ROOTS IN THE EARTH AND A FLAG IN MY HAND:

RURAL GENDER IDENTITY IN AMERICAN

MUSICAL THEATRE

by

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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The integrated musical is a vehicle for the creation and communication of a national identity, created through the use of coded performances of gender and, at times, rural settings conceptualized as essentially "American." There is, however, little research about the ways in which gender operates *in* rural settings in musical theatre, or the ways in which rural gender identities are utilized to communicate nationalist ideologies. This thesis seeks to address this gap in research by examining three contemporary American musicals – *Carrie, Violet,* and *The Spitfire Grill* – in light of both American musical theatre conventions surrounding gender performance and contemporary theory around gender, rurality, and intersectional rural gender identities. This thesis ultimately suggests that an approach to rural gender in musical theatre grounded in a specific physical and cultural moment and location is best equipped to both honor the narratives of rural communities and propagate appropriately complex narratives of national identity.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The musical, one of the few art forms that originated in the United States, "has been a primary and widely accessible voice through which the so-called American way of life has expressed itself to people in the USA and to much of the rest of the world," particularly after *Oklahoma!'s* premier during WWII (Miller; Karp; Filmer, Rimmer and Walsh 381). *Oklahoma!* reminded soldiers of the American values for which they fought, and its rural setting is no coincidence as rural places and spaces have always held a prominent position in American national imaginations (Filmer, Rimmer, and Walsh). The rural idyll is a prominent element of the "American dream" (Hedges and Hedges).

David Savran calls for a "demythologizing" of the post-war musical, suggesting that the period's musicals were created specifically to uphold conventional gender ideals in response to national anxieties about shifting gender roles after the second World War (216). Scholars Robert Lawson-Peebles and Christian Mendenhall argue that a cohesive, patriotic national identity is no longer possible so, by extension, musicals are no longer able to speak to universal national concerns and aspirations as they did in the post-war era. I argue that contemporary musicals set in rural America operate similarly to post-war musicals, creating idealized communities that suggest "correct" social formations as a balm for national woes after the Millennium.

Even in a United States in which there is allegedly no longer a universal understanding of correct practices of citizenship or performance of identity, the myth of the rural idyll – in this case, the idea that there is a rural space that is uniquely and

essentially American, and an element of America that is uniquely and essentially rural – is pervasive (Keller, Lloyd and Bell). Audiences implicitly understand that rural spaces are intended to be "more real" than their own communities, depicting "a place of happiness and solidarity where kinship ties prevail and where relationships are unfailingly 'tight knit'" (Little and Austin 102). This vision of the rural is compelling, particularly in places and times where the country feels distant and divided; musicals that invoke the rural are able to not only comment on the America-that-is, but suggest the America-that-could/should-be.

Joanne Jacobson points out that rural spaces in the United States are conceptualized by artists through "two alternative visions of resistance to change" (193). I consider the ways in which the majority of the musicals in this thesis interact with one such vision – that of the rural idyll. In an alternative vision, the "rural nightmare," some artists conceptualize the allegedly "insular, unchanging" nature of rural communities as "a source of suffocation and paralysis in an inescapably changing world" (Scott and Biron 311; Jacobson 193). The rural nightmare and rural idyll both imagine rural communities as highly conservative, unchanging spaces; the difference lies in the implicit value judgement of the community's predictability and conservatism. I'm interested in examining the ways in which three contemporary musicals – *Violet, The Spitfire Grill,* and *Carrie* – engage with ideas of the rural and, by extension, the ways in which they use the rural to make broader suggestions about the United States and, specifically, the role gender plays in the creation and maintenance of American society.

Rural identities and gendered identities do not operate independently of each other. Rather, an intersectional rural gender identity occurs that is sometimes directly in

line with urban or suburban understandings of conventional gender performance and sometimes differs (see Little; Little and Panelli; Keller, etc.). This thesis considers the ways in which these musicals feature and create specifically rural gender identities, and the ways in which the performance of those identities affects the relationships that build up the communities in which the musicals are set. Like the post-war musicals they emulate, a significant component of the work of *Violet, The Spitfire Grill,* and *Carrie* is an examination of the way that gender functions in the world of their musicals and, by extension, in the idyllic version of the United States the musicals represent.

Musicals are more than entertainment; they reflect the values of the world in which they are created, and they shape the values of the world in which they are performed (Brandth). If the rural is a stand-in for a universal set of American values, these musicals suggest what those values are or should be. If rural characters are to be read as essentially American characters, these musicals suggest how Americans are supposed to act, offering a definition for what the country's understanding of "normal" behavior and identity should be and a template for how those who fall outside that scope should be treated. Part of the work of this thesis is to interrogate those received norms.

Rural spaces tend to reward more conservative gender performances (Little and Panelli). Musicals, particularly those conventionally structured around a heterosexual romance narrative, tend to offer happy endings to those characters whose gender performances comply to conventions (Wolf, “A Problem Like Maria”). Musicals set in rural America can leverage these realities in one of two ways: they can interact honestly and thoughtfully with the way rural gender identities operate in their works, engaging the high cost of strictly codified gender norms in rural spaces and the ways in which rural

citizens modify their gender performance to remain a useful and relevant member of their family and community. In so doing, they can utilize their platform to subvert dominant narratives that are no longer relevant, or even actively harmful. On the other hand, creators can elect to use rurality as a screen on which to project their own prescriptions for conventional gender performance, turning rural spaces into visions of the kind of 1950s gender performance to which Savran is responding above. That version of "traditional values," Scott Miller argues, is "nothing short of race, class, and gender warfare" (29).

In this thesis, I aim to answer Savran's call for demythologization, unpacking the ways in which these musicals utilize rural gender identities to identify present national concerns and suggest future solutions. I do so through the consideration of the following questions: At a historical moment in which gender and sexuality (and questions of the acceptability of the variations thereof) are very much a part of the national conversation, do these musicals attempt to reinscribe damaging and outdated narratives suggesting that only citizens capable of a certain conservative gender performance deserve success or acceptance, or do they provide frameworks for ways in which communities and individuals can maintain their cultural identities while creating more open and inclusive spaces? In a country theoretically built on having space for “everyone,” how do these musicals reflect a tolerance for a multiplicity of identities, or tacitly encourage gate-keeping and xenophobia?

Carey Wall suggests that musicals following *Oklahoma!*’s tradition (musicals that project American values through the creation and maintenance of rural community are

> grounded in an ethnocentricity which brings "characters from other worlds into American communitas" and which, though "the stars serenading their roots . . . return us to our feeling'", makes "little acknowledgment of genuine cultural differences and the compromises they necessitate. Instead, universality is a kind of conservatism, a mask for the procedure of converting everything to American terms." (qtd. in Filmer, Rimmer, and Walsh 394)

In some instances, I agree with Wall – the musicals that consistently fail to engage with ideas of rurality in a specific time and place and with a specifically rural gender performance also punish outsiders, suggesting an America in which only those willing or able to conform to fit into a heterogeneous society have a chance of success. I argue, however, that the musicals which engage with rural gender identity (and the challenges and variations thereof) from the vantage point of a particular rural community at a particular rural moment are able to suggest a version of our country with space for a multiplicity of identities and hope for community formations that honor all of them.

The remainder of the introduction provides further theoretical framework for my inquiry, outlining more specific and nuanced understandings of the meaning and significance of rurality, gender, and rural gender identity as well as briefly introducing the musicals that will be explored throughout the document. I then briefly introduce the coming chapters.

RURALITY

Americans, according to Lucy Lippard, struggle with place – we value the idea of having a place in the world, a connection to specific geographic locations, but few of us

actually do. Perhaps a universal feeling of placelessness is the reason that musicals that celebrate place or feature characters with a deeply rooted sense of place are so successful; they offer their urban and suburban audiences something they wish they had or feel that they've lost. John Stilgoe, however, suggests a more troubling reason for this attraction to rural settings: "Contemporary Americans recall landscape with vague delight and understanding, remembering it as space objectifying a traditional social order" (qtd. in Lippard 6).

This thesis is interested in the way that musicals perform "America" through the representation of rural gender identities. The early years of the United States are characterized by a historical narrative of progress through the conquering of wilderness and human engagement with the land and, although the majority of people who create and view theatre now live in or near urban centers, rural areas where people engage with the land continue in the popular cultural imagination as the "true America" to which all citizens hold a claim (Merchant). The language around these areas is often emotionally charged – rural areas of the country are sometimes referred to as "the heartland," and food and music associated with rural communities are said to be from "down home," reflecting an assumed ownership of and connection to lands and communities most people using this language have never belonged to.

The concept of rurality is a deceptively complicated one. Different fields of academia and other research enterprises engage with the concept of rurality differently to meet the needs of their research (qualitative analyses in some areas of sociology, for example, and quantitative in economics). To complicate the matter further, there is no single working definition of rurality in any field; rather, there are numerous theories, and

each researcher must identify the definition(s) with which they are working before continuing with their research (Koizol et al.; Somerville and Bosworth; DeGannaro and Fatini). Peter Somerville and Gary Bosworth explain that theories of rurality "can be broadly classified into one of two groups: place-based theories (e.g., demographic, population, spatial, political economic, and socio-cultural theories) and social constructivist theories" (2). This means that measures of rurality may be concrete (What is the population per square mile? Is there diverse industry, or only one or two kinds? Is the community demographically homogenous?), may be assessed based on external observations of community relationships (Do the people who live there seem to share a common set of values? Is there a clear difference in the quality of relationships between "insiders" and "outsiders"?), or – still more nebulously – may rely on feelings of people in and around the area in question (Do the people who live there identify as being from a rural area? Do people in the surrounding area say that the community in question is rural?) (Somerville and Bosworth; Brown and Schafft).

Any attempt to define rurality is further complicated in an enterprise in which academic definitions intersect with public notions – as, when considering forms of popular entertainment for public consumption, the definitions must. Bernardo Corrado De Gannaro and Andrea Fantini suggest a "need to distinguish between the rural as a space (a specific kind of place) and the rural as a represented space, the so-called social representation which, in a post-modern society permeated by symbolic elements, can evolve in a different way than the material space" (256). I argue that these musicals often ignore the realities of "the rural as a space" in favor of a vision of the rural idyll. This choice denies the authentic lived experience of people in actual rural communities, but it

also perpetuates a falsehood with potential real-world consequences to the largely urban and suburban audiences who experience the previously discussed identification with the idea of the American rural. Suggesting that only rural spaces can be sites of good or pure connections with the land, family, and community establishes impossible expectations for audience members and disempowers them from pursuing responsible relationships with the parts of the world in their own backyards, where they truly have the potential to make a difference (Cronon).

GENDER

"Gender," argues Stacy Wolf, a musical theatre scholar, "is a constitutive element of Broadway musical theatre, fundamental to the musical's architecture, and as vital a building block as music, lyrics, orchestration, spoken text, choreography and dance, lights, sets, costumes, and props" ("Changed for Good" 6). There is a great deal of scholarship about the ways in which gender is constructed and performed, taught through both overt and covert social cues, a system of rewards and punishments that encourage adherence to a binary system with a series of (largely unwritten) rules (Butler). Structural functionalist sociologist Talcott Parsons attempted to codify cultural expectations for gendered behavior, prescribing that "male sex roles [be] 'instrumental' – that is, aggressive, competitive, rational – and female ones [be] 'expressive' – that is, nurturing, gentle, emotional, and non-ambitious, even fearful of success" (qtd. in Burchbinder 30). The full debate about whether gender– a person's identification with maleness, femaleness, or a category between or outside that binary – in people in the real (as opposed to theatrical) world is innate, learned, or some combination of the two is beyond the scope of this thesis. It may be said with confidence, however, that – at least in theatre

– characters' gender is constructed and performed, intentionally crafted by a writer and embodied onstage through an actor, and the ways that they adhere to or deviate from conventional masculinity or femininity and the way those choices are rewarded or punished strongly communicates something about the creators' worldview.

Musicals maintain more of an attention to and control of gender construction than any other contemporary Western theatrical form. Susan McClary - a feminist music scholar - points out that there is a long-standing tradition of writing dramatic music for gendered voices, and that all subsequent pieces of dramatic music (the category to which musicals belong) must orient themselves to or away from these traditions. If the very act of creating music isn't gendered (and, often, it is), then the quality and range of voices demanded in musical notation certainly is. Stacey Wolf notes that musicals have highly gendered conventions both in musicality (for example, lower female voices belong to more forceful characters, higher voices generally belong to conventionally feminine ingénues) and structure; in her entry in *The Oxford Handbook of the American Musical*, she expresses several common storylines in which female characters embark on a journey into conventional femininity or male characters move from a homosocial to heterosexual characterization.

It is important to note that, as Wolfe points out, a great deal of conventional musical structure rests on the presence of a successful heterosexual romance narrative (*A Problem Like Maria*, *Changed for Good*, "Gender and Sexuality"). In musicals in which the protagonist does not engage in a successful heterosexual romance narrative (like *Carrie*) or in which the heterosexual romance narrative in the plot is not the relationship set up as important by musical structure (as in *The Spitfire Grill*), I explore the ways that

the musical is deviating from conventional structure and consider the reasons for and implications of those deviations. Ultimately, I suggest that the musicals that offer positive representation of a multiplicity of gender identities most accurately reflect the lived experience of both audience members watching the musical and people who belong to the kinds of communities represented within the action of the play.

Rural Gender Identity

Rurality and gender are both applicable to the musicals in this study on their own, and will occasionally be explored independently of each other within this thesis. I am more interested, however, in exploring the intersections of these fields, and the ways in which these intersections create something different than the sum of their parts.

Rurality is strongly tied to economic models related to agriculture, resource extraction, or other manual labor sectors, and many people in rural areas are working class (Koizol, Arthur, Hawley, Bovaird, Bash, McCormick, and Welsh). Economic changes in the 1970s and 1980s that made these economic models less viable created a sharp shift in rural and working class masculinities that persists to the present day, creating conflict between cultural narratives of masculinity that demanded a man be able to both provide financially *and* work in the manual labor sector; when economic realities made fulfilling both requirements simultaneously challenging, if not impossible, men in rural areas were faced with a crisis of identity that men in urban areas with different narratives around masculinity did not experience (Cowie and Boehm).

The musicals in this thesis take place at different points in time in relation to the Vietnam War. Vietnam was the site of a turning point for masculinity in the United

States, and the inciting incident of previously discussed economic changes (Kimmel and Ferber; Cowie and Boehm). Paying attention to the ways in which these musicals are written to be conscious of and responsive to the historical moment in which they are set allows insight into the degree to which the musicals' authors are attempting to tell a story including a rural gender identity (as opposed to imposing urban and suburban ideas of gender on a rural character).

Although all musicals in this thesis have had Broadway or Off-Broadway productions within the past fifteen years, in a time Wolf points out is often decidedly characterized as postfeminist, rural gender identities are often assumed to be more in line with the traditionally kinds of gendered behavior described by Parsons above. Jo Little and Ruth Panelli explain that conventional ideas of gender in rural communities place "men at the head of a 'natural hierarchy' and women as the domestic, subservient sustainers of life and social formations" (281). According to Julie Keller, however, the ways in which masculinity and femininity are constructed in rural areas are more nuanced than conventional wisdom dictates; "the practices of some [rural] women align with an alternative femininity," and "more flexible forms of masculinity have emerged" in recent years (80; 81-82).

There is, then, a tension between the reality of rural gender roles and expectations of rural gender performance. This expectation of hierarchical gender roles in which men command and women submit contributes to high rates of domestic violence in rural areas compared to those of urban and suburban areas when community members are unable or unwilling to meet these gendered expectations (Sandberg). Some musicals ignore the complications of rural gender performance, portraying the conventional ideal as the

reality within the world of the musical and punishing those characters who fall outside it. To do so is to reinscribe conservative dominant narratives around the so-called correct style of gender performance and, I suggest, to consequently incur a portion of the responsibility for the violence that occurs when these narratives encounter opposition from community members who are unable or unwilling to attempt to live them out. I pay particular attention to the musicals that, in contrast, make the characters' efforts to navigate their gender performance within the specific context of their rural communities transparent, both acknowledging (and condemning) the violence that sometimes occurs as a byproduct of these efforts at navigation and suggesting possible solutions.

THE MUSICALS

My exploration of rural gender identity in American musical theatre is conducted by considering three contemporary musicals with Broadway or Off-Broadway premieres in the past twenty years. *Violet, Carrie,* and *The Spitfire Grill* all take place in a rural community or primarily feature characters from rural communities, open with single female protagonists under the age of thirty, and have been adapted from source material (rather than being original stories). Each of the protagonists are outsider, seeking a place to belong. Considering the ways in which creative teams altered the stories lifted from source materials in their musical adaptations provides valuable information about the intended message or meaning of the musical eventually produced, the writers' vision for the world of their musicals.

Below, I have included a brief introduction to each musical in the thesis, providing a brief plot summary as well as a short production history.

Violet

Violet, with music by Jeanine Tesori and book and lyrics by Brian Crawley, is an adaptation of Doris Betts' short story, "The Ugliest Pilgrim." Initially conceived at the National Music Theatre Conference in 1994, *Violet* ran briefly Off-Broadway in 1997 and was revived on Broadway in 2014 (Horn). Tesori and Crawley both reflect that they were drawn to the story because of the way in which it interrogated ideals of beauty in young women and cultural pressures for young women to work to attain beauty (Johnson). Tesori sought Crawley as a collaborator after several years of considering writing a musical based on Betts' short story (Johnson). Though the musical had a fairly brief run at Playwrights Horizons and did not transfer to Broadway in its initial run, it was critically well received and has enjoyed a robust life at regional and educational theatres (Johnson; Berliner).

The musical, described by reviewers as "shadowy Southern Gothic" and an "ambitious slice of dark Americana," was written at a time when, according to Michael John LaChiusa, "America [was] having an identity crisis" (Brantley "Lessons about Life" C12; Winer "Ugliness to Hope" B5). LaChiusa refers to the nation's dark "cultural psyche," influenced by "times which are even more cynical and caustic" than in Sondheim's heyday, and the result is a musical smaller in scale and more thoughtful in tone than post-war era musicals.

Violet tells the story of Violet Karl, a young woman from rural North Carolina who is facially disfigured after a childhood accident with an axe blade. The story's action is divided between Young Violet, who appears in flashbacks throughout the character's adolescence, and Violet, who is on a pilgrimage to visit a faith healer in Oklahoma in

hopes of a miraculous healing. Along the way, Violet meets two soldiers preparing to deploy to Vietnam and develops a friendship with them both. When Violet discovers that the faith healer is a fraud, she experiences her own small miracles through forgiving her father and discovering one of the soldiers' love. John Horn describes the essence of the musical as being about "how we define beauty, what we need for acceptance, where we find compassion and forgiveness."

The Spitfire Grill

The Spitfire Grill's Off-Broadway premier happened in October of 2001, a few months after the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001. At a time of national crisis and questions and doubts, it was a musical that offered reassurance about the possibility of hope and redemption in what people felt was a uniquely American setting. Though some reviewers scorned the musical's simple sweetness, many traded on the "Americanism" of the show, some even going so far as to suggest that disliking it was highly problematic: "*The Spitfire Grill* feels as if it has been transplanted to Times Square directly from an obscure patch of the American heartland…At a time when cynicism seems downright unpatriotic, sophisticates may find themselves powerless to resist" (Smith 42). It seems probable that this timing (and the fact that *The Spitfire Grill* offered a relatively small-scale show on a unit set when theatres, like all businesses, were being hit with the post-9/11 recession) contributed to *The Spitfire Grill's* long life in community and regional theatres and on international stages.

Mark Sullivan explains that "Valcq has made it clear in interviews that he and Alley chose this story because it lacked the cynicism of many new musicals" (20). *The Spitfire Grill* is based off an eponymous movie that was independently produced in 1996. The film focuses on a story of redemption with strong Biblical undertones, with cover art that reads "To a town with no future, comes a girl with a past" ("Pictures and Photos"). The musical maintains the themes of hope and redemption as it tells the story of Perchance "Percy" Talbott, a young Appalachian woman who's been released from prison and intends to serve out her parole in Gilead, WI so she can see the fall foliage. She secures employment at the Spitfire Grill, the social hub of the dying town, and befriends its proprietor, Hannah, and Shelby, Hanna's niece. As Percy's idea to raffle off the Grill brings tourism and industry back to the community, Percy learns to forgive herself for her past and embrace a bright future as she falls in love with the community.

Carrie

Carrie, based off the eponymous Stephen King novel, stands alone as the only pop musical (a musical with a score and vocal qualities similar to contemporary popular music) I'm exploring. *Violet* and *The Spitfire Grill* are both "small" musicals; the rurality of their setting is a large part of their appeal, so they are written to be life-sized, or as close to it as an art form in which people spontaneously break out into song gets (Simon 93). In including *Carrie* in this thesis, I wanted to explore the way a rural community is represented when the rurality of the setting is not a major plot point, but is written to be incidental; does the assumption that events in rural America are generalizable to the larger population stand if the average theatregoer doesn't enter the theatre expecting a

rural setting? Do the characters uphold the same conventions of rural life and engage in rural gender identities in similar ways to characters in more obviously rurally-set pieces? The musical also interacts with the rural nightmare rather than the rural idyll; the elements of rurality present in the musical's characterization of Chamberlain, ME don't characterize the community as a safe haven or source of joy for any of the characters.

I also wanted to see how rurality translated to a character of a slightly different age. Carrie is the youngest of the protagonists in this thesis, a high schooler in comparison to Violet and Percy's mid-twenties, so the kinds of community we see – school and home – are different; in another world, Carrie could've grown up to be a Violet or a Percy. The well-known plot looks back at the prom night destruction of the small town of Chamberlain, ME, engineered by Carrie, a telekinetic teenager navigating an abusive fundamentalist Christian mother, her own puberty, and the unkindness of her peers. Stephen King reflects that "*Carrie* is largely about how women find their own channels of power, and what men fear about women and women's sexuality" (qtd. in Csetényi 167).

Carrie debuted on Broadway in 1988 and closed after only five performances (Nichols). After vast revisions, however, *Carrie's* 2012 Off-Broadway revival was better received, and continues to be produced; between March and October of 2016, for example, there will be at least ten productions throughout the US ("Now Playing"). Although the 1988 and 2012 versions of the musical are both fairly consistent with the original source material, there are some key differences between them. The most notable is the period in which the musical is set; the 1988 version maintains the novel's 1979 setting, while the revival libretto sets the action in the present day. For the purposes of

this thesis, I will consider the revival script as the primary libretto with which I am concerned (as it is the version available for licensing) and view the Broadway script, along with King's novel, as a text from which the current version was adapted.

Each of the musicals listed above depicts rural gender performance(s) in different ways. These differences – due to choices made by the creators as well as the practicalities of stories taking place in different regions and time periods – are unpacked in the following chapters. In subsequent chapters, I perform a close reading of the librettos of *Violet, Carrie,* and *The Spitfire Grill* in light of contemporary understandings of gender and rurality and the ways in which they intersect on both an individual and social level through romantic relationships, portrayals of motherhood, and community interactions.

Finally, I conclude with a discussion of all three musicals in light of the above questions, exploring the ways the various rural gender performances encased in the relationships discussed in the preceding chapters suggest the overall vision of the country contained within each musical. I suggest that the musicals with the firmest grounding in the realities of the past present the most thoughtful visions of future possibilities, and encourage the productions of more musicals that consider the rural as a culturally, geographically, and historically specific setting.

CHAPTER II

ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS: IMAGING AMERICA

"[T]he key structuring convention in musical theatre is the heterosexual romance plot, which the musical numbers follow and develop," explains Stacey Wolf ("Defying Gravity" 11). The focus on romantic relationships in musicals "constitutes a significant cultural practice, the conventions of which are related to the way we live" (Wexman 4). Heterosexual romance narratives – particularly those that conclude with a monogamous marriage – have long been a defining feature of not just musicals, but American society. The "nuclear family" – a man, a woman, and their children living apart from other family – has long been considered to be the default family structure in the United States (Bengston). Though the truth of rural communities is that they're slightly *less* likely to be home to traditional nuclear family units than their urban counterparts, musical theatre convention dictates that these musicals are likely to feature the building blocks for a nuclear family unit: a romance (O'Hare, Manning, Porter, and Lyons).

