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## **“SWEET TITS OF BILLY!”: REMAKING QUEER HISTORY IN *EXIT STAGE LEFT: THE SNAGGLEPUSS CHRONICLES***

Mihaela Precup and Dragoş Manea

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This article examines DC’s 2018 reboot of Snagglepuss, a pink mountain lion that made his debut in 1959 on *The Quick Draw McGraw Show* as Snaggletooth (later becoming Snagglepuss) and went on to star in thirty-two regular segments of Hanna-Barbera’s *The Yogi Bear Show*, becoming famous for lines such as “Exit Stage Left” and “Heavens to Murgatroyd.”<sup>1</sup> Writer Mark Russell and illustrator Mike Feehan return to Snagglepuss in *Exit Stage Left: The Snagglepuss Chronicles*, a six-issue comic series that constructs an origin story for the eponymous animated character, transforming him into a famous gay playwright and replacing the character’s initial coded queerness with closeted homosexuality. The rebooted version of the character also incorporates traits reminiscent of Tennessee Williams, but, unlike Williams himself, is eventually blacklisted during the McCarthy era, when left-leaning intellectuals and homosexuals were targets of persecution. In this context, Snagglepuss’s original campiness is reinterpreted as queerness in a new character with added muscle, poise, swagger, and a penchant for spending time at a hidden gay bar, dubbed “The Stonewall.” In a chilling atmosphere that evokes the Red Scare of the 1950s in the United States, where self-preservation tests human/animal connection, salvation is finally to be found outside of the world of high art and in the ‘low’ medium of animation, where the elitist blacklisted playwright Snagglepuss finds a home as a cartoon character.

In Russell and Feehan’s Snagglepuss reboot, set between 1953 and 1959, humans and anthropomorphic animals live side by side during a dark time in American history: alliances are fragile, conformity is brutally preserved, and difference is swiftly punished during a time popularly named “The Red Scare.” In fact, the first Red Scare took place after World War I, but *Exit Stage Left* references the second Red Scare, a post-World War II phenomenon that saw an intensification of the activities of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), particularly after 1950, when senator Joseph McCarthy capitalised on Cold War fears of Soviet domination and nuclear attack (Shi and Tindall, 1166-1167). The famous playwright Snagglepuss is initially dismissive of the actual threat posed by McCarthyism: he has already been called before the HUAC once but did not reveal anything compromising and was allowed to return to his life. His partner, Pablo, who is Cuban and who eventually returns home to fight in the Cuban Revolution, is against this type of political apathy and argues instead that: “Every nation is a monster in the making. And monsters will come for you, whether you believe in them or not” (Russell and Feehan n.p.). As the action progresses,

Snagglepuss becomes increasingly aware of the seriousness of the situation culminating with his childhood friend, famous novelist Huckleberry Hound, being arrested during a raid at the Stonewall, and his own association with Huckleberry Hound made public during a second questioning by the HUAC. Huckleberry Hound's reputation is tarnished in the press and he subsequently commits suicide. Unable to find work after being similarly blacklisted, Snagglepuss is finally offered a position as an actor on the *Quick Draw McGraw Show*, where the title role is played by Huckleberry Hound's former lover, a horse who was fired from the police after being caught with a same-sex partner in a public place. Animation is depicted by *Exit Stage Left* as a haven of those mistreated and rejected by the system, a refuge, but also, it is suggested, a possible place of subversion. The only obstacle is Snagglepuss's own snobbery and his initial inability to produce a catchphrase more uplifting than "Sweet tits of Billy" (a tongue-in-cheek rewriting of animated Snagglepuss's "Heavens to Murgatroyd!"). *Exit Stage Left* thus advocates for the importance of political involvement and commitment, be it overtly manifested through revolutionary gestures (as in Pablo's case) or more covertly, as in Snagglepuss's more oblique subversion through his involvement in animation.

