Strut, Sing, Slay:
Diva Camp Praxis and Queer Audiences
in the Arena Tour Spectacle

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Aristotle University of Thessaloniki
I dress to kill, but tastefully.
—Freddie Mercury
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Introduction

Dorothy Gale singing “Over the Rainbow” in *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) has constituted a defining moment both for Judy Garland’s career and her subsequent queer consecration as a gay icon. Longing for a land where the impossible can happen, little Dorothy managed to appeal to the queer psyche by offering a liberating songtext whose open-endedness could easily accommodate queer people’s desire for freedom of expression. The song was backed by the film’s colorful spectacle of esteemed for its time proportions that aided in vivifying the liberatory effect. *Oz*’s onscreen transition from black-and-white monotony to Technicolor-imbued imagery marked a connotative passage from secularity to dream and from seclusion to openness. Coupled with Dorothy’s otherworldly, albeit friendly, encounters in the Land of Oz, the transition’s queer message was indeed hard to miss. “Over the Rainbow” became Garland’s signature song as she went on to be established as one of the most iconic figures of American queer culture and perhaps one of the first to exert a wide queer appeal of considerate magnitude and longevity. More specifically, gay men’s attraction to Garland’s star icon was not simply directed toward the star herself, but was part and parcel of what the Garland experience enclosed: namely, the opportunity to find, in a very practical sense, the dreamland she was musing about. At a time when queer socialization was mostly under the radar, Garland’s appeal openly helped semantify queer bonds and culture sharing among gay men to the point where a cultural stereotype was birthed: “friends of Dorothy” became a euphemism for homosexual men, thereby exposing and specifying what had then been clandestine.¹ Years later, impacting the queer community of New York City, Garland’s funeral service on 27th June 1969, which was followed by the Stonewall riots on 28th June,

¹ Cf. Daniel Harris’ essay on “The Death of Camp: Gay Men and Hollywood” as this appears on *The Rise and Fall of Gay Culture* (1997).
circulated rumors that connected these two events. Though that idea seemed farfetched, one cannot overlook that what was possibly a coincidence was indeed a temporal landmark enveloped with queer affect which was triggered by the grief over the death of the icon as well as the aggressiveness of the Stonewall incident.

Almost seventy years after Dorothy’s musical call to the Land of Oz, Kylie Minogue appears on a glittery crescent-moon prop to perform “Over the Rainbow” during the Dreams segment of her Showgirl: The Greatest Hits Tour (2005). Kylie, whose notoriously lavish extravaganzas have for years attracted international audiences, has emerged as a contemporary gay icon catering to her queer market as well as serving as an advocate of the modern LGBT+ movement. Her choice to include Garland’s classic in the concert setlist of her greatest numbers is a self-conscious one that aims at bringing together queer past and present. Minogue and her creative team are well-aware of both Kylie’s and Garland’s queer appeal; the idea to have the former quote the latter is a musical nod to the cultural canon of queer iconicity and repertoire. Such acts of intergenerational homage and cultural exchange are frequent among divas who generally share the target groups of queer audiences. In fact, since pop culture serves as a plateau of sharing and intertextuality whereupon producers and consumers of culture navigate accordingly guided by tastes, desires, and sensibilities, it is conditional that the linking lines between producers and consumers are dynamically formed out of the specificity of the cultural codes they (wish to) share. The line established between divas and queer audiences, for that matter, relies on culturally-specific information available to queer groups and, at the same time, generates new relational codes that simultaneously preserve and forge the said link. Kylie’s tribute to Garland is a demonstration of knowing her audience by addressing all these elements that constitute Garland’s as well as her own relationship to queer culture.
Divas and queer people have long been affiliated. The cultural production of queer communities manifests a wide range of divas coming from the popular fields of music, cinema, and television, among others. They have been upheld as inspirational figures of power, success, and glamour as well as served as vessels of identification regarding sexual desire, gender expression, and empathy. As a matter of fact, queer people’s fascination with divas has almost become a truism, since their relationship, being of reciprocal interest and respect, has been widely solidified through years of mutual cultural fodder. Divas have variously fed the queer imagination while, in turn, their followers have invested in their icons in terms of cultural power, finance, and sentiment. Delving deeper into the cultural practices and productions of queer community in North America, for example, one finds an array of famous women who have each been a commonly agreed-upon adored icon. First and foremost, the silver screen has functioned as the primary source of diva fascination, introducing glamorous women, femme fatales, virgins and whores to the queer public (Babuscio 1999; Harris 1997, Halperin 2012). It is noteworthy how queer culture absorbed and reiterated the drama around the personae of Marlene Dietrich, Marilyn Monroe, and Joan Crawford, to mention just a few; or how fictional characters, such as Norma Desmond, portrayed by Gloria Swanson in *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), and Margo Channing, played by Bette Davis in *All About Eve* (1950), have left their imprint on camp culture with their distinct acting style. Theatre has also given life to notorious heroines who have been embraced by American queer culture; consider fictional characters from highly popular dramatic and musical texts, such as Tennessee Williams’ Blanche DuBois (A Streetcar Named Desire, 1947) and Alexandra Del Lago (Sweet Bird of Youth, 1950), or Christopher Isherwood’s Sally Bowles from Goodbye to Berlin (1939), who rose to Broadway popularity with *Cabaret* (1966) and was subsequently immortalized onscreen through Liza Minnelli.
Last but not least, the domain of music, which will be the focal point of this project, offered to queer culture a great many entertaining divas. The musical personae of Diana Ross, Cher, Whitney Houston as well as more contemporary ones such as Christina Aguilera and Arianna Grande have generated some of the most popular music diva models, such as the disco diva and the torch songstress, whose extravagant theatrics have found inroads into queer cultural expression.