In the introduction, I suggested that the musicals in this thesis function similarly to postwar musicals. David Savran notes that postwar "integrated" musicals (those with a script, or "book," that supports a plot and consistent character development throughout the piece) "engineered an increased emphasis on the production of male interiority . . . and endeavored to reassure audiences that an independent-minded, unruly, or shrewish heroine would be tamed by the final curtain" (216). The audience needed reassurance, Savran asserts, because gender roles were in flux after the second World War – women's roles had changed at home while their husbands were fighting overseas, and the country

was unsure how it would get back to the way it had been. Musicals of that era provided reassurance that "normal" was within reach.

"Normal" has shifted again since the post-war era. There has been a cultural "shift toward more flexible gender roles and companionate marriages" in recent history, including the legalization of same-sex marriage in the United States, but the gender roles in musical theatre have not changed at the same rate (Larson, Wilson, Brown, Furstenburg, and Verma 56). The journey of a musical adhering largely to conventional musical theatre structure is still often as described by Savran above, a woman living outside of community norms marrying (or at least entering into a romantic relationship with) a man who will make her more acceptable by helping her to live within the conventions of their community. The main couple transitions from disliking each other at the beginning of the musical to being in a committed, monogamous relationship by the end, or moving towards one; in the middle, the leading man and woman sing a variety of songs together and separately chronicling their journey. The leading woman is almost always conventionally feminine, or makes a journey to conventional femininity during the course of the musical; the leading man is almost always conventionally masculine, or learns to be as he works to win his partner (Wolf, *A Problem Like Maria).*

These characters are part of a formula with a purpose beyond reinforcing conventional ideas of romance and gender performance. Wolf suggests that American musicals often "use the heterosexual couple's journey from enemies to lovers to stand in for the unification of problematic differences in American culture—between the city and the country, between work and leisure, between us and them, between whites and racialized Others" ("Defying Gravity" 9). A tension is present in conversations (or

musicals) that involve romance between the present and the past, conservative and liberal ideologies about proper family structures and the way gender operates within them. The resolution to this tension is different in *Violet, Carrie,* and *The Spitfire Grill.* The romantic relationships in these musicals signify the "normal" of the worlds of those musicals – and, by extension, the kind of "normal" the musicals suggest might be within reach for their viewers. By extension, each musical suggests different methods for the healing, creation, or maintenance of community through the romantic relationships depicted within.

I suggest that the musicals in this thesis use the romantic relationships they contain (and their adherence to or intentional deviation from conventional musical theatre structure) to suggest a vision of the United States, one that contains both a prescription for the navigation of gender roles in romantic relationships and a suggestion for the shoring up of communal ties. In this chapter, I unpack the relationships contained within these musicals and the worldviews I believe them to convey. I further consider the ways in which the gender performances and romantic relationship(s) contained within the musicals are reasonably accurate to the location and historical moment in which they are set. A musical set in a rural area has the particular challenge of engaging with a specifically rural gender identity that, in some ways, looks very much like the conventional gender performance in traditional musical theatre structure (Keller; Wolf, *A Problem Like Maria*). Rural gender identities in real rural communities, however, are more nuanced. Though it's true that rural communities can be "the site for the performance of . . . particular stereotypical form[s] of traditional" gender identities, rural gender is often constructed around practicalities; men and women fulfill the roles they

need to for their communities to function (Little 668; Little and Panelli). Since community needs have shifted after economic changes in the 1980s and the mechanization of a great deal of agricultural labor, rural gender identities have also shifted (Bock and Shortall).

All three musicals use the ultimate resolution between men and women through the protagonist's heterosexual romance narrative to suggest a mode of resolution for national challenges, creating three very different visions of America. I suggest that musicals that depict the construction of gender identities and their navigation within romantic relationships as ongoing projects rooted in specific locations and cultural moments also offer clearly drawn visions of the United States that advocate a hopeful future. A musical crafted to include only conservative constructions of gender that aren't in conversation with the historical moment and subsequent community challenges wouldn't be portraying a rural gender identity; it would be using the idea of the rural as a screen onto which to project narrow gender roles no longer "in vogue" in the broader community. In this chapter, I both suggest that musicals that do so fail to meaningfully represent rural communities or offer hopeful solutions for national challenges and highlight the ways in which some of these musicals are, I believe, effectively addressing the challenges of rural constructions of gender.

Violet's Interrogation of Masculinities

"I s'pose she liked best the boys who had done some traveling," Young Violet fishes when asking her dad about her mother's romantic history. "Is it true she had the choice of any boy in the 5 countries hereabouts?" (Tesori and Crawley 28). In an

interview discussing why she chose Doris Betts' "The Ugliest Pilgrim" as the bases for a musical, Jeanine Tesori notes, "I'd never seen a character like Violet. . .I'd never seen a woman go out into the world with an adventure like that, especially one that wasn't about a man" (Wallenberg). It's curious, then, how hard *Violet* – a story about a young woman, played by two actors to represent the younger and older versions of herself – works to foreground heterosexual romance. "Mama, why's a man have eyes? / If I tell you don't you tell – / so he can try you on for size" Young Violet sings at the opening of the musical. From the first moment, Violet is concerned with not only the way she looks, but with the way she is *seen,* and – most importantly – the ways that renders her as an eligible sexual and romantic partner. Adult Violet doesn't get to choose who she wants – she likes best the boys who like her back.

Violet navigates her own identity through interactions with masculine others and (often unfavorable) comparisons to other women. The musical is structurally complicated, moving back and forth between the present (much of which is set on a bus travelling through the American South the year the Civil Rights Act was passed) and Violet's thirteenth year, after the accident that left her disfigured. In addition to following Young Violet's relationship with her father and Adult Violet's journey to a faith healer in Omaha, the musical also follows a largely conventional structure with the soldiers (though in some cases, the moment that would occur in a musical conventionally structured around a heterosexual romance narrative is deliberately subverted).

In the following section, I unpack the information Violet's sexual and romantic relationships provide about the gender performance of the characters in them and offer interpretations for what those relationships suggest about gendered expectations in

broader cultural terms. The musical suggests that attempts to conform to conventional gender roles have a high cost (particularly for Monty) and that the fulfilment of popular standards of beauty is unnecessary for a happy or successful life. Though individual characters frequently explore gender in ways that question dominant ideologies, these conservative models of gender performance are unfortunately reinscribed in Flick and Violet's romantic coupling and the ways in which the characters' communication patterns are gendered. Later in the chapter, I consider the ways in which the kinds of gender performance and statements about gender in *Violet* contribute to worldview the musical contains (and, by extension, the tools *Violet* offers an audience for community building).

Masculine Femininity and Military Masculinity

Violet meets Montgomery "Monty" Harrill, a soldier headed to work for Special Forces in Vietnam, at a rest stop on her trip. In "The Ugliest Pilgrim," Violet wants Monty immediately – the story after their meeting is full of quiet moments of acute desire – and, in the end, she gets him. In *Violet,* however, Violet and Monty's relationship is more complicated. They are sexually involved, but their ultimate failure as a couple is foreshadowed with their failure to follow musical theatre convention in the formation of their relationship. Rather than fulfilling the conventional roles of respectively masculine and feminine romantic partners, Monty and Violet both engage in different performances of masculinity.

Violet engages in a performance of masculine femininity, a particular rural gender identity in which women are able to take on traits conventionally coded as masculine in order to be able to do necessary work in their rural communities, while Monty displays a

military masculinity (Kayzak). Though Violet and Monty both criticize each other's gender performance, Monty's judgements of Violet's masculinity seem to have little effect. In contrast, Monty's masculinity is called in question throughout the musical, and his attempts to assert it ultimately prove self-destructive.

Monty is from near Raleigh, NC, a larger city, and speaks with a Southern drawl that he's teased about in some productions (in the 2014 Broadway production, for example, Violet drawls his name out several syllables longer than she normally would in jest…though she has a pronounced dialect of her own.) Monty's rurality and military involvement are tied together; "masculinity and rurality intersect in the making of the soldier" (Woodward 235). He's a paratrooper, headed to train other soldiers to jump out of airplanes – "Because you keep your eyes closed when you jump," Flick jokes. "Like you do with your women. Never know what's gonna turn up under you" (Tesori and Crawley 15). Woodward suggests that "values such as controlled aggression, a capacity for violence, and aggressive heterosexuality are celebrated in both" ideals of military masculinity and idealized conventional masculinity – which, according to Keller, "draw[s] on the symbolism of the rural man" (82).

When Monty and Violet meet, there is no indication (beyond having a man and woman onstage together) that they are headed for romance. The first song they sing together is "The Luck of the Draw," a poker scene happening with Monty, Flick, and Violet at the same time as Young Violet learns to play poker with her father; it is a moment showing Violet's mastery of a skill and connecting her with her father and younger self, not providing either a romantic connection for Violet and Monty or the kind of direct antagonism that would conventionally set up a love story later (Wolf, *Changed*

for Good, "Defying Gravity"). Poker was specifically taught to Violet as a way to avoid sexual contact – "poker'll give you something to do with the boys, when the time comes for that, and you'll never have to leave town because of it," her father tells Young Violet after she reveals that she doesn't know subtraction because her math teacher got pregnant and left town (Tesori and Crawley 17).

The scene, rather, makes Violet "one of the boys" as she inserts herself into their friendship. Monty points it out – "What kind of girl knows poker like that?" he asks, the first of many times he criticizes Violet's performance of gender (Tesori and Crawley 23). Flick, Monty, and Violet continue the journey as a trio, made possible (particularly given the time period) because Violet participates, to some degree, in what Kayzak calls "female masculinity" – a performance of gender that allows rural women of any sexual orientation to present and interact with the world in a more conventionally masculine way (825). She does so by engaging in manual labor for money, taking care of her land when her father is dead, and by spending time with the soldiers on the bus.

Violet directly rejects the idea that Monty could manage to force her to perform a submissive version of femininity or enact ownership over her body after Monty notes "if you had a man, he wouldn't let you make a trip like this" (Tesori and Crawley 25) She insults both his general masculinity and ability to leverage said masculinity to do things like letting her make a trip:

> Someone sure has had it easy;
>
> A boy in the skin of a man
>
> Thinks he's born a gift to women
>
> Thinks he's irresistible

Thinks what no one else has managed, he's the one

Who can – (Tesori and Crawley 25)

Interestingly, Monty doesn't respond by getting upset with Violet – instead, he suggests that she might prefer the preacher just change her into a man herself, saying that if she were a man, "wouldn't make no difference if you was ugly or not" (Tesori and Crawley 26). She agrees with him, albeit half-jokingly.

It's Violet's status as an honorary "one of the guys" that allows her to join the soldiers in a Memphis boarding house. Monty teases her about their impending night out on the town, promising they'll "draw some dirty pictures in [her] book" (her mother's Catechism she uses as a journal) and give her "sump'n real to write in that book of [hers]. Sump'n to remember" (Tesori and Crawley 44). When Monty comes into Violet's room where she's sleeping, he reads through Violet's journal entries about him – mostly quips about his worldliness, or lack thereof – as the radio sings "Who'll be the one, if not me?", a question that seems characteristic of his relationship with Violet throughout the rest of the musical (Tesori and Crawley 45). He reacts with a song more characteristic of the kind of musical theatre song setting up for a romance, scolding her sleeping form for interfering with his fun with his pal. He complains about her lack of femininity ("You're a pain in the ass / got no kinda class") and compares her to "a back road I think will dead-end / that I travel past where I intend / cuz it seems to unravel around every bend" (Tesori and Crawley 49).

The moment is telling. It's a sort of love song, in some ways – the journey of Monty acknowledging an interest in Violet – but it also indicates that Monty is ascribing to Violet a specific, rural femininity. Women have long been associated with the land in

"a particular interpretation of masculinity and femininity that sees women representing the innocence of the natural world which active masculinity must support, protect and oversee" (Little and Austin 103). Though a country road isn't quite the land – it, like the scar on Violet's face, is marred and molded through human actions – it's clear that Monty's position has moved from noting that any man "in charge" of Violet wouldn't have let her go on the trip to thinking of himself as someone with a right to possess and explore the terrain Violet offers. However, most of these kinds of songs – songs in which character who are ultimately destined to be love interests express distaste that will eventually turn to affection – happen as duets, since "singing together as one…contradicts the animosity on which [the characters] insist" (Wolf, "Defying Gravity" 13). Monty's song is neither a duet, nor a song of direct address – it's sung while Violet is sleeping and he's invading her privacy. Musical theatre structure teaches the audience that his song, however heart-felt, isn't to be trusted.

Monty and Violet's relationship continues to self-consciously defy convention in the following scene. Violet and the men dance together, then Monty and Violet dance alone. Wolf notes that, often, "love is revealed in a big dance scene," ("Defying Gravity" 14), but Monty and Violet don't find love as they dance. The stage direction notes that "Monty's hands start to wander a bit; Violet is surprised but does nothing to stop him," but they have no revelation of love; in fact, she leaves his embrace to follow Flick when the soldier looks upset (Tesori and Crawley 51).

Though the musical makes it clear that Monty and Violet aren't the intended heterosexual romance of the musical, he comes to her door that night as the hotel singer outside reprises the song they danced to: "You could be just anyone / when right now

anyone would do" (Tesori and Crawley 52). He and Violet have sex – "he puts her hand in his lap" and she pulls him into a kiss as the scene shifts to Young Violet and Billy Dean – and the action of the play returns to Monty and Violet as they sit in a post-coital embrace, Monty telling her about his motorcycle (Tesori and Crawley 52). Violet has consistently challenged Monty's masculinity throughout the musical; even after they've been intimately involved, he feels the need to reassert it. Talking about his motorcycle helps to do so because "technology and masculinity are mutually and simultaneously constructed" – though, interestingly, Violet in "The Ugly Pilgrim" derisively notes that "it seems funny that my hand, brown and crusty from hoeing and chopping, is harder than his. I guess you don't get calluses rolling a motorcycle throttle" (Brandth 123, Betts 27). Monty is from the South, and he participates in a military masculinity, but it isn't the same as the rural masculinity of the man with whom she will ultimately enter into a relationship.

When the time comes to part ways the following day, Monty and Violet are both awkward –they separately rehearse speeches to let each other down, Violet continuing to plan to lampoon Monty's conventional masculinity (or her perception of the lack thereof) as she sings:

You weren't so bad, for a soldier

You weren't the best or the worst

But when you started to cry, boy

I tell you, that was a first (Tesori and Crawley 61)

Violet would rather paint herself as promiscuous than let Monty think she's emotionally invested in him. For a moment, it looks like Violet and Monty are both going

to manage to let each other down gently as their confusion of voices finds a rhythm, singing a common script. However, Monty changes the music, moving from the choppy, upbeat song they were singing to a romantic ballad, singing to Violet: “All I want is you / you’re not some beauty / that don’t concern me” (Tesori and Crawley 62). Monty is trying to pull Violet into a conventional relationship, but she’s uninterested; she holds tightly to their original melody together, turning him down: “too bad you open your mouth boy / you look too good to be true” (Tesori and Crawley 63). Violet once more strikes at Monty’s masculinity, suggesting that his looks are more important than his thoughts, a position generally reserved for women.

Throughout the musical, Monty demonstrated his conventional, militaristic masculinity – he showed controlled aggression fighting with Flick (but managing to deescalate from physical violence), revealed his aggressive heterosexuality in his songs and actions towards Violet and, it’s implied, many other women before - in the one act version of the show, performed in the 2014 Broadway revival, Monty has a song in which he sings “I like the kind of girlfriends you pick up in a bar / who know what to make of the promises barroom promises are” (TheatreCast). It is in this scene, however, that Violet and the audience understand his capacity for violence as he yells at Violet as she reboards the bus to continue her journey, the melody of moments before turned to a threat as he tries to make Violet promise to return before the bus leaves.

Monty is removed from the musical until the final scene. Violet returns on the bus, unhealed, and he offers her a plastic ring from a crackerjack box and the promise that he’ll marry her and they’ll have time together before he leaves – he’s volunteered for Vietnam which, he assures her when she bursts into tears, “barely even counts as a war”

(Tesori and Crawley 86). Though Violet has teased Monty about his masculinity throughout the musical in what was largely assumed to be good fun, this moment in the play nods to the fact that the narratives around masculinity in the United States – and particularly those narratives that required violence through military service as a proving ground for that masculinity – had deadly consequences for the mostly working-class young men who served in Vietnam (Cowey and Boehm, LeConey and Trodd).

Throughout the musical, Violet refers to Monty as a "boy" rather than a man, and he – in September of 1964, right before active combat units were introduced to the war in 1965 – bought into the "promotion" of the war that glorified the experience of fighting ("Vietnam War"). Though Flick dismisses Monty's eagerness for battle, noting that if a "man has an easy life, he looks forward to danger," Monty wasn't the only eager soldier (Tesori and Crawley 38); according to LeConey and Trodd, "Vietnam had become a movie: approached by politicians like a western and fought by cowboy-generals and soldiers with expectations of what veteran Ron Kovic later called 'the glory John Wayne war.'"

Other musicals in this thesis feature characters dealing with the aftereffects of men who shared Monty's attitude towards war, one of looking forward to adventures and a proving-ground of patriotism and manhood. As the musical ends, he's brave and ready to go serve his country; it's the crying Violet that he finds disquieting, asking Flick to "make her stop" (Tesori and Crawley 86). His leaving is abrupt – he asks Violet to wish him luck, then walks away, disappearing from the script until he joins the full company in the finale. In the 2014 Broadway production, the choreography of the finale made a haunting nod to Monty's probable fate, putting only he (in full military regalia) and

Violet's father – the only character in the musical who is no longer alive – on an upper level in different lighting from everyone else, implying that Monty, too, was lost.

Consent and Declaring Desire

Violet follows Violet from the ages of thirteen to twenty-five. In addition to chronicling her growth and her journey, the musical records Violet's loss of agency and ability to verbalize desire as she grows into womanhood, a "mature" sexuality. Violet's first sexual encounter was with a boy who had taken a bet with friends that he could get her to sleep with him. In the short story on which the musical is based, the encounter is a bitter aside of a graduation night liaison, Violet's one and only romantic encounter. Though it's fair to assume she had little to nothing by way of formal sex education – a teacher was dismissed from her school for getting pregnant, and sexual education is still a matter of some concern in rural communities (Ng and Kay, Blinn-Pike) – it is also implied that Violet learned *something* about sex from reading her late mother's catechism, which her mother wrote in like a diary in a way that it had "things in its pages not suitable for a young girl" (Tesori and Crawley 27).

In the musical, Violet is younger (around thirteen, as opposed to the roughly eighteen she was in the book), but she also has a great deal more agency in the encounter than the short story implies. In the musical, Billy Dean tries to woo her, and Young Violet responds with derision. "Billy Dean, you are so dumb. One day you're calling me names, the next I'm supposed to think you're sweet on me?" she points out (Tesori and Crawley 53). When it's revealed that Billy Dean is, indeed, trying to bed her to win a bet

and he offers to split the pot with her, she takes the interaction into her own hands. “I don’t want the money,” she says. “I want you to be gentle” (Tesori and Crawley 54).

Though the situation certainly isn’t ideal, Young Violet is able to successfully verbalize her sexual desires and effectively communicate with a partner in spite of cultural messages that communicating sexual consent and desire is unfeminine (Powell). Young Violet is able to do so well throughout the musical; in a dream sequence, she dances with her father and the soldiers, and asks Monty to dance with her a second time when he pulls away. In both the 1997 off-Broadway production and the 2014 Broadway production, Young Violet is a competent ballroom dancer (though her upbringing gives her no particular reason to be). However, when Adult Violet goes to dance with the same soldiers a few scenes later, her dancing is odd, clumsy. Though women certainly don’t have to be graceful to be desirable, it’s interesting that Violet became less capable as she grew older without any indication as to why the change took place. Similarly, as she moves from being a precocious adolescent to an adult woman, she is characterized as being less capable of communicating desire and consent.

Adult Violet attempts to voice her desire early in the musical through an unconventional love song, one sung about her future self if the preacher heals her. Violet is telling the soldiers about the stars whose pictures she uses as inspiration for the way she wants to look once she’s healed. Violet names movie stars and body parts in rapid sequence, occasionally pausing on one possible incarnation of her future self to affirm that “I love ‘er all, I love ‘er all / I love ‘er ah-ah-all to pieces!” (Tesori and Crawley 33). It’s a love song not for soldiers, but for conventional femininity, ending with a shimmering, dreamlike coda expressing the desire for *desire:*

All I need is someone

To wonder, who is she

To ask how to meet me

To love me all to pieces (Tesori and Crawley 34)

Violet wants to be wanted, to be cherished in the same way that she cherishes the women she catalogues in her portfolio of pictures and memories of movie stars. This part of the song takes place with Violet alone, the men distracted by talking about the sports page in the paper – she's not seeking their attention specifically. The music doesn't resolve, but leaves an opening…that is filled by Young Violet's reprise of the opening number, reminding Adult Violet that it's being seen through a man's eyes and being tried on for size that matters, and that she will always be wanting by that measurement.

As Violet moves closer to an adult romantic relationship, her ability to express desire and offer consent continues to decrease. In the boarding house, she mentions to Flick that her door can't lock, intending it as a code that he should visit her that night. When Monty comes to her room, she doesn't verbalize her wishes at all; they kiss, and the lights fade, implying that they slept together.

Once Monty is asleep, Violet sings about their encounter. "My skin is singing," she sings, expressing that the encounter might "redeem" her (Tesori and Crawley 54). "Rural young women lack a sense of embodied sexuality," Lynne Hillier, Lyn Harrison, and Kate Bowditch assert, because they are "constrained by their own ideas of their sexuality and the restrictions placed upon them by their communities" (93; Little and Leyshon 266). Violet is growing into a sense of embodied sexuality. To do so, however, she has to leave her ability to advocate for her own needs behind.

Bryant and Pini note that working-class women – a group to which Violet belongs - are often portrayed as "brassy, loud, tough and displaying an excessive heterosexuality," traits typically aligned with masculinity (7). Though Violet's performance of "female masculinity" has served her in her friendships and daily life, the musical resorts to stereotype when it comes to romantic interactions – she isn't wanted until she's able to be demure, quiet, vulnerable, and lacking in desire. Though sexual politics were certainly different in the 1960s than the present moment, one has to question the responsibility of a musical that models that the only way for young women to find romantic fulfillment is to stop engaging in practices of clear and enthusiastic consent.

Romance and Reinscriptions

Grady "Flick" Fliggins is an African American Sergeant First Class with the US army and Violet's eventual romantic partner. He also comfortably embodies rural masculinity – he talks about his manual work fishing on the beaches of Cherry Grove, SC, and functions like Monty's older brother. Violet and Flick's relationship is foreshadowed from the moment they first sing together, when he and her father most often share harmonies in "The Luck of the Draw" – in a musical about Violet's relationship with her dad, aligning the soldier with him vocally, through movement, and through words in Flick's first song makes it clear that the relationship with him will prove to be important. It will also, unfortunately, ultimately force Violet to change her gender performance to be able to enter into a romance.

Violet and Flick's relationship is foreshadowed from the moment they first sing together, when he and her father most often share harmonies in "The Luck of the Draw" – in a musical about Violet's relationship with her dad, aligning the soldier with him vocally, through movement, and through words in Flick's first song makes it clear that the relationship with him will come to be important, too. Whereas Monty is uneasy with Violet's unconventional femininity, Flick embraces it, praising her card skills and offering her his liquor when she talks about growing up drinking with her dad.