This article asks what the title character's depiction as a "sexy gay daddy" – as *The Advocate's* Brian Anderson put it – contributes to the established cultural memory of the persecution of homosexuals during McCarthyism in the United States. We do this by first examining how *Exit Stage Left* reconstructs gay life in New York City in the 1950s against the cultural and historical background of the "Lavender Scare," a term coined by historian David K. Johnson in his 2004 monograph on the subject, *The Lavender Scare*. We then examine the double rewriting that *Exit Stage Left* performs: firstly, of the original animated character and secondly, of Tennessee Williams. These two figures – one from the 'low culture' medium of mainstream animation and the other from the 'high culture' medium of theatre – create the opportunity for the comic to examine the cultural hierarchies at play in the United States, particularly the dichotomy between theatre and popular culture media such as television (and mainstream animation in particular), as well as the potential of popular culture to foster political subversion, dissent, and create a shelter for gay creators persecuted during the 1950s and after. We also consider how the comic book version of Snagglepuss's masculinity is visually and verbally constructed in *Exit Stage Left* – against the softer masculinities of the initial two characters incorporated in him – and whether it may inadvertently act as a corrective of these softer masculinities as it seems to be proposed as a means of resistance to the American state's mechanisms of surveillance and coercion from the 1950s.

### Reconfiguring Gay Spaces and Political Dissent during the Lavender Scare

*The Snagglepuss Chronicles* does not exist in a void; it occupies a space in the tradition of American comics that center the experience of queer characters. As cartoonist Justin Hall shows in the preface to *No Straight Lines: Four Decades of Queer Comics* (2012), an important anthology of queer comics he edited (and which was the basis for a documentary film in 2021), queer content in comics form became more visible after the Stonewall Riots (1969), first in short strips published in *The Advocate* (which began in 1967), and later in certain segments of the underground comix press, which hosted a variety of stories focused mainly on coming-out narratives and gay erotica (n.p.). The queer tradition

in comics was later consolidated thanks to the work of pioneering comics creators and editors such as Howard Cruse and it branched out into a wide array of genres, styles, and topics (n.p.). Anthologies like *No Straight Lines*, databases such as queercartoonists.com, and the popularity of queer content in comics for different age groups – in both online and print form – testify to the richness of this tradition. In this context, Ramzi Fawaz and Darieck Scott in “Introduction: Queer about Comics” (2018) propose a reading of comics as a queer medium (197), while others, such as Tasha Robinson, proclaim this a golden age for queer comics. This is partly due to the more mainstream presence of queer comics, such as – to give only a few examples – the queer iterations of American superheroes, with varying degrees of success and regular comics series such as *Lumberjanes* (2015-present) and *Ms. Marvel* (2014-present) that target young audiences.

*The Snagglepuss Chronicles* also belongs to the tradition of using anthropomorphised animals for social and political commentary. In comics, this was most famously accomplished by Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* (1980-1991), but human-animal hybrids have more recently been used to ask questions about the construction of non-normative bodies, sexualities, and practices in successful comics series such as Brian K. Vaughn and Fiona Staples’s *Saga* (2012-present) and Kurtis J. Wiebe’s *Rat Queens* (2013-present). In addition to this, creators have also employed devices from various genres (such as Fairy Tales or Science Fiction) to create human-monster (or human-creature) and human-alien characters. One example that comes closer to the kind of revisitation of the past proposed in *The Snagglepuss Chronicles* is Jeff Lemire and Tate Brombal’s *Barbalien: Red Planet* (2020-2021), where the main character is a gay human-Martian hybrid who takes refuge on Earth during the AIDS crisis.

Unlike *Maus* and some of the works mentioned above, *The Snagglepuss Chronicles* does not rely on the human-animal metaphor to reflect on race, ethnicity, or even to suggest there might be another form of significant human/animal hierarchy – except for the fact that, in good old-fashioned cartoon tradition, the animals do not generally wear pants. Apart from imagery of the powerful mountain lion which lends its strength and commanding physical presence to both the original Snagglepuss and Tennessee Williams, *The Snagglepuss Chronicles* is a fairly straightforward historical comic that evokes – with some variations, as we discuss below – the best-known moments of the McCarthy era: the relentless pursuit of homosexuals during the Lavender Scare, the interrogations about communist sympathies and one’s sexual orientation, and the danger of losing one’s career and public respectability if deemed guilty. This process is orchestrated here by Gigi Allen, a closeted lesbian version of (closeted gay) lawyer Roy Cohn, who acted as an advisor to both Senator Joseph McCarthy and, later, as legal counsel to Donald Trump before he died of AIDS. The comic may thus also suggest possible parallels to conservative political climates like the Ronald Reagan presidency or the Donald Trump presidency, thus functioning as a reminder that fundamental human rights are gained slowly and painstakingly but can easily be lost.

