my character Hermes describes himself as a man with feathers on his feet. And when I, the actor André, sing that portion of the expositional song, I see the gay community in the theater lean forward. Because they’ve already owned the idea that they are men with feathers on their feet. That’s pretty queer. (De Shields in Kumar 2019)

With the exception of De Shields, the musical does not draw on Black lived experience or centre Black stories, the cast does feature POC but this is not an intrinsic aspect of the story, and principle cast members are largely white performers. This is problematic when the musical’s dramaturg, Ken Cerniglia, has explained that ‘the deep history of Catholicism, African religions, and connection to the Divine particular to New Orleans infuses the show’ (Wexler 2019). This is beyond the scope of what I am exploring here though the issue calls for further exploration: here, I am concerned with the way in which De Shields disrupts the heteronormative musical form of *Hadestown* and the broader assumptions of white supremacy that has focused so heavily on white straight experiences.

De Shields’ performance disrupts an essentially heteronormative musical that functions in the context of two (albeit it rather complex) troubled heterosexual love stories between two white couples. He can be seen to carry out what Daphne Brooks has positioned as ‘the insurgent work of musical time’ (Brooks 2014, p. 64) in the work of black women artists. Brooks considers how these artists ‘play time and play with time by way of the vocal body’ (ibid., p. 65). She argues that black women artists may ‘play with and inside of its compositional and lyrical form with so much volatility that one jolts the listener, the spectator into a thrilling, moving, disruptive relationship with past, present and future’ (ibid., p. 66). Clearly, there is a problematic history of conflating femininity with homosexuality, and that is not my intention here at all—what I am interested in is the articulation of the idea of a performance practice instigating a disruptive relationship with time. De Shields has addressed Hermes’ relationship with time, calling him ‘the sundial’ of the show, who helps the audience understand the story: ‘I’m not saying that’s what Rachel Chavkin directed. I’m saying that’s how I approach Hermes. When Hermes reappears, time has shifted’ (in Solís 2019). Queer resistance here is intertwined and doubled by Black resistant practices, and Black queer practices in particular. There is also additional resistance in the work of QPOC, and in the case of *A Strange Loop*, black queer performers and creative teams, where multiple kinds of discrimination and minoritisation operates. It is crucial to call on E. Patrick Johnson’s work in establishing Quare as a way of understanding and acknowledging this, in attending to ‘the different “standpoints” found among lesbian, bisexual, gay, and transgendered people of color—differences that are also conditioned by class and gender’ (Johnson 2001, p. 3).

There is a close relationship between dramaturgy and the organizing of time in the musical: queer temporality shapes the unfolding of narrative and resolution of the story and may even deny the

expected resolution that a musical usually brings. Elizabeth Freeman, in her pivotal work on *Queer Temporality: Queer Histories*, comments that the artists she is approaching reuse the past in order to imagine better futures (Freeman 2010, p. xvi). Freeman positions queer temporalities as ‘points of resistance to [the heterosexual] temporal order that, in turn, propose other possibilities for living in relation to indeterminately past, present, and future others’ (ibid., p. xxii). To consider the past events that have led to now and to tell their story ‘anyway’ (to borrow from Hermes) requires a resistant turn, a turn towards the future. Muñoz’s argues that that queer futurity is the participation in imagining which attends *hopefully* to something greater than individual futures:

To participate in such an endeavor is not to imagine an isolated future for the individual but instead to participate in a hermeneutic that wishes to describe a collective futurity, a notion of futurity that functions as a historical materialist critique. (Muñoz 2009, p. 26)

4. *Fun Home* (2013)

Queer dramaturgy in the musical can play with temporality through unleashing its structure in performance and challenging the expected suspension of disbelief audiences usually undergo in watching, and immersing themselves in Broadway musicals. Though Campbell and Farrier are primarily focused on live art and contemporary theatre, they note the characteristic quality of queer dramaturgy that reveals in performance:

[...] strategies of making and reading [that] resist what Lehmann calls a ‘closed fictive cosmos’ (Lehman 2006, p. 99), where the character exists unproblematically separate from the labouring body that speaks its lines and performs its actions. (Campbell and Farrier 2016, p. 16).

In calling to Hans Lehman’s post-dramatic theory—they establish that the performative nature of queer theatre can disrupt the tidy boundaries of the fictive (dramatic) cosmos. *Fun Home* is an example of a musical with queer dramaturgy that is still deeply rooted in the context and shape of a Broadway musical, yet one that clearly disrupts these boundaries. Notably, the creative production team have asserted the dramatic unity of the project, as Rebecca Applin Warner notes, Lisa Kron is clear Alison does not know about the audience and is simply a narrator, ‘She’s a character doggedly pursuing a goal as characters do’ (in Warner 2019, p. 152).