The first time Flick and Violet are alone onstage, Flick suggests Violet comes to visit him at the Carolina ocean and verbally paints a picture of his hometown, drawing a verbal daydream reminiscent of the way that Violet speaks of the life she had with her father – their styles of speech draw them together. Though Flick's work is on the ocean and Violet cares for her farm in the mountains, it's also clear that they share certain experiences of rurality. Though both speak of their homes in ways that could be seen as invoking the imagery of the rural idyll, the musical acknowledges the (manual, working-class) labor that is necessary for Flick and Violet to live (Little and Austin, Yarwood). In the short story, this connection through the land is emphasized when Violet describes plants she has at home and Flick is able to name them (Betts).

Flick, Monty, and Violet get in a street fight together, solidifying their friendship. It is a particularly potent example of Violet's engagement in female masculinity, and it is also the last scene in which Violet and Flick will be friends without romantic tension. Out dancing, Flick and Violet connect, locking eyes as she dances with Monty. Though musical theatre convention dictates that dance scenes are where people fall in love, it isn't Monty who Violet pursues; it's Flick. She leaves Monty to return to the hotel with

Flick, and they talk outside her room. He's the first character throughout the musical – aside from Violet herself – to touch her scar. He caresses it, asking if it hurts; he sees her. Once Flick sees Violet as a romantic possibility, her failure to conform to conventional femininity is immediately a problem. Flick is furious at her the next day for sleeping with Monty – "Don't you get it?" he asks. "You're just a piece of ass to him. And an easy one at that" (Tesori and Crawley 57). Now Flick and Violet do disagree, and he sings, condemning her choice to "do something wrong" and telling her "you can't ever get enough / of a thing you don't need" (Tesori and Crawley 58).

Violet responds to Flick's anger by singing part of his earlier song back to him – a sure sign that two characters are intended to find their way together by the end, as they speak each other's language even in discord – and reminding him that he told her to say yes to things (Wolf, "Defying Gravity"). She reveals how much she's changed over the course of the journey, and sings "I'm gonna miss you, Flick, a lot / I wish you felt the same as I," the first verbalized indication of romantic feelings in the musical, to which Flick fails to respond (Tesori and Crawley 59).

It isn't until Monty is on his own, speaking to Violet, that the audience has the opportunity to hear what Flick is feeling:

I've been waiting, for a lifetime

For someone simply

To look and see me

The way that I see you (Tesori and Crawley 62)

Like Violet, he wants a partner who sees him. He doesn't, however, tell Violet about his desire; she has not yet proven herself worthy through an appropriate performance of a marriageable femininity.

Flick doesn't appear again in the musical until Violet has travelled to Tulsa and met with a fraudulent faith healer. In her time there, she had a vision in which her father counselled her to find "someone who can make [her] happy"; she won't be at peace with who she is until a romantic partner gives her permission to do so (Tesori and Crawley 80). Still, when Violet encounters Flick after discovering that there was no miracle and Monty is leaving for Vietnam, her impulse is to run away. When Violet arrives at the bus station and Monty reveals that her face isn't healed, she runs away and Flick appears in her path. The stage directions indicate that Flick steps in holding a glass door, pushing it open so "the sun makes a funhouse mirror" of it and "in it Violet sees her own image reflected. Perhaps this is the one time we see her face, scar and all, as she sees it" – not only does Flick see Violet, but he makes it possible for her to see herself, and for others to see her, too; he renders her visible (Tesori and Crawley 85).

Flick reaches out to her with her words from previously – once more sharing language – as Young Violet encourages Adult Violet to stay and listen to him, to let him "give [her] the wings of an angel" (Tesori and Crawley 87). It was Young Violet that reminded Adult Violet of the unattainability of being wanted the way she dreamed of earlier in the show – it's Young Violet who tells her now that this is an appropriate way for her to be loved.

Violet doesn't take the lead in this interaction. She "turns away from Flick in confusion," giving no sign of her own desire (Tesori and Crawley 88). She isn't sure who

she is anymore, but Flick "know[s] who [she is]" and "where [she] belong[s], too" (Tesori and Crawley 87). Violet waits for him to tell her, not stepping in with her own music, but tentatively echoing his melody back to him. Only once she proves that she can follow his musical lead do they sing together, reprising several songs in quick succession as they work out the ways in which they can live a life together. It is the only moment in the musical that Adult Violet harmonizes with a single other person; they are, indeed, intended for each other. Violet and Flick reassure each other that they are seen, and as Young Violet sings about discovering the purpose of a man's hands Flick cups Violet's face – scar and all – and kisses her.

Violet's performance of rural femininity through female masculinity outside of romantic relationships is interesting and nuanced – she gets to have her first tender moment with her future partner hours after joining him in a street fight, own and operate a family farm she never has trouble running by herself, and save her own money to make her own pilgrimage. Adult Violet is shown to be highly competent at navigating the world, able to provide for herself. When Violet and Flick share their first few companionable scenes, it seems probable that the musical is going to allow them to be true partners, whether in friendship or romance.

That did not, however, prove to be true. Wolf notes that, in conventional musical theatre, a female protagonist "usually needs to be taught a lesson, and usually is taught a lesson by a man," a structure designed to reinscribe conventional gender roles that place women in positions in which they are less knowledgeable and capable than men (*A Problem Like Maria* 1). The heterosexual romance narrative Flick and Violet share is complicated. Flick teaches Violet to love herself and think she's worthy of being wanted

and seen, which is positive, but it's concerning that she's only able to love herself when someone else (particularly a male someone else) gives her permission to do so.

Convenient Colorblindness: A Problem with Race

Flick and Violet are written in parallel; two characters whose physical appearances prevent them from engaging in the world as they wish. Violet's physical difference comes from a scar, Flick's from his race. The musical dismisses the idea that race and deformity are comparable early on – when Violet expresses that she knows how Flick feels being made fun of by a waiter, Monty scoffs, "Last year, he coulda been thrown in jail for sitting here. But you know what that's like" (Tesori and Crawley 15). After the token dismissal, however, *Violet* continues to treat Violet and Flick as if their conflicts are the same. The musical engages in troublesome reinscriptions of racialized media tropes (those of the "wise saint" and "Black buddy") that prevent Flick from being a fully realized characters (Winer B9; Collins 170).

The musical takes place in the South in 1964, shortly after the Civil Rights Act was passed. It was a tumultuous moment in history, but instances of racial persecution aren't viewed as a serious threat and don't seem to have any lasting effect on Flick; rather, they serve as plot points to allow Flick, Violet, and Monty to deepen their relationship. Violet meets Flick and Monty because she joins Monty in standing up to a waiter in Kingsport, Tennessee who uses a racial slur towards Flick. The moment is never referred to again; it is simply a way for the trio to meet. In another instance, two men in Memphis approach Flick. "I guess he figures, as long as he's got the uniform, he's entitled to one of our girls, right? No matter what she looks like," one of the men

comments before attacking Flick (Tesori and Crawley 42). Once more, the moment is never discussed; the men stealing Violet's bag prompts her to stay with the men at the boarding house. When the boarding house proprietress criticizes Flick for bringing a white woman to the African American institution, it's played as a humorous conflict, in spite of the fact that Flick had been attacked for being with a white woman moments before. The musical uses racialized violence "to establish the time and place," but makes no attempt to interrogate the effects of that violence (Johnson 46).

Flick's status as the character who gives Violet permission to live a fulfilling life reflects a concerning gender politics, but it also reinscribes "a recurring theme" in American media in which "African Americans . . . help Whites get in touch with their better selves" (Collins 171). Linda Winer observes that Flick "carries the unfortunate burden of being the story's wise saint" (B9). Flick's only song on his own in the show takes place in the same scene, and he uses it to inspire Violet and encourage her to see her own strength rather than visiting the faith healer – "So what do you need with this preacher? You came this far without him" (Tesori and Crawley 39). It's a show stopping gospel-infused song about family and taking chances with the message that personal risk is worth the potential reward:

Say yes, and your adventures start

Not always as expected;

Say no, you stay apart,

But you stay protected (Tesori and Crawley 39).

This is the moment where Flick and Violet initially connect – when Flick is finished singing, Monty notes dryly that he and Violet seem to be quite comfortable with

each other, innuendo clearly intended – but the song is also uncomfortable. Aurally, it's stunning (Flick is consistently cast as a singer first and foremost, and the notes soar), but there is the strong sense that the song has very little to do with Flick himself – his musicality is for Violet's sake. The song structure supports the thought. Generally, in musical theatre, a song starts with the character in one place, involves them learning or discovering something along the way, and ends in another (Moore and Bergman). This song isn't written in that way – it's a message intended for Violet rather than a glimpse into Flick's internal life.

Flick is, in effect, Monty's "Black buddy," a largely asexual sidekick to a White character who, through his relationship with the White character, functions to "tame the threat of Black male promiscuity and violence" (Collins 170). Unlike Monty, who is both violent and promiscuous, Flick barely even manages to dance with another woman, doesn't come to Violet's room in the boarding house, and only fights to defend himself. Flick is the man to Monty's boy, measured calm to Monty's broad fluctuations of mood, but he is not allowed his own conflicts or complexities. He upholds his conventional masculinity effortlessly, with no information about the ways his masculinity functions in his family or his work. The characteristics that paint him as the steady, mature character also fall in line with a tradition of depictions of Black friends of White characters as "safe" in a way that implies that a depiction of a character that allowed for any kind of conflict or complexity would be dangerous.

As discussed previously, the musical eventually allows Flick the opportunity to state his own opinions and express romantic desire, but only near the end of the musical. Flick and Violet's romance is unusual – interracial couples are rare in media, and

nonexistent in story lines where the woman is an interest of the White male character with whom the Black male is associated (Collins). Though this representation is important, their relationship isn't crafted as carefully as it should be; it ignores the realities of life in the American South in the early 1960s for an interracial couple. Anti-miscegenation laws are still on the books in North and South Carolina during the time of the musical and will continue to be until 1967, when *Loving vs. Virginia* is decided by the Supreme Court – the musical implies that Violet and Flick ride home to build a life together, but doesn't consider what that life might look like.

Violet models having challenging conversations about race with some of Flick and Violet's interactions and offers one of very few onstage representations of interracial relationships. The musical fails, however, to meaningfully engage with Flick's race; Flick's Blackness is used as a plot device to give him something in common with Violet, to incite instances of racialized violence that exist solely to bring the main characters closer, and to justify his gospel number. When the realities of being an African American keeping company with a white woman in a turbulent historical moment are inconvenient, they are ignored.

The creative team chose to move the action of the musical from its original 1969 setting to the musical's 1964 setting. When asked for the reason for the change, Crawley said "It has everything to do with audience perception. . . [W]hat we, as Americans, think about 1969 is Summer of Love, rock and roll, long hair, and hippies. We don't think of soldiers with crew cuts and a square young woman" (qtd. in Johnson 48). In order to avoid this confusion, *Violet* was moved to the year of the Civil Rights Act, to a time years before *Loving vs. Virginia*, the Supreme Court ruling that would've allowed Flick and

Violet a legally formalized relationship; the 1964 setting is more complicated for Flick and Violet's relationship than a 1969 setting would have been, and the musical doesn't acknowledge any of those complications. Apparently Americans are expected to be more aware of the Summer of Love than the timeline of the Civil Rights movement.

In "The Ugliest Pilgrim," from which *Violet* is adapted, Flick is never a potential romantic partner; Violet is always taken aback by his race, and ends the story with Monty (Betts). Tesori and Crawley chose to have Violet end up with Flick because they anticipated that the audience would be "more powerfully disposed to want [Violet] to find someone steadier [than Monty], and Flick was steadier" (qtd. in Johnson 43). Flick's steadiness comes, unfortunately, not from a character development that allows him to rise *above* challenges, but from an erasure of his identity and the invocation of tired racial tropes that ensure this character won't make waves. People of color in the real world, however, face unique challenges in rural communities that they can't choose to simply ignore; Flick's inclusion in the plot is better than a world populated solely by White people, but inclusion isn't enough (Probst, Moore, Glover, and Samuels).

A Partial Subversion

Though some critics called Violet "small," it seems that *Violet* is full to bursting with storylines and concepts, perhaps without adequate space and time to explore them all (Simon 93). The plot elements of a woman who performs a masculine femininity, men who are differently capable of performing a military masculinity, gendered and classed expectations of sexual conduct, female sexual pleasure, the contrast between a rural and more urbanized man, and the navigation of an interracial relationship all have the

potential to open up conversations about the what people want and the ways in which their gender performance trains them to get it.

The characters in *Violet* are often conscious – or make the audience conscious – of their navigations of gender roles, as well as the ways in which their previous lives in Carolinian communities (rural communities for Flick and Violet) affect the ways they now interact with and are perceived by the world. This is uncommon in an art form that generally assumes conventional masculinity and femininity without considering alternatives or the effort it can take for people (and characters) to uphold those conventions.

In an effort to explore everything, however, *Violet* ends up making some concerning assertions about the way women should alter their femininity in the context of romantic relationships; her rural, masculine femininity is suitable as a friend and a farmer, but not as a partner. Though the musical questions gender more actively than many, the musical structure also serves to reinforce conventionally gendered patterns of communication. The men are poor emotional communicators. They almost never sing alone which, since solo songs often serve to offer the audience access to a character's innermost feelings about a situation, means that the audience had little access to the men's feelings about their interactions with Violet or their journey. The male characters also tend to engage in patterns of communication in which they become upset if expectations that are never stated are unfulfilled – for example, Violet's choice to sleep with Monty was criticized even though Flick didn't indicate that he was interested or acknowledge her interest – and in which Violet's speech and expectations, though given

more stage time, are often dismissed or ignored (or, in the case of her final scene with Flick, paused entirely in order to demonstrate her suitability as a romantic partner).

The final effect is that, though the musical begins to question the ways gender and place affect its characters' daily lives and interactions, the exploration is ultimately discarded as all characters move to their "proper" places in the world, a romantic relationship for Violet and Flick and a career for Monty. Yet, the ending is not unambiguously happy; Violet didn't get her miracle, Monty is going to a war he likely won't survive, and Flick knows he's entering into a romance with someone who didn't actually come back to the train station for him. All the characters end up in situations consistent with conventional expectations of their gender performance (and even their rurality – the characters from rural communities, Flick and Violet, return to the family farm), but their ultimate conformity to convention doesn't necessarily solve everything in the way they might have hoped.

Violet's handling of gender and rurality (and the race and class that intersect with both) is inconsistent. I've demonstrated that the musical engages rural gender identities and relationships that are not often shown in media, which is exciting; women today still struggle to assert their identities as farmers and be accepted as such, and Violet's ability to hold down her homestead after her father's death is encouraging for them (Keller). Interracial relationships are rarely seen, and the choice to include one, *especially* when Violet chooses Flick over a man who embodies the kind of "macho" masculinity that is supposed to be most desirable, is an important step (Collins). However, Flick and Violet's relationship isn't well thought-out; in addition to failing to engage with the time

period, its inclusion in the musical is also the catalyst for Violet's regression to conventional gender performance.

Though Tesori was initially drawn to the musical because it wasn't about a man, the story became about three of them. This musical itself consistently follows the same pattern, beginning to explore and subvert normative narratives around gender and identity and failing to fully do so. Like Violet herself, the musical's gender politics take a journey a long way from their conservative home base, but make their way partly back by the end.

Exploring Alternatives in *The Spitfire Grill*

Like the characters in *Violet*, many of the characters in *The Spitfire Grill* actively wrestle with the ways in which their gender performances (and the romantic relationships they navigate alongside them) allow them to or potentially prevent them from engaging with their communities in the ways they've grown to expect. *The Spitfire Grill* features three romantic relationships, each distinct in both its structure and the masculinities and femininities of its participants. The two relationships in progress at the musical's beginning are each influenced by their own historical moments; the musical uses these relationships to examine the ways in which cultural pressures influence romantic relationships, particularly through demands of certain kinds of conventional gender performances on behalf of the relationships' participants. Through these relationships, the musical further explores the ways in which inherited ideas of correct gender performance or romantic structure may be unfit for the present moment; changing times, the musical suggest, require changing approaches to the ways relationships are shaped.

The Spitfire Grill fits the broad plot outlines of a conventional musical theatre plot – Percy and Joe have a challenging initial encounter, undergo conflict, then end up together by the musical's end. The relationship is more egalitarian than most found in musicals, and Percy maintains a performance of her unconventional femininity by the musical's end. Her function in the plot is as the catalyst for change in Gilead, bringing the present to a town stuck in the past and hope to a hopeless community. A hopeful view of the present, the musical suggests, is one in which everyone is able to be a valued member of a relationship just as they are, without having to conform to others' expectations (towards or away from conventionality) in order to be accepted.

In the following section, I explore each of the three romantic relationships in the musical, considering the ways in which they function through their interaction with their historical moment. I argue that *The Spitfire Grill* avoids prescribing a specific gender performance or relationship structure, instead encouraging space for individual identity. To this end, *The Spitfire Grill* calls for communication – within relationships, across generations, in order to consider the way one approaches the world. Relationships marked by a lack of communication suffer; having challenging conversations, in the world of the musical, leads to positive change. The musical is every bit as hopeful as critics describe, but the musical's firm grounding in its place and historical moment suggest that the happy ending isn't solely the result of life in a musical utopia, but a possible future for the real-world communities the musical mirrors (Brantley "Bottomless Cup").

A Cautionary Tale

Hannah, the owner of the Spitfire Grill, is a widow; her husband died over a decade before the action of the musical. Hannah and Jack's marriage, in some ways, is what sets Gilead's plot (that of a town losing its hero and fading away) into motion. As the only relationship already concluded at the beginning of the musical, it also provides the audience with a "default" relationship structure for the community; Shelby, Joe, Caleb, and all other local members of their generation grew up with Hannah and Jack's model as a relationship. It's clear, however, that this relationship isn't a model that's intended to be emulated; Hannah's marriage is the only romantic relationship in the musical that is shown to have far-reaching negative consequences for both her own well-bring and the community. "The idea of an insular, unchanging Midwest" may have "served a changing America outside the region," but the legacy of Hannah and Jack's relationship makes it clear that an unchanging conservative relationship structure doesn't serve anyone in the present (Jacobson 157).

When Hannah's son, Eli, returned home after deserting from the Vietnam War, Hannah's husband threw him out of the house; Hannah didn't actively reject her son, but she's kept Eli's existence a secret and lived with the shame of the fact that she "didn't do a thing to stop [her husband]" (Valcq and Alley 66). This inaction on Hannah's part seems out of character; throughout the musical, she's seen as being in charge of nearly everyone and everything – the town matriarch, self-contained and self-confident to the point of brusqueness.

Hannah's behavior makes sense, however, when viewed in light of rural post-war femininity. Though women began working outside the home more after WWII – the war

in which Jack was a hero – gender roles in rural areas remained complex. "[M]en experienced substantial authority and control in communities, while women were expected to engage in activities and behaviors that would nurture, service and maintain traditional values, practices and relations within the community," Jo Little and Ruth Panelli explained (282). Hannah engages in a "productivist rural femininity," where she was actively involved with the daily running of the family business, but had "relatively little involvement in the major decisions made [about the family business]; accountable for the care and health of family; and responsible for the "soft skills" of problem-solving among male stakeholders in the . . . business" (Keller, Lloyd, and Bell 138).

It's logical, given the cultural moment from which she is coming, that Hannah was able to work in a grill providing food and a space for social connection – roles appropriate for a woman – but still felt required to submit to her husband's family leadership, even up to the point of casting away their child. Hannah's choices make sense within their historical context, but the musical does not reward them; on the contrary, the choice to allow Eli to be thrown out has tragic consequences not only for Hannah and Eli, but later generations in the community.

Silent Strength and Room for Redemption

Shelby and Caleb's relationship is a study in the damaging consequences of a masculinity that is not allowed to change. The particular brand of rural working-class masculinity handed down to Caleb isn't adaptive in the present world in which Caleb finds himself. His frustration with his inability to correctly perform the version of masculinity he was taught is taken out on his wife, with whom he initially shares a

relationship that echoes Hannah and Jack's in structure. Shelby makes Caleb's lunches and does the laundry, leaving the business and decision-making to Caleb. She is conventionally feminine even outside of her romantic relationship, sweet and unassuming.

Throughout the musical, both characters have the opportunity to interrogate their relationship structure and the ways in which they perform their genders both within and outside it. Through Caleb, the musical interrogates toxic narratives of a restrictive masculinity, though it doesn't offer simple solutions. Shelby, in turn, challenges cultural understandings of conventional femininity as inherently weak or dependent. As with most elements in the musical, the pair ends with hope. Their environment and cultural moment didn't set them up to have an equitable, mutually fulfilling union. By the end of the musical, with the aid of communication and compromise, there is hope that the pair are on their way to a happier future together.

Though neither of them are the protagonist, Shelby and Caleb carry the voice parts of the conventional musical theatre leading couple, with Shelby singing in a "shimmering folk soprano" and Caleb living more in a baritone range ("The Spitfire Grill"). The choice to give the secondary couple those voice types could be in reaction to changes in the field – many contemporary musicals now choose to cast a mezzo-soprano belter and a tenor (Percy and Joe's voice types) as their leading couple – but the choice could also be a deliberate hearkening back to the Golden Age of musical theatre, the way it used to be thought that things "should" be.

Shelby's first appearance in the musical is as a dutiful wife, bringing Caleb's forgotten lunch to the Spitfire. She is subservient, waiting for her husband to answer for

her when Joe invites her to join them for a cup of coffee – the stage directions describe her as "painfully shy" (Valcq and Alley 17). Though Caleb doesn't thank her for bringing him his lunch, he notes Shelby as being one of the much-needed and rarely found "good-hearted women / who stand beside their men" (Valcq and Alley 16). Shelby's loyalty to him is assumed at the beginning of the musical, but he seems to be threatened by her encroaching independence when Shelby starts working at the Spitfire to help out after Hannah has an accident. The second time Shelby and Caleb appear onstage together, he's scolding her for not having the specific shirt he wanted to show the quarry ready for him to wear that day. There is no doubt that he's in the right; Shelby immediately apologizes and promises to go home during lunch and get it cleaned. It's clear that Shelby is supposed to subscribe to conventional rural femininity as described by Bettina Bock and Sally Shortall – she may work outside the home, but her real job is to see to "community, household and family" and support the apparently more important work of her husband (160).

Caleb and Shelby have a complicated relationship, and theirs is the storyline that most closely reflects the lives of people in the rural and working-class communities highly impacted by the economic changes in the 1980s that put miners, farmers, and other manual laborers out of work (Kimmel and Ferber, Williams). Shelby isn't the only one whose gender performance is a source of difficulty; Caleb is struggling as well, having grown up around the same ideas of manhood that Monty (in *Violet*) did:

> You grow up fast, pay your dues,
>
> Learn to walk in your father's shoes.
>
> Build a home, take a wife,

Settle in with the working life (Valcq and Alley 38)

Caleb sings, laying out his plans of living a life in line with conventions and communal expectations of his gender performance.

However, "[w]ars . . . and the displaced blue-collar worker of the late twentieth-century service economy . . . challenged notions of manhood and required its revision," Baron asserts (145). Cowey and Boehm explain that men coming of age during the Vietnam War – like Caleb – missed out on the proving grounds for masculinity men of previous generations had. In Caleb's case, his uncle Jack was a big war hero and his cousin, Eli, managed to enlist in Vietnam and receive all the glory that went with such a decision. Eli disappeared, though, and with changing public opinions about war, the option to use enlistment to prove manliness was denied to Caleb.

Absent a war to fight, "the workplace is a key site for the construction of masculinity and male identity" (Baron 143). Caleb "was foreman . . . at the quarry," an identity he holds onto years after the quarry has been closed down and he's settled into a real estate job (Valcq and Alley 16). It's reasonable, given Caleb's surroundings, that he has a hard time holding onto his notions of what makes him a man. Language around masculinity in the changing labor markets of the 70s and 80s "created an idealized notion of working-class manhood as resolute and heroic, but which established a measure of manhood that required repeated demonstration, since it could never be secured . . . Labor discourse was infused with 'gender anxiety' about the fate of worker manhood" (Kaster qtd. in Baron 145). "Maybe I ain't a man at all," Caleb sings of his inability to live the life he grew up thinking he would (Valcq and Alley 39).