As Johnson explores in his monograph, the persecution of gay men during the Lavender Scare stemmed from “a fear that homosexuals posed a threat to national security and needed to be systematically removed from the federal government” (9). Although it was government workers that

were primarily targeted during the investigations, prominent artists and intellectuals whose work had the potential to influence public opinion also found themselves under scrutiny. This practice was not new, but it gained more momentum during the 1950s, a time when, as Lee Edelman describes in "Tearrooms and Sympathy, or, The Epistemology of the Water Closet," "the idealization of domestic security, for both the nuclear family and the nuclear state" produced widespread paranoia that America was going to be destroyed from within if non-normative sexuality were allowed to occupy any official or public position (560).

The rupture between public and private spaces caused by political persecution is emphasised from the beginning of the comic, particularly with reference to the title character. At the beginning of the story, Snagglepuss also appears to be in a position of power, as he is publicly perceived as an American success story, his vulnerability apparently deflected onto his plays, where characters are depicted suffering profusely and based on the wide gestures and postures, quite melodramatically. Snagglepuss is portrayed as being protected by his fame, yet he has to maintain a public mask – to which his wife, Lila Lion, also knowingly contributes – that enables the character to lead a double life. From the first issue of the comic, we find out that there are two performances Snagglepuss devises: a successful play that has had a long run on Broadway and the spectacle of heterosexuality, for which he compliments his wife before he heads for the Stonewall to meet his boyfriend. Snagglepuss's first appearance is glamorous, as he exits the car with his wife against the backdrop of a full-page depiction of the busy and brightly lit entrance of a Broadway theatre. The press eagerly records his arrival for the closing night of his play, *The Heart Is a Kennel of Thieves*. Snagglepuss appears somewhat *blasé* and skeptical of both his success and his fans' adoration. He and Lila Lion are portrayed as a power couple, elegantly dressed against the background of the star-studded sky and bathed in the lights of Broadway. In this first appearance, Snagglepuss is pictured from below, an angle that is frequently used in the comic and has the effect of enhancing his already commanding presence.

Some the events from 1950s US history are depicted in a manner that relies on the audience's presumed familiarity with widely circulated images, names, and facts of that time, but they are also altered to anticipate future resistance and enhance the title character's subversion and political resistance. For instance, Snagglepuss meets his lover at the Stonewall, an establishment which bears a lot of the characteristics of The Stonewall Inn as it existed in 1969 when the riots occurred; they are now widely read as symbolically marking the beginning of the gay rights movement. From *Exit Stage Left*, we learn that, much as the original Stonewall Inn, the gay bar Snagglepuss frequents was owned by the mob, the gay clientele felt sheltered there, and the police regularly took bribes to keep quiet. However, as historian David Carter shows in his exhaustive study of the Stonewall Riots published in 2004 (and as the "Historical Glossary" inserted at the end of the comic also specifies), in 1953 the Stonewall Inn did not exist in this particular form. By inserting the Stonewall in a time period where it did not exist as a place where gay men could show affection in public, the comic beckons to a better future while also suggesting that resistance and activism are necessary.

In *Exit Stage Left*, gay life in New York City in the early 1950s seems to be circumscribed solely to the Stonewall or relegated to dingy motel rooms. When novelist Huckleberry Hound arrives in the city, after being rejected by his family and losing access to his child, he is overjoyed when Snagglepuss introduces him to the Stonewall as a place to meet men, following his failed attempt to approach a man in the street. However, not even the Stonewall is safe, as Gigi Allen (in search of incriminating evidence against Snagglepuss) orders a raid which marks the end of Huckleberry Hound's career (and, eventually, prompts him to take his life). This depiction of the Stonewall as the only place gay men may meet reinforces what historian George Chauncey defines in his 1994 monograph on gay New York culture from 1890 to 1940 as "the myth of isolation" that circulated in the pre-gay liberation days, according to which "anti-gay hostility prevented the development of an extensive gay subculture and forced gay men to lead solitary lives in the decades before the rise of the gay liberation movement" (2).<sup>2</sup> Chauncey himself acknowledges that a lot of this subculture was destroyed during the 1950s, to such an extent that "gay life in New York was *less* tolerated, *less* visible to outsiders, and *more* rigidly segregated in the second third of the century than the first" (9, original emphasis), but suggesting – as the comic does – that there was only one place for gay men to gather creates a false image of gay men in the 1950s as unable to foster communities and safe places. By giving additional momentum to Snagglepuss's subsequent defiance of the HUAC, which gains even larger proportions, it also presents him as an exception, standing out in an otherwise timid and isolated mass of gay men (whose presence is suggested, synecdochally, by Huckleberry Hound) who do not speak up or fight for their rights.

