

FRUIT PIE AND THE MAKING OF A QUEER ARCHIVE

by

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(Under the Direction of CASSIA ROTH)

ABSTRACT

Minneapolis gay activist Thom Higgins became infamous in 1977 when he threw a fruit pie at Florida pop singer Anita Bryant as a protest against her anti-gay religious views. In this paper I trace the story of that fruit pie across multiple archival waves: the immediate context of the seventies, the rise in twentieth century social media narratives about pie, and a recent musical that takes inspiration from both Higgins and Bryant. I ultimately argue that following the evolving media interpretations surrounding fruit pie demonstrates how opposing political narratives about queer bodies influence our construction and interpretation of the historical archive.

INDEX WORDS: Queer Archive, Thom Higgins, Anita Bryant, Fruit Pie

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Chapter 1

Introduction

....The queer archival turn is often about queer people turning to the archive, seeking out in the archive others who are themselves. It is thus a turning outward as a way of turning in.¹

—Daniel Marshall and Zeb Tortorici, “Introduction”

In February 2022 on a message board for the website *FindAGrave.com*, I anxiously awaited the response of a man named Dennis Henry. It was my first time on the site, a platform where friends and family of the dead can post memorial notices, comments, and memories. I did not know about the website’s existence until I happened across a memorial page while googling Thom Higgins, a gay activist from Minnesota who became famous for throwing a pie at pop singer and noted homophobe Anita Bryant in 1977. I was interested in a comment Henry left on the website where he mentioned he had met Higgins briefly while the two were involved in the gay bath house scene in Minneapolis in the seventies. By that point I was already a couple months into researching Higgins for a seminar paper, but I still had no contacts with people who knew him. I was so gripped by the idea of chatting with someone who had met Higgins that I was ready to go to any length to be able to do so. Here is part of how Henry describes his first-time meeting Higgins:

I was living in Des Moines in 1977. I heard about Anita Bryant coming into town. I didn’t pay it much attention until I turned on my car radio and I heard Jim Zabel of WHO radio interviewing her. I had a lot of respect for Zabel but it ended that day. Zabel was the sports announcer for the Iowa Hawkeye football team. When Zabel interviewed her, the pie throwing incident had already happened. Several times she said, ‘well, at least it was a fruit pie.’ Zabel didn’t protest that comment and that is why I never respected him

¹ Daniel Marshall and Zeb Tortorici, “Introduction: (Re)turning to The Queer Archive,” *Turning Archival: The Life of the Historical in Queer Studies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022), 15.

again. She was such a hypocrite. Moments before in front of tv cameras, she was acting like a good Christian and praying for Thom Higgins, the one she considered an evil homosexual. That night Des Moines cops were harassing gays at the cruising areas downtown. Two cops pulled up next to my car and asked me if I wanted to buy Anita Bryant records. I replied with expletives and 4 letter words. Three nights later, I was at a gay bath house in downtown Minneapolis. I don't remember exactly how I met Thom but I was in his room with both of us wearing nothing but a towel. (We didn't have sex). We were talking and then I realized that I recognized him. He said 'yes, I'm Thom Higgins.' The one thing I remember most is when he told me that he put his hands in the air the moment he threw the pie because he didn't want to get shot. We talked for about an hour about being gay, about wanting respect as a human being. He changed me. Before that night, I didn't give much thought to gay rights and activism. What I thought was going to be a night at the baths, and of course sex, turned me into being in awe of someone who risked his life and someone who wasn't going to take the abuse anymore. I consider it such an honor that I met him, even though it was only for an hour.²

Then, Henry expands a bit further on his chance encounter with Higgins in relation to his identity and how it impacted him:

Sure, you can quote me about how Thom Higgins changed my life and my perception of myself. What he did is such an iconic moment and a galvanizing moment in gay history. After that pie throwing moment, advertisers knew that Bryant was radioactive. The orange juice boycott gained more juice. Major movie stars got on board. In less than two years after her destiny with the pie, her orange juice contract wasn't renewed. In less than three years after her destiny with a pie, her marriage was over. After the divorce, that put the nail in the coffin of her campaign of hate. Fundamentalists could no longer see her as the epitome of a Christian. When I met and talked with Thom in Minneapolis. I certainly didn't understand, foresee, or appreciate all the things that he would help set in motion.³

Ultimately, what began as a cursory glance at the death record began to unravel larger questions about historical memory and the role of narratives. Higgins occupied a space in the national fight for gay rights through the 1970s that makes his story an important site for how we recall, repurpose, and augment historical narratives about the gay rights movement through to the present. He was someone who directly inspired people, whose defiance turned shadowy

² Memorial page for Thomas L. Higgins, *Find A Grave.com*, Memorial ID 53033644, accessed March 20, 2023, <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/53033644/thomas-lawrence-higgins>.

³ Memorial page for Thomas L. Higgins.

bathroom conversations into larger moments of inspiration that have reverberated through the historical record. People involved in the American queer community since the seventies have continued to recognize the Higgins name through his past spectacle, making the memories and narratives surrounding Higgins and pie-throwing into a symbol of what could be, an embodiment of liberation.

Despite the visibility of the archival fragments that surround and provide glimpses into Higgins' interesting life, the pie incident has entrapped the Higgins archive within a series of evolving narratives about his conflict with Bryant. As such, most public, historical memory of Higgins has eschewed his eccentric private life—an out gay man from rural Wisconsin who started his own pagan religion. Rather, people on the internet—on blog pages, *Facebook.com*, and *Youtube.com*—have been more gripped by the one instance that came to mark his entire life. Higgins, as Henry recollects, was the man who threw a fruit pie at infamous anti-gay figure Bryant in 1977 during one of her rallies in Des Moines, Iowa opposing state protections for gay people. The other strange details of his life that I uncovered—the poems that he penned in his university journal, the little electronic hand he placed in the window of his Minneapolis apartment so that it could “wave at little old ladies” as they walked by, the time he was suspended from the University of North Dakota for publishing an underground zine critiquing Greek life—these are all moments that have not come to the attention of the wider public audience for the pie-throwing spectacle.⁴ Rather, through media narratives that perpetually

⁴ For poetry written by Higgins, see Thom Higgins, “In Which (Publication of the UND Honors Program), 1967-1968” (1967), Thom Higgins Papers, OGLMC 1292, Box 1, Folder 7, Elwyn B. Robinson Department of Special Collections, Chester Fritz Library, University of North Dakota, Grand Forks, ND, hereafter UND. <https://commons.und.edu/higgins-papers/8>, 8. For information about Higgins' personal life including the electronic hand he placed in his window, see Sara Jones, “His Pie in the Sky is Gay Rights,” *The North Dakota Star*, December 1977, 1. For further reading about the university trial surrounding his suspension, see Student Relations Committee (SRC), Minutes Regarding Higgins' Role in the Underground Newspaper *Snow Job*, Thom Higgins Papers, OGLMC 1292, Box #1, Folder #1, 9, UND.

recreate and reanimate Higgins by retelling the events of Bryant's pie to the face, both Higgins and Bryant's identities have been transmogrified through a strange archival afterlife. This realization led to several questions about historical memory and archives: Why do people like Henry feel compelled to post their memories of Higgins and message with random strangers on the internet about his legacy? What does fruit pie, and the narrative surrounding pie-throwing, have to do with the historical memory of both Bryant and Higgins? In this thesis I argue that fruit pie, from the 1970s to the 2020s, has become a representative device for the polarizing ideological debate surrounding queer bodies in American society. The conflicting narratives and adaptations surrounding fruit pie and pie-throwing have created an archive of both Higgins and Bryant together, what I call the Higgins-Bryant archive. These opposing political narratives and ongoing contestations over queer bodies continue to influence our construction and interpretation of the historical archive.

Furthermore, I use the word "queer" and the term "queer archive" throughout this thesis for several critical reasons. Because the Higgins-Bryant archive includes Higgins, who was a gay man, but also Bryant, who is heterosexual, we must clarify why queer is an appropriate term to refer to the entire archive. The main reason that I consider this to be a queer archive is because the core of the Higgins-Bryant archive is its focus on competing narratives about queer bodies and an ideological battle between left and right over queerness. The use of the term gay, while appropriate to refer to Higgins himself, would not be fully inclusive because of the presence of nonbinary and trans audiences in the last decade who have brought gendered discussions into the archive. Queer in this project refers to the full community of the LGBTQ+ audience, incorporating discussion not only on non-traditional sexuality but also on gender identity and its difference from biological sex determined at birth.

Moreover, as I will discuss, queer carries with it several historiographical meanings, which stem from the way that historians can approach the archive in a queer way. To provide a queer historical reading, the “queer archival turn” as Marshall and Tortorici emphasize in their recent anthology, is to center on the archival study of the non-traditional body: “What centers the queer archival turn is this figure of the body and how critiques, rejections, friendly amendments, and cautions regarding queer at some level revolve around questions of embodiment– the racially minoritized, gendered, classed, crippled, transed bodies.”⁵ I do use the term “gay” and “gay media” at times in this thesis to refer explicitly to the media debates of the 1970s, where gay was a synonym for homosexual and predominantly referred to homosexual men like Higgins. As I will argue, each archival wave in the Higgins-Bryant archive from the 1970s to the 2020s involves a polarizing debate about the queer body in its many contested and critiqued facets.

⁵ Marshall and Tortorici, “Introduction,” 5.

Chapter 2

What is Pie?

Pie, as most of us know it, is a sweet dessert. Yet pie becomes a political act when it is used to target someone who stands opposed to your ideas. Pieing, the act of throwing a pie at someone or something, turns the innocent dish into a statement (either political or comedic or some combination of both). Higgins became a notable gay activist in 1977 when he targeted Bryant during one of her rallies, but both of their stories do not end there. When we look to the archive of their lives, the memories of Higgins and Bryant stretch beyond 1977. Fruit pie is our vantage point for access into the memories of a terse, polarizing narrative about the irreconcilable differences between a gay activist and a Christian fundamentalist. Higgins died from AIDS in the nineties, but he lives on through the strange allure of his story that continues to make its mark in the registers of the archive. It is the story of an archival life created by pie. Pie is the variable that allows us to make sense of Higgins and Bryant through the strange narrative forces that continue to pit them against each other. Pie is an archival window. In 1977, Higgins' life became connected with Bryant but both have continued to be affected by pie even in 2023. The goal of this thesis is not to write a biographical story. The emphasis here is on the queer and mainstream media's reception and interpretation of both Higgins' and Bryant's stories together to make the queer archive that I refer to as the Higgins-Bryant archive.