Caleb struggles to navigate his masculinity in the world that's been thrust upon him through desperate attempts to control the social world around him (since he can't control his professional life). He does so, like many rural men, through control of his intimate partner. "A sizeable portion of [economically disempowered] rural men who strongly adhere to the ideology of familial patriarchy" – as it is fair, considering he comes from a family where Eli was forced to live in the woods for decades since his uncle said so, to assume that Caleb does – "compensate for their lack of economic power by exerting more control over their wives," Walter Dekeseredy and Marvin Schwartz explain (100).

As Shelby continues to work outside the home, Caleb's difficulty establishing his role in the community is compounded. Rural gender identities – particularly those around romantic relationships – are "built on a particular interpretation of masculinity and femininity that sees women representing the innocence of the natural world which 'active masculinity must support, protect and oversee'" (David and Hall, qtd. in Little and Austin 103). When one partner changes the way they participate in the complimentary structures of rural gender identities, it alters the other's self-perception. When Caleb attempts to make Shelby quit her job, she throws his failures of employment back at him – "Caleb, you're not my foreman. This isn't the quarry" – and leaves, refusing to stay and do laundry; her purview in a world where a woman's place is in the home and a man's at work (Valcq and Alley 55). This prompts a reprise for Caleb, who sings, "What does it take for a man to feel some pride?" (Valcq and Alley 55).

As it is tempting to view Caleb as simply an archetype of a backwards, abusive redneck – one reviewer certainly did, dismissing his "frustrated back-country manhood"

– it is also tempting to view Shelby as a stereotypically "helpless little lady." However, just like the truth of Caleb's situation is more nuanced and based in reality, so is Shelby's. Like Hannah, she's grown up in a world where she is "cognizant of the community narrative that requires [rural women] . . . to perform a version of femininity to be afforded moral worth and respect" and tried to fit in to that narrative (Bryan and Pini 18). However, she subverts the cultural narratives that say that rural women (particularly those in situations with potentially abusive intimate partners) tend towards "exhibiting passivity and learned helplessness" (Anderson, Renner, and Bloom 424). When Caleb lifts his hand to strike her – for the first time, the musical leads the audience to assume – she makes him leave. "[W]omen who are victimized creatively and thoughtfully defend and protect themselves . . . when confronting escalating violence," and so does Shelby (Anderson, et al. 424). She isn't helpless; she's trying to navigate her role in the world, and – unlike cultural imaginations that paint the rural and people who live in it as static – figure out how it's changing.

So is Caleb. When it's revealed that Eli didn't die as a war hero, but was punished with decades of homelessness for his failure to adequately perform his role, Caleb realizes, "My whole life I've been trying to live up to something that never was in the first place. I stayed here, and tried to bring something back to this town. I just wish to God [Hannah] would have told us the truth. There's so much I think might've happened different" (Valcq and Alley 66). The musical doesn't promise immediate resolution for Caleb and Shelby, but it does offer the character the chance to recognize the toxicity of the narratives to which he's been exposed and offer hope that he'll interact with them more thoughtfully in the future.

Love and the Land

Percy and Joe begin the musical with a working relationship neither are sure how to navigate. He's her parole officer, the first person she speaks to in the musical, and the person who secures her position at the Spitfire Grill. If Caleb is stepping into the stereotype of the "back-country man" content to stay in his small town and in the past, Joe is his opposite, wanting to leave Gilead forever and never look back. Percy's interest in Gilead is explicitly tied to the land – she came to Gilead to find the "autumn colors along Copper Creek near Gilead, Wisconsin" she saw in a book in her prison (Valcq and Alley 11). Joe is unimpressed by his hometown – after all, it's "a ghost town" and "the fall colors are long gone" (Valcq and Alley 11). It's clear from the first moment they meet in the musical that their relationship isn't purely between them, but between them and the land.

In her review of the initial production, Mimi Kramer asserted that "*The Spitfire Grill* really was a show about real estate. It was about redemption through the acquisition of property" (37). She was correct in that land is, of course, significant, and essential to the very concept of rurality – it's through a relationship with the land in rural areas (which the concept of the rural idyll paints as more "pure" than relationships individuals might have to the earth in urban or suburban centers) that provides both the challenge and romance associated with rural living in the cultural imagination (Little; Little and Austin). Land is also important to real rural people – "land has 'tremendous economic, cultural, and political value to rural communities' and constitutes a resource that cannot be transported or easily duplicated elsewhere if sold" (Acevedeo-Garcia, Lochner, Osypuk, and Subramanian qtd. in Probst, Moore, and Samuels 1696). What Kramer

failed to observe, however, is that rural real estate carries with it a host of associations and gendered and classed opportunities and limitations with which *The Spitfire Grill* engages with varying degrees of thoughtfulness or success.

When the town sings "Something's Cooking in the Spitfire Grill," while many of the other townspeople are worrying about Percy's history, Joe is trying to puzzle out why she's interested in Gilead, specifically, singing:

Don't ask me why she's here

I only wish I knew

Gilead's a place for leaving,

Not for coming to (Valcq and Alley 17).

His feelings about and interest in Percy are tied to her connection to the land. Even the first time the subject of intimacy is brought up between them (albeit negatively), it's due to a specifically rural, land-based chore: Percy is outside and Joe startles her on his way to make sure Hannah's woodpile was sufficiently stocked, and she says "If you're thinkin' I'm one of them sex-starved prison gals or somethin', you're damn wrong" (Valcq and Alley 26).

Percy and Joe are outside, looking at "his" woods (the woods the Spitfire backs up to are owned by his father, and will eventually be his) when Percy reveals that, though she was also born in a rural area – the "West Virginia mountains" – she didn't get to have a relationship to the local nature in her childhood due to mining (her father's profession) and, after her father's death, a move to a city (Valcq and Alley 40). Rural citizens in primarily agricultural communities generally consider miners to be "lesser" than other people who work with the land (Bryant and Pini). And, though the rural Midwest (of

which Wisconsin is a part) has become "the embodiment of stability, fertility, and coherence; . . . a timeless refuge" in the cultural imagination, Appalachia has very different associations (Jacobson 193). Rather than rolling farmlands with timeless values, Appalachia is the purview of "white trash," as Effy refers to Percy, working-class people without a class or future (Jun, 318). Percy's revelation not only allows her the opportunity to become closer to Joe, but invites the audience to utilize their associations with Appalachian mining country to understand how Percy can be both a folksy, scrappy young woman and also enamored of a forest full of trees.

Joe is particularly unhappy with the trees in question, as the forest was felled for lumber when he was a child "and what grew back is no damn good; / just scrub trees and brush wood…" (Valcq and Alley 41). Percy responds by pointing out the value of the trees – they may not be economically useful, but they can still be walked through and sat beneath – and the two part. However, once Percy returns to the Grill and Joe is left outside, they sing together; he remembers the joy he had climbing the trees as a child, and he and Percy harmonize, singing her words from moments before. The moment is interesting, because it serves the purpose of a conditional love song, but with the land – once more – as a buffer between Joe and Percy; they each use the land to express their mutual hypothetical affection for the other. A conditional love song is a musical theatre convention in which two characters sing about what would happen *if* they loved each other (Taylor and Symonds). The understanding is that the characters don't think or aren't willing to admit that they love each other but, of course, they will find their way to each other by the end of the musical. Here, Percy and Joe both sing that "I'd dream myself deep roots / to reach the water" in the hypothetical situation in which they had a

claim to the woods – Percy likely meaning that she would do so if there were some way the woods could be hers, and Joe likely meaning that he would do so if something could happen to make him feel like the woods were valuable once more (41). By the end of the musical, they will provide those things to each other.

Indeed, the next time Percy and Joe are alone onstage together, it's for him to tell her that his father has given him ten acres, and he's picked the ten she came to Gilead to see – right along Copper Creek. He references their earlier song together and expressed that she's helped him understand the value of the woods – "I'm just a fool who couldn't see the forest for the trees / that is, until the day you came along," he sings (Valcq and Alley 58). He tells her that he's planning to build a house in the woods and wants her help with placing the front porch ("Front of the house might be good," she quips), and all but proposes when Percy stops him (Valcq and Alley 59). She can't have children; she isn't marriage material. As she told Shelby, she's "a wild bird . . . Wild bird don't have no nest" (Valcq and Alley 43). Though that isn't a deterrent to Joe, he respects her wishes and leaves. It isn't until the last scene of the musical – the next time Percy and Joe interact – that their story reaches its conclusion. Percy starts to speak to Joe and, assuming she's about to explain or apologize, he tries to spare her. "You don't have to tell me," he says. "I know a little something about wild birds" (Valcq and Alley 70). "Yeah?" she responds. "Well, I don't know nothin' about front porches, but I got some ideas for that house 'o yours" (Valcq and Alley 70). The implication, of course, is that they'll get their happy ending.

Percy and Joe both subvert some gendered expectations about the ways they'll deal with the land and operate as a member of a rural community (and couple), but also

reinscribe some conventions in problematic ways: Percy is clearly written to be a force that places great value on and advocates for the land, and Little and Panelli argue that "associating femininity with nature and rural landscapes has resulted in the perpetuation of the male gaze and the notions of male husbandry, dominance and control of rural and wilderness settings" (284). Additionally, Keller, Lloyd, and Bell criticize those who move to rural areas seeking their idea of "the country," as they generally fail to engage meaningfully with an extant community and instead contribute to inflation in the area, making it harder for people who originally lived there to continue to find work and affordable resources in their homelands. (Certainly, Percy doesn't experience the same anxiety about Gilead's economic situation as, say, Caleb – she has a guaranteed home and job from the moment she arrives in the community.) Finally, Bock and Shortall criticize those who move from more urban areas to rural areas for more traditional lives, particularly those that come for the "traditional rural gender system" – though some rural areas *are* more conservative in their gender politics, Bock and Shortall argue, newcomers "contribute to [traditional patriarchal gender relations'] constitution by importing their own images about the idyllic, 'genuinely' rural gender relations when entering rural society as newcomers" (160).

Among outsiders to rural communities, particularly, there is a longstanding cultural history of conflating women and land (Little and Austin). Scholars suggest that this association of rural women with nature is made in order to keep social structures organized – work and masculinity on one side, home and femininity on the other, closely tied to the contrast between the "longing for rural tranquility versus urban restlessness and corruption" (Davidoff and Hall qtd. in Little and Austin 103). Percy and Joe,

however, complicate this categorization, and the ways in which they do so temper the musical's tendency to fully align Percy with the land.

Percy works outside the home – Joe got her the job – and she shows no inclination towards quitting if they are wed; she can't bear children, so there's certainly no expectation that she'll stay home to be a mother. She also isn't conventionally feminine, especially not in the way Shelby embodies; she stood up for herself, murdering the man who harmed her and her child. She doesn't cook well – Joe jokes about it, but there's no indication that she's expected to be able to do so – and Joe asks her for her advice about building, a pursuit that's certainly coded as masculine. Finally, while land is associated with women, a vested interest in property ownership is still considered a male domain, and she expresses a clear interest in it – in fact, the musical ends with her owning, alongside Shelby, half of the Spitfire Grill; she's a business owner. In contrast, Joe seems to place little value on owning property (aside from the worth it holds in pleasing Percy) and seems to be perfectly at ease in a position that, while it offers a certain degree of power, certainly doesn't engage with the highly physical kinds of masculinity someone like Caleb prizes.

Percy and Joe's relationship fits within basic musical theatre conventions – both characters establish what they want through song, sing a love song together, and form a relationship as they move toward their goals. Their relationship also subverts expectations of a conventional musical theatre plot in notable ways. Though Joe provides Percy access to land, that is only part of what she wants – the peace and self-fulfillment she seeks are far more important, and she finds them on her own. Though musicals often feature a woman learning her lesson through the male romantic love interest, this musical

doesn't tell that story; Percy teaches Joe a great deal about valuing his community, but any lessons she learns from him are learned first and best through her relationships with Shelby and Hannah. Finally, though it seemed that Joe was getting ready to propose, it is Percy who controls the romantic trajectory of their relationship – she prevents him from proposing and, when she's ready, reopens the possibility of a romantic connection for them.

Though one could certainly problematize Percy's role as a "guide" for Joe in his own community, both in the ways in which an outsider is assuming authority in an extant community and in the way that a female character's personal journey is being utilized for a male character's fulfilment, it seems that to do so is to miss what Valcq and Alley managed for the couple; a fairly conventional musical theatre romance that is developed logically throughout the musical without requiring the woman to learn to perform conventional femininity or give up what she wants to fit into the male character's world. Little and Austin note that "there can be no doubt that the woman of the rural idyll is the wife and mother, not the high-flying professional, the single childless business entrepreneur," the woman of *The Spitfire Grill* is, indeed, a childless business owner who gets the opportunity to live her life on her own terms; a fate rarely offered to women in musical theatre or in the cultural imagination of rural romance (106).

Revisiting Representation

The Spitfire Grill is a musical with an impressive capacity to inspire empathy, particularly for the romantic lives of its characters who are attempting to navigate relationships, families, and jobs in a rapidly changing world. Songs effectively give

Percy, Joe, Hannah, Caleb, and Shelby moments to reveal their innermost thoughts to the audience in ways that make the character's position clear without excusing or glossing over bad behavior. *The Spitfire Grill* offers a glimpse into the multiplicities of masculinities and femininities at play in ways that are surprisingly historically accurate and consistent with sociological research about rural communities. With this accuracy, a musical that could have been an idyllic flight of fancy can instead be viewed less like an "animated catalogue from Talbots or Eddie Bauer" and more like a well-researched effort to "make [Americans] feel that there might be some hope for us after all" (Brantley "Bottomless Cup" E1; Lepidus).

The musical begins with a conflict of representation – Percy comes seeking the rural idyll, and the bus driver and Joe describe a rural nightmare. Throughout the musical, Percy and the community work together to discover a Gilead that is (for the most part) neither; the nightmare and the idyll both assume a community in a frozen past, and Gilead and the citizens within it are moving together towards a future.

In the introduction to the thesis, I referenced research that draws a connection between high rates of domestic violence in rural communities and the stress caused by attempts to fulfill gender roles designed to function in a different culture and time. *The Spitfire Grill* is the musical in this thesis that best captures this conflict, both allowing for depictions of the challenges characters attempting to fulfill highly conventional gender roles face (Caleb, for example, isn't written purely as a villain; the musical is careful to show audiences how his expectations for his and his wife's rural gender performance were created and policed throughout his life) and offering possible alternatives for a stronger, more inclusive community. *The Spitfire Grill* avoids the narrative of a static,

unchanging community, instead suggesting a world in which changing with the times is both possible and necessary.

There are, of course, limitations to the representations available in the couples in *The Spitfire Grill.* There are no living children featured or alluded to in the musical, and motherhood is generally considered to be a key component of conventional rural femininity; it would certainly have altered the kinds of conversations Shelby and Caleb had around her work outside the home if she'd also had to secure childcare (Davison and Brodie). The characters all seem to be financially secure. Caleb is concerned about his quarry being closed, but he's still managing to make enough money as a real estate agent that he and Shelby don't need a second income, and Hannah is making enough at the Spitfire Grill to be able to keep business open (and, later in the musical, to be able to give the restaurant away without making any profit). Financial stressors are as much a reality in rural areas as any other, and the choice to shield characters from them is a valid one, but certainly changes the way their marriages and relationships work. A musical can't represent everyone, however, and this musical provides a complex picture of the characters it chooses to include that allows for more thoughtful representation than many.

Carrie is Missing the Point at the Prom

Carrie, according to Stephen King, is "largely about how women find their own channels of power, and what men fear about women and women's sexuality" (qtd. in Csetényi 167). King created "a novel that was a male reaction to feminism" (Guthrie 13). *Carrie* was written during the second wave of the movement; the anxieties around sexuality and reproduction present in the characters in the novel echoes national concerns

about feminists' politicization of sexuality and reproduction (Rampton). Though King's early works have been widely criticized for their portrayals of women, King's novel attempted to consider the potentially disastrous consequences of pathologizing women's sexuality.

King's novel devotes considerable attention to establishing the setting of the small town of Chamberlain, ME. The town is a picture of the rural nightmare, drawn as a microcosm of the broader cultural climate, marked by an aggressive commitment to maintaining traditional gender roles and family structures and a xenophobia towards anyone unable to maintain the status quo (Csetényi; Strengell). The community is also noticeably rural; the town is described as a small hamlet near farms, the full town proper – from the roadhouse on its outskirts of to the small local jail and high school – only taking up a couple miles (King). It is, in part, the secrecy specifically associated with small, insular communities that allows the novel's events (beginning with a small, apparently abused Carrie telekinetically raining rocks down on her family's home) to unfold (Sears). The teenage characters reflect a restlessness and dissatisfaction with the opportunities afforded them in their community that mirrors those reflected by real rural adolescents (Rye).

The source material for the musical version of *Carrie* is imperfect, but one opportunity afforded by the adaptation of a potentially problematic source material is the chance to mitigate problematic aspects of the source material while emphasizing the elements that made it interesting and worthy of adaptation in the first place. The musical might have offered more nuanced interpretations of broadly drawn characters while maintaining King's exploration of the damaging effects of rigidly enforced gender roles

and cultural norms that punish female sexuality. Instead, the musical reinscribes the very norms its source material critiques, using Chamberlain's rural setting only as an excuse for the rigidity and conservatism of the expectations of gender performance the musical reflects.

Sexuality and Shame

Margaret White's religiously fueled aversion to anything to do with sex and sexuality is responsible for Carrie's lack of knowledge about her first menstrual cycle and, by extension, the tragic actions of the entire musical. Mrs. White's attitudes around sex and sexuality in the novel are complex; though she advocates abstinence, she is "as sexually needy and socially repressed as the younger generation that surrounds her" (Reed B4). The musical sets up a simplistic narrative in which Mrs. White was sexually promiscuous as a young woman and was sexually assaulted; her assault is treated as a punishment for her sexuality, and she is fully sexually repulsed in the musical's present as a result. Though a nuanced exploration of the ways in which sexual assault might affect a survivor could be useful and offer the opportunity for a conversation around a difficult topic, *Carrie* reinscribes narratives that dictate that assault is the direct result of a survivor's actions. Furthermore, the choice to have a sexual assault as Margaret's backstory prevents the musical from recognizing cultural narratives that punish both women who are not sexual *and* women who are.

In "I Remember How Those Boys Could Dance," Margaret tells a story of sexual assault, describing Carrie's father getting drunk and the way that "he took me and touched me / I tried to fight," as a story of warning to prevent Carrie from attending the

prom (Gore, Pitchford, and Cohen 55). Margaret is opposed to her daughter attending the prom for fear that "the smell of the blood . . . will drive [the boys] mad" and produce similarly predatory behavior from them (Gore, Pitchford, and Cohen 54). The musical implies that Carrie's father raped her mother and left them both to fend for themselves – it's unclear, even, about whether or not Ralph (unnamed in the musical) and Margaret knew each other beyond Ralph being one of the "boys [who] could dance / pressing close on Friday nights" (Gore, Pitchford, and Cohen 54).

In the novel, however, Ralph and Margaret were married, and Ralph was just as religiously zealous as Margaret. Carrie's conception in the novel isn't clear-cut; Margaret tells of sleeping with her husband before their marriage once, then managing to live chastely until the night Carrie was conceived. That night, Carrie's father left the house and got drunk then, Margaret explains, "with the stink of filthy roadhouse whiskey still on him he took me…*and I liked it o* [sic] *all that dirty fucking and his hands on me ALL OVER ME!*" (King 248, emphasis his). Margaret and Ralph prayed together afterwards and lived together until Ralph passed away.

Though all adaptations require some changes, it's notable that the creators of the musical chose to change Carrie's conception into a clear-cut assault rather than allowing it to be a more complicated interaction. "Many . . . women resist articulating desire before sex because they do not want to be seen as unfeminine"; cultural norms dictate that women aren't supposed to admit to wanting sex (Baker 304). Margaret didn't have a model of consent that allowed her to enjoy sex with her partner and retain her respectability. Just as wanting sex is cast as unfeminine and inappropriate, however, women who don't have an interest in procreation have also historically been suspect,

shirking their feminine duties (Tasca, Rapetti, Carta, and Fadda). Considering Margaret's relationship to Ralph, the community, and her own sexuality in light of a world that would shame her for wanting sex *or* not desiring to procreate (or that could paint her as simultaneously immoral for seeking male attention and frigid for resisting the same male attention) creates a much more complex, nuanced, and human character, inviting critique of not only Margaret White's choices, but the world that lead her to them.

The musical, however, is uninterested in delving into this complexity. Instead of a husband joining Margaret in complicated negotiation of faith/cultural expectation and desire, the musical gives Margaret a rapist, cheerfully engaging in victim blaming besides – in the song in which Margaret reveals her sexual assault to Carrie, the first four stanzas of the song are Margaret detailing the way in which she interacted with the young men she knew ("Oh how those boys were demons of romance / in their cars we'd chase the lights," she sings wistfully) before explaining to Carrie that that kind of behavior would end in boys chasing her "like a whore," implying that Margaret's assault was due to her own actions (Gore, Pitchford, and Cohen 54).

Though the argument could be made that the understanding of sexual assault as a punishment for promiscuity is coming from Margaret's point of view, due to her own aversion to sex through her religious faith, the musical doesn't question Mrs. White's assertions. Rather, it seems to suggest that sexual assault wasn't a sufficient punishment – "sometimes I wish you were dead," Carrie sings before using her power against her mother for the first time (Gore, Pitchford, and Cohen 55). The audience is, naturally, meant to be excited for Carrie's use of her powers – she's finally standing up to someone who has abused her and reaching for what she wants. However, creating an experience in

which the revelation of a sexual assault is a catalyst for an additional act of violence against the survivor (an act of violence that prompts pleasure in the audience) is incredibly irresponsible. There are already a host of negative judgements towards survivors of sexual assault; suggesting that a crime committed towards a survivor renders them as not only broken but as deserving of additional violence is as far from a progressive sexual politics as possible.

A Quartet of Conventions

Along with Carrie herself, "Sue Snell, Tommy Ross, Chris Hargensen, and Billy Nolan cover the full range of interests, afflictions, pressures, and fears experienced by the average adolescent from all walks of life[; they] are representative of personality types drawn from the wellspring of adolescent experience," writes Neil Mitchell (47). Both King's book and Cohen, Pitchford, and Gore's musical offer the quartet of teenagers in contrast to Carrie, the main character. Through Sue and Tommy, the musical suggests an "appropriate" masculinity and femininity that is highly conventional, conservative, and dated; their relationship seems more appropriate to teenagers in the fictional 1950s than the present day. Chris and Billy each suggest a different, less acceptable gender performance.

Though Carrie is certainly the protagonist of the eponymous musical, it's Sue and Tommy that are set up as the conventional main couple and Chris and Billy that become the secondary couple (even in musical theatre structure, Carrie doesn't fit in). Stacy Wolf explains that the musical theatre convention of featuring two couples is to offer "contrasting representations of masculinity and femininity," and this quartet certainly

fulfills the requirement ("Gender and Sexuality" 214). Sue fills the role of the ingénue, the (aside from Carrie and her mother) principal female role – a young soprano, conventionally pretty and wholesome, exhibiting both "strength and grace" and a certain "naivety" (Schrader 78). Chris is a version of the soubrette – she is friends with the ingénue and has a lower vocal range, as well as being "clever…flirtatious, pretty, and vivacious" (Schrader 84). The women are paired with appropriate partners – Tommy is the leading man, "the cowardly American hero," the "tenor who can admit his fear and overcome it" (Karp 112). Billy is the male of the secondary couple, with a voice part lower than Tommy's and a more sexualized, "macho" gender performance.