*Exit Stage Left* relies on the recognisability of certain public spaces to evoke the presence of significant political dissent that might anticipate further political resistance from the gay community. For instance, we see well-circulated images of the hearings, like the tables covered in microphones, wires hanging off them, and bright cinematic lights beaming down on those who are subjected to interrogations. As he is preparing for the hearing that would end his career as a playwright, Snagglepuss is first depicted on the steps of Congress. Pictured as a larger-than-life brave heroic figure, clad in a knee-length elegant light blue overcoat, complete with matching scarf, hat, and gold walking stick, Snagglepuss looks as if he is mid-step up the stairs and has only stopped for a minute to answer a few questions and communicate his defiance to the press. His strong final political stance is uplifting and justified, coming as it does in the wake of Huckleberry Hound's suicide. Russell and Feehan depict him in front of the cameras, in a room full of hostile men, speaking passionately about the ability of creativity to offer a country the possibility to change. The subtext here is also the accusation of homosexuality, which Snagglepuss addresses head-on, in another panel where he is depicted standing in solidarity next to a large portrait of Huckleberry Hound and heroically towering above Gigi Allen, his accuser. In fact, there was no public broadcasting of those interrogations that were related to accusations of a sexual nature; instead, they were relegated to smaller spaces and hidden from view (partly because of the lack of opposition from the accused), as Johnson shows (5). While it may be uplifting to witness this hopeful episode of alternative history, we argue that it can also read as an implied accusation against creators like Williams and others who knew their sexual orientation could be used against them and who did not make such public statements of defiance.

There are other moments when *Exit Stage Left's* take on revolutionary attitudes and policies goes in a direction that paints a problematic picture of the actual persecution of gay men within and without the US. For instance, through the figure of Snagglepuss's former lover, Pablo, the comic idealises the post-revolutionary regime in Cuba, where Pablo becomes a well-respected official writing letters to his former partner from his comfortable office across from the Capitol Building in Havana. The time span of the comic does not go beyond 1959, when, in fact, in the wake of the Cuban Revolution, the persecution of homosexuals became even worse; for instance, as Lourdes Arguelles and B. Ruby Rich discuss in "Homosexuality, Homophobia, and Revolution" (1984), gay people were placed in reeducation camps, as they did not fit Che Guevara's notion of the "new man" ("Cuba's gay rights revolution," 2012) and this led to a spike in immigration to the United States (688). In this context, the comic provides a simplified and vague support of social protest and revolution that obscures the issue of the persecution of gay people by both left- and right-wing political organizations in the 1950s, 1960s, and beyond. In addition to this, *Exit Stage Left* also ends on a playful portrayal of Nikita Khrushchev, presented as both a ruthless and a shrewd political operator who does not shy away from eliminating his rivals and as a worthy opponent to Richard Nixon in the famous 1959 Moscow World Fair Kitchen Debate. In *Exit Stage Left*, Khrushchev provides a particularly articulate critique of American inequality that does not appear in the transcript of the original debate as transcribed in the CIA archives. Khrushchev thus appears to be the undisputed winner of the debate, with lines such as "Your system is a sham that takes credit for the very things it tries to destroy," "You worship the music of people who can't even drink from the same fountain as you," or "Capitalism doesn't make you creative, it just makes you better at commodifying your victims" (Russell and Feehan, n.p.). On the very last page of the comic, Khrushchev's gleeful face as he is engaging in a playful corn fight with an American farmer during his visit to the US is juxtaposed with Pablo's more somber one as he is trying, perhaps unsuccessfully, to reach his former partner. The last page appears to cast both the political regime from Cuba under Fidel Castro and Nikita Khrushchev (and, by extension, the Soviet Regime), in a positive light or, at the very least, quite similar to the US political regime. It does this by placing the depictions of Khrushchev and Pablo side by side, as the top and bottom panels show America as a wasteland that kills its dissenters. Such a view is problematic, as it seems to equate the Soviet purges of intellectuals and dissenters and the persecution of 'subversives' in the US during the 1950s. However, as Snagglepuss reminds Huckleberry Hound Jr. of the vital importance of storytelling, *Exit Stage Left* also suggests – by showing Khrushchev throwing corn instead of missiles – that in times of crisis and persecution, salvation lies in anarchy and creativity.

