

## Jake Johnson Research Statement

### Current Research

My research asks how communities in America use music, voice, and sound to perform an identity as American. Musical theater has proven to be a helpful means of investigating this question, and for three related reasons: 1) Unlike most popular music styles, musicals are neither primarily nor traditionally media-dependent, so 2) musical theater is a de-centralized mode of music-making, existing everywhere among many types of communities, which means 3) musicals reveal through liveness local values-making among a host of American populations. Although musical theater has traditionally been understood and criticized for its relationship to wealth, elitism, and progressive white audiences in New York, my work asks what musicals mean and how they matter outside of Times Square. These qualities of musical theater inform my first two book projects.

*Mormons, Musical Theater, and Belonging in America* (University of Illinois Press, 2019) contributes a fresh perspective on voice in religious communities. In this book, I do two things: 1) I draw attention to the rich musical theater practices outside of Broadway and 2) I explore vocal theatricality as a theological principle in American religion, which helps explain why fundamentalist religions like Mormonism are so drawn to American musical theater. I argue that Mormonism and early musical theater were cut from the same ideological cloth, both borne out of Jacksonian-era ideologies—namely self-fashioning and white supremacy. Musical theater and Mormons therefore have a lot to say about one another and, when analyzed together, ask provocatively what it means to be and sound American.

A special journal issue and a second book have emerged from asking a similar set of questions regarding identity and musical theater. First, I am co-editing a special journal issue of *Studies in Musical Theatre* titled “Ethnography and Musical Theatre,” which hopes to direct scholars more robustly toward considering the lived experience of musicals. Second, and prompted by my experience working as a musical director and vocal coach among regional and collegiate theaters in the Midwest, I wanted to better understand what kind of work musicals do for racial-majority communities who, not unlike Mormons, feel their way of life threatened by modernity’s creep. In *Re-Placing Broadway: Musical Theater Everywhere* (University of Illinois, under contract) I consider how musical theater gets used across the country to advocate for and reinforce whiteness, including among religious fundamentalists, new-wave populists, aging people, and those living in rural areas. The manuscript will be submitted summer 2019.

My third book expands my critical examination of sound in American communities to the realm of cultural biography. Tentatively titled *The Music Room: Betty Freeman and the Development of New Music in Los Angeles*, this book examines a series of musicales hosted from 1980 to 1994 by one of the most important music patrons and art collectors of the twentieth century. In contrast to robust studies of art and music patronage during the Renaissance, this study marks one of the only scholarly contributions to twentieth-century American musical patronage. It also stands apart in its unique structure, navigating readers through Freeman’s Beverly Hills home and excavating transcribed conversations from her musicales by some of the most dynamic composers of our time, including John Cage, John Adams, Steve Reich, Pierre Boulez, and Kaija Saariaho. This book is currently under review by University of California Press.

## Future Research Plans

Going forward, I see my work evolving along three strands—one on American musical theater's global expansion, another looks at the performance of patronage, and the third examines the role of voice in American popular culture. Along these research strands I am considering four book-length projects over the next five years.

First, I am planning a book-length project that takes on the expansion of American musical theater globally, particularly in mainland China. Much of my work argues for the religiosity of musical theater—that musicals enact and sustain moral values in keeping with the restorative religions musical theater developed alongside—so I am interested in such latent cultural values that musicals carry with them into other parts of the world.

Second, I will investigate the performative qualities of contemporary music patronage, alongside studies of sound, in a book project tentatively titled *Fanfare: Commissioning America's Sound*. This book will be a microhistory of the infamous Eugene Goossens fanfare commissions—cause célèbre of Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra's 1942-43 season and the impetus behind eighteen nationalist-themes fanfares, most notably Aaron Copland's *Fanfare for the Common Man*. The eighteen fanfares Goossens commissioned will structure as many small chapters, each contributing to the splintered, confusing, and sometimes contentious story of war-time America and its sonic identity.

Finally, I have two short-form book projects in mind related to voice and popular culture. The first is a cultural history of the "oo" vowel in American popular music singing, called |u|: *What Popular Music's Ugliest Vowel Says about America*. This expanded essay takes an amusing but serious look at parallel developments in a flattened vowel sound and shifting values brought about by neoliberalism. Second, I am preparing a critical essay about vocality and the camp sensibility in hip hop I'm provisionally calling *Fake Noose: Hip Hop and Camp in an Age of Duplicity*.