Fun Home’s casting disrupts the normal dramaturgical form of the musical in casting three differently aged performers to appear as Alison Bechdel simultaneously: Small Alison (Gabriella Pizzolo), Medium Alison (Emily Skeggs) and Alison (Beth Malone). Musicals normally use multiple casting to show a character’s progression in age, as in *Shrek* and *Billy Elliot*. This approach can also reveal the limitation of an actor’s labouring body: in the original production of *Oklahoma!* Laurey and Curly doubled with professional ballet dancers for the dream ballet. Subsequently it became the norm for revivals of *Oklahoma!* to have the same cast throughout (as in the National Theatre’s 1998 production) perhaps revealing changing demands for triple-threat musical theatre performances. Yet intriguingly, Daniel Fish’s 2018 revival radically separates the dream ballet by reinstating the labouring body of dancer Gabrielle Hamilton—arguably borrowing from contemporary (and queer) theatrical practices. Other musicals (particularly those represented in Table 1 with multiple time jumps such as *Follies*) have also used differently aged versions of the same characters on stage simultaneously.

Fun Home challenges heteronormative dramaturgy through its focus on multiple versions of Alison and a singular Bruce, placing a crucial emphasis on who at the centre of the story. Yet, Alison is also a real person outside of the musical, who really exists in our time: the division between the ‘fictive cosmos’ of the musical and the real stakes of this story are slippery. Jeanette D’Arcy has considered the underpinning source material for the musical, noting that the comic book structure means the audience ‘are aware not only of how events unfurl in the performance but of the multiple ways in which the event could have occurred and thus of the contingent nature of social and political relationships and choices’ (D’Arcy 2019). The musical materially analyses the relationship between Alison and Bruce and

their queer experiences across two generations. Narrative and dramaturgical time is in flux throughout *Fun Home*—everything is happening at once—in order for Alison to work out her relationship with her father and move into her own future. Muñoz notes that the temporal manoeuvres of queer futurity ‘wrest ourselves from the present’s stultifying hold’ (Muñoz 2009, p. 28) and the musical can be read as enacting material analysis of the past in order to imagine a future for Alison.

The second song of the musical ‘Welcome to Our House on Maple Avenue’ sets up our understanding of the world. (Table 2 sets out the function of the opening sequence of *Fun Home* and the time in which it is taking place.) This song occupies the space traditionally occupied with the ‘I want’ song and apparently reconceptualises it as a ‘he wants’ song, as that phrase is repeated throughout the number. We see the family in the past, and Alison remembering them from the present, singing about Bruce’s meticulous demands: with his overwhelming desires for what he wants the house to look like. But the song simultaneously reveals Alison’s ‘I want’, which is to find an answer to the question ‘Am I just like you?’; Alison wants to understand her own relationship with her father.

Table 2. Exploring time in the opening sequences of *Fun Home* (using the original cast recording).

Song	When Is It Happening?	Dramaturgical Notes
‘It All Comes Back’	Alison is looking at a box of her father’s belongings in the present : she summons the past through her memory.	Initially song by Young Alison, with dialogue between Bruce and Young Alison. Bruce sings about his feelings about the antiques in the box—but in turn, Alison picks up Bruce’s lyrics and repeats them. Eventually the song becomes a noisy crash of Young Alison, Bruce and Alison’s music. Alison reflects on the question ‘Am I just like you?’
“Sometimes my father appeared to enjoy having children”	Present introduction of past memory—a fragment	This spoken dialogue moves us between songs (notably, it is included on the cast album) to make the shifts make sense.
‘Welcome to Our House on Maple Avenue’	Past then Alison reflects repeating Helen’s original verse in present . Alison sings along with past memories. Bruce sings fragments of the ‘Not Too Bad’ song.	Helen (Alison’s mother) leads this song guiding the children in preparing the house for what ‘he wants [Bruce]’ rather than the traditional ‘I want’ song. By the end of the song, Alison introduces the connection between her and her father, but notes that he killed himself and she became a lesbian cartoonist.
‘Not Too Bad’	Past , then present reading of her early diaries.	Middle Alison sings a version of Bruce’s ‘Not Too Bad’ about her own early cartoons. Alison summons her earlier memories.