Questions about audience bring to light structural questions about the creation of the archive. For example, how do queer bodies move through the archive in light of this polarization between queer and fundamentalist viewpoints? How are queer bodies sustained by the archive

through this divided, polarized debate? What kind of afterlives do they have? Therefore, the story of Higgins and Bryant is one interwoven with the making of a queer archive. Telling the story of Higgins and Bryant is not solely the story of one fateful October day in Des Moines in 1977 that resulted in pie in the face. By moving from the pie incident to the wider archival pathways that stem beyond Higgins' death in the nineties from AIDS and the end of Bryant's commercial success in the music industry, we use pie as a variable for tracing a multifaceted, shifting archival afterlife.

This thesis traces the life of the banana cream pie that Higgins threw at Bryant from 1977 through to 2023. Why has the conflict between Higgins and Bryant gripped so many viewers across generations of time, and why does it continue to be reanimated, given new life, re-baked in myriad ways? How has it been received by generations of queer people, how has it reanimated the story of Higgins and Bryant, and what might scholars gain by historicizing its unique position in the archive? On the flip side, how has pie-throwing been used by those who oppose Higgins, those who continue to champion Bryant as a defender of family, children, and the institution of marriage? When we investigate the narratives about Higgins' and Bryant's involvement with pie further questions like these about the reinvention, recreation, and expansion of archives arise. This thesis is therefore a genealogical history of the making of the Higgins-Bryant archive as a case study for understanding how queer bodies are both memorialized and contested over time through divided narratives, perpetually shifting, perpetually in the act of recreation and innovation.

Chapter 3

Historiography

I draw upon two pre-existing concepts about the queer archive and queer usages of time.

The first text, a theoretical investigation of the queer archive mentioned earlier, is Daniel Marshall and Zeb Tortorici's anthology entitled *Turning Archival: The Life of the Historical in Queer Studies*. In their co-written introduction, Tortorici and Marshall artfully posit how queer bodies often exist in a peculiar relationship with the archive:

Almost half a century after the establishment of community LGBTQ archives, the notion of the queer archive is seen by some as an idea that has lost useful specificity. But like the zombies in *The Return of the Living Dead*, queer archives refuse to die as the knowledges they signify get reanimated, over and over. We return to the archives queerly, then, to explore how the fragments of the past—all that ephemeral dust, desire, and documentary incompleteness—get turned, again and again, into material to feast on in the present.⁶

Marshall and Tortorici's notion that archival pathways reinvigorate queer bodies, perhaps mystically, deserves further consideration. The fun anecdote of a strange, zombifying process whereby the dead engage with the living is an entertaining interlude in Marshall and Tortorici's argument, yet we should not cast it off as solely cursory filler. Here is where Higgins' peculiar death and archival rebirth prove insightful. Rather than zombies stirring up the dust of the past, we can instead look to pie-throwing as an apt symbol for the study of this phenomenon of an archival afterlife, or rather consecutive archival afterlives, which have re-centered the Higgins name across a vast and ever-expanding network of mediums that include social media posts, blogs and periodicals, musicals, and movies.

⁶ Marshall and Tortorici, "Introduction," 7.

Queer bodies move through the archive in different ways than heterosexual bodies. One main reason for this difference is because queerness is not seen as an absolute, fixed concept by everyone but is instead often interpreted as a recently created way of life that is thus open to debate among all audiences. Marshall and Tortorici even state directly this unfixed nature when they describe their concept of turning archival in a queer way: “Turning thus partly constitutes and partly unfixes, each and every archival subject, as the following chapters demonstrate. Every turn to the archive is a witnessing of the archive turning into something else.”⁷ The reiteration and adaptation of debates about queerness from the 1970s to the 2020s has forced Higgins and Bryant to become actors who transition seamlessly—are themselves unfixed—from the past and the present as their symbolic meanings are repurposed through ongoing debates about queer life in America.

A fundamental characteristic of queerness is the fact that it has always existed in a space of contestation, critique, and investigation through its polarization from heterosexual, so-called traditional, ways of life. Tortorici and Marshall also emphasize the ways that queer bodies are unique when it comes to archives because this contestation and unfixing means that they move “multidirectionally”:

That the queer archival turn might be said to have multiple different starting points, or what we might all hinge moments, is only fitting in the context of queer studies where the ideas of teleological development and universal paradigm shifts have been problematized by scholars pointing to the performative interplay of multiple simultaneous epistemological formation; turns beside turns... Besides, then, Straight histories of the queer archival turn that might posit the turn as happening at some static historical point in time, this collection meditates on the evasive allure of turns, and how different accounts of them function generatively.⁸

⁷ Marshall and Tortorici, “Introduction,” 13

⁸ Marshall and Tortorici, “Introduction,” 16.

My interpretation of this mutlidirectionality as it pertains to the Higgins-Bryant archive is in line with Tortorici and Marshall. I see the Higgins-Bryant archive as containing several hinge moments across several different decades that have altered how we recollect the timeline of Higgins' and Bryant's lives. Pie-throwing in 1977 created a spectacle that made its mark on the registers of the archive, but it has not been a linear archival story. Pie-throwing was the impetus for historical interest in Higgins' earlier years, but through new mediums like theater, movies, and digital media, Higgins and Bryant have reached new audiences who widen the scope and meaning of the archive, forcing new information into the archive from before and after the pie-throwing event itself. By attaching debates about trans bodies and gender identity to the narrative of Higgins and Bryant during the Trump presidency and into the 2020s, the Higgins-Bryant archive has moved both historical actors beyond 1977 and given them a new significance as emblems of a divided American political landscape. Renewed interest in Higgins has also led to increased digitization efforts. For example, the Higgins archive from the University of North Dakota, where Higgins went to college from 1967–68, has since been digitized in 2022 due to an uptick in public interest in his life story. All of these turns, resignifications, and non-linear adaptations of the Higgins-Bryant archive contribute to its fundamentally queer nature.

This work takes influence not only from the themes about the queer archive laid out in *Turning Archival* but also, and perhaps more explicitly, from Jack Halberstam's ideas about time in their 2005 book *In A Queer Time and Place*. Halberstam's methodology in the book derives from a similar origin to my own work on Higgins: what began as the biographical story about one man eventually became a study of how one event shapes the archive and the perception of that man over a span of years. Halberstam focuses on one single event in the life of Brandon Teena, a transgender man shot execution style in rural Nebraska alongside his two friends, Lisa

Lambert and Philip DeVine, after local men discovered that he was going on dates with local cisgender women. The timelines of both studies closely align (Teena died in 1993 and Higgins in 1994), but, even more importantly, both men share peculiar archival afterlives amplified by media sensation. Published as a succinct report with a few lines of text describing the incident, Teena's death quickly moved from a local news story to a wider network of national queer newspapers. "That media rush, in many ways, transformed the Brandon murders from a circumscribed event to an ever-evolving narrative," Halberstam writes.⁹ In the days following the local report, the transgender community and gay community both adopted the story, and in the wake of this attention the story of Teena's death was made into a documentary, a play, and eventually an Oscar-winning dramatic film entitled *Boys Don't Cry* starring a young Hilary Swank as Teena.¹⁰ Overnight, Teena's death became a cultural media sensation. In the years following the murder, Teena's life has taken on a new significance, becoming an embodied queer motif and a useful cultural touchstone for those reflecting on the long history of victims of anti-LGBTQ+ hate.

Clearly, the story about trans murder has a much graver tone than the story of Higgins, but the aftermath of both narratives follows a similar archival pattern. In the immediate aftermath of the pie incident, as I will detail, Higgins became a sudden media sensation. His identity was forever fixed as a pie-throwing gay radical. Fruit pie effectively fused both Bryant's and Higgins' identities together in the archive. In the early 2010s, years after the pie-throwing spectacle, with the emergence of social media, the Higgins-Bryant archive was born anew through an expanding digital environment of gay blog posts and comment threads on *Facebook*

⁹ Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: NYU Press, 2005), 23.

¹⁰ *Boys Don't Cry*, directed by Kimberly Peirce (IFC Films, 1999).

and *Youtube*. In the incendiary space of digital media, Higgins and Bryant have come to serve as opposing forces, each with their own symbolism that the political left and political right continue to use to bash each other. Meted out across the social media sphere, the Higgins-Bryant archive has moved from the space of institutional archives and periodicals following Higgins' pie-throwing in 1977 to an ever-shifting, ever-expanding matrix of digital sensation bolstered by new waves of queer audiences who re-animate and re-symbolize what Higgins means and what his pie spectacle continues to mean in light of the last two decades of political division. In 2018, during a time of intense divides surrounding Donald Trump's presidency, the Higgins-Bryant archive was again re-made as an embodied archive of performance when a nonbinary screenwriter, Gordon Leary, debuted *The Loneliest Girl in the World*, a musical based on the lives of both Bryant and Higgins. At the time of this writing, the Bryant side of the story is now moving to the big screen for an upcoming biopic about Bryant's life currently in pre-production. These several archival sites, as I will discuss, have created a resurgence of the Higgins-Bryant narrative that mirrors the archival revival of the Teena story at almost every turn. Although the movie *Boys Don't Cry* came out in 1999, it too recently has gained a newfound media focus as debates about the ethics of cisgender actors portraying trans characters increasingly becomes a point of political debate.¹¹

Teena's story engages its own argument about transgender identity in the context of rural/urban cultural divides. However, the Higgins-Bryant archive's genealogy, the fact that it has been made and re-made several times over, means that both archives operate on the same conceptual level. Zooming out to the broad strokes of making and remaking archives, Higgins' unique archival story follows a similar pattern of spectacle and narrative that animates,

¹¹ See Hugo Greenhalgh, "Should non-LGBTQ+ Actors Play Trans or Gay Characters?," *GayTimes.com*, n.d., accessed March 24, 2023, <https://www.gaytimes.co.uk/life/should-non-lgbtq-actors-play-trans-or-gay-characters/>.

reanimates, and disrupts our understandings of how queer bodies move through archives and historical memory. Halberstam's book charts this phenomenon by showing how Teena's death resulted in a genealogical study of a peculiar archival path from which the story was reanimated through different, shifting mediums:

In death, Brandon became a hero, a martyr, and a fallen friend to hundreds of viewers and readers who would have shown little to no interest in his plight had he been killed in a traffic accident or died of a disease...I had originally planned a study of the Brandon case along the lines of some of the books written...But as the 'Brandon Industry' grew, and as films, videos, novels, true-crime mysteries and other accounts of the case were released, I felt ambivalent about simply contributing to the growing fascination with this young transgender man among gays and lesbians. In the hopes of steering clear of the representational and emotional vortex that surrounded Brandon, I decided to study the construction of Brandon in terms of some of the questions about time and space raised by queer studies. And so, I look at Brandon as a figure who represents both anachronism and dislocated-ness (a person who chooses the rural over the urban as his theater for staging his gender); Brandon is literally and figuratively out of time and out of place.¹²

I too feel ambivalent about contributing to the emotionally entertaining details of those events of Higgins' life. Doing so would be to ignore Halberstam's warnings. I do not wish to rehash the same overwrought emotional plot points of pie-thrower vs. bigot, gay hero vs. hetero villain. Rather, I am interested in getting beyond this "vortex" to investigate the underbelly of the Higgins-Bryant archive—tracing the path of the archive to understand the overarching meaning that underpins the narrative itself and allows for its continued legacy among both queer and fundamentalist audiences.