### Television, Animation, and Masculinity

In our research for this article, we have been unable to find any recorded initial audience reactions to the original animated character, the (initially orange, later pink) mountain lion, but Snagglepuss is today included among what audiences read as queer coded early animated characters. For instance, a 2013 *Weekend Update* segment on *SNL* has Snagglepuss (Bobby Moynihan) comment on Proposition 8 being passed, coming out of the closet, and even confessing to a relationship with The Great Gazoo, the green alien from *The Flintstones* who is tiny but all-powerful and quite

contemptuous of humanity (“Weekend Update: Snagglepuss on Gay Marriage – SNL,” 2013). In his review of *The Snagglepuss Chronicles* for *The Advocate* (2018), Brian Andersen also refers to the original Snagglepuss as a coded gay character:

If you’re of a certain age, you might remember the 1960s cartoon version of Snagglepuss, the wisecracking mountain lion who starred in his own cartoon shorts as part of the iconic Hanna Barbera cartoons. As a lisping, funny, and fey animal, Snagglepuss was a coded gay character whose sensibilities were played for laughs as he longed for the stage. He flounced about on stage as he chased his dream, delivering his trademark catchphrases (‘Exit, Stage Left,’ and ‘Heavens to Murgatroyd’) dripping with sass (n.p.).

The incorporation of the original Hanna-Barbera animated character in the strong figure of the mountain lion that towers above most of the other characters is embedded in a wider conversation about popular culture media and their potential to transform contemporary American life. As James Penner shows in *Pinks, Pansies, and Punks* (2011), in 1950s American literary culture the perceived non-normativity of creators was already interpreted against the soft/hard binary that usually equated non-normative masculinities with softness, emotional openness, and empathy (16). As Michael Trask argues in “Gay and Lesbian Literary Culture in the 1950s” (2011) During the Lavender Scare and even beyond it, monitoring soft/hard masculinities relied on imprecise (and paranoid) ever-shifting criteria that reflected the fixation with preserving the heteronormative genome of American government – and, by extension, of the American people. In this context, Trask further argues, gay male identity was bound with the idea that, while the public display of soft masculinity strongly indicated non-normative sexual preferences in men, strong masculinity could not in and of itself guarantee that the subject was, in fact, heterosexual. This often led to an internalisation of the stare of the ‘straight state’ (Margot Canaday qtd. in Trask), something that is well incorporated in the conduct of the gay characters from *Exit Stage Left* who attempt to curate their public image and only live openly in private or in safe spaces.

*Exit Stage Left* interrogates both cultural hierarchies and the potential of ‘high’ versus ‘low’ art forms to host genuine political protest or at least offer refuge to those persecuted for their political convictions. Initially, Snagglepuss speaks as a defender of high culture, but his elitism decreases as his political consciousness rises. We thus see him slowly changing his approach to popular culture genres: at first, he displays a sort of amused scorn as he creates a distinction between the (to him) inferior television as the creator of stars who “show people as they’d wish to be” versus the superior theatre, home to actors, which “shows them what they are” (Russell and Feehan, n.p.). In the comic, the ‘star’ from this classification is exemplified through the figure of the cowboy, the exemplar of traditional American masculinity that dominated the landscape of American film during the 1950s, but, as David Savran shows in *Communists, Cowboys, and Queers* (1992), was also a figure that defined his masculinity through “a form of male bonding that retained, at the least,