Sue and Tommy are painted as a nearly perfect couple according to normative expectations, conforming to conventional gender roles individually and as a couple. Though King's Sue in the book experiences a great deal of anxiety about growing up to live in the same rigidly defined world as her parents and peers, expressing her concern about being stuck as a stay-at-home mother while her husband works, the Sue of the musical seems to have no such problems. When her boyfriend, Tommy, suggests that "everything's laid out in front of [them], [their] whole future, all planned out," she reacts as if the words are a given rather than cause for concern – she's going to Brown (we know only because Chris now gets to room with her; the musical doesn't mention the academic abilities of any woman in a positive light), she's going to backpack through Europe with her boyfriend, and prom is going to be "the biggest night of [her] life" (Gore, Pitchford, and Cohen 44; 57).

Sue is sweet and conventionally feminine, one of "the two most popular girls" in school (Gore, Pitchford, and Cohen 23). She also fulfills conventional rural femininity

laid out by Keller et al. which, as previously discussed, involves "relatively little involvement in the major decisions" of a couple's life, being "accountable for the care and health" of others, being "responsible for the 'soft skills' of problem-solving," and excelling at "communication" between her own social group and the broader community (138). Sue is on the Prom Committee even after she knows she won't be attending the prom, and takes it upon herself to make amends with Carrie for the whole group's actions, going so far as to set Carrie up with Tommy. However, she is subservient to Tommy – she seeks his advice for how to handle the situation with Carrie, repeatedly apologizes and offers him chances to reconsider once he agrees to attend the prom with Carrie, and does not voice her own opinions about his post-graduation plans for their lives. Finally, as Linnerman notes, she manages to be "sexy, but not sexual," finding the feminine middle ground on which women are expected to live; for example, she's happy to dance with her boyfriend in the gym and to kiss him, but tickles him and truncates their encounter before it can get out of hand (15).

Tommy, Sue's boyfriend, enacts the contemporary masculinity Louisa Allen's subjects refer to as being "real macho and sensitive at the same time" (150). Tommy is a poet; the English teacher asks him to read his composition aloud in class after scolding the rest of the class for their poor quality work, and Tommy sings about being "a dreamer in disguise" (Gore, Pitchford, and Cohen 34). Though his girlfriend enjoys his writing and encourages him in a writing career, his friends tease him about the poem; in Chamberlain, like many other small towns, boys are "not expected to attend diligently to academic work" if they want to maintain their masculinity; academic success, *if* it comes, should be incidental rather than effortful (Morris 737). Tommy is also a gifted athlete and

is friends with the "popular" crowd at school, sharing their definition of masculinity – "God it's rough / stayin' tough," they sing in the opening number, describing the expectations the town had of them to simultaneously engage in a "devil-may-care" attitude but to also "'Make a plan!' / 'Be a man!'" (Gore, Pitchford, and Cohen 5).

In contrast to Tommy's "all-American" charms – there is never doubt that Tommy will, in fact, make a plan and build a life with Sue (unless, of course, he dies in a tragedy at the prom) – Billy is a picture of rural working-class masculinity. Morris describes the kinds of masculinity espoused by rural working-class teens as being characterized by "resisting school, engaging in risky, physically challenging behaviors such as fighting or drug use, and embracing manual or illegal labor" (733). Billy clearly doesn't care about school – he's already repeated the grade once, and seems unconcerned about doing so again. He's the drug dealer for the group of friends, helps Chris obtain and set the trap with a bucket of pig's blood, and sings a story about physically attacking a student in gym he perceived as being a homosexual. Additionally, he "totally freaks out [Chris'] old man" (Gore, Pitchford, and Cohen 24). Rural working-class masculinity is treated as being dangerous, the exclusive purview of men who are unlikely to go far in life; the musical doesn't offer information about what industry or employment opportunities (or lack thereof) in the community might exist to reward Billy's performance of this particular kind of masculinity.

Chris is also a contrast to her counterpart. Unlike Sue's gentle femininity, Chris is violent – she is the instigator of the event with Carrie in the shower, the only character who won't apologize, and it's her idea to slaughter a pig to have blood to dump on Carrie. She isn't seen participating in any school events, and isn't conventionally

submissive to her male partner – she's dating him until her dad promises her a nice enough car once they break up. Rather than encouraging community, she points out that "Ever since the world began / same plot! / everyone's been dumping on their fellow man," and encourages her peers to continue the trend (Gore, Pitchford, and Cohen 25). She also, as Linnerman points out, uses her sexuality not as a way to form closeness with her partner (an accepted purpose), but as a bargaining chip; she stops giving Billy access to her body when she wants a favor from him, then offers sexual favors in exchange for his acquiescence.

Chris' publicly demonstrated sexuality and brassy disregard for authority are her identifying characteristics in the musical. Billy and Chris' relationship in the musical is notably different from that in King's story. Rather than exclusively using her working-class boyfriend to anger her father, Chris is seeking freedom from the oppressive social structure her cultural position dictates. She finds herself with few options but enduring a physically abusive relationship with Billy or succumbing to her family and community's expectations. In the musical, Chris is not complex; she's spoiled, and she uses her boyfriend unapologetically. She's treated as the antagonist – even Billy, who got the pig blood *for* her in the book, condemns Chris' prom night prank, saying "this trick is pretty damn sick" after they've killed a pig and set up the bucket together (Gore, Pitchford, and Cohen 85).

The need for a clear antagonist is understandable, but when the antagonist is also the only woman in the musical who seems to be comfortable with the idea that she is a sexual being, it suggests that her comfort with her own sexuality is part of what makes her such a reprehensible character. Chris is confident and assertive, qualities the other

women in the musical struggle with; the musical engages with a longstanding tradition of painting women who don't fulfill certain kinds of convention as "bitches," punishing their gender performance (Fiedler 314). In the world of *Carrie,* it seems, only the most conventional of gender roles can be performed without disastrous consequence.

Denying Desire

Though Carrie's mother asserts that "lust was how the sin began" that led to Carrie's menstruation – the inciting incident for the whole musical – Carrie doesn't have a romantic partner (Gore, Pitchford, and Cohen 21). Furthermore, she doesn't seem to express a desire for one. Carrie wants to fit into the community and attempts to perform the normative femininity of the other women in her school, but doesn't express any interest in a romance narrative. The result of this is that a musical predicated on anxieties about female sexuality has a protagonist that doesn't seem to experience sexual desire. Her sexual viability through the onset of menstruation is her only connection to female sexuality, and it causes her destruction, as well as that of the entire community. Removed from the context of an era actively engaging in debates about female sexuality, the 2012 version of *Carrie* suggests that it is destructive and dangerous; a distinct step backwards.

Carrie's unwillingness or inability to communicate desire, even in the internal monologue of song, is new to the off-Broadway revival. In the 1998 version of *Carrie,* the protagonist's initial "I want" song (in which she tells the audience what she wants and, therefore, what to expect from the musical) has a bridge that begins "I wish I was blessed / by someone / not like the rest" that goes on to lay out a fantasy of meeting someone, having a courtship, and marrying with her mother's permission (I-2B-1). This

bridge was later reprised in “I’m Not Alone,” a song performed while Carrie flew her prom dress, hairbrush, etc. around the room and celebrated her connection to Tommy, singing “thinkin’ of him / thrills me so much / I could move a mountain now with just a single touch” (II-3A-2).

The Carrie of the 1988 version was more confident, expressed desire, and was desired – Tommy sang her a love song at the prom, echoing the scene in the novel in which the pair held hands, Tommy thinking that he might be in love with Carrie. She was also played by Linzi Hately, a full-figured actress much physically closer to the Carrie in King’s book than the more conventionally attractive Molly Ranston of the 2012 production, and also more deliberately written to sound small-town (note the “thinkin’” in the above lyric – it’s typical of 1988 Carrie’s speech, but no one in the 2012 version speaks that way). Though a female character’s fulfilment through a heterosexual relationship is hardly revolutionary, for *Carrie*, it was notable that both her telekinesis and sexuality were a source of *personal* pleasure; Carrie’s sexuality was a literal source of power. This ownership of sexuality and desire was consistent with the sexual politics of mainstream feminism at both the time of the novel and the 1988 adaptation (Rampton). By allowing Carrie to find joy in her powers and have the possibility of fulfilling her romantic desires, the 1988 version of the script offered hope that Carrie might be able to successfully navigate her femininity in a way that let her feel able to be socially accepted and plan for a future.

In the 2012 version of the script, however, Carrie no longer expresses romantic desire. Miss Gardner – the gym teacher – encourages Carrie to seek a date to the prom, singing that “it’s like magic how your spirit soars / once you feel his hand in yours”

(Gore, Pitchford, and Cohen 43). Even when Carrie *does* get a date to the prom, however, she doesn't seem actively interested in Tommy in any kind of romantic way; her concern is for the opinions of her peers as a community. "*They'll* like me," Carrie insists in response to her mother's insistence that Tommy has ulterior motives (71, emphasis mine). Even when she is invited to prom, Carrie doesn't get to enjoy her sexuality or the powers to which it is tied. In the Off-Broadway production, "I'm Not Alone" was replaced with "Why Not Me," an anxious exploration of Carrie's commitment to perform an uncomfortable and foreign femininity in hopes of winning her peers' approval: "I'm gonna walk in three inch heels / I'm gonna fight the urge to turn around and flee," she sings (Gore, Pitchford, and Cohen 70).

Carrie makes it to the prom, but this version of the musical doesn't make it seem likely that it will end well. The 2012 script's choice to disallow Carrie the opportunity to experience attraction and desire (in addition to also being without friends, being teased for her looks and her Otherness, and not knowing basic biology) doesn't make Carrie come across as a female character who has transcended the need for romantic entanglements; it makes her come across as broken. There is never any doubt in the revival script as to whether Tommy will love Carrie, because it's clear that she's unlovable – the musical constructs Carrie's "female sexuality as monstrous," not useful to or wanted by her or anyone else (Lindsey 34). Furthermore, choosing to maintain the connection between Carrie's sexuality and her powers but choosing to remove any reference to occasions on which Carrie used her powers with intentionality and joy renders Carrie's sexuality – and female sexuality, in general – as an out-of-control force to be feared, the exact view King's novel criticizes.

An Unexpected Subtext

Though there are no romantic relationships between characters of the same gender – and, indeed, no gay or otherwise LGBTQ characters – the musical has a concern with homosexuality that should be noted here. Homosexuality is used as a running joke throughout the musical among the men in the show, but the musical also engages in conventions that could be read to code Sue and Carrie as a couple or to indicate Mrs. Gardner's homosexuality and/or attraction to her student. It is probable that, given the care the musical takes to make sure the audience knows homosexuality is unacceptable in Chamberlain, the potential for queer readings was unintentional. I suspect that the creators of the musical suffered from the same problems Erica Dymond identified in King's writing – an unwillingness or inability to write female characters that didn't think and react to each other like men. However, in creating these potentially queer subtextual relationships, the musical replicates a rural community in which gay and lesbian community members are present and visible, but often unnamed (Yarbrough).

Among the men in the show, there is a fair amount of banter that has to do with joking about homosexuality – for example, Billy refers to Tommy's poem as "beautiful, for amber waves of *gay*" (Gore, Pitchford, and Cohen 35, emphasis in original). Edward Morris notes that this is typical of male homosocial interactions, at least in the rural communities where he conducted his research, but it seems that the running joke of George, especially, extends beyond typical friendly interactions. George consistently says things that are overtly sexual or romantic to Tommy, then laughs them off – "if you were that desperate, why didn't you just ask me [to prom]?" (Gore, Pitchford, and Cohen 60). The character reads as closeted throughout, a tone-deaf joke without a payoff – and a

dangerous one, in a world where Billy cheerfully sings about assaulting homosexual students in public spaces.

There is also concern among the citizens of Chamberlain about Miss Gardner's sexuality. Chris derogatorily refers to the gym teacher as a "lezzie," and Sue, clearly concerned, responds "She's not a lesbian. At least I don't think so. She's not. Is she?" (Gore, Pitchford, and Cohen 11). Though King's Gardner may well have been a lesbian – her clothing, appearance, and bearing was described as conventionally masculine, which is certainly a cultural shorthand to indicate that a woman is gay – the musical seems to find it very important that the audience knows that this Miss Gardner dates men, enough so that it devotes several minutes of the prom scene to Miss Gardner telling Carrie about her own prom, "one of the best nights of [her] entire life" (Gore, Pitchford, and Cohen 80).

Of course, the musical's insistence that Miss Gardner is straight causes the audience to look more closely for evidence to the contrary – for example, the prom story Miss Gardner tells involves her getting injured so she didn't actually have to interact with her prom date in any romantic ways aside from talking. When Miss Gardner tries to give Carrie hope that someone might want her enough to take her to prom, she tells Carrie, "you are a beautiful young woman . . . Look at those eyes – and with the right shade of lipstick –" (Gore, Pitchford, and Cohen 43). The moment is clearly in the script to allow Miss Gardner to teach Carrie conventional femininity, but the teacher's close attention to her pupil's potential attractiveness (and the exact steps that would have to be taken to achieve it) could also be coded as a romantic interaction, particularly considering that the only portion of a song that could be construed as a love song that Carrie gets to sing is

sung with her teacher. Finally, at the prom, Tommy approaches as Carrie and Miss Gardner are hugging and jokes, "better not let me catch you hugging any guys like that," implying that the hug was particularly intimate (Gore, Pitchford, and Cohen 80). (Carrie's quick reassurance that "you won't" brings her own interests in being physically intimate with men into question.)

Sue's relationship to Carrie could also be read as a romantic one. In fact, Sue and Carrie's relationship most follows conventional musical theatre structure – Sue sings her "I want" song in "In," expressing a desire to fit in. Carrie sings hers in "Carrie," expressing that she wants to be noticed. The rest of the musical is the story of Sue noticing Carrie and trying to make things right between them. Sue's songs about Carrie are also romantic – after their first actual interaction, Sue sings about how

> For years
>
> You look
>
> You look at someone passing by
>
> And then one day you see her
>
> One day you finally see her (Gore, Pitchford, and Cohen 36).

Sue's realization is, theoretically, about finally understanding that Carrie is a person, but it is certainly worded like the moment of realization of a love song and is followed by Sue endangering all of her own social and romantic prospects to fulfill Carrie's goal of being seen and fitting in. In Carrie's final moments, as she lays dying, Sue gathers Carrie into her lap and reprises the love song Sue sang with Tommy, telling Carrie that "I see you shine and the dark disappears" (Gore, Pitchford, and Cohen 93). Unlike with Tommy, however, from whom Sue is always moving away and decreasing

the level of intimacy, Sue has no difficulty initiating physical contact with Carrie. Sue mentions that what she remembers most about the day of the prom is Tommy telling her he loved her, but the last image the audience views onstage is of the two women in each other's arms.

A Muddle of Misogyny

Though King's book was flawed, it interacted with gender, place, and the historical moment in which it was set in interesting ways. King created the rural nightmare of Chamberlain, ME and the story of the young people trapped in the community to explore concerns relevant to the broader culture at the time of his writing. The musical adaptation reflects contemporary adolescent concerns about fitting in and finding one's place in the world, but does not seem to wage the same critique of that world that its source material does. The musical fails to preserve a clear sense of the community's rurality, instead using the small-town setting only as a justification for why a musical set in the present day contains gender politics that were controversial forty years ago (and which King wrote his book to challenge). Rather than appearing as an indictment of a specific kind of America at a specific place and time, this is a musical that is aggressively misogynistic. The musical seemed to be determined to pick the most damning portions of all possible settings, occurring in the present so that the group of girls could prove themselves capable of cyberbullying as well as generally being mean and so Carrie could look even more foolish for her inability to Google her situation. At the same time, the musical holds onto the gender roles and social customs of the original setting, with the helpful addition of constant, casual homophobia.

Laura Linnerman points out that Carrie and Chris are cast as "the whore" and "the Madonna," a dichotomy in which women are insufficiently or overwhelmingly sexual (Casper and Gilmour 27). Carrie's mother is ridiculed for her fear of sex, her sexual assault brushed aside. Miss Gardner is alone, undeserving of a partner, though it's unclear whether that's because she's an outsider to the community, she's a gym teacher, or she's a "lezzie." Even the ways in which the men are indicted reflect poorly, ultimately, on the women in the show – Tommy dies because he did his girlfriend's bidding and caught the psychic witch's attention with his effeminate poetry, Billy is emasculated by following his girlfriend's instructions (and is, in this incarnation of the story, completely free of his own guilt).

At the end of the musical, only Sue survives – Sue, who is conventionally feminine, is rewarded for her self-sacrificing behavior with her life (but is punished for overstepping through the loss of the man she loves…and, perhaps, the woman, as well). In King's book, there are multiple survivors, but Sue is still the only one who lives from the main cast of characters – her character is left to bitterly question the world that set up such impossible expectations for all the young people trying to make their way in it. In this musical, however, it isn't society's expectations that are critiqued – it's the characters who fail to live up to them, and the punishment is death. Rather than setting their story in a different time or place, the creators chose to remind young women in the present place and time that femininity is "a subject position impossible to occupy" (Lindsey 34).

Conclusion: Three Views of America

This chapter has explored the sexual and romantic relationships present in *Violet, The Spitfire Grill,* and *Carrie* with the understanding that romantic relationships in musicals are very rarely simply a plot point – rather, a successful romantic relationship in an American musical "ensures the maintenance and the perpetuation of the community" it represents, with the romantic couple representing broader communal forces (Filmer, Rimmer, and Walsh 386). The communities in question in these musicals aren't merely the locations in which the musicals occur, but that of the whole country. From *Oklahoma!* and beyond, nearly any musical set outside of an urban population center "poeticises the . . . idyll of rural life and organic, human community which is a key American myth" (Filmer, Rimmer, and Walsh 385). This chapter assessed the ways in which these musicals' romantic relationships reflect a worldview, a version of American mythology specific to that musical. In this conclusion, we will briefly revisit each of the three musicals and the message embodied in the union of its main couple.

Initial concerns that the musicals in question would use rurality as a surface on which to project conservative ideals about American romance and family structures were not unfounded. *Carrie* did this most notably. Though *Carrie* doesn't feature a romantic leading couple in the conventional way, the musical makes it clear from the opening number – in which teens sing about the difficulty of fulfilling their social roles – that the musical is, indeed, intended to reflect problems of contemporary society. The rural nightmare King created and that the musical maintains, however, is a little *too* "unchanging" to be able to function effectively (Jacobson 193). It is unclear if the creators believe that small towns are sufficiently "backwards" to remain socially

unchanged from forty years ago (aside from the addition of technology) or if the alteration of the setting simply wasn't thought through. Regardless, the result is jarring – "small-town New England schools also come with computers, and they're windows to the world even for girls kept in the darkness at home," Joe Dziemianowicz, a reviewer, notes (43). The result is a musical that, in spite of its clear intentions to do so, fails to engage in interesting or insightful ways with the changing demands of gender performance placed on these contemporary rural teens, which is especially unfortunate considering that it is one of very few musicals that even attempt to do so. Instead, it enforces conservative social mores and highly gendered romantic interactions with the highest of prices for a failure to conform. Though there is no final romantic couple (unless one counts Carrie and Sue), the musical's message is still clear: women are dangerous, and living in the world is impossible unless you're able to closely conform to convention.

Violet is, in some ways, better about both its representation of rurality and conceptualization of gender identities. The way in which Violet enacts a masculine femininity for the majority of the musical is interesting, and Monty's attempts to nurture a successful rural masculinity through his work as a soldier are thoughtfully and subtly handled. On the other hand, both the necessity for Violet to conform to more conventional standards of femininity to be worthy of a romantic partner at the end and the ways in which the intersectionality of Flick's identity as an African-American soldier shortly after desegregation are problematic. *Violet* had the opportunity, since the creators chose to alter the source material for Violet and Flick to be romantically connected, to speak meaningfully to race in the Unites States both during Vietnam and at the time of

the musical's mounting through the union of its romantic couple; instead, the writers avoided the subject and didn't give the couple adequate time to develop their relationship, rendering *Violet* "a parable that says nothing more than beauty is only skin deep" (Brantley c12). In *Violet,* peace between disparate populations is possible, but only if nobody actually addresses the problems between them.

Surprisingly, *The Spitfire Grill* is both the musical that adheres most closely to conventional musical theatre structure and allows its characters to interact most thoughtfully with convention. Percy and Joe are chaos and order, a penniless ex-convict from a broken home and a law enforcement officer with a family that's promising him hundreds of acres of land, but their relationship is both balanced and – most importantly – not the actual focus of the musical. Valcq and Alley also manage to include a couple (Shelby and Caleb) that fulfill highly conventional gender roles in a way that interrogates those gender roles and the culture that created them without shaming the characters for their gender performance. Similarly, though the musical makes a joke of Percy's inability to enact conventional femininity through cooking, she isn't expected to more successfully fulfill conventional femininity at any point; she's (nearly) proposed to through an invitation to build a house, which certainly isn't a conventionally feminine endeavor. Though *The Spitfire Grill* is problematic in other ways the musical is both thoughtful and accurate in its handling of rural gender performance. Its message that successful relationships come from open, honest communication across common goals is a worthy one.

The relationships in these musicals suggest three very different kinds of Americas: a dystopia in which success and fulfillment is impossible, whether because of

the impossibly high bar of success or one's own inadequacy (the musical seems unsure for which it is arguing); an America that tolerates certain degrees of difference so long as bigger problems are swept under the rug; or a quiet corner of the world where differences are easily resolved through communication and common effort. As Paul Filmer, Val Rimmer, and Dave Walsh point out, musicals – especially those specifically concerned with the country – often glorify and simplify a "better" time in the past to provide hope for the future. However, these musicals frequently engage effectively with challenging details of their historical moments in ways that lends veracity to their characters; these musicals generally avoid flinching from difficult truths concerning the ways rurality (and, by extension, class) places specific pressures on their characters (and the real people in the situations the characters represent). These musicals also frequently prove an apt representation of the United States in less positive ways, proving a reluctance to engage thoughtfully with racial diversity (*Violet* is the only musical in this thesis to have any cast members of color in its original cast) and a talent for subtly – or very directly – forcing women to conform to gendered norms, even in stories partially about the journey to free men from the same. In the next chapter, I look at another institution that often enforces a woman's place in her community: motherhood.

CHAPTER III

MOTHERHOOD: AN ESSENTIALIZED IDENTITY

Mary Braithwaite notes that "the stereotype of a rural woman is that of a family woman, traditional and conservative, absorbed in the care of the home" (12). She is "at the heart of the family, the centre of the community" (Little and Austin 106). In other words, the stereotype of a rural woman is that she is a mother; her performance of her femininity and her role in the community rest on her ability to successfully perform that function. Mothers who failed to conform to the "domestic ideal, or women who were not mothers, were either invisible, suspect, or problematic characters" in the national imagination, particularly in the generation after WWII – the generation that forms the older generations of characters in *The Spitfire Grill* and *Violet* (Vandenberg-Daves 174). Bailey McDaniel describes the notion of motherhood as "a centrally contentious, portentous site of being whose influence exceeds the private landscape of domesticity" (168). Motherhood has effects beyond any isolated mother-child pair; the raising of the nation's upcoming generation is placed on the shoulder of its mothers, and women are judged by their ability and willingness to carry the weight (Vandenberg-Daves).

Mothers are expected to function within a nuclear family unit as "a mother and full-time housewife, [in a position that is sometimes] maintained by other strict moral codes that involved substantial sexual repression and to some extent the subjugation of women" (Popenoe 29). Though this family structure is the conservative ideal, it isn't the norm in most rural communities; over half of young people in rural communities live in an arrangement that doesn't include their married biological parents (Livingston). For many, changing family dynamics in the United States are more than simply

sociologically intriguing; they are a matter of national health. "[A]s the family goes, so goes the nation," at least according to conservative popular opinion (May 157; see Popenoe; Kudlow; Wilcox and Lerman).

Depictions of motherhood in musicals, particularly those set in rural America (which Paul Filmer, Val Rimmer, and Dave Walsh point out is a favorite space in which to set musicals particularly intended to espouse American values), are complicated. Musical theatre's entry into the conversation about women's roles in the home began after WWII, where musicals "sought to heal a perceived breach in the social contract caused by the ending of World War II, the problem of reintegrating the working woman back in the home" (Mendenhall 57). These musicals, however, often focused on young women becoming wives; as Stacey Wolf points out, actual motherhood is rarely represented on the musical stage (*A Problem Like Maria*). According to Stuart, this is because "a mother's concerns are domestic, life size. Mothers…are not sexy" (40).