Halberstam also raises another important question about the pitfalls of biographical histories. They say "...the Brandon story suggests that too often minority history hinges on representative examples provided by the lives of a few extraordinary individuals."¹³ Halberstam goes on: "The Brandon archive, then, needs to be read less in terms of the history of one

¹² Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*, 16.

¹³ Halberstam, 44.

extraordinary person, and more in terms of the constructions of community and self that it brings to light.”¹⁴ Halberstam navigates this methodological problem by eschewing the emphasis on the captivating qualities of Teena as an individual and instead emphasizing the way that Teena’s identity has shifted to fit a complex array of queer narratives: “The Brandon archive is not simply the true story of a young queer misfit in rural North America. It is also a necessarily incomplete and ever-expanding record of how we select our heroes as well as how we commemorate our dead.”¹⁵ The Higgins-Bryant archive follows the Brandon archive’s methodology by moving beyond the spectacle in order to get at how narratives shape the scope of archives and influence how we recall queer bodies.

¹⁴ Halberstam, 45.

¹⁵ Halberstam.

Chapter 4

Why Higgins-Bryant?

I divide the Higgins archival genealogy into several distinct waves. First, I trace the immediate aftermath of the pie-throwing event and its context within the pre-existing debates about LGBTQ+ rights in America sweeping through the late seventies. Next, I discuss the social media activity from the early 2010s to the present regarding Higgins and Bryant as a way of showing the continuities and parallels between 1977 and the political divides of the last decade. Then, I move to a specific date, 2018, discussing a musical production about Higgins and Bryant as an embodied form of archive through performance. Lastly, I reflect on how all of these different archival afterlives influence our historical memory of queer bodies through left and right-wing political use of narratives. Each afterlife encompasses a different time period and context, demonstrating how narratives shift over time through various mediums as new audiences and users of archives continually reconstruct and reinvent the past.

Still, there remains the question of why one should consider the Higgins-Bryant spectacle in the first place. Why should we concern ourselves historically with the biographical details of Higgins? Tracing the archival interludes of the Higgins-Bryant story, I argue, is an articulation of the ongoing, continuous divides between queer and fundamentalist America. Pie, and the polarization between left and right that pie-throwing symbolizes, serves as a useful motif about the ruptures between queer and heterosexual worldviews, reproduction, myths of childhood, and the threat of non-traditional ways of living. Pie-throwing, I ultimately argue, has become a figurative embodiment, a literal and metaphorical theatrical space for the feelings of justice and

redemption that queer people seek when reckoning with the restrictive dialogue that emerges from political divides based on fear-mongering narratives about a perceived queer threat to children and the American family.

Chapter 5

Pie on Tape

I begin the archival story of Higgins with the televised footage of the pie incident itself. It's from that initial image that we can reconstruct a richly detailed scene. It's where I first happened upon the story of Higgins and where many viewers first find their footing for the events and series of spectacles that shaped the fight for American gay rights following the year 1977. The details of the Higgins pie incident on October 14, 1977 in Des Moines, Iowa have reached thousands upon thousands of viewers because the story is not only universally entertaining to even those without knowledge of its context but also because of the very simple fact that it was captured on tape. The recording is why we can so closely relate to the action—there is not the level of visual removal that happens when we read a newspaper or hear someone else's account of an event. Rather, the matters of that day are visible to anyone and everyone with an internet connection.

Higgins, an advertising copywriter turned nurse and gay rights activist, stood up from the crowd of spectators, took aim, and flung a banana cream pie into the air. The dessert landed right in the face of its intended target: anti-gay rights figure Bryant. A singer from Oklahoma with multiple hit songs in the fifties and sixties, Bryant openly opposed several 1970s gay rights ordinances in places like Florida and Minnesota. But after the pie attack, the attention in the

room was all on Higgins. He made his way to the exit, stopped, and exclaimed, “Thus always to Bigots.”¹⁶ Bryant’s husband, Bob Green, called out, “Security agents, security agents!”¹⁷

Her face completely covered by pie and whipped cream, Bryant spoke into the microphone in prayer, “Father, I want to ask that you forgive him and that we love him and that we’re praying for him to be delivered from his deviant lifestyle, Father.”¹⁸ Higgins had long, shaggy hair. He ambled to the exit while Bryant clasped her hands in prayer. Bryant wiped pie from her face and then broke down in tears. After the event in the parking lot, off camera, Green threw a pie at Higgins’ accomplice Patrick Schwartz. The retaliatory occurrence quite literally makes the pie-throwing an act that goes both ways: it is not just an expression of queer frustration but also a device used by the right. News coverage of the event described it as follows: “Despite his early plea for non-retaliation, Bryant’s husband took it and threw it in one of the pie-throwers’ faces.”¹⁹

I’m able to depict the specifics of the event precisely because of the camera’s gaze. It is a pivotal moment. Most importantly, it is a moment of archival allure, where the viewer is seduced by the spectacle of an archival find. Those moments of voyeurism were more than salacious images to be spliced up and dished out in quick news blurbs. Rather, the recording of the event allowed for the audience to become a witness to the genesis story of one man’s archival rebirth. Just as a sensational story published in a local Nebraska newspaper created a new version of Teena—a representational Teena that could be fit into various narratives—so too did the pie video create a new representational version of Higgins: one that reverberates through history and

¹⁶ NBCUniversal Archives, “Anita Bryant’s Pie to the Face,” *Youtube.com* Video, 1:26, June 9, 2014, accessed March 21, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5tHGmSh7f-0>.

¹⁷ NBCUniversal Archives, “Anita Bryant’s Pie to the Face.”

¹⁸ NBCUniversal Archives.

¹⁹ Dennis Wilden, “90002_7511_01,” *OddBallFilms.com* Stock Footage, filmed October 14, 1977, accessed August 21, 2023, https://www.oddballfilms.com/clip/90002_7511_01.

continues to be relevant across new mediums. The news story detailing Teena's death, published in 1993, was the archival genesis of a narrative that complicated Teena's historical timeline. Teena was not just a young man shot execution style but also a trans archetypal character whose tragic death embodied what many queer viewers thought of as the inescapable divisions between ruralness and queerness—being truly queer meant living in a big, progressive urban environment. After death, Teena became the physical embodiment of fundamentally queer anxieties about the threat of rurality to trans people.

In the Higgins story, it is also a queer audience that has co-opted the narrative to give the Higgins name an altogether new meaning. As I argue, the peculiar afterlife of Higgins as an embodied narrative is best observed when we trace the Higgins-Bryant pie narrative as it applies to the exigencies of an audience grappling with an ongoing struggle over queer bodies within the American family. As I cover in the next section, culture wars that politically divided sixties America over the question of civil rights migrated into debates about gender, sexuality, and childhood by the seventies. With her 1977 "Save Our Children(SOC)" campaign, Anita Bryant created a unified front of republicanism that used traditional ideas about family to counter the gay rights movement, labeling it as pedophilic, debaucherous, and oriented around grooming the children of America.²⁰ With social media these debates have continued through the 2010s and into the 2020s, re-purposing the context of the seventies to fit increasingly caustic political positions in the context of new debates about trans bodies.

Yet the discussion about Higgins does not fully answer an important methodological problem: How do we tell the biographical story of someone whose story really only begins after their death? After studying the immediate aftermath of the pie-throwing incident, I quickly

²⁰ Gillian Frank, "The Civil Rights of Parents': Race and Conservative Politics in Anita Bryant's Campaign against Gay Rights in 1970s Florida," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 22, no. 1 (2013): 141.

realized that I was researching two different versions of Higgins—the one that came before the pie and the one that came after. The critical variable to consider was not actually the flow of events happening throughout Higgins’ entire life but rather the flow of the audience—how the audience members themselves changed and shifted their interpretations of Higgins to fit the context of their own lives. Therefore, the answer is a simple one. We shouldn’t rely upon traditional methodology for telling the story of Higgins. We must turn to a new format, a new way of telling a story based on the pathway that the archive sets forth for us—we must tell the story in a way that honors the peculiar reality that Higgins is also a historical actor “out of time and place.”²¹ We can do so by thinking not of the historical actors (Bryant and Higgins) first but instead thinking about the way that queer and fundamentalist audiences have consumed, processed, and reproduced both of their identities across time through media narratives. What position does the audience occupy in this narrative, and what route does the audience for the Higgins-Bryant archive take?

There are several key factors to mention here when we talk about a “new” version of Higgins that emerged after the pie video. The first point is that both sides of the audience, left and right-wing media outlets, have stripped Higgins of his Minneapolis identity. Despite his role in the Minneapolis gay rights movement, his friendships, his lovers, the details of his advertising career and his later switch to working as a nurse in a hospital in Minneapolis through the AIDS crisis, queer and mainstream media outlets have not registered his as a uniquely Minnesota story. This omission has resulted in an audience that has consumed Higgins as an embodied motif about queerness but removed his lived experience in the process of proliferating the fruit pie narrative. This fact is perhaps the reason for the Higgins-Bryant archive’s popularity: It has

²¹ Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*, 16.

become a national story that is presentable and readable to those without local context, one that, through both the media's presentation and the audience's gaze, has unmoored Higgins both temporally and spatially. Whether Higgins and Bryant knew it or not, that fleeting recording at the height of the action became a defining moment in both of their stories. Yet despite Higgins' active role in the initial production of the spectacle, it is likely that even he could not have foreseen the sheer impact that those few moments would have on the fabric of gay history and the wake it would leave in his future archival story.

