***Glee*: Give Us Something to Sing About**
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"Musical Multiculturalism"

In 2009 *Glee* catapulted into the nation's cultural imaginary and sparked widespread discussions about multiculturalism, representation, and difference. *Glee* features plots that link racism, sexism, homophobia, disablism, and anti-Semitism to issues of popularity, identity-formation, and community in high school and it does so in a format that has historically not been successful on television: the musical. Declarations that *Glee* was successful despite its song-and-dance format forget that the musical as a genre has long been associated in the United States with translating the nation's diversity into a popular cultural register. Given this history, it may be that *Glee* succeeded not in spite of being a musical but precisely because it was one. I am interested in the relationship between the show's genre (a musical) and the show's explicit engagement with questions of multiculturalism and difference.

*Glee* includes a diverse cast of characters, and the show self-consciously refers to the Glee Club as being filled with those who are "different," suggesting that students of color, queer and disabled students, and Jewish students should stick together and come together to create a sense of community. Since *Glee* hews close to traditional conventions of "behind-the-scenes" musicals—"rehearsals" are actually full-blown performances; and song-and-dance numbers enact resolution of difficulties by depicting onstage community through chorus and choreography or by providing important narrative development—how does the show's form/genre enable a particular kind of narrative engagement with questions of difference? What does it mean that differences are often resolved musically rather than narratively?

I am interested in how the show is so self-aware about addressing questions of equality and inclusion among the students and how it does so using both plot lines and the placement and genre of musical numbers. For example, in "Throwdown," as critics have noted, the show confronts the relationship among and between the student's "differences." Though the plot ultimately tries to suggest that the Glee Club students are all the same, in that they are all "different," formally, through its choice of musical numbers and character development, it shows otherwise and foregrounds some characters over others. This follows a long tradition of musicals in the United States whereby the "integration" of song-and-dance numbers into the plot often echoes the "integration" (or not) of non-white characters into the story, and this tradition helps contextualize the similar pattern (though with some important differences) in *Glee*, whereby the students whose lives and concerns are developed in most detail (Rachel, Finn, Kurt, and Artie) are white and the students of color are inconsistently included in plots and songs. This means that the <u>form</u> of *Glee* is as important as its <u>narrative</u>. Additionally, the show's title reminds us of the importance of <u>affect</u>—how the show makes us feel. *Glee* regularly has touching moments of redemption and camaraderie among the characters, particularly between Kurt and his father, who forcefully advocates for his son, even as he struggles against his own homophobia. The songs and dances reinforce this emotional connection with the audience by foregrounding musical harmony, coordinated movement, and upbeat tempos.

I also am interested in the tension between form, narrative, and affect in *Glee* in relation to the show's use of satire to confront prejudice and discrimination. *Glee'*s use of satire through the character of Sue Sylvester, attempts to deconstruct racism, sexism, homophobia, racism, disablism, and anti-Semitism through mocking hyperbole, walking a fine line between legitimizing and criticizing such prejudice. By reframing intolerance to individual acts of prejudice, the show sidesteps institutional structures that maintain privilege. Though the character of Rachel repeatedly refers to her "two gay dads" and their close relationship with the A.C.L.U., which she threatens to involve in many altercations involving perceived unequal treatment, the show often mocks her as much as it does Sue's original expressions of prejudice. By using the same rhetorical structure to depict both intolerance and organizations that fight intolerance, the show minimizes historical and institutional power relations, and injurious statements in the present are only recognizable as individual prejudice rather than structural advantage. Where the musical as a genre foregrounds community, the show's use of satire emphasizes individuality. In these moments, the show's narrative, form, and affect seem interestingly at odds with each other.

As a show that consistently confronts how students negotiate questions of belonging and community at high school, *Glee* has become a surprisingly productive venue for discussions about representation, discrimination, and equality. But questions of narrative content cannot, I believe, be separated from the show's formal structure of a "behind-the-scenes musical," which in turn cannot be separated from the show's affective work and devoted fan following.