As Stuart claims that mothers aren't acceptable subjects for the American stage, Mendenhall questions the viability of contemporary musicals treading the same rural space for the same purposes as their mid-20th century predecessors, asserting that the integrated musical as a piece of Americana is dead, as it "can no longer mediate the realities of American life as believed and experienced by the dominant culture" (68). Yet, these musicals feature mothers, and this thesis asserts that these musicals *are* written as acts of patriotism. How, then, do the two coexist?

In 1988, Stuart said that "Mother-child relationships – fierce, prickly, loaded with the land-mines of our neuroses – go against the grain of what people want from musicals" (41). I argue, however, that these complicated and multilayered relationships exactly

reflect the America of the present moment. If, as Christian Mendenhall suggests, the post-war musical structure is no longer viable as a tool to reflect American society partially because of its tendency to oversimplify the challenges of living in the world, then musicals that present a greater capacity for acknowledging the complexity of family ties should be more satisfying to contemporary audiences.

Jodi Vandenberg-Daves notes that "it has been difficult to talk about motherhood in recent decades without expressing ambivalence and a sense that mothers must make and then live with difficult choices" (269). In a world wracked with difficult choices and uncertainty about the direction(s) in which the United States is moving, it makes sense that musicals who attempt to make a clear argument for the country's ability to work together and unify through their central romantic couple reveal anxieties in characters and relationships without a conventional role on the musical stage.

"Motherhood is seen as a central (if not *the* central) facet of women's identities in rural areas and women who do not conform to the expectations of motherhood (either by choice or circumstance) are frequently marginalized in terms of dominant rural culture," Joyce Halliday and Jo Little explain (423). Each of these musicals, in their own way, explore the cultural expectations surrounding motherhood and the ways those expectations often conflict, making "successful" motherhood (in which one manages to conform to all expectations) impossible. The musicals respond differently to the tension between motherhood, rurality, and national identity, calling attention to the impossible standards to which mothers are held and addressing them with varying degrees of effectiveness.

MOTHERHOOD IN ABSENTIA IN *VIOLET*

Violet never offers the audience the opportunity to meet the protagonist's mother; she's deceased at the beginning of the musical, having died of unrevealed causes when Violet was young. "A nurturing, caring, unconditionally loving mother is so central to our idea of family that it is virtually impossible to have a family without her," James Lovelace and Laura Howell Smith note (18). *Violet* is, in large part, Violet and her father's struggle to create a family in the wake of her mother's death. Though Violet's mother isn't a character in the musical, she haunts it as Young Violet twirls through the musical singing a conversation she remembers having with her mother; aside from the full company finale outside the action of the plot, *Violet* is bookended with the words of Violet's mother…about finding a romantic partner.

Mendenhall suggests that musicals often depict a journey from being a "working woman" (which, as the sole owner and operator of her family farm, Violet is) to a homemaker: "the working woman…is separated from the society by her lack of family rootedness and passes through the male world of work (which was believed to be by nature foreign to her), and enters into her new and proper status" (59). For Violet, her lack of family rootedness is complete – she has no living relatives with whom she has ever spoken, and her father and mother are both deceased. Her work on the farm is not decidedly unfeminine – women have often helped with agricultural work as part of their duties of supporting the home – but she *does* pass through a new, male-dominated world as she takes a bus ride with men to visit a male preacher to heal her scar (Keller).

Violet simultaneously attempts to discover her own womanhood and mourn the mother who was unable to help bestow it upon her; femininity and grief are intertwined.

Violet asks its protagonist to take Mendenhall's journey while simultaneously embodying the ambivalence around motherhood to which Vandenberg-Daves refers; Violet must learn to embody an appropriate femininity in her romantic relationship, as discussed in the previous chapter. By the end of the musical, Violet has proven herself able to successfully navigate the areas in which her mother failed and has entered into a heterosexual romance…but one in which a wedding, an indicator of Violet achieving her "proper status," is impossible. The final step of embodying a conventional rural femininity as a wife and mother would be to have children, but children outside of wedlock are suspect. *Violet* does not question the value of motherhood outright, but the consistent uneasiness around the subject of motherhood calls into question the cultural expectation that it is a necessary and fulfilling endeavor for all women.

Violet consistently paints motherhood and the presence of children as something undesirable – a punishment, a chore, the tax to be paid for femininity. "You'd never hafta be pregnant," Monty points out as a reason Violet should consider asking the televangelist to make her a man; Violet doesn't disagree (Tesori and Crawley 26). The only women Violet reflects having interactions with are educators – specifically, her math teacher, who only manages to teach subtraction by ones and fives before being impregnated by the preacher's son and having to move away from the community. The teacher is painted as incompetent, her unwed pregnancy a punishment for her, and her alone (with no culpability for the preacher's son in question.) Later in the musical, Violet meets an older woman on the bus who talks about her children at length, making Violet uncomfortable. She is moving to help her son and his wife care for her grandchildren, but she expresses that her daughter-in-law resents her presence and that she's "right tired of

children" (Tesori and Crawley 10). The character isn't depicted sympathetically, but as an irritation – when she offers Violet the chance to stay overnight, Monty and Flick tease her until she leaves, and Violet is grateful she's gone. Aside from Flick's mother, who he references as teaching him valuable lessons growing up, there is no positive representation of motherhood in *Violet.*

Violet does not have a female maternal figure of any kind. Her community is small, and she and her father live largely apart from it on their farm in the mountains. In fact, Young Violet's world is populated entirely by men – we see her interact with her father and with Leroy, the boy with whom she shares her first sexual experience, but Violet is never seen exchanging dialogue onstage with any women in her community. There is also no sense that any female family members have been a part of Violet's life; she mentions that she's never met her mother's cousins that live in Memphis, and there's nothing to indicate that she's met any of her parents' other relatives. This is unusual, considering that single parents (everywhere, but particularly in rural and remote communities) often specifically live where they do in order to make use of their kinship network in raising their child (Mannis; Hertz; Ferguson; Hertz and Ferguson).

The death of Violet's mother changed her relationship with her father to one very much like friends, or perhaps that of a father and son. "With Mama dead, shuffling cards by a kerosene lamp was all was left to me and my Papa. Once I passed 15, we'd drink together too," Violet shares with the soldiers (Tesori and Crawley 23). Her father also taught her to play poker – generally a homosocial activity – specifically to be able to have a way to interact with men. Though Violet is sometimes responsible for picking supplies up from town and sometimes plays dress-up with her mother's old clothes, there is never

any indication that her father wants her to be *like* her mother. Instead, Violet's mother – like all mothers in the musical – is depicted as being problematic. The diary entries to which the audience are given access (the only time the audience hears Violet's mother's words aside from the song Young Violet sings) are haughty, saying "she had the choice of any boy in the five counties" in the area (Tesori and Crawley 28). Lovelace and Smith indicate that a young woman who lost her mother as a small child generally assumes "her mother's role in the household," but Violet won't get a chance at her happy ending until she does the opposite, proving herself free of her mother's faults (Tesori and Crawley 17).

The musical never suggests that Violet is at risk of thinking too highly of herself – she makes it clear that she considers herself unlovable – but Violet aspires to a specific kind of highly visible and sexualized femininity at the beginning of the musical. When she tells the soldiers about what she hopes will happen in her healing, she daydreams, "if I threw you a glance, / and I let it linger / I could wrap you around my finger" (Tesori and Crawley 33). Violet might not think she could have any boy in the nearest five counties, but she *wants* to – furthermore, she wants to be able to do so as a movie star, a different kind of working identity. Flick's mother (through Flick's music) is the first to discourage Violet's daydreaming. "Forget what might have been," she advised Flick, and he repeats the advice to Violet (39). The preacher reiterates the advice, quoting Bible verses about vanity. When she persists, he says "this [healing] is not what you need" (Tesori and Crawley 76). It isn't.

The moment that changes everything for Violet – at the end of the climax of the musical– is when her father reminds her of their domestic history together. He points out

that, while Violet *looks* like her mother, he raised her "strong enough to start / seein' with [her] heart" rather than being concerned with physical appearance (Tesori and Crawley 79). Violet's mother "liked best the boys who had done some traveling," but when her father encourages Violet to find a man who can make her happy, it will be the man she'll encounter on her way back to the home where she belongs (Tesori and Crawley 80).

Violet reflects a cultural uncertainty around motherhood. "[M]otherless daughters feel the impulse to become perfect," but *Violet* doesn't provide its protagonist with a clear road map to what perfection looks like (Lovelace and Smith 18). Violet's journey away from her mother's faults appears to lead her towards a path of forming a conventional family, but no one in the musical seems to find motherhood to be fulfilling or pleasurable in any way. Violet's mother is omnipresent in the musical through her catechism (constantly by Violet's side, the instrument of her hoped-for salvation and its failure) and her words that Young Violet repeats, but none of the questions Violet asks about her are ever answered; she, and the legacy she might have had to give to Violet, remain a mystery.

"Mothers…are not sexy," but romantic partners are supposed to be, and *Violet* creates an ever-present tension between the two (partially due to the second identity tending to lead to the first) that is never fully explored (Stuart 40; Linnerman). The tension is uncomfortable, but it also serves to point out the discomfort of normative structures of femininity that assume marriage and motherhood for those who might be unable or unwilling to pursue one or both of them.

DEMYTHOLOGIZING MOTHERHOOD AS MORALITY IN *THE SPITFIRE GRILL*

"Hannah had a son," Shelby explains to Percy early in *The Spitfire Grill* (27). The holding onto or losing of children and the ability or refusal to mother are prominent themes in this musical. The movie on which the musical is based expresses specific ideas about what kind of motherhood is appropriate and what kinds of mothers deserve to continue to be not only mothers, but to be people at all. Early in the movie, Percy – who miscarried a child conceived through sexual assault – tells a story about a Native American woman who was attacked, along with her child, while canoeing on a river. Sailors threw the child into the water, drowning the infant. Percy concludes: "The story didn't say what happened to the mother, but I figured if [*sic*] it's best if she just... drowned too. Don't you think?" (*The Spitfire Grill*, Zlotoff). Percy's redemption occurs when she drowns trying to save Hannah's son; in the film version of *The Spitfire Grill*, it's best if she just drowns too. (Rather than Percy and Shelby being given the Grill, a young woman who looks strikingly like Percy but has a living child wins the raffle contest and moves to town, finding herself immediately accepted.)

The understanding that a woman – but particularly a rural woman – must be "a family woman, traditional and conservative, absorbed in the care of the 'home' without allowing space for individuality" is tied to what has been termed the "domestic idyll" (Braithwaite 12). The domestic idyll is the particular understanding of the ways in which families in rural spaces are assumed to operate within strictly delineated and highly gendered conventional roles and, though rural spaces do tend to be *more* conventional than urban and suburban spaces, it is largely considered to be a myth (Foy-Phillips and Lloyd-Evans). Choosing to perpetuate a narrative in which the only rural women allowed

to live in the world are those participating in a specific familial organization buys into and perpetuates this myth, clinging to a world that can be simplified into neat divisions and shaming women who are unable to run their families as culturally dictated.

Fortunately, musicals eschew "the many representations of 'perfect' mothers on television and film" and offer women "an identity that exceeds motherhood" (Wolf, *A Problem Like Maria* 16). The identities of the women in *The Spitfire Grill* are intricately connected to their motherhood, but the musical sharply interrogates the myth of the domestic idyll, illustrating the damaging effects of cultural narratives that reduce a woman only to her capacity for reproduction. Instead of suggesting that women are (or should be) homogenous in their motherhood or family structure, *The Spitfire Grill* attempts to question the value of dominant ideologies around motherhood and suggests, instead, the formation of communities with space for a multiplicity of femininities.

Exploring Expectations

The taciturn New Englander is a familiar character and, though the musical chose to transport the story from its initial Maine setting, Hannah retains her gruffness. Throughout the musical, Hannah's character is used to establish expectations through the use of tropes or conventions, then to complicate or subvert those expectations, creating space for conversations questioning how a woman is to conduct herself in a world that requires she be both a submissive wife and a fiercely effective and protective mother. When conflict arises between the identities, the musical points out, there is no cultural model to suggest which should win out.

From the beginning of the musical, it seems clear that she will fall into a well-known character type that Snyder refers to as the "wise nurturer" (12). These characters "have motherly instincts, even if they are not mothers. They present a stoic, brave front during adversity. They seem to have precisely the right thing to say at the right moment" (Snyder 12). Due to the ubiquity of this trope, the audience establishes expectations for Hannah from the moment she reluctantly allows Percy into her home and business: Hannah might not be nice, but she will provide the friend and maternal figure Percy needs to navigate the new world in which Percy has found herself.

Hannah steps neatly into the role. She dismisses local town gossip about her new employee and refuses to allow Caleb to pressure her into closing the Grill and sending Percy away after Hannah has a bad fall. Hannah builds Percy's self-confidence by giving her manageable but challenging tasks and by asking her for help and advice. She performs a similar role with Shelby, asking Shelby's opinion rather than Caleb's about a business decision. Throughout, Hannah remains stoic – irritation and pleasure are similarly expressed through wry quips. As a single business owner, Hannah perfectly fits the image of the wise nurturer.

However, Hannah's role in the musical proves to be more complex. The revelation that Hannah was once a wife and mother comes in scene four, approximately halfway through the first act. Shelby explains the story of Eli's assumed death in Vietnam and his father's subsequent death via heart failure, which Shelby attributes to grief. This serves to reveal that Hannah once fit in with "social constructions of acceptability" – she was once part of the fabric of the town in a more traditional role (Foy-Phillips and Lloyd-Evans 391). The assumption that Hannah was simply a woman visited by familial

misfortune isn't challenged until the final scene in the musical, when Percy coaxes Eli into the Grill, unintentionally revealing to the town that the narrative they've all believed about the family's history has been a lie.

Hannah shares a story about how her son, Eli, was a deserter from the Vietnam War. His father threw him out and died of shame, and Hannah has been leaving food and blankets for Eli to use at his dwelling in the woods ever since. Though the town is, understandably, upset with Hannah's deception, the time in which the musical is set offers some mitigating forces for her choices. Mothers raising children shortly after WWII (like Hannah) were charged with the responsibility of raising good children who would grow into good citizens, but were also discouraged from holding their children too close for fear of "turning their sons into weaklings, perverts, criminals, and communists" (Wolf, *A Problem Like Maria* 113; Vandenberg-Davies). It's understandable that the ideology and mothering style that equipped Hannah to raise a self-sufficient, patriotic, and "all-American" son she and Jack could be proud of would leave her equally ill-equipped to navigate Eli's return. Furthermore, Hannah was placed in an impossible position between her role as wife to her husband – the head of the family – and mother to her son. Hannah is eventually able to find a solution; after a conversation with Percy about the loss of children - "[Eli] don't need bread," Percy tells Hannah, "he needs you" – Hannah reconciles with her son and passes the Grill on to Percy and Shelby so she has time to reconnect with Eli (Valcq and Alley 67).

The characters in *The Spitfire Grill* seem to place all blame for the secrecy around Eli's fate on Hannah's shoulders, without consideration of Jack's role, illustrating the censure women face who are unable to live up to cultural expectations. (Inevitably, had

she chosen Eli over Jack, she also would've faced criticism for her failures in her role as a wife.) Hannah's storyline offers *The Spitfire Grill* the opportunity to critique cultural narratives that place women in impossible positions and criticize them for their inevitable failures.

Reframing and Redemption

Percy "ain't no kind of damn mother," or at least that's what she insists to Shelby when Shelby daydreams about seeing Percy "and Joe with a truckload of kids someday" (Valcq and Alley 43). Percy doesn't seem particularly maternal - she responds to Shelby's problems with her husband "with as much hair-trigger anger as sympathy," and her bedside manner when Hannah hurts herself is more combative than tender (though it's her combativeness that forces Hannah to allow Percy to take her to seek medical attention) (Valcq and Alley 39). Percy also fails utterly at the conventional femininity Braithwaite suggests is tied to imaginations of rural motherhood – she can't cook, she speaks openly about sex, and she makes no effort to hide her colorful history. Nevertheless, Percy's motherhood – and lack thereof – is revealed to be central to her character.

Through Percy, *The Spitfire Grill* examines the guilt women sometimes experience around sexual assault, abuse, and motherhood, with a specific focus on the guilt experienced after a miscarriage. It is common for women to experience guilt and self-blame after a miscarriage, but Richard Lazarus "states that for guilt to be provoked, one must believe that she . . . had some moral failing in the past either real or imagined" (qtd. in Huffman 54). *The Spitfire Grill* challenges narratives that would reinforce the

sense of guilt experiences by a woman who has miscarried, paying particular attention to the challenges posed to women in rural communities without adequate resources for their health and safety. Ultimately, the musical's narrative is redemptive, giving Percy relief from the isolation she's experienced after her miscarriage and offering opportunities through which her worth can be reaffirmed outside the realm of motherhood.

Percy doesn't reveal that she was almost a mother until the second act of the musical, after cutting off Joe's would-be marriage proposal. Speaking to Shelby, Percy explains that she was impregnated after her stepfather's sexual assault: "I found myself lovin' that little life inside me. Feelin' it grow. . . And I swore to God that I was gonna protect that baby no matter what" (Valcq and Alley 59). She shares that she miscarried after her stepfather beat her, leaving her unable to have future children, and that she was in jail for murdering her stepfather after he pulled her out of the hospital. Percy takes a great deal of the blame for the events – "[Joe] deserves better than me," she says (Valcq and Alley 59).

Percy's experience of domestic violence at the hand of a family member and lack of subsequent protection is, unfortunately, not outside the plausible lived experience of someone in her situation. Rural women are more likely to know their assailants than women in urban and suburban areas, and the closeness of rural social ties mean that sexual assaults in rural areas are highly underreported; when they are reported, it's more likely that the assailant will be friendly with or related to law enforcement officers or other service providers, limiting the survivor's ability to get assistance (Rennison, Dragiewicz and DeKeseredy; Lewis and Reed). Like most rural women who are

convicted for violent crimes, Percy acted in self-defense (Websdale). Though Percy blames herself, nothing in the musical suggests that she is at fault.

The movie from which the musical was adapted is less forgiving. Many distributors of the movie version of *The Spitfire Grill* pulled their funding when it was revealed that the major funding for the project was a branch of a religious organization, believing that the film was too clearly faith-based to serve a secular audience (Associated Press). The movie is lauded for its unwavering pro-life stance by several faith organizations, which has the potential to make secular audience members suspicious of the musical's views and handling of Percy's miscarriage and subsequent conflict (Weathers). Indeed, the movie seems to reflect that women have little value outside of motherhood. Early in the film, Percy tells Shelby a story:

> There was this Indian squaw, and she was rowin' in a canoe with her baby. A couple of sailors who were good and liquored up caught sight of them on the river. They'd heard this story that Indian babies knew how to swim from birth. They capsized the canoe. The baby went straight to the bottom. The story didn't say what happened to the mother, but I figure it's probably best if she just drowned, too. Don't you think? (*The Spitfire Grill* Zlotoff)

Aside from the problematic racial language that also isn't present in the musical, it's also clear that the movie believes that, indeed, women who can't successfully mother are tarnished, broken. Percy only finds redemption through saving Eli, Hannah's son (presumably as she failed to save her own) and dying in the process. She is replaced at the Grill by a young woman who looks like her, but was able to successfully reproduce and has brought a child with her.

Eli and Percy's child are linked in the musical as well; after Hannah's injury, Percy takes over the duty of putting out a loaf of bread each evening. Shortly before the end of the first act, Percy meets the person for whom she's leaving the loaves of bread (Eli, though neither Percy nor the audience knows his identity yet) and connects with him, asking if she can call him Johnny B, the name she had picked out for her child. Rather than giving Percy redemption through death, the musical deals more sensitively with the challenging subject of Percy's motherhood.

Percy certainly isn't alone in mourning her miscarriage or in feeling at fault for it. Percy's difficulties fall directly in line with a phenomenon McDaniel describes in contemporary understandings of motherhood that particularly affects mothers who are of an unconventional race or class (that is, not white, comfortably middle-class, or both). McDaniel asserts that ideologies that cast a woman's reproductive abilities as the most important thing about her are harmful, particularly since "when the results do not turn out 'optimally,' some moral shortcoming on the part of the woman must be responsible" (154). *The Spitfire Grill* also resists the idea that women who are unable to conceive or who have difficulties with their pregnancy are in some way morally lacking; Shelby's response to Percy's confession isn't horror or distancing pity, as Percy fears, but affection.

It isn't only Shelby that reassures Percy of her worth, but the world itself. Eli (Hannah's child and a stand-in for Percy's unborn son) leads Percy to a place where she can see the view from the picture that lead her to Gilead; rather than demanding Percy's sacrifice for past sins, the musical reminds her of her triumph in reaching her goal of reaching Gilead and finding a place to belong. Percy overlooks the view printed on the

page of the travel magazine she brought with her to Gilead and sings "Shine." The song begins with Percy's voicing of "perceived past transgressions," a common reason for women to feel guilty about a miscarriage (Huffman 6). "There's sins river water / will not wash away," Percy sings. She calls on the light, naming herself as broken and asking for healing:

> Mornin' light,
>
> Shine on me,
>
> Shine…
>
> Find a diamond of hope
>
> In this dark heart of mine. (Valcq and Alley 63)

As she continues to sing, asking the light to shine, the stage directions say, "Overflowing with a deeply satisfying joy she's never allowed herself to feel before, she realizes she is good! She is worthy!" (Valcq and Alley 64). Percy is empowered not only to forgive herself, but to coax the very sun to rise in approval; the Earth itself affirms her worthiness, a sharp contrast to suggestions that only motherhood can be a woman's "natural" place.

Through Percy, *The Spitfire Grill* acknowledges unique challenges rural women may face surrounding their personal safety and reproductive health. It also offers a narrative of a woman dealing with a pregnancy loss and subsequent infertility that concludes, not with the discovery that Percy can have children after all (and is therefore "useful" again in a model that views women's roles as mothers first and foremost), but with affirmation that she is a good and worthy human being even without reproducing.

More than Motherhood

There is always the concern, when introducing a character to a rural community, that the character will serve the same role as the real-world migrants to rural areas described by Bettina Bock and Sally Shortall. These families move to rural areas specifically seeking "traditional" gender and family structures and "contribute to [a traditional gender/family structure's] constitution by importing their own images about the idyllic, 'genuinely' rural gender relations when entering rural society as newcomers" (Bock and Shortall 160). Percy's lack of conformity to traditional gendered norms and lack of comment on the gender performance and family structure of others largely prevents her from falling into this trap.

Shelby has children in the movie, but is childless in the musical adaptation. Her lack of children is never noted or brought up in the musical, but it is notable that the most conventionally maternal character in the musical is also the only principal female character who's never, as far as the audience knows, conceived a child. Given that Shelby is a successful homemaker to Caleb at the beginning of the musical, it is probable that she would be similarly successful at being a conventional mother; Valcq and Alley's choice not to provide a "correct" version of motherhood to operate in contrast to Hannah and Percy's less conventional models enforces the musical's efforts to avoid judging the women. Furthermore, in a musical that is so very much about women and their relationships to their children and their own motherhood, it's refreshing that the most conventionally feminine character is the one who seems to not have a relationship to motherhood at all. Shelby's ease around the issue allows the musical to make it clear that,

while motherhood factors prominently in these particular stories, it does not have to be part of a woman's story or identity for her to perform her gender successfully.

Mary Frances Casper and Deneen Gilmour note that, in a great deal of media, "[motherhood] is depicted as a quest for personal completion, and female behavior is regulated and normalized through examples of appropriate mothering" (27). *The Spitfire Grill* doesn't suggest that mothering is unimportant, but it does suggest that it is hurtful for a woman's entire identity to hinge on her ability to mother in a way that meets arbitrary communal standards.