While the structure of the opening sequence fulfils the demands of traditional Broadway dramaturgy, the underpinning musical structures manage the complexity of telling three simultaneous stories in Alison and Bruce’s lives. The musical makes consistent use of looping musical motifs which challenges the traditional expectations of how a song works in the musical: instead of reprises of whole songs, phrases and sections communicate the fragments of memory. James Lovelock notes that the musical shows Alison and Bruce’s continuous coming out process ‘reminding the audience that the characters are still negotiating the heterosexual matrix despite the inherent ‘queer space’ of their relationship’ (Lovelock 2019, p. 200). The ending sequence (explored in Table 3) allows time to happen at once, allowing Alison to make some kind of peace with her father’s death.

Table 3. Exploring time in the ending sequence of *Fun Home*.

Song	When?	Who?	Dramaturgical Notes
'You ready to go for that drive? ...'	Past but also present	Alison steps in for Medium Alison.	Spoken transition—Alison enters her memories for the first time.
Telephone Wire	Past but simultaneously present as Alison remembers	Alison answers as Medium Alison actually did, she cannot change what has already happened. She sings 'make this not the past'	Alison becomes aware her father did not want to listen to her (Bruce twice resists fulfilling rhyming structures).
'It was great to have you home'	Present remembering of past		Transition from opening 'Maps' music
Edges of the World	Past (initially a letter to Alison) potentially imagined letters to Alison	Bruce—in letters (possibly imagined) to Alison, internal thoughts.	Multiple quotations, fragments of a 'Not Too Bad'; long music and lyrical quotation from 'Changing My Major to Joan'; lyric quotes from 'It All Comes Back'
'This is what I have of you'	Present as Alison reflects on her father	Alison	Quotes 'It All Comes Back' opening section; repetition of caption
Flying Away (Finale)	Two past moments and present all simultaneously—the music overlaps as it did in the opening—but now it is beautiful.	Alison sings several of Young Alison's phrases, she refers to Dad as Daddy; Middle Alison sings what Alison sang in Telephone Wire.	Musical fragments from 'It All Comes Back'; 'Not Too Bad'; 'Maps'; the Caption motif.

'Flying Away' offers the most explicit moment of queer resistance to the form of the musical. It allows the queer audience a way to sit with the unique lived experiences that being LGBTQ+ enact in all their complexities (the joy of 'Changing My Major' and the almost unbearable pain of Alison being able to talk to her father about who she is). 'Flying Away' offers a way for Alison to move into her future, accepting her difference from her father, and being able to hold the complex threads of her queer past into the future. *Fun Home* does not offer any traditional happy ending, instead it tells a sad song that can only result in the death of Alison's father: but in telling the story again, in this way, offers a queer resistant hope. This complexity is continued and extended in *A Strange Loop*.

5. *A Strange Loop* (2019): Explicitly Embracing Performativity

A Strange Loop engages far more clearly with queer dramaturgy and temporalities in its structural and performance practice than *Fun Home*. *A Strange Loop* repeatedly disrupts any easy relationship between its character and the labouring body; the audiences are implicated as witnesses and participants. At Playwrights Horizons Larry Owens played Usher, who is on stage for almost the entirety of the one-act musical, six QPOC performers play Usher's inner thoughts (1–6): Antwayn Hopper, James Jackson, Jr., L Morgan Lee, John-Michael Lyles, John-Andrew Morrison, and Jason Veasey. The ensemble also plays all supporting characters, for example in 'We Wanna Know' all six play Usher's mother. The musical revolves around the extraordinary performance practice of Larry Owens, whose performativity within and through the role echoes many of the loops around this musical. Owens has discussed how the role of Usher as a black queer man of size echoes his own personal experience and the 'specificity of the lived-in experiences of a fat body' (in Goldberg 2019). The musical is particularly onerous in terms of the physical and vocal demands it makes on Owens, and after its closure he poignantly noted:

‘Hopefully I don’t have to do a play as taxing as this ever again. Hopefully, this tells the industry what I need them to know’ (in *ibid.*).