The American queer paradigm of diva adoration, as perhaps the most densely annotated one, is only an indicative case. As a matter of fact, the circulation of cultural data between divas and queer groups as well as meta-data concerning divas that are shared among queer groups per se has been a model materializing across the globe. With cultural specificity always factored in, the diva-queer group relationship model is to be found in most of queer localities, thus manifesting itself as a transcultural mode of appeal that nurtures and is nurtured by local cultures. Each queer locale has its own pantheon of adored divas who abide by the specificities and desires of their accustomed queer culture. However, soon one notices that, on a global level, the diva models and their appeal tactics tend to overlap in terms of persona structure, image politics, and fan reception. From dramatic flair to assertive narratives of femininity and from pathos to glamorous aloofness, world divas share an expressive network of assets. As interaction between cultures, especially in the digital era, leads these models to convergence, it is important to underline that a shared global diva culture cultivates a global audience the aspects of which, though varied, are, as one might presume by extrapolation, led to convergence as well. In this light, what is the receptive ethos of a global queer audience and, more importantly, how does this impact on or align with queer politics, localities, and personhood? I would like to explore this argument further

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2 Consider French diva Dalida who was adored across France and whose tragic figure left its own mark on the local queer community.
through specific international diva cases, including Madonna, Kylie Minogue, Beyoncé, and Lady Gaga, who, despite personifying Western standards of politics, image, gender, and sex, exert global appeal in the sense that they allow for identification flexibility as they, more often than not, target a broad-radius audience market.

The inspiration behind this research project lies at the dynamic links connecting these divas with global queer diva-adoring audiences. Questions emerge as to what is comprehensive of the physiognomy of queer audiences, what the culture enveloping them is as well as how this culture has gone global. Other questions pertinent to this are how the diva worship model has become popular among queer groups, what role glamorous femininity (within the broader context of how femininity is constructed) plays in the narratives of queer expression and fan attachment, and, most importantly, how the relationship formed between divas and queer fans materializes. Always attentive to essentialist slips, it is imperative to note at this point that divas do not exclusively appeal to queer cultures since they embody consumerist fantasies that appeal to multiple audiences at once. Simply put, they are indivisible from the popular culture that gives birth to them and thereby abide by the market rules of “the more, the merrier.” However, the cultural channel connecting them with queer groups that allows the flow of code-sharing makes the divas’ queer appeal all too specific to ignore. What is it ultimately about divas that queer culture finds so fascinating and ever-inspiring? What does the figure of the diva stand for in the camp imagery of queer practices and how is her spectacle attuned with queer sensibility? All things considered, why does queer indulgence in diva culture (still) merit analysis?