ambiguous sexual resonances" (18). The image of the cowboy also appears in Tennessee Williams's work, "strangely and obliquely" in the two related short stories "The Mysteries of the Joy Rio" and "Hard Candy," both published in 1954, where "an aging male homosexual protagonist journeys to a 'third-rate cinema' to engage in furtive sexual encounters with young men who have come innocently to watch the 'cowboy pictures' playing there" (Savran 19). This image returns in *Exit Stage Left* as we catch a glimpse of Stalin watching westerns with his entourage, but its final embodiment is as the horse cowboy animated character, Quick Draw McGraw, a goofy humorous take on the serious silent hypermasculine Hollywood hero. This shift is indicative of Snagglepuss's own evolving understanding of popular culture.

As Snagglepuss fleshes out his argument against popular culture forms early in *Exit Stage Left*, it appears that he objects not to the entire medium of television or film, but rather to their reliance on simplification rather than complexity, as well as their encouragement of stardom rather than acting. Marilyn Monroe, who also appears briefly in the comic, helps articulate this dichotomy as she expresses her disappointment with this aspect of her own career. However, as events unfold and Snagglepuss finds himself hard pressed to consider popular culture forms, he comes to praise the escapism offered by them and their potential to absorb the "fanaticism," as he puts it, of a population. His words accompany a page where an image of the crowd cheering at an Elvis concert is contrasted with a depiction of a military parade presided over by Soviet president Nikita Khrushchev, a sinister grin on his face. This contrast, simplistic as it may be, is generally upheld by the overall logic of the comic, but it is also somewhat revised in the end by the suggestion that 'low' popular culture media such as mainstream animation aimed at young audiences also have the potential to harbor subversives, mainly because they are less monitored than other, more 'serious' media.

However, *Exit Stage Left* does not produce unreserved praise for either popular culture or television, in particular, as the latter is depicted as a space that displays a mainstream version of personhood confined to a heterosexual space and facilitates the consumption of the suffering of those who do not fit in it. For instance, *Exit Stage Left* opens with a page that shows a conventionally romantic evening of a heterosexual couple in a restaurant, finishing a meal and preparing to go to a show for which they temporarily misplace the tickets. Because of the structure of this episode, readers are not immediately made aware that the show is of the public execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg. The presence of the nameless man eager to watch the Rosenberg execution functions as a warning against the potential of television to foster a fascination with suffering: as the couple attempt to find a taxi to Sing Sing Prison, the man is suddenly riveted in front of a store window, so fascinated by a television screen that his nose and hands are pressed against the glass. This makes them so late that they miss Julius Rosenberg's execution, which suggests the increasing appeal of a mediated experience of the spectacle of suffering as offered by television. The execution evokes the atmosphere of fear of communist infiltration, nuclear obliteration, and subversive conduct of any kind that might damage the integrity of white, straight, middle-class American identity.

Snagglepuss's own narrow view of film and television is also bound with his suspicious and scornful attitude towards "stupid" cartoons, as he puts it, that seems to stem from the popular perception of mainstream animation as innocuous and childish (as comics are still sometimes perceived). As Jason Mittel describes in "The Great Saturday Morning Exile" (2003), around this time, it was believed that children were the main (although not yet only) target audience for animation (38), something that would continue through the 1960s and only change with the emergence of *The Simpsons* in 1990 (47). It is this perception that, as Paul Wells argues in the introduction of *Prime Time Animation* (2003), allowed animation in the 1950s to operate "as a potentially non-regulatory or subversive space by virtue of its very artifice, and the assumed innocence that goes with it" (16). The general assumption that cartoons belonged to a space of harmlessness protected the medium, as Mittel shows, from the scrutiny endured by other media (43).

However, as Sean Griffin argues in "Pronoun Trouble" (2004), animation has "a history of queerness" (105), with an established tradition of queer coded characters such as, to give the most circulated example, Bugs Bunny, who often cross-dressed but who was also, as Griffin points out, "always in drag as a human being" (107), something that can also be said of the anthropomorphised animals from *The Snagglepuss Chronicles*. Still, animation traditionally represents homosexuality "as effeminacy in men" (108), a limitation of the medium from the 1950s and 1960s that is amended by the comic and by the progress made by more recent animation. However, when Snagglepuss reluctantly joins *The Quick Draw McGraw Show*, he is indeed painted orange for the part, but no mention is made of rewriting his masculinity as effeminate. The comic thus departs from the tradition of queer coded characters in American animation by exempting its main character from being depicted somewhere at the intersection of humor and effeminacy in his career as an animation hero.

