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Abstract

This dissertation argues that religious world-making in popular culture can reveal and resist hegemonic times. Taking as my primary case study the United States in the 2010s, particularly the shift from the Obama to the Trump era, I analyze cultural constructions of time—as sacred history, destiny, and “the times”—that reflect and shape national identity and belonging in the American imagined community. In this context, such temporal constructions have privileged whiteness and heteronormative masculinity, positioning those who embody or approximate this norm as “of the times,” while also displacing BIPOC, women, and queer people as “out of time.” I posit time as a material and mediated aspect of culture performed by bodies in normative and non-normative ways. Such temporal performativity, I argue, can reify hegemonic norms, but it can also expose and disrupt the constructed nature of these norms in acts of liberative resistance.

My project places theories of religion, media, and culture in critical conversation with an analysis of particular examples of larger trends within the popular culture of and about American times in the 2010s. I examine the *performative anachronism* of time travel narratives (in *Timeless*, *Outlander*, and *Doctor Who*), the *re-presenting* of past onscreen or onstage worlds through revivals and reincarnations (in *Roseanne/The Conners* and *Star Wars*), and history as *improvisational memory performance* (in *Hamilton: An American Musical*).

Through textual/visual, contextual, and audience analysis, I consider the temporal performativity of these examples and trends in connection to world-making: a relational activity, both conceptual and performative, that imagines and enacts the narrative, aesthetic, and ethical contours of what is most real, true, and important. Such world-making is religious insofar as it reflects and shapes the “really real” in the imagined community; and it also relies on teleological notions of time drawn from Protestant Christian theology, which remains culturally dominant in the religiously scrambled context of the twenty-first century United States. I argue that the religious world-making of the popular arts can function to reify cultural hegemonies; but such worlds can also be sites of liberative resistance to hegemonic times.