A Strange Loop calls for far lengthier critical exploration than can be considered here, but I want to focus on some of the specific ways in which the musical disrupts any sort of closed fictive cosmos to enact queer resistance. Firstly, the disruption between character and the labouring body extends beyond Larry Owens as Usher, because Usher is so clearly a response to creator Michael R. Jackson’s own identity as a black queer writer. This musical started as a single song ‘Memory Song’, which Jackson has described as a ‘thinly veiled personal monologue’ (in [Playbill 2019](#)) and over the following decade was substantially reworked and developed. Jackson has said about the episodic musical, which can be seen as structurally related to Stephen Sondheim’s *Company*, ‘lots of things came from personal experience, but most are fictionalized. [. . .] I’ve been using the term self-referential as opposed to autobiographical’ (in [Cole 2019](#)). Jackson has repeatedly emphasised that he is trying to show that ‘the black gay male experience is a multiplicity’ (in *ibid.*). Thomas DeFrantz and Anita Gonzalez note that in Black performance practice ‘the terms of performance are expansively imagined to allow for subversive and normative simultaneity: cross-rhythms of rupture and coherence amid shifting landscapes of intervention and virtuosity’ ([DeFrantz and Gonzalez 2014](#), p. 10). Elsewhere, Jackson notes that ‘as a black person living in this white supremacist, capitalist patriarchy, you are constantly translating. So I’ve always been interested in examining how race and blackness in particular is translated through multiple identities’ ([Sanford and Jackson 2019](#)). In addressing the multiple aspects to Usher, the ending of the musical is perhaps the most significant departure from the form of the Broadway musical. It is simply the recognition that ‘nothing is wrong with [Usher] and that he doesn’t need to change. That recognition leads to a reversal, which is that he changes from a place of self-loathing to self-acceptance’ ([Jackson 2019](#)).

The musical delights in manipulating time: note Freeman’s argument that queer temporality may ‘propose other possibilities for living in relation to indeterminately past, present, and future others’ ([Freeman 2010](#), p. xxii). [Table 4](#) lays out the opening five songs of the musical and their inner timescales. The opening song effectively pauses time, ‘Intermission Song’ features the ensemble as patrons of *The Lion King* throughout asking Usher how much of intermission is left with the musical phrase ‘usher, usher?’ (it is worth noting that this musical does not have an interval). The song features Usher himself speaking in first and third person; the ensemble also play out Usher’s Thoughts, speaking an inner monologue delivered in third person about him—Usher. Usher has a set of interval chimes, and their looping (the first double A note repeats up the octave before ending on the E) announces the end of intermission, but the motif loops through the musical. Leitmotifs are a staple of the musical form: here Jackson has employed them to support the dramaturgical structure of the loop, and Usher’s realization that he does not need to change.

Queer dramaturgy through performance is perhaps most evident in the closing numbers of the musical. ‘Periodically’ is a phone call song (Usher is listening to his answer machine) which appears to offer Usher the certainty of his mother’s genuine love and delight at her son turning 26 on the 26th day of the month before revealing the full complexity of that love. Jackson notes that in the musical the song is ‘an emotional rollercoaster of the deep love and homophobia that Usher’s mother feels and Usher’s perception and perhaps internalization of that love and homophobia’ (in [Playbill 2019](#)). Her emotions for her son are inseparable from the pain of her deeply felt religious beliefs, and these beliefs in the song disrupt the neat and tidy structure of a musical theatre solo which we would expect to deploy repetition to develop musical sections. It also actively separates the character from the labouring body in performance: its real life source material comes from a real message that Jackson’s own mother left on his answer machine on his birthday (*ibid.*). Secondly, the extraordinary performance of John-Andrew Morrison takes the role of Usher’s perception of his mother for the entire final sequence of the musical.

Table 4. Opening sequence of *A Strange Loop*.

Title	Details	Timescale of Song
'Intermission Song'	Usher is thinking about writing his musical, while being asked when the show will restart by the audience of his day job, an usher for <i>The Lion King</i> .	Real world: a moment Inner thoughts: longer Time seems to stop inside the song as it becomes overwhelming
'Today'	Usher is telling us about his reality and his hopes for writing a musical: cruel interjections from the Thoughts interrupt his inner monologue. It is choreographed and plays with tension of Broadway expectations and structures.	A moment/outside of time. The song reveals the world of the musical, by introducing us to Usher's Thoughts
'We Wanna Know'	A phone call—all six of the Thoughts play Usher's mother, or how he interprets her.	A single phone call (though it is clear the phone call is relatively frequent)
'Inner White Girl'	Largely Usher's thoughts while the Thoughts work more as an ensemble supporting the song and echoing his feelings	The song pastiches the white girl songs Usher is talking about—it is the most song like full song we've heard so far
'Didn't Want Nothin'	A phone call—Usher's dad calls him, the ensemble take sections of the song	