Hannah and Percy operate in parallel in this musical: both women are less feminine in their mannerisms, value their independence, and are distrustful of outside offers of assistance. Both are now-single mothers who perceive themselves as having failed their children, and both secretly cling to that failure as a defining element of their character – their motherhood is very much tied to their personal completion, their ability for self-actualization. Rather than attempting to regulate female behavior through the reward of "appropriate" mothering or punishment of "inappropriate" mothering, however, *The Spitfire Grill* suggests that various relationships to motherhood can all be valid.

FAILURES OF FEMININITY IN *CARRIE*

"You'd have thought her mother would have told her," Miss Gardner, the gym teacher, remarks after Carrie is shocked to discover her period (Gore, Pitchford, and Cohen 11). In a musical adaptation "reconfigured to focus on the troubled bond between mother and daughter," Carrie's mother, Margaret White, manages to mother both too

much and not enough (Kennerly 15). Mrs. White fails to tell her daughter the basic facts of life, a duty clearly assigned to mothers (Cseténi). In all other ways, however, her control is exacting and exhausting – she's a "religious nut," a "sicko," a "crazy zealot" and an "abusive" "Bible thumper" (Snook 72; Vincentelli 40; Dziemianowicz 42 – 43; Haagensen 60; Kennerly 14). Margaret White is vilified in the musical, but she is also justified; her actions clearly stem from an effort to balance conforming to the norms and expectations of her culture and beliefs and protecting her daughter from a world that renders femininity dangerous and impossible.

Mrs. White is deeply religious, a working-class mother raising a child alone in a small town. There is an immediate tension between the family structure expected by both her religiosity and rurality and the realities of her life with Carrie. Christy Mesaros-Winckles explains that, especially in fundamentalist Christian families, the woman's role is in the home – depictions of women feature her in "domestic roles and never as independent from the family structure" (68). Martin Phillips points out that rural areas are designed with the traditional nuclear family in mind, assuming a mother is able to stay home with children. This happens in tandem with a social structure placing "men at the head of a 'natural hierarchy' and women as the domestic, subservient sustainers of life and social formations" in their communities (Little and Panelli 281). Both Mrs. White's faith system and cultural context encourage her to stay home and tend her child while her husband works, but Carrie's father is deceased – Mrs. White *must* work outside the home, and she has no man to be the head of her family. The nuclear family is the norm in Chamberlain, ME, the setting of the musical, and so Margaret and Carrie White are painted as outcasts before Mrs. White's apparent mental instability is considered.

Upon first sight, Margaret and Carrie White have a positive, if particularly religiously influenced, relationship – Margaret and her daughter listen to the radio together when Carrie returns from school, and Margaret talks about Carrie's school friends as she has her daughter set the table. Doing chores and talking about their days are fairly normal mother-child activities. It isn't until something unusual – Carrie sharing the news of her period – happens that the women move into concerning and abnormal territory. Margaret condemns her daughter, alleging that Carrie must have sinned to have received "the curse of blood" and manhandling Carrie into a prayer closet to pray for her sins (Gore, Pitchford, and Cohen 21).

Beginning at that point in the musical, it becomes clear that Margaret and Carrie's relationship fits the pattern professionals who work with domestic violence refer to as the "cycle of violence" (Coleman 420). The cycle begins with a period of tension (Carrie tells her mother about getting her period, her mother berates her, Carrie begs for her not to be upset), is followed by an explosion (Carrie's mother drags her to the closet and locks her away), then a honeymoon period in which both parties make amends and things go well (Margaret lets Carrie out of the closet, apologizes, and they sing together of their mutual love for each other), then repeats (Coleman). As in the cycle of domestic violence, the cycle increases in intensity and frequency, and the victim (Carrie, in this case) is in the most danger at the moment she chooses to leave: "when the [abuser] realizes that [their] partner intends to abandon [them], and [their] usual methods of control no longer are effective, [they are] likely to resort to more extreme acts of violence" (Coleman 420). In this case, Margaret stabs Carrie when she returns from the prom, a wound that will eventually be fatal.

Margaret means well, however. John Wesley and John Calvin explain that some schools of thought held the belief that "all children are born with an innate tendency to sin and evil, they regarded it as a parent's duty to the child to defeat the 'devil within'. Parents were advised to 'break the will of the child,' by imposing strict controls. If they did not their child would surely go to hell" (qtd. in Richardson 29). In light of this ideology, Margaret was attempting to do her duty as a mother and save her child from herself. Even in the world of the musical, though Mrs. White is detested, she isn't wrong; she warned Carrie that her classmates would "laugh at [her] watching [her] fall apart," that they would "build [her] up only to watch [her] fall," and both came to pass (Gore, Pitchford, and Cohen 54; 71). When she stabs Carrie, Margaret does so not out of anger, but because it's the "one chance [she] can save [Carrie]" (Gore, Pitchford, and Cohen 74).

Molly Collins points out that the book and film versions of *Carrie* create distinctions between pregnancy as a punishment for illicit sexuality and motherhood as a blessing to women who reserve their sexuality for the express purpose of bearing children; women like Margaret, who enjoyed a sexual encounter that created a child, are "to be punished by experiencing childbirth but relinquishing her role as mother by returning the child to God," which Margaret does when she kills Carrie (26). This conflict is beautifully captures in "When There's No One," Margaret's song after Carrie leaves for the prom, when she decides that she must kill Carrie to save her. Unfortunately, without the back story of Margaret's pleasured participation in Carrie's conception (which the musical elides, making Carrie's conception an unambiguous sexual assault),

the context of her emotional conflict is removed; even within the parameters of her worldview, it doesn't make sense.

Though King made an active effort to avoid the stereotypes of male writers who "create female characters who are either fragile victims or bitches [without anything] between these two extremes" when writing the novel of *Carrie,* Margaret White is written as an unsympathetic, hateful character (Csetényi 172). Reviewers point out that, though musicals have been called "the one performance form that features women as neither passive objects of desire nor subjects of vilification," Mrs. White "remains a misogynistic cartoon" in the musical adaptation (Wolf, *A Problem Like Maria* 17; Rich C3). She is written to be a villain, and that makes it challenging to view her as a mother.

Difficult mothers, however, are well represented in musicals – "domineering" mothers, as Wolf and Frank Rich point out, have a long history on the Broadway stage (Rich C3; Wolf, *A Problem Like Maria* 112). Controlling mothers like Rose in *Gypsy* are reflections of cultural discomfort around strong women, emerging from the movements in the 1950s that discouraged overinvolved motherhood at the risk of damaging their children (Wolf, *A Problem Like Maria*). *Carrie,* however, isn't set in the 1950s – it's in the 1979 setting of the book or the "present" setting of the musical, and "one often isn't sure where or when *Carrie* is taking place" in order to be able to appropriately understand Mrs. White's attitudes within their cultural context (Rich C3).

Carrie consistently nearly reaches a point with the character of Margaret that has the opportunity to engage with her role in the musical and within the larger context of her world in thoughtful or nuanced ways, but falls short. Margaret is created within the tradition of domineering stage mothers, but the convention is neither fully engaged with

nor subverted. Conversations about the intersectionality between motherhood and sexuality are precluded by the choice to remove the reality of Margaret as a sexual being, and songs that could have continued *Carrie's* trend of inviting empathy with monstrous characters instead feel simply unhinged.

Carrie offers another version of the ways in which failure to fulfill conventional gendered expectations can lead to domestic violence (Sandberg). The musical paints Margaret White as a villain; she is violent because she is a bad person. This is, however, an unfortunate oversimplification. Mrs. White is attempting to equip Carrie to perform her own gender in a way that is correct, that allows her to operate as what Margaret understands a functional adult to be within the context of her own value system; she isn't trying to be a villain, she's trying to be a parent, and finds herself without appropriate tools to do so. In making Margaret crazy rather than flawed, *Carrie* misses an opportunity to engage with intergenerational patterns of violence that occur when parents pass inadequate coping mechanisms (and, in this case, modes of gender performance) on to children who, without an intervention, will grow up to pass them on to their own children, as they have no alternative (Pollak).

This is especially unfortunate considering that music gives the ability for larger-than-life views – which, to a contemporary and largely secular audience, high-stakes religious beliefs like Margaret's qualify as – to be examined in ways that have a chance of feeling genuine; King's horror novel wasn't necessarily an appropriate avenue to explore Margaret's inner life, but the musical could have been. Mrs. White feels underdeveloped, a would-be diva (in the musical theatre tradition) underwritten or oversimplified to a caricature. *Carrie's* almost offered a portrayal of a mother that

explored the ways that faith, sexuality, and family structure (with the accompanying class consequences), all of which have their own expectations and rules of engagement in rural communities, affected the process of rearing a child. Reed calls Margaret "a Bible-thumping wreck, singing and ranting mostly about sin and salvation, fire and fear," and unfortunately, the musical gives her space to be little more (B4). This mother isn't sexy, and she isn't soothing – she's scary. As the only adult woman with a child – the telekinetic witch who, after being teased by other girls, destroyed the town – she's another piece of evidence in *Carrie* that women aren't to be trusted.

CONCLUSION: MOTHERHOOD…AND MORE?

Motherhood is important, not only to these musicals, but to the concept of rurality and our national identity. Vandenberg-Daves claims that "throughout American history, motherhood – with its lofty ideals and its complex and sometimes gritty realities, has lurked behind nearly every debate about women's place in society, women's psyches, and even the future of the nation's moral rectitude" (2). This is particularly true in rural spaces, the cultural constructions of which depend on conventional gender roles, and especially women's roles as mothers (Foy-Phillips and Lloyd-Evans). A mother shown on stage offers more information than just the way she interacts with her family; she gives the audience information about the way the musical suggests the world works, or should work, and women's roles in it.

Each of these musicals features complex relationships between mothers and their children – cycles of love and abuse in *Carrie,* questions of responsibility and grace in *The Spitfire Grill,* and complications created by absence in *Violet.* The way these musicals

deal with the challenges to (and created by) the mother-child relationships vary. *Violet* and *Carrie*, in their own ways, share a concern over how women are able to navigate motherhood and other identity categories – in both musicals, daughters must find their paths away from their mothers in order to continue with their own lives. For Violet, that means satisfying her father and finding a romantic relationship. For Carrie, it's more complicated – closeness to her mother leads to abuse, but breaking away leads to death and heartbreak. *The Spitfire Grill* suggests a model of motherhood incorporating self-compassion, featuring women who are able to forge lives as business women and as mothers without one being elevated above the other. No one in the musical, however, attempts both.

Though the musicals view women differently and offer varying levels of support for women's choices and different family models, all reflect the continued contemporary concern over how families function and what a woman's role is in making sure her family flows as smoothly as possible. Certainly, one's role in one's family and relationship to one's parents is a major contributing factor to the quality of life of a person of any gender, but it is telling that the women in all three musicals experience principal conflicts with their roles as mothers or daughters. Women in rural communities *are* mothers and daughters, but they are also farmers, bankers, crafters, lovers, and a host of other identity categories that don't focus chiefly on their places within the home. Having nuanced conversations around issues like miscarriage and rural social services for victims of domestic violence is important, but in an art form that can imagine telekinesis and conversations across death, it would also be interesting to see musicals that can imagine rural women outside their domestic roles, something these musicals don't

manage to do. In the next chapter, I look at the way these three musicals imagine the communities in which they are set more broadly.

CHAPTER IV

COMMUNITY: BOUNDARIES AND BALANCE

"The concept of community involves issues of inclusion and exclusion, of unity and division, and of heterogeneity and homogeneity" (England 92). Scott Miller explains that most musicals are, on some level, a celebration of community. This is particularly true for musicals set in rural America that aim to reinvigorate a national spirit of community. The rural setting is chosen specifically because "the traditional rural community is represented as a place of happiness and solidarity where kinship ties prevail and where relationships are unfailingly 'tight knit,'" qualities seen as both personally desirable – in an increasingly individualized culture, a place to belong is important – and useful for harnessing a national identity (Little and Austin 102).

As Marcia England points out, however, the concept of community is marked by "binaries" and "dualisms"; though cultural imaginations of rural communities celebrate the closeness of their citizens, rural communities are also sometimes perceived as highly exclusionary, dedicated to maintaining their homogeneity (92). For a community to exist, it must have both physical and ideological boundaries that render it as distinct (McMillan and Chavis). In musicals, "central characters must make a choice to either change in certain ways in order to join the existing community or they must be removed from that community by leaving or by dying" (Miller 34).

In keeping with this musical theatre convention, each of the musicals in this thesis includes a protagonist that begins as an outsider and seeks a place to belong. The process the characters undergo as they attempt to gain access to the communities of the musicals provides two pieces of information. First, the musicals offer prescriptions for the

treatment of outsiders. A community can exist only if there are people both within and outside it, but outsiders can be treated with respect or distaste; I suggest that the musicals' models for the way outsiders are treated in their rural communities parallel the ways in which dominant cultures in the United States interact with those perceived as different from the norm.

Throughout this thesis, I have suggested that the musicals that ground their plots in a specific place and time offer representations of rural communities that are not only more accurate to the information available about those communities, but also offer more complex and thoughtful representations of gender and more helpful suggestions for national challenges. This exploration of the communities present in each of the musicals also allows me the opportunity to address accuracies or inaccuracies of representation that have not been germane to other sections, but *do* speak to the musicals' implicit ideologies surrounding rurality and the broader American communities these rural communities are written to represent.

SOCIAL EXCLUSION IN *VIOLET*

Violet operates differently from the other musicals in this thesis in that it doesn't take place in a single, geographically concrete community. Rather than an exploration of a character's community like *Carrie* or the story of a character finding a new community like *The Spitfire Grill*, *Violet* is the journey of a character *leaving* a community, but with the intention of returning again. *Violet,* however, operates differently – Violet's kin are deceased or estranged, and her community isn't a friendly one. Violet demonstrates virtues that Elaine Hedges and William Hedges say "characterize at least one type of

'ideal' American" – "simplicity . . . industry . . . [and] piety," but the parts of her life that allow her to embody those characteristics are dismissed by her community (3). As previously discussed, some of the language Violet uses to describe her farm could be described as idyllic, but Spruce Pines is created to be a rural nightmare; it's written as a lesson in the ways America shouldn't function.

Rather than finding peace and acceptance in her community of origin and the social structures generally used in rural communities (church and community events), Violet finds her acceptance in Flick. The ending is happy for Violet and Flick on an individual level, but I argue that the suggestion that removing those who are different or Other from dominant society ends happily for both those removed and the conventional people who don't want to interact with them reinscribes a rationale for a polarized society.

"The people of Spruce Pine are stupid," Adult Violet sings during her first song in the musical (Tesori and Crawley 8). It becomes clear throughout the musical that she and her father are not a part of the greater community – Violet considers Spruce Pines to be the place she "left [her] troubles" (Tesori and Crawley 12). What Violet leaves is a community with cultural expectations to which Violet is unable or unwilling to conform. Though Violet is on a faith pilgrimage, indicating her own belief, the conflicts she experiences with the townspeople seem to be largely tied to her family's lack of participation in the community's faith system – even her mother, a devout woman whose memory and Bible serve as Violet's guide, was an outsider as a Catholic in a Protestant community. Young Violet tells her father that the pastor in town "says the accident is just

desserts cuz [they] never go to church," and Adult Violet recalls the "words of Christian sympathy [townspeople] spat in [her] face like boiling oil" (Tesori and Crawley 13; 49).

The ostracization of a family of people of faith for their lack of performance of their faith seems counter-intuitive. However, Arthur Vidich and Joseph Bensman note that church attendance in rural communities isn't necessarily about religious faith; it's about communal participation. Attending church services and other religious activities at local churches, they suggest, is an important way for locals in rural communities to connect and to indicate an interest in communal involvement. Violet's piety – saving to visit a healer, reading the Bible, memorizing scripture – doesn't please her community, because they're interested in the *performance* of faith. (This is echoed with the fraudulent faith healer later in the musical.) Still, being outside the religious community in a rural town can make fitting in otherwise difficult, and Violet's father is uninterested in taking her to church or attempting to integrate into the community; this affects Violet as an adult, as well (Milot and Ludden).

Lea Bryant and Barbara Pini explain that a great deal of one's status in a rural community comes from one's family ties, particularly – at least for farming communities – from the respectability of one's father. "Fathers' and grandfathers' achievements in the community and on the family farm [are] a key recurring feature of class and its relation to both social location and belonging in rural communities," they write (11). Violet's father, however, is not someone she can use to leverage social capital; aside from the town's religious concerns, he was also mocked for causing Violet's accident. It's also clear that the Karls' farm isn't particularly successful; Violet and her father are able to maintain their home, and Violet's father occasionally is able to give her pocket change to go see a

movie in town, but even with the farm's income and the money from her father's health insurance Violet has to take side jobs to be able to afford her trip to Tulsa. As Bryant and Pini point out, class and social respectability are intertwined, and Violet's work as a manual laborer makes her suspect in the eyes of a farming community. Bryant and Pini explain that waged workers – a position Violet took on when picking galax, both as a child and an adult – are "considered lacking in the virtue of industry" since they aren't exclusively self-employed as farmers (15). This judgement prevents Violet (and all rural waged workers) from enjoying the host of positive assumptions that follow one's classification as a self-employed farmer and aid one in ensuring a respected place in the community; her family's simplicity in running what appears to be a largely subsistence farm doesn't earn them a place in the community.

Finally, Violet is excluded from the Spruce Pine community because she does not perform the correct version of femininity. A rural woman's femininity "requires [her] to become visible through involvement in social activities or volunteer work" in the community, something Violet doesn't do (Bryant and Pini 18). Instead, she stays alone on the mountain and tends her farm with pride – a choice that would be correct for a man, but not for her. Her industry goes unnoticed and unrewarded. The musical resists narratives of conventional rural femininity in the sphere of home and work – the masculine femininity that allows her to run her farm and ingratiate herself with her future partner keeps her from being a part of the community, and it's clear that this is a failure on the part of the community's values rather than Violet's gender performance. (This makes the musical's ending, in which Violet moves towards a more conventional performance of femininity in her romantic relationship, even more confusing.)

The values that make Violet an "'ideal' American" also prevent her from being a part of the community in her hometown (Hedges and Hedges 3). She is able, however, to enact a community identity informed through familial connections with Flick. On the bus, when discussing the faith healer, Flick shares that he doesn't believe in faith healers – rather, he believes his family's motto that, while people have little control over their own lives, "You can make your music from the simplest thing / and you're the one has got to tend your soul; / you got to give it room and let it, let it sing" (Tesori and Crawley 40). Personal identity – and group belonging – is enacted through song. When Violet ultimately visits the faith healer and discovers that he is a fraud, she runs to his altar and sings her own blessing. Unlike all of Violet's previous music, however, this song is diegetic – she's singing within the world of the musical, not just in the way that music becomes a kind of heightened speech within the conventions of musical theatre. Like Flick's family motto directed, she's tending her own soul, and she's doing it through song. It's this song that conjures her father's memory and allows herself to make peace with him. She finally belongs – with Flick.

When Violet returns to Flick, it is after this display of community identity. She and Flick become a community of two as Monty leaves for Vietnam, and they board the bus back to the Carolinas together, presumably to return to the mountains or the ocean. No matter where they go, however, they will continue to be marked as outsiders – Violet has joined a community with Flick, but she hasn't made any steps towards making her peace with the Spruce Pine to which she's returning. Flick has joined a community with Violet, but it's unclear where he stands with the army and with the seaside community he left behind. Both remain outside the religious conventions of their homes, both remain

physically different from the norms where they're from, and neither seem to have a plan for navigating the world outside the two of them, in which nothing has changed since they boarded the bus days before.

The people of America will always root for the underdog, and an ending in which a disfigured woman and an underappreciated soldier run from the war and society's judgement into each other's arms satisfies our sensibilities – the people who were unfairly disadvantaged at the beginning of the story found love by the end, and all is well (Sagarin). For Violet and Flick, the ending is perhaps a happy one – they can't legally marry, but Violet is a land owner, which potentially offers her enough social as well as fiscal capital to be left alone with her new partner (Probst, et al.). Violet and Flick are both able to live their lives with someone who understands and values them in a world that finds them without value, and on an individual level, the idea that people outside the norm can form their own accepting communities and find fulfillment on their own terms is empowering.

From a broader point of view, however, the conclusion is concerning. The end of the musical features the full company joining Flick and Violet in singing a love song about coming together and coming into the light. It is a highly conventional "bringing the community together" closing number in a musical that hasn't earned it - having all actors on stage, singing together, makes it look as if Flick and Violet have created community. The reality, however, is that they haven't – they remain outside their broader communities. Iris Young points out that dominant assumptions about the way rural communities function (and community groups at large) are problematic – clearly defining a community must mean including some people and excluding others, "separating the

pure from the impure" (qtd. in Little and Austin 109). In this musical, Flick and Violet would clearly be sorted into the second group. Their creation of their own micro-community, however *emotionally* satisfying, doesn't address the very real effects of their exclusion from broader communities that remain unaddressed.

Choosing to make the ending unambiguously positive, a triumph for both characters (as opposed to a bittersweet ending with some victory and some loss, an understanding that the joy of the moment is in contrast to rather than a replacement for their sorrows, both options Jeanine Tesori and Brian Crawley had available to them) ignores the realities of their situations, and does a disservice to an audience watching the musical from our position inside a country that continues to struggle with how to deal with those who don't fit into our dominant community narratives. The notion that those who don't look like "good" or "typical" Americans can find happiness off by themselves elsewhere, without broader community involvement or support, is inappropriate and potentially leads to social violence – it's the reason, for example, that people of color outside of urban areas (like Flick) receive worse healthcare than anyone else in the country (Probst, et al.). Suggesting the isolation of Others is not an acceptable solution to the problems of racism, xenophobia, and other forms of prejudice audiences – and the country at large – continues to struggle to navigate.

Ignoring Economy in *The Spitfire Grill*

Socio-cultural conceptions of rurality, in part, rely on "embedded intra-community relations, including individual and group-level social ties, cultural practices, and political behavior, [to] reinforce the affiliative networks within a given locality"

(Schafft and Brown, qtd. in Koziol, Arthur, Hawley, Bovaird, and Bash 3). That is to say, rurality (at least in some definitions) is about community – the people in a rural community expect a certain homogeneity in the personal politics, religious faith, etc. of the other citizens in their community, and the community functions effectively because members work to uphold the expected community structure. In *The Spitfire Grill*, Percy shakes up community structures that no longer serve the people of Gilead, but community – the relationships between the citizens of Gilead – remains important to the characters' happiness and fulfillment.

I've discussed the ways in which Percy's relationships with individual townspeople were developed previously. Here, I consider the ways that the musical focuses specifically on Gilead itself. I suggest that, though the musical is generally successful in avoiding the invocation of the rural idyll, a more precise focus on Gilead's economy could have offered an additional opportunity for exploring the challenges faced by real rural communities.

"Something's Cooking at the Spitfire Grill," the second song in the production, offers an insight into the social structure of the community. The community is presented as a whole – they sing the same song in harmonies, indicating a unity of thought – but every character also has moments of counterpoint in which they break from the main melody, indicating a dissatisfaction with the way the community is presently functioning.

This first song in which the full company appears establishes the community as insular and homogenous, but dissatisfying for its participants. The second song in which all community members participate isn't until well into the second act, after Percy and Shelby give Hannah the idea to try to raffle off the Grill and people from around the

country start mailing letters to Gilead as entries to the contest. The song begins with the characters "reading" letters aloud, each letter expressing a yearning for the small-town values a community like Gilead provides. One letter reads:

I have lived in this building
Fifteen years come this fall
And I still don't know the names
Of the people 'cross the hall. (Valcq and Alley 54)

indicating the belief that Gilead (and rural communities in general) are able to access community (as an idea) in ways people in urban areas aren't. The song would risk reinscribing ideas of the rural idyll if it weren't for the inclusion of Caleb. Caleb sings his own words, and they similarly represent a dissonance between what his life currently is and the ideals – in his understanding – of understood-to-be-conservative small town values when he reprises an early song, singing "What does it take for a man to feel some pride? / Not lie awake, wishin' for a hole to hide…" (Valcq and Alley 55). The inclusion of Caleb doesn't minimize the difficulties faced by the letter-writers, but it does challenge the idea that simply moving to a rural community would fix them.