The original Snagglepuss's queer coding was also, like much queer coding from the 1950s, imbricated with humor or it itself functioned as a source of humor, even if perhaps these and other cartoons are remembered fondly as important markers of early visibility (See "How Queer Characters Have Evolved in Children's Animation," 2011). In this context, it is important that DC's Snagglepuss is not someone to be laughed at or trifled with; he is strong, opinionated, talented, and proud. At the same time, that these qualities, which make him an admirable character who stands up to the pressure of the HUAC, should be tied up with a harder more muscular and imposing version of masculinity runs the risk of suggesting that perhaps softer masculinity can be relegated to the realm of comedy and children's programs, while harder masculinity belongs in the political arena and the world of adults.<sup>3</sup>

*The Snagglepuss Chronicles* provides a stage where the coded queerness of the initial animation hero, as well as Tennessee Williams's homosexuality are openly revealed to the readers through the representation of intimate gestures (such as Snagglepuss kissing his boyfriend) and statements where the main gay characters denounce the morals of a society where they have to hide. In a manner that is similar to the transformation of the original cartoon character we discussed above, as an embodiment of a version of Tennessee Williams, the tall, lean, and muscular mountain lion who towers above all the other characters may be perceived as a correction of the sort of

alternative masculinity embodied by both 'originals.'

There are not a lot of elements that create a recognisable connection between Snagglepuss and Tennessee Williams. Like Williams, Snagglepuss also grew up in Mississippi (but, in the young lion's case, it is rural Mississippi, where he stands out). Early on in the comic, he is depicted in a panel as a young, dainty, and elegant pink mountain lion quietly reading *The New Yorker*, ensconced in his half of the panel which is also bathed in soft pinks (the color coding him as effeminate at a time when little boys no longer wore pink). The other half of the panel is occupied by three male workers on a break (one dog and two humans), lined up on a bench in their overalls, somewhat baffled by the sight of the young pup, from their own space of neutral colors, a silo in the background. Snagglepuss later abandons Mississippi for the relative freedom of the big city. He is also rejected by his father for leaving home to pursue a career in theatre, in an environment that would allow him to flourish – his father's rejection because of his sexuality is also strongly suggested. In addition to this, there is, of course, the fact that Snagglepuss embodies a famous American playwright who is gay, whose works are successfully performed on Broadway, and with a penchant for melodrama, as some of the excerpts from his plays in *Exit Stage Left* suggest.

This version of Tennessee Williams is traditionally masculine and imposing, as we mentioned above, but (unlike Williams), he is married and (also unlike Williams), he proudly speaks up against the oppression of 'subversives' when he is called in front of the HUAC. Snagglepuss's homosexuality may be a reference to Williams, but his muscular and agile masculinity rewrites the author's well-known 'soft' masculinity. In his *Memoirs* (1975), Williams brings up this matter of masculinity and the consequences he faced because he did not conform to his father's standards in particular. He depicts his father as a heavy drinker who did not shy away from the occasional fistfight and who often expressed disappointment with his son's masculinity. The decision (in the comic) to have the main character perform such a strong masculinity and only partly abandon it when he accepts to be dyed orange in order to play the part of a cartoon character seems to suggest that the effeminate flamboyant masculinity of the animated character is a useful mask, lying on top of a strong masculinity that is never completely covered. But, in doing so, *Exit Stage Left* runs the risk of erasing the alternative masculinities of both Tennessee Williams and the original animated character.

This matter is tied up with the decision to portray the main character as both unconflicted about his sexuality and unafraid of the consequences of his defiant statements to the HUAC. There is evidence that Williams was, at various points of his life, conflicted about his homosexuality and this can also be seen in the reception of his work. As Michael Paller shows in *Gentlemen Callers* (2005), after having been initially criticised by straight critics for the gay subtext of his plays, Williams was later critiqued by gay critics for not allowing for more positive outcomes for the gay characters in his plays: "What is stranger is that, in the 1990s, some gay critics took up where their straight predecessors left off. Since then, the problem has been that Tennessee Williams isn't gay enough; that he was incapable of producing a 'positive image' of a gay person" (2, original emphasis). There is, undeniably, evidence in Williams's work that he was conflicted about his sexuality and that there was a measure of guilt and self-loathing there that we cannot find anywhere in *Exit Stage Left*.