We should not take the camera's recording as a cursory detail, especially when we consider the historical relevance of television to the social movements born amidst the culture wars of the seventies. Historian Yashikuni Igarashi explores the role of the camera's gaze in history. In his analysis of post-war Japanese society, Igarashi uses the term "metavisuality" to explain how a new modern sense of both nationality and gender roles emerged in and through television productions.²² The significance of his argument is predicated upon a fundamental circularity—the perpetual cycle of interplay between television footage and the audience's consumption and reinterpretation of that footage. Metavisuality is how Igarashi explains the critical shift in gendered notions about masculinity and femininity that evolved in the post-war period. For the first time, the act of watching television and watching the weekly news instilled in Japanese audiences a real sense of seeing themselves reflected culturally, witnessing the self from an "outside perspective."²³ This new technology forced audience members to reflect about their relationship to society in a much more visceral, emotional way.²⁴ It also caused cultural changes that built upon the narratives displayed on screen. Igarashi ultimately emphasizes the

²² Yashikuni Igarashi, *Japan, 1972: Visions of Masculinity in an Age of Mass Consumption* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021), 60.

²³ Igarashi, *Japan, 1972*, 60.

²⁴ Igarashi, *Japan, 1972*, 52.

importance of media narratives as essential to this newfound capacity for self-reflectivity—and this is the most critical argument for our discussion about Higgins:

Theorizing the voyeuristic gaze of televisions and exposé weeklies leads Fujitake Akira to a gloomy conclusion about Japanese society in the 1980s, whose members, he claims, suffered from a sense of powerlessness in the face of the media's ubiquitous presence. It is possible to see democratic potential in this development: the masses expanded their egos in proportion to the growth in media coverage. In exchange, however, they internalized the media's gaze, which does not recognize the boundaries of individuals. In an often-cited episode of Jean-Paul Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, a solipsistic voyeur is caught in a tangled web of social relations the moment he discovers that somebody is watching him. Similarly, television viewers lose their transcendence as omnipotent seers once they sense that their gaze is reciprocated. Sartre's episode insists that the gaze always contains a counter gaze, which necessarily complicates the seeing agent's relation to the world. While the French philosopher comments on the general state of subjectivity in the visual field and ultimately in the field of bodily senses, Fujitake is primarily concerned about the degree to which individual beings have come to be mediated through the modern technology of seeing.²⁵

On a conceptual level with regard to the audience, Igarashi's considerations about the camera's gaze are relevant to our discussion of how television viewers in the U.S. received the pie. The context of 1970s Japan mattered to the ways in which narratives about the self and about society proliferated through the television. So too did the cultural context matter in the effect of the Higgins pie-throwing spectacle. Metavisuality is at play here in the narratives surrounding the Higgins-Bryant archive when it comes to the topic of sexuality and the American family. In particular, Igarashi's claims that "the masses expanded their egos in proportion to the growth in media coverage" rings particularly true when we look to the immediate context of gay rights in the U.S. through the late seventies.²⁶ Pie-throwing was a symbol of support for queer people and also a sign for the religious right about the threat of queer backlash. On both sides of the debate about fruit pie in 1977, audience members reacted to the culture war over gay rights in a way that inflated their own egos and their own developing understandings of identity politics.

²⁵ Igarashi, *Japan, 1972*, 77.

²⁶ Igarashi, 77.

Igarashi's study is thus an apt way for thinking about how an American audience member might have read and interpreted the scene of the pie-throwing as it occurred in the homes of thousands of viewers that day. It was one of the first instances where a queer viewer would have seen their own frustrations meted out in a visceral, physical way. Witnessing the fruit pie changed people. Let us recall Henry's comments at the beginning of this paper when he first heard about the pie-throwing:

Sure, you can quote me about how Thom Higgins changed my life and my perception of myself. What he did is such an iconic moment and a galvanizing moment in gay history. After that pie throwing moment, advertisers knew that Bryant was radioactive. The orange juice boycott gained more juice. Major movie stars got on board. In less than two years after her destiny with the pie, her orange juice contract wasn't renewed. In less than three years after her destiny with a pie, her marriage was over. After the divorce, that put the nail in the coffin of her campaign of hate. Fundamentalists could no longer see her as the epitome of a Christian. When I met and talked with Thom in Minneapolis. I certainly didn't understand, foresee, or appreciate all the things that he would help set in motion.²⁷

In the Higgins story, the original footage, the subsequent media narratives surrounding the event, and the audience's consumption and subsequent re-interpretation of the event all matter. Some fundamentalists, as Henry alludes to, rejected Bryant for speaking out against queer people. Moderates saw Bryant's brash stances as having the potential to alienate wider American supporters who didn't have such hardline stances against queer people. Others double-downed and supported Bryant. The context of the years leading up to and surrounding 1977, which will be covered in the next section, ultimately created a gulf between queer people and fundamentalists, a gulf that fruit pie only widened.

²⁷ Memorial page for Thomas L. Higgins.

Chapter 6

The Late Seventies in Queer History

The sheer popularity of the story of fruit pie and the image of Bryant's face covered in whip cream was only one part in a larger history of sexual debates happening throughout the seventies. Bryant and her anti-gay SOC campaign, which stood against allowing gay people to serve openly in teaching positions, meant that Bryant was already a hotly contested figure by the time Higgins threw the pie in 1977. Narratives in the seventies about sexuality gained a following on both the left and the right through the growing usage of television. By the end of the decade, television usage had more than doubled since 1970 with over 15.5 million subscribers nationwide.²⁸ Broadcast companies went through a period of immense change as a result of new government efforts at regulating media consumption based on fears about the linkages between violence and news consumption.²⁹ In 1979, a reporter for *The Washington Post*, Tom Shales, commented that "TV was a battered football for assorted coalitions of newly emerging media activists armed to the teeth with cleats."³⁰ It was the decade where television increasingly became a political tool, a political fear, and a cause of concern regarding its perceived harmful effects. Action for Children's Television (ACT) lobbied for news with any hint of violence to be restricted to late night hours.³¹ New questions about the television's influence on the individual cropped up through novel lawsuits. Shales commented that "TV was

²⁸ Tom Shales, "TV in the 70s," *The Washington Post*, December 27, 1979, accessed April 11, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1979/12/27/tv-in-the-70s/6a3a1ac0-d251-428c-acf7-1e227488474a/>, n. Pag.

²⁹ Shales, "TV in the 70s."

³⁰ Shales.

³¹ Shales.

blamed for much in the 1970s, especially violence in American society. It was claimed (but rejected in court) that an incident depicted in the NBC movie ‘Born Innocent’ led to an attack on a teen-age girl. It was contended that ABC's telecast of the movie ‘Fuzz’ inspired juvenile delinquents in Boston to imitate the immolation of winos -- just as they had seen it done in the film.”³²

Debates about television’s ethical threat to childhood innocence, of course, included questions not just about violence but also about sexuality. Much of this media debate centered around Florida’s summer 1977 repeal of a gay rights ordinance protecting gay people in housing and employment that was passed earlier in the year by Dade County on 18 January 1977.³³ Right-wing narratives about sexuality created opposition to the Florida protections as well as other legislation for gay people in other states. A similar ordinance took place in 1975 in Minnesota which will be discussed later in this section when we discuss Higgins’ explicit involvement in the gay rights movements of the seventies.

Scholars have argued that the uptick in debates about sexuality through the seventies catalyzed by Bryant’s 1977 SOC campaign had its origins in a deeper history in which southern politicians migrated their strategies away from the civil rights debates of the sixties and into new critiques of gender and sexuality:

SOC’s discourse of child protection embodied a protean logic of family privacy against queer sexuality. That strategy was, in part, learned from southern US resistance to desegregation dating back to the Civil War, which used the language of privacy and protection to address issues of race. In Florida, popular resistance to the court-ordered busing of children to achieve racial integration in schools saw a continuation of long-standing fears about interracial sexual contact among youth and set the stage for battles over racial equality that would directly inspire SOC’s 1977 antigay campaign.³⁴

³² Shales.

³³ Frank, “The Civil Rights of Parents,” 141.

³⁴ Frank, “The Civil Rights of Parents,” 128.

Florida's Dade County ordinance to enact protections for queer people in positions of employment and public housing was approved by the state in an initial vote on 18 January 1977. The ordinance created controversy that lasted for some months as Bryant widened her basis of fundamentalist support. SOC used media coverage about child pornography and capitalized on fears about gay men molesting children to drum up hundreds of thousands of signatures from January to June 1977 in order to oppose Florida's ordinance, eventually leading to a referendum on 7 June 1977.³⁵ A media battle ensued between left and right, and on the day of the referendum 60% of the 300,000 Dade County residents voted to reject protections for sexuality.³⁶ News coverage after the referendum's repeal decision displays these continued right wing attacks on protections for sexuality. A reporter from a local television station in Dade County stated that such state legislation would result in the Orange Bowl parade, a local tradition involving floats and marching bands, turning into a scene like that of San Francisco with "men hugging other men, cavorting with little boys, wearing dresses and makeup. The same people who turned San Francisco into a hotbed of homosexuality want to do the same thing to Florida."³⁷

I detail the Dade County referendum because scholars view it as one of the main events that ignited nationwide political division between the left and right on the topic of acceptable American sexuality and the family. Yet it's important to emphasize that, despite having the most popular and recognizable of the sexual ordinance debates, Florida was one of several states to enact legislation intended to protect homosexuality. In fact, the Dade County community was actually the 38th community in America to do so.³⁸

³⁵ Frank, 146

³⁶ Frank, 157.

³⁷ SuchIsLifeVideos, "Anita Bryant On Constitutional Revision No. 2 (Protect America's Children Campaign)," *Youtube.com*, July 17, 2014, accessed March 24, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zbatcxlCG_Q, 1:07.

³⁸ Frank, "The Civil Rights of Parents," 141

Just a few years earlier, the debate about sexuality came to a head with a similar ordinance passing through Minnesota's state legislature in 1975. Spirited on by these debates and by right-wing media rhetoric about gay people being pedophiles who needed to "recruit" children because they couldn't reproduce, Higgins' pie-throwing increased the dramatization over queer bodies at around the same time that Bryant's anti-gay activities did so.³⁹

While we've established that Bryant was an expert at attaching narratives about pedophilia to the question of queerness in America, Higgins was also an expert at creating media drama. In college, he was suspended for writing articles in an underground newspaper critiquing the fraternity system at the University of North Dakota.⁴⁰ Part of this particular penchant for drama likely also came from the fact that he had worked for several years as a copywriter for a top advertising agency in Minneapolis, Colle McVoy. He knew how to grip an audience member with his words and actions. By nature of his work, his queer background, and his overall discontent with the media coverage coming from the religious right, Higgins knew the power of spectacle.