By the end of "Come Alive Again," everyone in the town sings the same words in rich harmonies – they are united, a whole community in which most citizens are fulfilled and pleased with the communal structure. Interestingly, this fulfillment doesn't come through a rejection of outsiders, but through the newfound heterogeneity of the community provided through the resurgence of their town through tourism:

Old store fronts are painted,
Each flower box fills,

The sidewalks are patched and repaired.

There are cars along Main Street

With out-of-state plates.

It's been so long since anyone cared. (Valcq and Alley 56)

The influx of industry isn't unreasonable; tourism and hospitality are important in Crawford County, the real country in which the fictional Gilead is located. What's interesting, however, is that the people of Gilead don't discuss the resurgence of their tourism industry in economic terms; they sing about the way that "Gilead has come alive again" (Valcq and Alley 56).

"Come Alive Again" is a useful example of the uneasy relationship *The Spitfire Grill* has to class and the realities of rurality. Though Wisconsin's Department of Workforce Development expresses that "Crawford County's employment is even more heavily influenced by hospitality, tourism, agriculture, and seasonally based manufacturing than the state as a whole," the characters in the musical – as discussed above – largely don't work in those industries; they have stable, largely white-collar jobs (5). When the industries of tourism and hospitality have a shining moment, the economic realities of those successes are buried in metaphors.

Furthermore, the musical intentionally distances the characters the audience is meant to side with from other common industries in Gilead. In "Way Ho," characters sing about the end of winter and the return of nature with the Spring, but their interactions with the land around them are superficial and based on inconveniences, like shoveling snow. Only Caleb sings about chopping wood for his wood stove and looking forward to fishing, albeit as sport, and Caleb is firmly situated as the closest thing the musical has to

an antagonist. (No one engages in agriculture in any way.) The quarry is the closest thing Gilead had to a source of manufacturing jobs, and Caleb's insistence on remembering and trying to get back to his job there is denigrated throughout the musical.

In the movie on which *The Spitfire Grill* is based, Gilead regains economic traction because it's revealed that Joe's trees (which will be further discussed when looking at Joe and Percy's relationship) have a medicinal property that makes them valuable to pharmaceutical companies. Though it's problematic that Joe only finds value in the trees when they are revealed to be a source of monetary revenue, it at least acknowledged the need for an economy; the musical's refusal to address money at all (while making the town's renaissance happen through economic changes) and unwillingness to allow for characters that work in blue-collar professions – or professions thought of as "rural" – is jarring in a musical that is unflinching in its portrayal of other challenging realities of rural life. The changes in Gilead's economy mirror those in other rural communities post-1980s that have moved from economies primarily driven by agriculture and land-based forms of employment to economies based in tourism and adjacent jobs in service sectors (Bini and Leach). The musical successfully portrays a geographically specific community where everyone knows each other deeply and well – a truth of many real rural communities – but missed the opportunity to engage with the ways changes in rural economies can "destabilize but also potentially reconstitute rural ideologies" (Slama; Bini and Leach 2).

SHIRKING SPECIFICITY IN CONTEMPORARY *CARRIE*

"To deny King's worth," Joseph Citro says, "is to deny the society in which we live" (qtd. in Cseténi 167). *Carrie* is often discussed as being uniquely and essentially American, offering "a thorough-going critique of American institutions and values" (Waller qtd. in Lindsey 34). Critics, reviewers, and scholars perceive that Stephen King's writing holds a truth about American culture, offering a "harsh criticism of American patriarchal society" through the creation of a rural nightmare that feels familiar to readers (1). The world of *Carrie,* these scholars suggest, isn't a distant fictional landscape for readers – it's a familiar one. Korinna Cseténi points out that King's rural American characters are easy for readers (and audience members) to identify with, calling the school the students attend "an average American high school" (167). King's criticism is lost in a broadly drawn world full of archetypal characters.

If King's *Carrie* is capable of simultaneously reflecting and criticizing the world in which it is set, then the musical based off the work should be particularly well-situated to do the same. The creators – Lawrence D. Cohen, Michael Gore, and Dean Pitchford – make it clear in their notes preceding the musical's script that this is their intention: "From the moment we began writing *Carrie*, our intent as authors was to tell a dramatic fable about a girl whose very name has become synonymous with high school bullying," they write (iix). Their musical is intended to reflect American culture; it is "serious," and "tries to turn ordinary, all-too-familiar high school angst into the stuff of tragedy" (Zoglin qtd. in Gore, Pitchford, and Cohen iix).

Richard Zoglin compares *Carrie* to *Miss Saigon* and *Spring Awakening,* other musicals that also managed to be sincere, and praises *Carrie*'s writers for their choice not

to follow those musical's leads in "setting their stories in distant times and places," but to set *Carrie* in the "real" world (qtd. in Gore, Pitchford, and Cohen iix). I argue that the reason *Miss Saigon* and *Spring Awakening* work is because they set up a specific world with clear rules that draw sharp parallels to contemporary American society; *Carrie,* though theoretically set in contemporary American society, is as nonspecific as possible (one reviewer notes its "willfully humdrum tone"), and this lack of specificity renders the musical ineffective (Brantley, "Prom Night" C4).

Carrie is set in the present in the fictional small town of Chamberlain, ME. Though the novel and the 1988 Broadway version of the musical take place in locations around the entire community (road houses, farms, diners, and drive-ins in addition to the school and homes) the Off-Broadway version of the musical takes place almost entirely in the high school and at Carrie's home. The characters don't discuss their community – there is no mention of after-school activities or community events, no clue as to the kind of labor townspeople participate in or that the students anticipate being a part of after graduation. The only sign that the community is in a small town rather than an urban location is Chris and Billy's familiarity with the local farmer whose pig they kill to get blood to pour on Carrie.

The libretto specifies that sets should be minimal and non-naturalistic, "a versatile landscape on which a shifting mosaic of time, place, and memory could be enacted," and the lack of specificity in the set as well as a lack of information about the broader community combine to undermine the creators' goals (Gore, Pitchford, and Cohen xii). The world of *Carrie* doesn't feel real and present – it feels generic, too unspecific to

allow audiences to identify with characteristics of the community and too grounded in conventional musical realism in tone to be used to create an intentional disconnect.

Carrie is set in the present, relocated from its original 1979 setting. The choice to set *Carrie* in the modern world could have been an effective one. As Raven Snook, a reviewer, notes, "the story's major themes – the battle to be accepted by peers, over-the-top bullying and retaliation, and parent-child power struggles – are timelier than ever" (72). Several reviewers draw parallels to school shootings in the years prior to the 2012 revival, and the revival was undergoing the process of adaptation during the highly publicized cluster of LGBTQ teen suicides in 2010; when the revival was mounted, the collective cultural consciousness was hyperaware of the potential cost to young people who are different, and to those who persecute them for being so (Reed; Kennerly; Winer; Strassler; Windman).

The world of *Carrie,* however, is more consistent in tone with a version of the imaginary 1950s than the present day, with conventional gender roles, prom committees, and crepe paper – Linda Winer called the revival "a sort of *Grease* for the post-Columbine generation" ("Fresh Blood" L1). Rather than feeling like a rural nightmare that reflects a stagnant, unchanging community and outdated social expectations, the Chamberlain in the musical feels like it *is* the past. Though Sue's concerns in the novel for keeping a tidy suburban home have been replaced with worrying about who she'll room with at Brown and the drive-in has been replaced by a house party while Chris' parents are out of town, the contemporary elements of the script feel like anachronisms. The details that date the musical are small – Billy is in his sixth year of high school in a state that no longer allows matriculation past the year a student will turn twenty, Annie

Leibovitz is casually referenced as a photographer it's assumed everybody knows – but, added up, they create an unintentional distancing effect for the audience.

The inclusion of technology, in particular, is jarring. "[T]he internet has totally changed the world and the way kids grow up," Lawrence D. Cohen, the musical's book writer, explains (qtd. in Snook 72). Cyber bullying is certainly a real problem, and is alluded to in the musical – Norma uses her phone to upload a video of Carrie being pelted with menstrual products to an online social media service, which other students can access – but the use of technology is inconsistent. Carrie doesn't have any kind of phone or computer access at home, which isn't outside the realm of realism, but she also doesn't make use of technology at school; she researches telekinesis from an encyclopedia in the library. Considering the huge role that the internet plays today in both giving bullies new venues to taunt their victims and in providing information and community for "different" kids looking for evidence that they aren't alone, it is odd that the musical doesn't explore the way technology affects adolescence today by giving Carrie opportunities to engage with technology, either to find her own resources or to be affected by the cyber abuse of her classmates.

Furthermore, the plot itself doesn't work in a world where cell phones exist. Sue attempts to enter the prom to warn the teachers that Chris is pulling a prank on Carrie, and is escorted from the prom before she can tell the adults what's happening. The reason Carrie is elected Prom Queen and gets the blood dumped on her is because Sue is unable to communicate with people inside the prom. With the inclusion of cell phones, Sue could have called the school, posted on the prom's Facebook event, or utilized any number of methods of reporting the problem to school officials. It is also unlikely that no

one was recording the coronation of the Prom King and Queen to have documentation of what happened afterwards on their phone or camera; if such documentation existed, there would be no need to interrogate Sue, and the musical would have no framing structure.

It is challenging to discuss the role the broader community plays in the musical adaptation of *Carrie*, considering there are few references to the community outside the high school or scenes set elsewhere. King referred to high school as a "place of bottomless conservatism and bigotry, a place where the adolescents who attend are no more allowed to 'rise above their stations' than a Hindu would be allowed to rise above his or her caste," but – aside from the initial shower scene, in which only Carrie was targeted as an outsider – there are few opportunities in the musical to observe characters from different social groups interacting (qtd. in Cseténi 167).

The musical – a form that offers the opportunity for characters who are unwilling to say or perform certain feelings, attitudes, and identities in front of the other people with whom they share their world to do so through song and dance – is uniquely capable of highlighting the difference between public performance and private truth. Musicals offer space for the "jock wingman," "wise-cracking class clown," and "easy-going, get-along followers" (all character descriptions from the musical) who can't leave their places in the social hierarchy to share with the audience how or why they want to (Cohen, et al. xi). The character notes preceding the libretto of the musical explicitly state that each of the characters "should also very much be individuals," but the characters aren't given sufficient opportunities to illustrate their individuality (xi).

Carrie isn't the story of one young woman to whom the world was unkind – it's the reflection of a system that isn't working for anyone. Carrie just happens to be the one

who is most punished for her place in the system and finds the power to lash out. The school shootings, suicides, and other problems to which the musical is reacting, similarly, stem from systemic problems. *Carrie* seems to give the impression that everything in the school was fine before the incident in the shower with Carrie – it's Carrie, and Carrie alone, who has problems and is the source of problems for others. Carrie is in sharp focus as the one disturbed element in a broad and nonspecific world.

The reality, however, is that challenges with fitting in and finding one's place in the world have always existed, and likely always will. They affect everyone; communicating to audiences (especially the teenagers to whom the musical's writers are speaking) that feeling out of place is reserved for the girls who kill everyone at the end is dishonest and damaging. Zoglin criticized *Spring Awakening* and *Miss Saigon* for their distant settings, but those musicals are effective because their approach is the inverse of that of *Carrie's* creators: their worlds are specific, in clear focus with complicated histories and systems and patterns audience members recognize, and their characters reflect a broad array of experiences within those systems. Teenagers aren't a stand-in for "real people" – they are people, with unique challenges and experiences. A small town isn't an "everyplace" – small towns have their own challenges and opportunities, and they vary regionally. A musical isn't the appropriate venue for a heavy conversation about systems of oppression, but it can and should be a space where varieties of experience are honored. That is not the space that *Carrie* provides.

Conclusion: Challenges in Responsible Representation

There are areas in which the musicals in this thesis treat rurality, and gender as tied to rurality, with surprising care and authenticity. Each of these musicals struggle, however, with depicting the ways rural communities function. *The Spitfire Grill* is thoughtfully set in its historical moment, engaging with the challenges of the location and time period in thoughtful ways, but wanders into the rural idyll creating an economy-free, labor-free landscape. *Violet* explores the way its protagonist's gender and family ties can both include her and exclude her from community, but rather than engaging the challenging issue of homogeneity and prejudice in rural communities, side-steps it. *Carrie* includes youth, an underrepresented group, but fails to address the rurality of its setting almost completely, except as a plot device (and perhaps an unspoken reason for the conservatism of the gender politics the musical espouses).

It is challenging to effectively represent rural communities in a way that seems authentic while making the story accessible to outsiders. The rural community is complicated, as even the people who live in rural areas struggle to find balance between the reality of their lived experiences and the expectations shaped by cultural narratives about their communities – there is a strong sense of knowing and being known, but constant closeness and expectations of conformity to community standards can be suffocating (Foy-Phillips and Lloyd-Evans). Rural spaces and communities are beloved because they are perceived as unchanging, which may be both a comfort and a source of dissatisfaction for people who live in them (Jacobson).

Rural social expectations are set not only by the people who have lived on land for generations, but also by outsiders who move to rural areas seeking more socially

conservative communities; outside expectations have very real effects on the functioning of rural communities (Bock and Shortall). Visiting a rural community for an evening through a musical may be a fun activity, and there are ways in which it can be done responsibly and well. It is important to continue to remember, however, that the rural communities created in musicals and other forms of fiction have real-world counterparts that deserve to be more than a metaphor or an idea. If artists wish to continue to put rural communities on stage, they have a responsibility to do so with specificity and care.

In the concluding chapter, I consider the ways in which these three musicals have handled the rurality of their settings and characters and the ways works might do so in the future.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Julie Keller, Sarah Lloyd, and Michael Bell argue that "a preoccupation with nature and rural spaces…signals anxiety about ethnic and national identity" (136). As a result, the "agrarian idyll of rural life and organic, human community" is a "key American myth" to which Americans repeatedly return, and is preserved and reinscribed through rurally set musicals from *Oklahoma!* to those of the present day (Filmer, Rimmer, and Walsh 385). Contemporary musicals set in rural America, I have argued, function similarly to post-war musicals, utilizing the satisfactory resolution of gendered relations in a rural community (a heterosexual couple coming together, a woman outside the community learning to be a part of it) as a template for the satisfactory resolution of conflict in the country at large. Throughout this thesis, the question at hand has been whether musicals in rural settings operate solely as a vehicle through which ethnocentrism and social conservatism can be rendered palatable, or whether it is possible that these musicals can tell rural stories in a way that honors the rural experience and suggests strategies that could contribute to a more equitable America better equipped to deal with contemporary challenges.

Christian Mendenhall asserts that the musical in the post-war tradition, that of creating a version of an idealized America, are no longer possible in the cynical contemporary era. "The myths celebrated by the American musical comedy are creedal formulas," he suggests. "The stories in which these myths were embodied were symbol of what the dominant culture believed to be 'the way things *ought* to be,'" (Mendenhall 57). Put differently, Mendenhall believes that those musicals worked because they

happened at a time where the Americans viewing musicals were able to believe a simple, moralistic story with a simple, moralistic conclusion. The conventional community-driven musical theatre form is no longer able "to contain anxieties about the future of the USA within a…nostalgic appeal to a simple, comprehensible, idealised [rural or agrarian] past" because contemporary audiences, Mendenhall suggests, are less hopeful, less trusting, and more aware of the world's complexities (Mendenhall; Lawson-Peebles; Filmer, Rimmer, and Walsh 385).

I believe that Mendenhall is correct in some ways; though older musicals are much beloved, contemporary audiences don't see their lives reflected in the narrative simplicity and optimism (LaChiusa). Audience members' problems are bigger than deciding who to accompany to the box social. Nevertheless, all three of the musicals I have discussed manage to arrive at a definitive conclusion, have a clear moral they wish to communicate, *and* engage with contemporary gendered problems in a significant way (Savran). All three musicals involve women who have been sexually assaulted or sexually coerced, single parents, and clear examples of the ways in which masculinity (and particularly rural masculinity) is required to be "earned" through violence. Though John Short noted that the appeal of rural settings is often that the rural "is the location of nostalgia, the setting for the simpler lives of . . . people whose existence seems idyllic because they are unencumbered with the immense task of living in the present" culture, the characters of these musicals grapple with cumbersome problems (34). The presence of these problems (rather than a simplified conflict) created the potential for each of the musicals to engage with challenges of contemporary American society, considering

factors that contribute to the challenges or proposing possible alternative modes of being. The musicals did so with varying levels of success.

As I have examined the ways in which *Carrie, Violet,* and *The Spitfire Grill* establish a rural gender identity through the performances of romantic relationships, motherhood, and community identity (and the ways in which this establishes expectations and suggestions for how America should function), I've made a distinction between musicals and elements of musicals that invoke the myth of the rural idyll or rural nightmare and those that engage a specific rural setting in a nuanced and historically/factually accurate way. Though none of the musicals I've considered are flawless and none are completely without merit, I have discovered that *The Spitfire Grill* is the most consistent and rigorous in its adherence to the place and time in which it is set and its depiction and interrogation of rural gender identities, while *Carrie* largely reiterates dominant cultural narratives about gender, conflating rural and conservative communities. *Violet* falls between the two, exploring rural gender in interesting ways but not fully realizing realities of the cultural moment relevant to events in the script.

In addition to failing to offer representation to rural Americans, I believe the musicals and musical elements in the first category – those that utilized the rural as a mythic setting, either positively or negatively - failed to offer meaningful solutions to the problems posed within the musical. These failures often perpetuated problematic cultural narratives in addition to being at the root of the musicals' less successful elements, as defined by critics. These are the musicals to which Carey Wall refers, those "grounded in ethnocentricity" that perpetuate an insular version of America unable to participate in the global community (qtd. in Filmer, Rimmer, and Walsh 394).

For example, *Carrie* depicts a cycle of violence, with young people struggling to find their place in the world attacking another young person trying to find her place, who kills them in turn. Unlike the novel, in which King leaves many survivors to carry forth the lessons of compassion and empathy the Chamberlain tragedy taught, the musical's creators only allow one survivor – the character who already knew her place in the world and successfully fulfilled her role in it. The lesson isn't that the mistreatment of perceived outsiders has potentially devastating consequences (which, given our present historical moment and questions of the ways in which the US treats outsiders needing help and perceived "others" within, could have been timely), but that all the problematic elements will remove themselves if the good and normal people leave them alone. Rather than setting the musical at a specific time in the past or fully considering the changes to the setting that would be required to create a rural nightmare that makes the community of Chamberlain "a source of suffocation and paralysis in an inescapably changing" *contemporary* "world" that allows audience members to empathize with characters they understand, *Carrie's* creators split the difference, setting the musical in a nebulous "present" with the gender politics of the 1950s (Jacobson 193). The result of this choice is that audience members have little choice but to view it as something of a morality play with a deeply disturbing moral (Strassler).

The musicals and musical elements grounded in a specific and historically accurate reality, in contrast, consistently offered reasonable solutions for the problems posed in the script. They also offered depictions of specifically rural gender identities, not only providing representation to rural citizens, but doing so in a way that interrogates the cost of requiring a specific, conservative gender performance. For example, Monty, in

Violet, performs a highly conventional rural masculinity that renders him desirable. However, his performance of masculinity is clearly effortful – it's challenged throughout the musical – and leads him to volunteer for Vietnam, a war noted as being the catalyst for a change in masculinity (LeConey and Trodd). *The Spitfire Grill*, like *Carrie,* begins with a community full of people who are unsure how to live meaningfully in their world; the citizens of Gilead, however, find ways to communicate their needs, compromise, and begin working towards solutions together by the musical's end. Though the colonial implications of Percy's problem-solving are, as previously discussed, problematic, there is an appropriate balance between suggesting that the problems of the people in Gilead can be solved through community effort and being aware that solutions require time and effort.

The musical offers an "expression of the ideals, dreams, anxieties, feelings, fulfilments and frustrations of its audience" through a narrative story (Filmer, Rimmer, and Walsh 382). When things in the United States go awry, Americans look out to the rural for solutions (Hedges and Hedges). I believe that the experiences of real rural communities can responsibly echo a United States navigating questions of economy and gender and the appropriate balance between individual desire and collective betterment. Theatre scholars have criticized theatre that suggests (often as part of a rural community) an insular, homogenous American identity, especially that which does so through the enforcement of rigid gender roles; sociologists have criticized the notion of the rural idyll as perpetuating misunderstandings of the rural experience (e.g. Mendenhall; Lawson-Peebles; Filmer, Rimmer, and Walsh; Little and Austin). I suggest that musicals set in a particular rural time and place and engaging a specifically rural gender identity can both

meaningfully represent authentic rural experience and provide a forum for exploring solutions to national problems.

Rural communities are not, as the rural idyll would suggest, unchanging; they experience the same conflicts and challenges as the rest of the United States (Jacobson). Rural communities struggle to understand the ways representations of gender in media affect their communities and to navigate rules of gender performance that both allow for individual comfort and a functional society (Bock and Shortall). They are forced to navigate economic changes, making choices about what parts of their culture to maintain and which to alter in response to a world in flux (Bini and Leach). The primary audiences of musicals set in rural communities are urban and suburban dwellers; they do not experience specifically rural challenges or triumphs. America's history with the land, however, dictates that all Americans experience a certain degree of identification with rural communities.

This identification hasn't always been helpful. The cultural narrative that those who worked hard deserved "material as well as spiritual rewards" in the form of their own physical space in the world was damaging when the first Americans invoked it to justify taking land from indigenous people in the expansion of the frontier, and it has persisted throughout our country's history (Hedges and Hedges 48). Conservative expectations of the performance of gender and sexuality, associated with the rural, can be harmful to those who are unable or unwilling to meet them (Keller). The musicals and musical elements in this thesis that represented a specific rural population at a specific historical moment, however, do so *in contrast* to both the rural idyll and rural nightmare that paint rural communities as conservative and unchanging. They provide audience

members with an exercise in comparing false (or oversimplified) assumptions and expectations about a community to that community's truth, a useful exercise in empathy for communities further afield.

Composers, lyricists, and librettists writing now have the opportunity to evoke Americans' identification with the rural in a way that encourages Americans to be willing to empathize with others and allow the variations of gender performance and community structure that meet their communities' needs, rather than those that meet arbitrary standards. This is impossible, however, if the creators don't thoroughly research the communities in which their works are set or award their rural characters the same variety, agency, and complexity as characters from other areas.

In order for creators to be able to use research to aid them in engaging meaningfully with rural communities, research exploring the ways these communities have traditionally been depicted and the representations that are missing must first exist. Though many musicals (and pieces of theatre more broadly) are set in communities that would be characterized as rural by most definitions, there is a dearth of research exploring what these representations look like, why they exist, and how they can be used more successfully in new works. This thesis specifically focused on three contemporary original musicals developed in New York for Off-Broadway and Broadway audiences with young, female protagonists. I did not consider works developed in rural communities or before the 1980s, "jukebox musicals" developed with country music that is frequently associated with rural communities, or musicals with older or male protagonists, all of which could be subjects of future study. Though potentially LGBTQ characters, youth characters, and religious characters all make appearances in this thesis,

further research into the ways in which those identity categories intersect with rural masculinities and femininities (and the ways in which they are portrayed onstage) is needed. The role of theatrical musical performance (and musical theatre, more specifically) in rural communities is also a potential area of further study.

Conventions that hold rural communities at arms' length as spaces outside of time – whether through the idyll or the nightmare – deny the realities of rural communities as sites of constant challenge and change. Musical theatre that chooses to use the American connection to rural places and spaces has a responsibility to do so in a way that doesn't obfuscate or oversimplify the experiences of real people navigating complex categories of identity but, rather, takes up the challenge to "bring [them] to light" (Tesori and Crawley 89).

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