With the aforementioned questions constituting the research objectives of this project, it is of paramount importance here to establish the framework whereupon these arguments will be explicated. The diva spectacle is a rich ground that can best accommodate a critical
analysis for the study of culture-sharing processes of production and reception. Since most scholarly approaches of the diva culture are usually applied from a visual culture studies perspective, meaning that analyses are concerned with the political and aesthetic construct of the persona as this appears in audiovisual media, my decision to follow a cultural reading via a performance studies route is governed by the need to examine both divas and audiences at their meeting point. In light of this, the diva concert tour show is a potent field of study that can provide a spherical and perhaps invigorating approach of both divas and queer audiences—standing for production and reception, and vice versa. I approach tour shows as the spatial and temporal moment wherein the relationship between the star diva and fans fully materializes. As opposed to the study of sound, image, or text produced by the diva persona through the mediums of song and music video, the study of a concert show allows for a kaleidoscopic approach that not only accommodates the aforementioned media, but also factors in live performance as a spatio-temporal event. Adding to that the fact that tours from the divas examined here are of international coverage, the materiality of space juxtaposed to the distant and immaterial nature of the digital media is of key importance in observing the diva concert experience.

**The Camp of the Diva: Theory and Praxis**

In order to theorize the relationship between divas and queer fans, it is imperative that we delve deeper into the cultural body of camp, a distinctly queer aesthetic, if sensibility, which has been the quintessential component behind the diva adoration pattern. Although cultural theory has been extensively focusing on camp, its subject still remains a contested topic among its critics and rather elusive in terms of a clearly-defined meaning. Fabio Cleto attempts a succinct, yet densely configured definition: “Tentatively approached as sensibility,
taste, or style, reconceptualised as aesthetic or cultural economy, and later asserted/claimed as (queer) discourse, camp hasn’t lost its relentless power to frustrate all efforts to pinpoint it down to stability” (2, italics in text). Drawing from postmodern theories on subjectivity and textuality, Cleto carefully approaches camp as a mode of perception/expression that entered gay male culture by means of adoption, meaning that it did not originate in the said culture and its points of origin are rather obscure to trace:

Being affiliated (the term coming from the late Latin affiliatus, ‘adoptive son’) with homosexual culture, camp is not the direct and legitimate offspring of a homosexual selfhood active with the properties of ‘biological paternity.’ The origins of camp are elsewhere – where, we can’t say – and only through a cultural process, so to speak, of adoption, camp has been brought to its supposed or reclaimed ‘homosexual paternity.’ (5, italics in text)

Homosexual men nurtured and circulated camp by infusing it with queer qualities, i.e. with a perception of reality—a heteronormative reality—through the eyes, psyche, comprehension, and living of queer subjectivity as this accrues from the historical and collective social life of queer people. Camp, thus, can only be thought of as an effect of cultural synergy that, whether it has come to be solely affiliated with homosexual men or not (which is arguably the case), fuses heteronormative reality with queer signification; hence, queer discourse, as Cleto underlines.

When talking about camp as part of gay male culture, one has to consider that perspectives on it have largely been formulated out of a Western and predominantly white experience of homosexuality. American culture and theory provides much of our understanding on camp, inevitably filtering it through a narrowly-focused lens. Though

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3 Cleto here explicates his use of “paternity,” arguing that “those who have spoken on behalf of camp as a gay property and offspring... assume male homosexuality as the real ‘parent’ and ‘owner’” (5, italics in text).
theorists of camp in later years have been rather flexible with and alert to camp’s Western/white background, they managed to do so by contesting previously theorizing attempts which appeared monolithic as regards camp’s cultural formation. Initially, Susan Sontag’s seminal essay on “Notes on Camp” brought the subject of camp in the limelight and eventually triggered a critical engagement with its politics and poetics. Sontag’s “Notes” accounted for a homosexual subculture that was by and large American, which, by extension, relied on the European past and its cultural production. Perspectives on camp prior to Sontag mostly derived from Christopher Isherwood’s novel The World in the Evening wherein he vaguely divided camp into low and high art—the former emulated by “a swishy little boy with peroxided hair, dressed in a picture hat and wearing a feathered boa, pretending to be Marlene Dietrich,” the latter being associated with “the whole emotional basis of the Ballet, for example, and of course of Baroque art” (110). Even Isherwood’s referential field of what comprises low and high camp has its basis on white ideals of art evaluation, beauty, and class, and connects the image of the swishy boy camp’s exposition with male homosexuality. With Isherwood’s quote serving as an influential starting point of camp’s literary existence as well as Sontag’s detailed essay, which rather functioned as a referential pool to draw from, but also as a template for contestation and debate, much of what was written about camp up until the end of the 1980s could not help but account for a camp culture of white male homosexual production.