This ability was the force underpinning his efforts in creating a perfect onslaught of satire aimed at directly inverting the religious right's rhetoric. For example, he heightened the drama of his cause by calling it not a gay agenda, as the right called it, but instead a "gay imperative."⁴¹ He did so in one of his most important speeches, a testimony on 24 March 1975 before a judiciary committee of the Minnesota House regarding Gay Rights Amendment H.F.536. In the speech, Higgins introduced himself as "President of the Gay Imperative" in addition to being the

³⁹ Dudley Clendinen and Adam Nagourney, *Out for Good: The Struggle to Build a Gay Rights Movement in America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999), 299.

⁴⁰ For further reading about Higgins' suspension, see Student Relations Committee (SRC) Minutes, 9.

⁴¹ Thom L. Higgins, "Testimony before Minnesota House," Tretter Collection Information Files, Box 17, Folder 4, Jean-Nickolaus Tretter Collection in Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Studies, University of Minnesota Libraries, Minneapolis, MN, 1, hereafter UMN Archive.

creative director of its advertising wing, both of which he said “receive funding from The Church of the Chosen People, America’s first gay, pagan religion.”⁴² Because the religious right’s and SOC’s main organizing backbone was largely church institutions, Higgins created his own gay religion to make the debate between two churches on opposing sides. The testimony is a prime example of the kind of verbose and deeply satirical language that Higgins employed throughout his life. For instance, he argued “Mark me well, gentlemen: tomorrow’s media will be forced to give even our most blatant conversionary advertising exactly the same protections and services they now offer any local jeweler who smells a profit in hetero coupling...regardless of its effects on their—and your—children.”⁴³ Here, Higgins outright called his agenda one of “conversion”—not shying away from the term’s loaded sentiment but instead using it openly to shock and dramatize. At each turn, Higgins inverted the language of the religious right. Anti-gay rhetoric became anti-hetero rhetoric: “It is the law that approves and legalizes hetero marriages, and subsidizes socially-irresponsible breeding, while ignoring the legitimate lifestyles of such vast numbers of gays.”⁴⁴ Pictures from a gay pride parade in Minneapolis show anti-hetero slogans rumored to have been coined by Higgins himself. One photo from the Minnesota Historical Society displays Higgins hoisting a banner that reads “Today’s breeder, tomorrow’s cow,” a rather sexist jest at pregnant bodies, but one that did so intentionally to antagonize the right.⁴⁵

His 1975 testimony, two years before his pie-throwing and before Bryant’s SOC campaign, called for widespread gay marriage, for the support of gay lifestyles as healthy, for the corporate world’s embrace of gay people, and for the passage of an amendment that would

⁴² Higgins, “Testimony before Minnesota House,” 1.

⁴³ Higgins, 2.

⁴⁴ Higgins, 3.

⁴⁵ “First Gay Pride March, Nicollet Mall, Minneapolis, 1974,” Thom Higgins Photograph Collection, I. 190.8, Minnesota Historical Society, Minneapolis, MN, hereafter MHS Archive.

protect the employment rights of gay people in Minnesota. His conclusion to the speech is equally potent and dramatic in typical Higgins fashion: “A few of my constituents tell me I am wrong, and that the majority of you are still too over inflated by Puritanism and hypocrisy to act. ‘Not this year,’ they say, and they are resigned to yet another senseless delay. But even they are convinced that this action will be taken, gentlemen, by your replacements, and while joyous bicentennial bells play proud tunes overhead.”⁴⁶

This increased spectacle, from 1975 to 1977, marked a severe backlash from right-wing fundamentalists while simultaneously entrenching gay rights activism. The two opposing sides of the consumption of the Higgins-Bryant archival narrative during 1977, at the height of tension, are evident in *Out Magazine*’s 19 July 1977 edition. By the summer of 1977, three months before Higgins’ pie event, Bryant’s rhetoric had already polarized some extremist anti-gay supporters who took her message to heart and went on a hunt to kill gay people, resulting in the June 22 murder of Robert “Jeff” Hillsborough, a thirty-two-year-old gardener for the City of San Francisco and an out gay man. On the front page, the article’s first two sentences read: “Anita Bryant and [California] state Sen. John Briggs [R-Fullerton] were both sued June 30 in the U.S. District Court for conspiracy in the slaying of gay city gardener Robert Hillsborough. Damages of \$5 million are being asked from Bryant, Briggs, Save Our Children, Inc., and the ‘accused killer.’”⁴⁷ The newspaper reported that the three murderers reportedly cheered, “this one’s for Anita Bryant” while they carried out their murderous deeds.⁴⁸

The importance of the murder to this study was not only its tragic emotional appeal but also its connection to the developing apparatus of media narrative consumption in the late

⁴⁶ Higgins, “Testimony before Minnesota House,” 3.

⁴⁷ Bruce Petit, “City Mourns Murder Victim,” *Out! The Gay Newspaper*, issue 1, July 29, 1977, 1.

⁴⁸ Petit, “City Mourns Murder Victim,” 4.

seventies and its profound effect on burgeoning debates about American sexuality. The lawsuit following Hillsborough's murder invoked the term "conspiracy" to refer to the SOC campaign. The SOC campaign proliferated a harmful media narrative that queer activists viewed as an outright conspiracy to deny equal protection for gays under the law as covered by the Fourteenth Amendment. A gay activist and attorney, John Vasey, commented in the article: "The save our children people are skilled in manipulating the media. They knew exactly what they were doing."⁴⁹ The coverage of the lawsuit in the gay media conveys very clearly the gay community's fears about media conspiracy and the real, physical dangers of right-wing narratives: "The suit labeled the Dade County campaign to repeal an ordinance protecting gays in jobs and accommodations as a 'guise-intended to incite violence and riot against the plaintiff's class' (gays)."⁵⁰

Most importantly to this discussion on media narratives, the article continues: "The Coalition for Human Rights, the gay umbrella group formed on June 13, credits its media committee for convincing the non-gay media to expose the crime as a blind-hate gay murder. The San Francisco *Examiner* buried the story on its June 22 obituary page as an attack by hecklers. But the *Chronicle* displayed the crime as its second lead story June 23."⁵¹ Bryant never directly incited her supporters to kill gay people, that much is obvious, but we must address the fact that right-wing extremist audience members did commit murder in the name of Bryant as a result of the narratives she created in our consideration of the spectacle's consumption. On the flip side, supporters of the gay rights movement rose up in droves at that year's pride parade. As one gay media article wrote, "Anita Bryant and sunny weather were credited for the record

⁴⁹ Petit, 1.

⁵⁰ Petit.

⁵¹ Petit, 6.

number of gays attending gay pride activities this year.”⁵² Angry with her rhetoric, the gay community nationwide boycotted Bryant’s sponsor, Florida Orange Juice.⁵³ Sales plummeted and political divides widened.

At the very least, some queer viewers were fearful and frustrated about their lives being the subject of so much media controversy and polarization. A recent *Time Magazine* article from 2019 reflecting on the long impact of media reportage on gay life in America through the 1970s displays this very fact:

Over lunch one afternoon at our kitchen table, with the latest issue of *TIME* turned to an article about Anita Bryant’s successful campaign to repeal a gay-rights bill in Dade County, Fla., I raged over the injustice of both Bryant’s assertion that gay people were a danger to children and the cowardly legislators who caved to prejudice and ignorance. Unknowingly, my red-faced outrage offered another clue to my mother that there was more than a little self-interest at stake for me in the fate of the gay civil-rights movement. Weeks later, she would ask me if I was gay.⁵⁴

The media coverage through the second half of the 1970s primed the palates of American audiences for division—division that would lead to further entrenchment and polarization when Higgins entered stage left into the national gay rights debate with his fruit pie in hand.

⁵² “Record Pride Days for Nation, World,” *Out! The Gay Newspaper*, issue 1, July 29, 1977 4.

⁵³ Paul J. Nash, “Is the Squeeze Working?” *Out! The Gay Newspaper*, issue 1, July 29, 1977, 13.

⁵⁴ Eric Marcus, “TIME’s Reporting on Gay Life in America Shaped- and Skewed—a Generation’s Attitudes,” *Time Magazine*, June 17, 2019, accessed March 24, 2023, <https://time.com/5606594/lgbt-media-history/>.

Chapter 7

Digitizing Pie: Social Media as Archive

As this section will establish, the divides between queer and conservative America that came to a boiling point over fruit pie are as relevant in 2023 as they were in the late seventies. While researching the Hillsborough murder and the drama surrounding the late seventies reception of the pie narrative, it was impossible to overlook the recent social media activity surrounding Bryant and Higgins. The massive growth of social media over the last two decades has transmogrified the Higgins-Bryant archive, reanimating the pie story within the context of terse debates about queer bodies in the twenty-first century. While reading up on Hillsborough, I came across several comments, all posted within the last ten to twenty years, that still show recent, ongoing division over the Higgins-Bryant narrative, evincing how the original narrative has adapted to fit the political orientations of the Trump campaign and a resurgence in fundamentalist narratives about queer, and predominantly trans, bodies.

One legible place to begin this second afterlife in the Higgin-Bryant archival genealogy is by returning to our earlier discussion of the Hillsborough murder, but this time with a particular focus on the way in which that narrative has shifted to fit the context of the political divides of the last decade. While researching the events surrounding those tense moments through 1977, I came across several secondary source reinterpretations of the Hillsborough murder that directly link the story to internet commenters' memories of Higgins and fruit pie—even when the story itself did not mention Higgins but instead only explicitly referenced Bryant and Hillsborough. A blog post on the website *Back2stonewall.com* summarized Hillsborough's death and the tensions

surrounding that year in gay history. The article is one of several that have cropped up across digital communities commemorating gay rights history with “on this day” style narratives urging young queer Americans to remember the fight for gay rights. At the very bottom of the blog page, several users posted comments on the site, reflecting on the murder. One user by the name of “malibud44” posted a comment on June 22, 2014 at 2:31 p.m. that reads as follows: “If anyone has that disgusting b*** Nancy Grace’s email could they please please send this to her. She seems to think Anita Bryant is a nice proper southern lady that reminds her of her mother. She does not understand why someone would throw a pie in such a sweet woman's face.”⁵⁵ While at first I thought nothing of the comment, I later noticed that a strange phenomenon regarding Higgins and Bryant was continuing to occur decades after the initial 1970s wave of media narratives about pie had faded. Despite my attempts to stay only in the 1970s, the audience for the narrative continually pulled me closer and closer toward the contemporary, forcing me to recognize the strange way in which the narrative has taken on an archival life of its own through digital media.