As Paller points out: “at the height of the McCarthy and HUAC witch-hunts he [Williams] put on Broadway an openly gay man in *Camino Real*; a few years later he outlined the moral paralysis of a man afraid to admit his homosexuality for fear of losing all the fame and love he had gained; a few years after that, he described the fate of a man who dared to live at the edges of sexual adventure and paid the price” (233). Expressions of dissent did exist even as early as the 1950s, but they did not take the same shape as the ones depicted in the comic.

Snagglepuss’s statements in front of the HUAC, his swagger, self-assuredness, and open protest when he is publicly interrogated about his homosexuality anticipate the marches for equal rights that eventually moved towards expressions of gay pride, the former being at least in part reactions to the persecution of gay men and lesbians after World War II (Johnson 10). In fact, The Mattachine Society, which was founded in 1951, two years before the action of *Exit Stage Left* begins, was only just beginning to have conversations about how “to develop in its members a strong group consciousness free of the negative attitudes that gay men and women typically internalized” (Johnson 58). While we are not arguing that everybody internalised such negative stereotypes, there is, however, no public record of a person of Snagglepuss’s fame that made such forceful statements in front of the HUAC. In fact, one of the most forceful positions of a famous playwright in front of the HUAC belong to Arthur Miller, whose resistance consisted in him refusing to incriminate anybody else (See “Excerpts from Arthur Miller’s Testimony,” 2020). All in all, imagining that there might have been a more forceful kind of protest is at best a hopeful look upon a very dark past, and at worst an implied accusation against those gay men who were there but did not express dissent as openly.

## Conclusions

*Exit Stage Left: The Snagglepuss Chronicles* relies on a logic of progress which takes present-day thinking and attitudes and inserts them into a past where they provide more dignity and strength to the main character, a gay creator harassed and humiliated by a system of surveillance adamant about his destruction or, at least, his effacement. By creating gay enclaves such as the Stonewall, which did not exist as such in the early 1950s and by giving its audiences a main character who is unafraid and unashamed of his sexuality, the comic appears to perform a kind of time travel stemming from the kind intention of arriving from the future into the past to tell those oppressed during the Lavender Scare that things will get better. However, by suggesting that gay men at the time were unable to produce a larger number of safe spaces and communities, and that only one man – or, in this case, only one mountain lion – out of the entire community is able to take a strong political stance, it runs the risk of suggesting that gay people should have expressed more open resistance during the 1950s. Both the original animated Snagglepuss and playwright Tennessee Williams were effeminate and, as a result, either the target of humor or of their families and other people’s displeasure and violence. By modifying the masculinities of the characters upon which this adaptation/reboot lies, *The Snagglepuss Chronicles* may inadvertently suggest that strong masculinity is a site of political resistance, while softer masculinities do not offer the same opportunity for dissent, relegated as they are to the realm of animation, where they become the target of laughter even as they produce queer coding.

## NOTES

1. Please note, this article includes spoilers of major events.
2. There is historical evidence that there were other gathering-places for gay men and women in and around the city. See, for instance, "Safe/Haven: Gay Life in 1950s Cherry Grove" (2021).
3. We are not suggesting that animation should be idealised as a radical site of political protest. As Nicholas Sammond argues in *Birth of an Industry* (2015), after its transition from the movie theater to television, animation also began a process of amending its "less than honorable history of representational, performative, and industrial practices of racism, misogyny, and homophobia" (xi); however, by eliminating racist representations of black people, television programmers, in fact, erased blackness and "effectively created a white-only genre of programming" (Mittell, 37). In this context, the early Hanna-Barbera cartoons were celebrated in the contemporary press "for their adult wit and satirical content," even if perhaps not all of the jokes and puns aged well (Mittell, 42). Even if adult audiences were also targeted during this time period, the dominant mode was comedy, and it would only be until much later that tragedy or the grotesque would also be included.

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