It was not until the 1990s when theories on camp acquired a more nuanced perspective by dissecting the dominant discourses of whiteness and maleness permeating its

4 From literature to art to ballet, European culture has been populated by camp figures, discourses, and images opulent with absurd taste and queer erotics: for example, the Mannerist movement in painting, Beau Brummell’s style, Jean Cocteau’s writings, Serge de Diaghilev’s aesthetic impact on the Russian Ballet, among others (Core 9-11). See also Sontag’s Note 13 and 14 in “Notes on ‘Camp’” for more examples (qtd in Cleto 57).

5 Consider camp critics, such as Jack Babuscio, Richard Dyer, and Philip Core.
canon. By then, also, camp’s artistic tools had entered the market sphere of mainstream culture, thus becoming a widely shared aesthetic enjoyed outside queer subcultures. Easy as it is to think that pop and straight culture simply appropriated camp from its subcultural zones of production, the truth is that queer people were also keen on projecting their culture onto more visible and even marketable avenues. “The 1990s,” according to Alexandra Chasin, “was a banner decade for gay men and lesbians. Representations of gay men and lesbians on television, in newspapers and magazines, in courts and in legislatures, in the workplace, and in pride marches and other public forums, increased dramatically” (29). In explaining how exclusion from mainstream culture can be corrected by simply entering the market with financial power and enfranchisement. Chasin argues that gay and lesbian groups were given a spot in the marketplace by being acknowledged as social consumers with “gay dollars” and, thus, had their identities consolidated by means of finance (29-39). This was rather expected considering how the political agenda of gay and lesbian movement in America invested in enfranchisement as a means to social visibility. Daniel Harris corroborates that “[t]he selling of gay culture was a synergistic arrangement, a marriage of convenience, a profitable intersection of interests, one that, far from resisting, homosexuals have fought long and hard to bring about, doing everything possible to make themselves more appealing in the eyes of advertisers” (6). Ever since, queer culture has become increasingly monetized, inviting mainstream market into its lifestyle and practices. As a result, queer-inflected cultural productions like camp were now widely available for consumption, enjoyment, and utilization.

At the same time, camp and its mechanisms became more open to criticism, which is how cultural theorists were given more ground to work on and, by extension, challenge the dominant patterns behind its production and annotation. Turning to queer and feminist theory,
critics such as Moe Meyer and Pamela Robertson, ascribed deconstructive qualities to camp by applying it on their cultural analyses as a critically postmodern tool with a subversive and radical edge. In seeing camp as “political and critical,” contrary to Sontag’s critique, Meyer defines camp “as the total body of performative practices and strategies used to enact a queer identity, with enactment defined as social visibility” (5). The writer contextualized camp within the postmodern condition and pop culture, underlining its appropriation from dominant culture and, therefore, it being simply derivative when co-opted by non-queer hands (13-15). On a feminist note and raising critical queries not only over camp per se, but also over its scholars, Robertson tackled male homosexual essentialism by claiming female agency in the production and reception processes of camp, a topic previously undertheorized or, worse, ignored. The writer underscores a pattern governing camp that sees female subjectivity as a victim of misogyny and castigates camp theorists’ analyses on it as rather insufficient: “gay men appropriate a feminine aesthetic and certain female stars but… women, lesbian or heterosexual, do not largely appropriate aspects of gay male culture… Women, by this logic, are objects of camp and subject to it but are not camp subjects” (5). Significantly so, Robertson’s astute critique underscored the complexity behind the relationship of camp and female representation and, inevitably, that between gay culture and divas, which is a highly ambivalent one.