Another comment on the same article by user “sarcastic9medved” reads as follows: “Anita deserved more than a cherry pie in the face. I wish it had been a sh*t pie. Plus Nancy Grace deserves that also.”⁵⁶ The content of the article does not mention Higgins or even Nancy Grace—whose context I will explain momentarily. Rather, the comments are cultural asides but ones we should not overlook. Here, internet commenters have grafted the context of queer

⁵⁵ Malibudjd44, June 22, 2014 2:31 PM, comment on “Gay History– June 21, 1977: the Brutal Gay Hate Murder of Robert Hillsborough Rocks the Nation,” *Back2Stonewall.com*, updated June 21, 2022, accessed March 23, 2023, <http://www.back2stonewall.com/2022/06/gay-history-june21-brutal-murder-of-robert-hillsborough.html>.

⁵⁶ Sarcastic9Medved, June 22, 2022 7:28 AM, comment on “Gay History– June 21, 1977: the Brutal Gay Hate Murder of Robert Hillsborough Rocks the Nation,” *Back2Stonewall.com*, Updated June 22, 2022, accessed March 23, 2023, <http://www.back2stonewall.com/2022/06/gay-history-june21-brutal-murder-of-robert-hillsborough.html>.

debates in 2014 onto the Higgins-Bryant archive, recycling the motif of pie-throwing and adapting both Higgins' and Bryant's identities to express ongoing frustration and discontent.

Nancy Grace is a former Atlanta prosecutor who went on to host her own show, *Nancy Grace*, from 2005 to 2016 and now is a political commentator on *Fox Nation*. Her comments came about during one of her episodes where she discussed an attack on Brad Pitt during an Academy Awards red carpet event. Grace's comment is difficult to understand, partly because it originates not from a discussion on gay rights history but from a strange celebrity drama piece. Commenting on the Pitt attack, Grace brought up Bryant during an episode of her show, ranting about the loose parallels between attacks on celebrities. It's not clear whether Grace knew of Bryant's anti-gay background, and the connection is a vague one. Yet the importance here to our archival discussion is the queer response to Grace's comments. One article on *Queerty.com*, which did not explicitly mention Higgins by name but only stated that Bryant was "hit in the face with a pie as retribution from the gay community," further contributes to our study of the second wave in this archive.⁵⁷ Higgins is unnamed, and his fruit pie represents the entire queer community, and pie-throwing overshadows our historical recollection of Higgins as an individual. In the article and in the wider archival story, Higgins is stripped of his lived identity and created anew through the strange narrative fascination with his connection to Bryant. The *Queerty.com* article summarizes the episode: "She was speaking on some issue dear to her heart," Grace says. 'I don't understand that. Why did that guy do that?' and then she kept repeating, "why would you do this?"⁵⁸ While many of the comments on social media are certainly

⁵⁷ Matty B., "Nancy Grace defends Antigay Icon Anita Bryant, Claims People Were Just Jealous of Her Beautiful Singing Voice," *Queerty.com*, June 4, 2014, accessed March 23, 2023, <https://www.queerty.com/nancy-grace-defends-antigay-icon-anita-bryant-claims-people-were-just-jealous-of-her-beautiful-singing-voice-20140604>.

⁵⁸ Matty B., "Nancy Grace."

demeaning and written in poor taste, the fact that people are mentioning the pie-throwing incident and do so in a way that connects the debates of 2014 with the pie narrative displays a peculiar archival phenomenon. Why are blog users bringing up fruit pie in a 2014 discussion about the 1977 murder of a gay man? Why are people like Grace bringing up pie-throwing in the context of Brad Pitt and discussions about celebrity drama? The answer is that Bryant and Higgins' archival memories have been fused together through the social media debates of the last two decades. The queer social media sphere used the Higgins side of the narrative as a tool to express anger at those who support Bryant—even when Higgins himself was not an explicitly involved party.

I aim to add another layer to this analysis by bringing to light the timeline of the audience itself. The way the historical archive forces us to chronologize a sequence of historical events does not serve the Higgins story. The timeline of the audience is not linear but ever-shifting. Audience time prioritizes the timeline that the audience witnesses and interacts with historical material. Though the historical subjects are of course relevant to the story, the most important relationship is this dynamic between audience and archive. In this way, the audience's timeline is a phenomenon charted across the entire story of Higgins, stretching beyond his death even to the present but also stretching back before the pie-event even began by including his college archive from 1967. The timeline of the audience is best represented when we bring in the digital media activity surrounding Higgins and Bryant and take all of these archival waves into account—stretching before and after pie-throwing in 1977.

One way that archives problematize our historical tendencies to establish a clear sequence of events is when we think conceptually about the way that viral videos work. For example, the Higgins pie video with the most views (there are several splattered across *Youtube*) now has

almost 300,000 views since the video was posted by NBC Universal in June 2014.⁵⁹ This digital activity represents a new wave in the uptake of the Higgins story. Other videos regurgitate the same footage, all of them having unique viewer comments. Each week, new comments and views arise, from both fans of Bryant and fans of Higgins. New audiences come to the scene depicted above. New audiences mingle with old audiences. New viewers experience the fruit pie event for the first time just as the real audience in Des Moines that afternoon in 1977 experienced it. More importantly, a new audience places the spectacle into the current environment of today by making it relevant to ongoing political narratives.

Rather than fully historicizing this digital media activity surrounding Higgins, I intend to trace a sketch of its wide contours by pointing out some critical moments that depict the renewed urgency of the Higgins-Bryant narrative within the heated social media debates of today. Higgins and Bryant live on through the comments and posts by thousands of social media users. Social media is a very visceral way in which the Higgins-Bryant narrative about pie serves as a tool that can be used to provoke, entice, or support a specific politicized viewpoint about queerness.

There are significant cultural and political parallels between the late seventies and the last decade. If the debates of 1977 were about the visibility of gay people in the public sector, now these arguments have been reanimated with a recent wave of critiques about gender. Florida's repeal of its gay ordinance in the seventies—which was Bryant's initial genesis story—has been reanimated with Governor Ron DeSantis' "Don't Say Gay Bill." This bill intends to prohibit educating children about the existence of queer people before grade three.⁶⁰ In an interview with NBC, historian Lillian Faderman emphasizes the parallels between the seventies and now: "It's

⁵⁹ NBCUniversal Archives, "Anita Bryant's Pie to the Face."

⁶⁰ Jillian Eugenios, "How 1970s Christian Crusader Anita Bryant Helped Spawn Florida's LGBTQ Culture Wars," *NBC News*, April 13, 2022, accessed March 24, 2023, <https://www.nbcnews.com/nbc-out/out-news/1970s-christian-crusader-anita-bryant-helped-spawn-floridas-lgbtq-cult-rcna24215>

a contemporary version of these older attempts to annul homosexuality.”⁶¹ Faderman ultimately claims that the recent legislation is of the same cloth as that from 1977: “‘In the present environment, you can’t go after homosexual teachers anymore,’ Faderman said. ‘We have too many allies. And so Florida has found another way to do it by this ‘Don’t Say Gay’ bill, which doesn’t go after homosexual teachers precisely. But the idea is the same. That is, that homosexuality is a pariah status, and it shouldn’t be discussed in the public schools.’”⁶²

The resurgence of right-wing fundamentalist arguments about queerness and its relation to grooming and pedophilia is a complex and crowded political space that mirrors its seventies context with a few key differences. Again, just as expressed earlier with the turn to gender and sexuality as a unifier of southern republicanism in the seventies, a new unified far-right republican front has come about through critiques of supposed left-wing gender ideology centered on transgender bodies. Fundamentalist groups in the last decade, bolstered by increasing support from politicians like Donald Trump and Ron DeSantis, have co-opted the ideology of seventies groups like SOC and shifted focus to critiques of gender expression. These far-right groups have, just like in the seventies, centered on enacting legislation against queer bodies and simultaneously repealing protections and rights: “While the gaslit GOP base is attacking drag queens, trans people and LGBTQ nightclubs, its leaders are introducing anti-trans bills in state legislatures at a dizzying pace—more than 410 in the first three months of 2023.”⁶³ One evangelical group called the “Concerned Women for America” aptly characterizes these

⁶¹ Eugenios, “How 1970s Christian.”

⁶² Eugenios.

⁶³ Diana Goetsch, “Opinion: What the CPAC Speaker Meant when he said ‘Transgenderism must be eradicated,’” *The Los Angeles Times*, March 8, 2023, accessed March 23, 2023, <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2023-03-08/transgender-cpac-michael-knowles-rolling-stone-ron-desantis>.

fundamentalist fears about childhood and the threat of queer grooming. An article by the organization responded to an event for a drag queen hosting a reading at a local bookstore:

Events like these rob children of their innocence by teaching them that they should explore sexual preferences and desires at a young age. The LGBTQ+ movement is based entirely on redefining the biological standards of sexuality, and therefore, any material in relation to this movement should not be given or discussed in front of young, developing minds. Today's youth are statistically the gayest generation in history because our society continues to desensitize morality by redefining objective truth.⁶⁴

While these fundamentalist versus liberal divides have been well established, scholars have mentioned little if anything at all about the way the Higgins-Bryant archive has been made anew in light of this recent social media tension. We've established the left-wing adoption of pie as a theatrical symbol for expressing queer discontent, but the right has also used pie-throwing as a symbol. In fact, rather than seeing the entire historical memory of Bryant as that of a villain or bigot, we must also recognize that to some on the right, Bryant has become a pioneer for a burgeoning fundamentalist movement expressing anxieties about a perceived breakdown of gender norms, one which continues today. This much is clear in the digital media activity surrounding Bryant and her pieing. One comment on a *Youtube* video depicting the pie-throwing written by user "ludovicoC" with eight likes reads: "Drag Kids? Drag queen story hour? Anita Bryant was a prophet."⁶⁵ On a *Facebook* post with a photograph of Bryant singing the national anthem during a Super Bowl halftime show, a fierce debate about her legacy ensued in the comment section below. Many of the comments are not political and many do not celebrate Bryant, but some do and these tell us much about the divides between left and right that have continued to widen. One comment in support of Bryant reads in all caps "A GREAT SINGER

⁶⁴ Morgan Schlesselman, "Local Bookstore Hosts Book Reading with a Drag Queen," *Concerned Women For America*, February 16, 2023, accessed March 23, 2023, <https://concernedwomen.org/local-bookstore-hosts-book-reading-with-a-drag-queen/>

⁶⁵ ludovicoC, 2020, comment on RETRO REPORT, "Andy Borowitz: Anita Bryant, Gay Rights Icon," *Youtube.com* Video, October 29, 2019, accessed March 23, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lorKkpqoJJU>.