Rather than verse and chorus, or expansive bridge sections, 'Periodically' functions in three distinct sections. Section A: the birthday message, where his mother sings around her own variation on the 'This is the Day that the Lord has made' phrase, repeating the word periodically three times. In the transition from Section A to B, Morrison belts for the first time, and while the underpinning chord progression suggests a dramatic modulation, the actual change is a frantic and unstable tempo. Section B: 'it ain't right' has a staccato underscoring, with the 'it ain't right' phrase repeated seven times. B uses the fastest tempo as Usher's mother becomes more frantic in her desperation to convince her son. It is the only moment in the song that employs comedic effect as his mother struggles to articulate her disgust when talking about gay sex. Section B repeats the lyric 'periodically' as a transition into Section C: 'hell is real'. Section C uses a gentle arpeggio formation: a lyrical contrast with her actual words about what she believes awaits Usher if he does not repent. Her love for Jesus is the profound lens through which she loves her son and which prohibits her from accepting Usher's sexuality. The song initiates the final sequence of the musical. Jackson notes that after it Usher 'begins to chip away at the fourth wall [. . .] He and his mother argue until he finally takes her into the Tyler Perry-style gospel play of his life that culminates in an ironic church/funeral scene for a friend who died from AIDS-related complications' (Jackson 2019).

'Precious Little Dream/AIDS is God's Punishment' continues the unflinching approach of the musical that has already staged a violent sexual encounter in 'Inwood Daddy'; Jackson has noted the sexual candour of the musical, 'it enters territory that musicals haven't always been comfortable in' (Sanford and Jackson 2019). In this sequence song the family set transforms, a large neon-lit cross and a coffin appear in the previously home setting; Usher takes the role of a preacher, repeating the chorus of 'AIDS is God's Punishment'. The audience become a kind of congregation, and Usher-as-Preacher invites the audience to clap along, and in the performance I saw, many of the audience did, before starting to realize perhaps what they were clapping along *with*. Jackson notes he strongly believes 'that everyone has to take responsibility for their own choices including whether to clap along [in the song] or not' (ibid.). João Florêncio in his consideration of queer dramaturgical strategies, explores how Derek Jarman's film *Blue* represents HIV/AIDS, and notes that the film brings 'AIDS to bear on the bodies of the audience as witnesses co-implicated in an act of testimony' (Florêncio 2016, p. 186). In this sequence, *A Strange Loop's* queer dramaturgy radically challenges the temporality of the performance

into the performative, we are co-implicated in the act of testimony within the collapsed dramatic structure of the musical.

The final two numbers of the musical 'Memory Song' and 'A Strange Loop', present deeply personal and dramatically subdued responses that demonstrate Usher revealing that he himself does not need to change, and he is able to accept who he is. 'Memory Song' occupies the traditional spot of the 11 o'clock number' but by this point in the musical it feels like the traditional structure of the musical has collapsed and something else is emerging in its midst. Dolan's concept of the 'small but profound moments' (Dolan 2005, p. 6) is useful here since this is a consciously small moment, right after the huge heightened spectacle of 'AIDS is God's Punishment'. In it, Usher begins to sing alone; the ensemble only accompany him at the end of the song by echoing key phrases, rather than disrupt him as they have previously. There is no big finale—but rather a quiet and contemplative realisation, that calls back to the original xylophone five-note motif. In the moments after the musical, in the resonant applause, it felt like this was how it must have been to watch *Company* in 1970, to have seen a completely new approach to the form of the musical that throws into question what has gone before. Jackson's musical centres black queer stories and in doing so resists the form of the musical itself.

6. Conclusions

When we approach queer resistance practices in relation to the musical, we must acknowledge their reliance on Black resistant practices and Black queer/Quare resistant practices. Campbell and Farrier consider the ways in which 'queer dramaturgies are [...] set against the dominant modes of representation and are shaped through forms that are on the fringe and boundaries of disciplines' (Campbell and Farrier 2016, p. 7). *Fun Home* and *A Strange Loop* challenge the structure of a heteronormative musical form and both musicals enact queer dramaturgies and futurity as part of queer resistance practices. They both present 'sad songs', complex and difficult, devastating queer stories in order to imagine better. Clearly, there is important future work to be done on specifically addressing *A Strange Loop* and the work of André de Shields through a Quare methodology. While each of the musicals I have discussed engage with queer performative practice and queer dramaturgies: *A Strange Loop* offers the most serious challenge to the musical as a form. As Campbell and Farrier note, queer dramaturgy offers 'other ways of being in the world, play[ing] out non-normative identities [to] imagine, rehearse and form new ways of expressing an experience of the world' (ibid., p. 3). Mojisola Adebayo, in her powerful call for what she has termed Afri-Quia theatre (calling to both the African diaspora and queer diasporas in drawing on her own Nigerian heritage to shift E. Patrick Johnson's quare studies), writes 'In you I see the curtain fall on all mythical compulsory normativities' (Adebayo 2016, p. 146). These musicals open new possibilities for the disruption of the musicals' normativities by forming new ways of expressing sad songs, and of expressing marginalised experiences of the world.

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