Regarding diva worship, camp has almost by definition been ambiguous, as it has been adoring, deriding, but, above all, scrutinizing female stars. One would argue that camp

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6 In Note 2 on her essay, Sontag argues that “[t]o emphasize style is to slight content, or to introduce an attitude which is neutral with respect to content. It goes without saying that the Camp sensibility is disengaged, depoliticized – or at least apolitical” (qtd in Cleto 54).
7 Drawing from the seminal works of Joan Riviere’s “Womanliness as Masquerade” (1929) and Esther Newton’s Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America (1972), Robertson, relying on camp’s “affinity with feminist discussions of gender construction, performance and enactment” (6), argues how misogyny can be averted when dealing with camp by revisiting camp performance as gendered play.
culture is itself a close study of divas and female behavior, which, to a great extent, can only be characterized as compulsive. Hollywood divas, for instance, have primarily served as objects of scrutiny and emulative desire for the pre-Stonewall generations of gay men. Daniel Harris argues that “over the decades gay men became so adept at communicating their forbidden desires through camp allusions that a sort of collective amnesia has descended over the whole process, and we have lost sight of the fact that our love for performers like Judy Garland was actually a learned behavior” (21). The writer adds that gay inclination to diva worship is still misconceived by many as “an innate gay predisposition” (21), predominantly because the diva cult has been culturally entrenched and perpetually disseminated among generations of gay men. Stonewall is set here as an alleged threshold that marks the beginning of a change of attitude toward the diva cult due to the fact that the forthcoming generations claimed more assertive identities—the 1960s liberation movements certainly played a key role in that—ones that seemed to be dissonant with the insecure, disenfranchised, and self-loathing queer psyche ensuing from the repressive conditions of the closeted self. “By the early 1960s,” according to Harris, “some gay men had begun to express repulsion for our obsequious fawning over celebrities” and “[b]y the 1980s and 1990s, the pantheon of immortals, while still treated reverently by many gay men, had become fair game for ridicule,” demonstrating that “the diva had come to be perceived as the emotional crutch of the pathetic old queen” (21-22). This is how the writer imagines diva camp’s transition from reverence to ridicule, coming to a seeming oblivion. However, Harris does not account for the fact that as a more self-conscious and socially visible gay identity emerged, different routes of identification, pleasure, and affect were sought. For, while the cinema diva adoration may have grown irrelevant, unable perhaps to widely captivate post-1980s generations, especially millennials, the adoration pattern itself remains dynamic and
queer culture’s connection to it has found a new focus of interest, one that is reflective of current cultural tastes, sexual and gendered expressions, and emotional states of the contemporary queer self.

This new focus, I would like to argue, nests now in the domain of music. Music divas, as matter of fact, seem to have emerged as this modern cultural symbol, advocate, or, plainly, focus of enthusiasm of queer culture. Seeing how queer culture in the U.S. develops through its practices, lifestyle, and cultural profile, music divas have become dominant models of camp pleasure in a way that is at points fundamentally different from past diva models, but, at the same time, bearing referential similarities with them. One would see, for instance, how pop music personae nowadays—compared to previous Hollywood divas models—endlessly inspire drag performances, continuously inform and update camp lexicon, and virtually saturate queer realities not only in America, but globally as well. The reasons behind this transfocalization of interest certainly vary, as we shall see shortly, and, of course, it should be noted yet again that American queer culture is taken as a point of reference as well as an indubitable influential source that feeds global perspectives. International diva acts, such as the ones serving as case subjects in this research and other notable personae, including Adele, Lana Del Rey, Nicki Minaj, Katy Perry and then some, have in their own way infused their audiovisual performance and songtexts with a camp aesthetic, incorporating elements of irony and parody and re-enacting overtly histrionic/dramatic femininities, which seem to resonate with queer culture’s contemporary physiognomy. Simultaneously, though, the camp of these divas appears heavily derivative when it comes to structural motifs, themes, and cited sources, which is rather indicative of two items: firstly, diva worship is a repeated pattern according to which old divas pass the camp baton to new ones, serving thus as imitative and inspirational templates; and, secondly, by buying into diva narratives, queer
culture endorses and preserves diva culture, and, conversely, divas acknowledge their queer appeal and accordingly invest in it.