AND WOMAN.”⁶⁶ Others don’t support her but instead note that it is strange that she remains relevant to the political debates of today: “She [Bryant] could run and probably win the presidency today. She was radicalized before it became fashionable.”⁶⁷ A reply to the comment by Thomasine L. Stroble reads “Maybe not the presidency, but a Senate seat easily.” Goode references Governor Ron DeSantis in his response below the comment: “Sad isn’t it? We have a senator who bilked Medicare out of 1.7 billion dollars and pleaded nolo contendere. ‘I have no defense.’ Subsequently elected governor, then Senate, and now he wants to defund Medicare. He’ll run for the presidency. Is this irony or hypocrisy? All Bryant did was preach hatred.” A comment by *Facebook* user Barbara Baricelli confirms this connection to right-wing movements: “Amen to that. She was one of the forerunners to today’s alt-right. Wonder if she’s ever changed any of her ridiculous and hurtful opinions. Too bad.”⁶⁸ While the *Facebook* post is only a photo of Bryant singing, one commenter, Scott Galvin, linked a video of Higgins pieing and another posted a gif of Higgins hitting Bryant with pie.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Rod Coppelage, 47 Weeks Ago, comment on Ghosts of the Orange Bowl, Facebook Post, March 25, 2022, accessed March 23, 2023,

https://www.facebook.com/ghostsoftheorangebowl/photos/a.446756302025217/5411770825523715/?paipv=0&eav=AfZOW5q8uf4BQnwBluBGIkbyJOSvZNjkjseGE1Pmfpgof1tA8Lmo3MRYw7v6m2Agv5s&_rd=1

⁶⁷ Robert Goode, 47 Weeks Ago, comment on Ghosts of the Orange Bowl, Facebook Post, March 25, 2022, accessed March 23, 2023,

https://www.facebook.com/ghostsoftheorangebowl/photos/a.446756302025217/5411770825523715/?paipv=0&eav=AfZOW5q8uf4BQnwBluBGIkbyJOSvZNjkjseGE1Pmfpgof1tA8Lmo3MRYw7v6m2Agv5s&_rd=1

⁶⁸ Barbara Baricelli, 50 Weeks Ago, comment on Ghosts of the Orange Bowl, Facebook Post, March 25, 2022, accessed March 23, 2023,

https://www.facebook.com/ghostsoftheorangebowl/photos/a.446756302025217/5411770825523715/?paipv=0&eav=AfZOW5q8uf4BQnwBluBGIkbyJOSvZNjkjseGE1Pmfpgof1tA8Lmo3MRYw7v6m2Agv5s&_rd=1

⁶⁹ For the gif of Bryant being pied to the face, see Scott Galvin, 50 Weeks Ago, comment on Ghosts of the Orange Bowl, Anita Bryant Photo, Facebook Post, March 25, 2022, accessed March 23, 2023,

https://www.facebook.com/ghostsoftheorangebowl/photos/a.446756302025217/5411770825523715/?paipv=0&eav=AfZOW5q8uf4BQnwBluBGIkbyJOSvZNjkjseGE1Pmfpgof1tA8Lmo3MRYw7v6m2Agv5s&_rd=1

For the post sharing the link to the pie video, see Adam Pinsker, 50 Weeks Ago, comment on Ghosts of the Orange Bowl, Facebook Post, March 25, 2022, accessed March 23, 2023,

https://www.facebook.com/ghostsoftheorangebowl/photos/a.446756302025217/5411770825523715/?paipv=0&eav=AfZOW5q8uf4BQnwBluBGIkbyJOSvZNjkjseGE1Pmfpgof1tA8Lmo3MRYw7v6m2Agv5s&_rd=1

Support for Bryant as a prophetic pioneer for anti-gay fundamentalist movements of the twenty-first century is splattered across the internet. In one *Youtube* video tracing the history of Bryant's SOC and its homophobic ideologies, a comment by Arthur Schaper reads "Anita Bryant has been vindicated."⁷⁰ Another on the same video reads "Wonderful Anita was a leader of men, in the mold of Joan of Arc! She refused to be intimidated, and bravely stood up, stuck her neck out, and went to bat to protect her kids (and everyone else's), and God bless her for it! Also, it was wonderful to see Ronald Reagan standing shoulder to shoulder with her, celebrating Anita, and her birthday."⁷¹ Another reads "A truly great, patriotic, God-fearing, courageous crusader for Truth, Justice, and the American Way! God Bless Anita Bryant!"⁷² Another piles on and states "God Bless Anita Bryant for standing up against perverts!!!"⁷³ Another invokes the SOC campaign directly by chiming in "I wish we had Anita Bryant Today #SaveOurChildren."⁷⁴

Across all of these comments, we see a shared left-right interest in the motif of fruit pie. In the social media sphere, queer audiences have used Higgins and pie-throwing to create a useful motif for combatting the gender fundamentalist rhetoric of the last decade. For example, one comment on a separate *Youtube* video showing the raw footage of Bryant being pied during the initial interview, a supporter of Higgins commented "Someone should do this to JK Rowling."⁷⁵ Yet anti-trans fundamentalists are also using fruit pie to memorialize Bryant as a

⁷⁰ Arthur Schaper, August 2022, comment on SuchIsLifeVideos, "Anita Bryant- Save Our Children Campaign," *Youtube.com* Video, July 10, 2014, accessed March 23, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IB5H--b3Xho>.

⁷¹ Maestro of Amore, 2017, comment on SuchIsLifeVideos, "Anita Bryant- Save Our Children Campaign," *Youtube.com* Video, July 10, 2014, accessed March 23, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IB5H--b3Xho>.

⁷² M*ff Diver, 2017, comment on SuchIsLifeVideos, "Anita Bryant- Save Our Children Campaign," *Youtube.com* Video, July 10, 2014, accessed March 23, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IB5H--b3Xho>.

⁷³ Bella Veritas, 2020, comment on SuchIsLifeVideos, "Anita Bryant- Save Our Children Campaign," *Youtube.com* Video, July 10, 2014, accessed March 23, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IB5H--b3Xho>.

⁷⁴ Lisa Feck, 2021, comment on SuchIsLifeVideos, "Anita Bryant- Save Our Children Campaign," *Youtube.com* Video, July 10, 2014, accessed March 23, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IB5H--b3Xho>.

⁷⁵ Wintermute01001, April 2022, comment on ws9455, "Anita Bryant Pie to the Face," *Youtube.com* Video, November 7, 2006, accessed March 23, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dS91gT3XT_A&t=12s.

defender of family and republicanism in the face of recent left-wing rhetoric. Rather than existing on one side or the other, the Higgins-Bryant narrative has experienced a strange afterlife in which both figures have come to stand in as their own oppositional narrative archetypes, animated with the exigencies and anxieties that underpin increasingly separate and irreconcilably different political ideologies. These comments are just a few examples of the forever growing matrix of digital media that draws upon political divides of the current moment. With Florida governor Ron DeSantis's "Don't Say Gay Bill," new limitations on trans-healthcare for youths in states like Utah, and shootings in queer nightclubs, right-wing audiences have used the pie narrative of 1977 to strip down and graft new divides of the last decade into the archive.⁷⁶ Even the slogan itself "protect trans kids" emerges from the crackdown on gender affirming healthcare stretching across several states, invoking historical parallels with seventies media battles over the relationship between childhood and queerness contextualized in the previous section. Fundamentalist crusaders have co-opted the SOC campaign's rhetoric to rally against abortion rights by donning the same name (a "Save Our Children" group rallied outside of a planned parenthood in Charlotte, North Carolina on June 15, 2019).⁷⁷ Over the last two decades, social media has created a new narrative about pie that has reshaped the dimensions of the Higgins-Bryant archive. On the internet, fruit pie goes both ways due to its useful applicability as a representative device for divides between the political left and right over questions of gender and queer America.

⁷⁶ For information regarding Utah's trans ban, see "Utah Bans Healthcare for Transgender Youth," ACLU Press Release, January 29, 2023, accessed March 23, 2023, <https://www.aclu.org/press-releases/utah-bans-health-care-for-transgender-youth>.

⁷⁷ Tanya Ditty, "Save our Children Rally and Noise Ordinance Update," *Concerned Women for America*, June 12, 2019, accessed March 23, 2023, <https://concernedwomen.org/save-our-children-rally-and-noise-ordinance-update/>.

Chapter 8

Performing Pie: *The Loneliest Girl in the World*

The musical production of *The Loneliest Girl in the World* represents a third wrinkle in our discussion of the audience in relation to the Higgins-Bryant archive. Most importantly, it represents another distinct afterlife for the Higgins-Bryant archive because it reanimates the original narrative, shifting historical identities to fit the context of the musical's author Gordon Leary. Written by Leary with music by Julia Meinwald, the musical debuted at San Diego's Diversionary Theater in 2018 during tense political divides amidst Donald Trump's presidency. Rather than solely charting the rise and fall of Bryant, the musical creates a parallelism to the lives of both Higgins and Bryant. While Bryant is herself the "loneliest girl in the world," a song she sings throughout the musical, Higgins parallels her origin story at each turn. As Bryant rises to fame in her pop career, we follow Tommy, a young, gay fan of Bryant who is inspired by Higgins, as he moves to Minneapolis with his mother Kay. Bryant meets her husband Bob Green and, in the same turn, Tommy meets his boyfriend Kyle. The mechanics of the stage production allow both Higgins and Bryant to stand side by side as they go about their separate lives. The stage unifies their plights. Tommy stands in a crowd of protestors on a college campus in St. Paul in scene twelve while Bryant simultaneously stands in a Miami stadium speaking before a crowd. Bryant says "I must admit that I'm a little nervous/ excuse me if I stammer as I go."⁷⁸ Simultaneously, Tommy says "I gotta' say that I'm a little nervous/ so sorry if I stammer as I go."⁷⁹

⁷⁸ Gordon Leary, *The Loneliest Girl in the World*, 2018, 69.

⁷⁹ Leary.

At first, Leary portrays both Bryant and Tommy as products of their environments. Both Green and Bryant's sister, Sandra, push Bryant further into embracing religious fundamentalism and increasingly hostile anti-gay religious stances. Simultaneously, Kyle pushes Tommy further and further into rejecting Bryant. Yet as the story progresses, Tommy tries repeatedly to change Bryant and make her see his point of view just as she tries to change him. Through this parallelism, we see a new version of the Higgins-Bryant archival path: one that, as Leary explicitly articulates, grapples with a fundamental question of forgiveness: "To me the question that the show asks is what are the limits of empathy."⁸⁰ Tommy tries to forgive Bryant but, in the end, both are pushed away from each other and the foundational connection between them is ruptured.

At each turn, fruit pie binds the musical together through several different symbolic meanings. In the first act, Kay teaches Tommy how to make a blueberry pie, signifying a bond between family. Later, when Tommy is injured in a police raid on a gay bar, Kay brings Tommy a blueberry pie. Kyle and Kay meet in the hospital, but there are three people and only two plates. Rather than taking a plate for herself, Kay gives the two plates to Kyle and Tommy.⁸¹ In doing so, pie becomes an indirect symbol of a mother's acceptance of her gay son. Toward the end of the musical, when Bryant arrives in Minneapolis, Tommy is still dead set on showing her kindness so that it will change her opinion of gay people. He bakes her a blueberry pie not to throw at her but to gift her in an act of forgiveness, but Green knocks the pie to the ground. Later, Tommy throws pie at Bryant, which signals the final rupture between both of their lives, representing an inversion of acceptance and becoming a symbol of frustration and the limits of

⁸⁰ Gordon Leary, interview by author, February 9, 2023.

⁸¹ Leary, "The Loneliest," 66.

empathy. This parallelism throughout the musical reinvents the narrative through the character of Tommy—who Leary says is a “composite of Thom Higgins and my own experience.”⁸²

The new direction for the Higgins-Bryant narrative is one that takes the fundamental polarization between left and right and subverts that entire framework to individualize the narrative as it pertains to Leary’s own lived experience. Rather than solely concerned with the Des Moines-pieing of 1977, the musical invents an entire backstory that emphasizes pie as not a source of queer frustration, revenge, or justice but a fundamental symbol of love in its many forms. Only later is this foundational message about pie changed through the divisive rhetoric of a politically polarized America.

A nonbinary writer who grew up idolizing Tammy Faye, Leary takes liberties with the historical facts of Higgins life—liberties that are essential to the peculiar archival genealogy of the Higgins-Bryant narrative. Kyle, Tommy’s boyfriend, is entirely fictionalized and thus pushes our understanding of what the Higgins-Bryant archive is and what it can be. An entire world of imagined intimacy is grafted onto the archive. Music enters the folds and grooves of the archival registers to evoke feelings that humanize both Bryant and Higgins. Rather than a story of a queer hero versus hetero villain, we see the human connections underpinning both Higgins and Bryant. We see their family lives. We see Bryant as a loving mother who worries about her children, and we see Tommy as a young man grappling with his own anxieties about sexuality.

This transformation in the archive brings up conceptual questions about performance and its role in historical memory. When asked about the role of performance, Leary said “so much of queerness is performance that that is in many ways the only way to tap into it.”⁸³ In this third archival afterlife created through *The Loneliest Girl in the World*, Kay, Kyle, Tommy, Sandra,

⁸² Leary, interview.

⁸³ Leary, interview.

Green, and Bryant all represent embodied forms of the archive, animated with a combination of historical facts and fictive elements grafted from the lived experience of the musical's creator. When asked about what Leary writes about, they said "finding your voice and finding your identity is what I write about and this is a really personal version of that."⁸⁴ Kyle is an imagined, personified form of embodied archive, a character who is not real in his lived identity but who is real in his archival importance. Kyle fills in the gaps in the archive, spinning a new source of information that imagines Tommy's intimate private life in a way that the narrative's audience had before been closed off from. Tommy's sexual awakening is displayed on the stage. Queer audiences turn to this performance to create new meanings, new storylines, and new conclusions. Tommy is not just Higgins, not someone alienated from Bryant at each step of the way but rather Bryant's biggest fan—someone who is robbed of that connection by harmful ideological stances. Throughout the musical, audience members grapple with their own frustrations—many of which no doubt would have seemed even more relevant to 2018. This point is exemplified by Leary's comments that "the majority of the final writing of the first half during the Trump Presidency" where Leary felt compelled to investigate the question of "bridging divides" and finding "what divides are unbridgeable."⁸⁵

⁸⁴ Leary, interview.

⁸⁵ Leary, interview.

Chapter 9

Conclusion

I mention the institutional archive last for several reasons. One reason is that it only makes sense when read in the light of current media surrounding the Higgins-Bryant narrative. It also builds upon a mistake I made previously when researching this project—and which confirmed to me the importance of how we structure our presentation of archival material to the audience. When I visited the physical archive, both at the Tretter Collection at the University of Minnesota and at the Minnesota Historical Society, I did not yet have a sense of the enduring activity surrounding Higgins and thus I was captivated only by, to recall Halberstam, an intention to further the “representational and emotional vortex” surrounding the narrative.⁸⁶ I encountered fragments of an oddball and confusing life, partial letters sent to anonymous lovers, birthday cards, graduation cards, random photographs. I interviewed activists who knew Higgins at some point in their lives: Jack Baker, Michael McConnell, and former boyfriend, Egil Jonsson. These individuals were helpful for sketching in parts of the representational story of Higgins, but the interviews did not reveal the larger questions of why Higgins should be studied historically. Only after I began delving into the actual underbelly of the archive itself did I eventually realize that my argument about Higgins was one where the institutional archive actually mattered the least. Rather than diving headfirst into the physical archive for the possibility of uncovering a gem of a primary source, it was actually more important for me to concern myself with the secondary interpretations of Higgins’ life. In this case, the lived details of Higgins’ life mattered less than

⁸⁶ Halberstam, *In A Queer Time and Place*, 16.

the actual extrapolation of his life story. It didn't matter how much I delved into Higgins' life, uncovering friends, bath-house acquaintances, etc.—because these continue Halberstam's point about how queer stories often create representational problems by adding to the spectacle of narratives without getting at their underlying meaning. The way to counter this is to uncover the reality that the Higgins before the pieing incident was, in fact, a different Higgins than the one who rose to fame after the pieing event. The Higgins-Bryant narrative became a catch-all vessel that a whole swath of different types of people could use to fill up however they saw fit. Just as anonymous users on *Youtube* and *Facebook* have used the Bryant story to confirm their own fears about queer lives, so too have queer people themselves used the Higgins-Bryant narrative to reiterate their own frustrations with the recent uptick in fundamentalist rhetoric.

In light of Halberstam's, Tortorici's, and Marshall's concepts about queer time and the queer archive, I realized, months after returning from my archival visit, that this project was not a study of an eccentric character whose life was to be uncovered or who deserved his own biography per se but a study about the very reasons why Higgins even is such a gripping individual in the first place. Why did the narrative grip me so much, why did it lead me down a rabbit-hole of archival material? What was the point of all this? The answer is that the Higgins-Bryant story is not one that should exist solely in the bubble of those events in the late seventies when the rights of gay people came into question through America's political circles. Rather, the answer is that we must read the Higgins-Bryant story, through each archival afterlife, as one that is as current and contemporary as it is old, one that reflects our current political divides as much as it reflects the divides of the late seventies. Higgins, therefore, is not someone who should be studied solely as a person of his time, as an activist from the seventies who died tragically of AIDS in the nineties, but rather as the embodied form of a narrative force fundamentally

unmoored from his physical past. As Halberstam calls it to refer to Teena, Higgins, too, is “out of time and out of place.”⁸⁷

The Higgins-Bryant archive matters most to an ongoing, ever-evolving audience that continues to derive new meaning from the useful theatrical qualities of the pie spectacle itself—transposing Bryant and Higgins’ identities onto new ever-changing mediums in current society. Both of their identities jump beyond the institutional archive, to internet comments read, liked, disliked, and commented on by thousands of new audience members. Both individuals move from Des Moines, Iowa in 1977 to the stage of an experimental theater production written by a nonbinary playwright who uses their own queer identity to turn Higgins into the complex and ambivalent Tommy who probes the limits of queer empathy. Higgins and Bryant become not themselves, not historical actors or agents fixed permanently to the events of their lives or deaths, but rather timeless symbols used by an audience reckoning with tradition and the fundamental way that queer bodies unfix and complicate these traditions.

The Higgins-Bryant archive is adaptable and ever-shifting. From the immediate memories of those who met Higgins during his more radical activist years in the seventies the Higgins-Bryant archive has jumped to new, increasingly divisive digital spaces across blogs, *Youtube*, and *Facebook*. 2018 was a unique moment in the Higgins narrative when the story reached the stage at Diversionary theater in San Diego, but that is not to say that the Higgins narrative has waned in its ability to continually re-invent and re-shape our fundamental understanding of what an archive is.

As I write this I am aware that a biopic is in pre-production, entitled *Anita*. The film will trace the arc of Bryant’s life. Written by a queer screenwriter, Chad Hodge has been working on

⁸⁷ Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*, 16.

getting the project into action for the last decade. In a 2011 interview with Hodge that asked about the difficulties in telling this type of story as a queer screenwriter, Hodge said:

It's a balancing act of being objective and then getting into her point-of-view in order to write her character not in a sympathetic way but in a real way. If I just wrote a movie from the point-of-view of a gay man angry at what she did—which of course I am—that wouldn't be a very good movie. My goal from the very beginning of this project was to tell the truth, 100%. Having read everything, talked to everyone involved, and compiled all points-of-view, that's what this movie is. The wild, amazing, shocking truth.⁸⁸

The news of this feature leaves us with parting questions that further contribute to the Higgins-Bryant archive's reinventive nature. Will this biopic feature the pie scene and Higgins? And if fruit pie makes it to the big screen, what might that say about the cycle in which narratives about queer bodies continue to reinvent and reimagine what an archive can be?

⁸⁸ Jim Halterman, "Chad Hodge Brings the Amazing, Shocking Truth About Anita Bryant to HBO," *LogoTV.com*, Nov. 15, 2011 2:12 PM, accessed March 23, 2023, <https://www.logotv.com/news/ukga4a/chad-hodge-brings-the-amazing-shocking-truth-about-anita-bryant-to-hbo>.

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