Music divas have always been a vital cultural component within queer communities. Their musical personae backed with songtexts that could usually engage queer audiences in their affective narratives or erotic undertones have provided firm basis for identification and enjoyment. In addition, their extravagant image and often pompous delivery, attributes that rendered their personae otherworldly, larger-than-life characters, established them as emblematic figures in camp culture and spawned genre- or scene-related archetypes. The torch songstress is a noteworthy example here. With a chic, ultra-feminine profile and a highly emotional repertoire, the figure of the torch songstress, which originated at the end of the nineteenth century and peaked in popularity in the decades of the 1930s and 1940s—consider the cases of Billie Holiday and Sarah Vaughan—became the symbol of unrequited love. John Moore defines the torch song as “a lament sung by a woman who desperately loves a commonplace or even brutish man. The latter treats her badly, leaves her or no longer cares for her. Occasionally, he ignores or rebuffs her tentative advances. And yet she remains inexplicably enslaved to him” (32). The torch songstress’s unreciprocated pathos would serve as an emotional state which queer men, specifically, could relate with at the time, since their expression of love interest towards a man often entailed risk and usually remained unfulfilled due to the social limitations imposed by the closet. In that sense, torch divas offered empathy to queer men, yet in a highly dramatic, often grandiose way reminiscent of Hollywood scenarios. Moore implies that this pathos was rather a driving force for torch divas, whose immersion into their drama enclosed “a hint of narcissism which suggests that in some way they [were] rather enjoying their emotional agonies” (33). As such, their pathos is staged, a performed melodrama that adds to their already delicate profiles qualities of
vulnerability, instability, and obsession with/over a male figure, qualities that both subvert—because they are acted out—and legitimate—because they are acted upon—their performance of femininity.

Torch divas emulated cosmopolitan models of femininity, embodying mostly a modern and urban aesthetic in attire and behavior, which underlined their personae as elegant, yet particularly aloof. Moore explains that:

[v]isually, the torch singers are linked through images of urban sophistication. These images – projected by the singers on stage and constructed for them in promotional material – are deliberately contrived to convey the impression that these women are urbane, worldly-wise, but hence rather world-weary, and possessing a deep sadness edging toward despair. (33)

Moore adds that there was also a sense of exoticism surrounding their personae mainly due to the use of cosmetics and lavish costuming (39), which fulfills the camp imagination of viewing femininity as an unrealistic object of appeal. Torch songstresses are in part perceived by the camp eye as living ornaments, distant, peculiar, and narcissistic, which underlines their ontology as rather passive, considering their mania for unrequited romance. Queer audiences at the time could empathize with the torch diva because their social, emotional, and cultural self was conveyed through, and projected upon such personae. This, of course, represented only part of the queer self as it is often male-centric and cannot be sufficiently accounted for, especially when we take into consideration queer resonances in other contemporary figures and genres, such as the erotically-tinged music and profile of the blues singers. In the history of camp, torch songstresses were largely eclipsed by Classical

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8 Consider the popularity blues singers such as Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey and Gladys Bentley had and how their songtexts enclosed queer undertones and sexually-charged lyrics, with marked lesbian erotics, as opposed to torch songs, the concerns of which were “entirely romantic, and [did] not include the earthiness of playful
Hollywood divas who usually monopolized camp interest at the time. Yet, they have managed to leave their imprint on music culture and further become citational models for future artistic ventures. The camp of the torch diva, as a matter of fact, has been influential on the British soul diva tradition best reflected in the personae of Adele, Amy Winehouse, Duffy, and Paloma Faith.

Progressively and more specifically with the advent of the freedom liberation movements of the 1960s, a new diva model emerged, that of the disco diva, which has been fundamental for queer culture and the camp canon. The rise of disco in the early 1970s saw many African-American and Latino female artists dominating the scene, while audiences were racially, ethnically, and sexually mixed. However, as Gillian Frank argues, disco songs performed by women resonated among gay men, whose empathetic response derived from their own narratives of oppression or coming out (284). In fact, the writer points out that “disco music rose to cultural prominence within the gay community at the moment of their political and cultural ascendance (285). Disco divas also brought sexuality center stage, lyrically, sonically as well as spatially, as indicative of the 1960s and 1970s sexual zeitgeist that impacted on pop music. Discotheques would become safe spaces of sexual expression embellished with titillating anthems and centralized around the image and voice of the diva. Judy Kutulas argues that “[d]isco divas created a fantasy woman in songs like ‘Dancing Queen’ and ‘Hot Stuff,’ a woman whose desires completely coincided with men” (188). Similarly to torch divas or, basically, to every diva model, disco queens emulated unrealistic

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9 Frank elaborates that “[g]ay men interpreted popular songs such as Wilson Pickett’s “Don’t Knock My Love,” the Pointer Sisters’ ‘Yes We Can,’ Aretha Franklin’s ‘Respect,’ MFSB’s ‘Love Is the Message,’ and Gloria Gaynor’s ‘Never Can Say Goodbye’ as reinforcing gay pride and affirming gay identity, romance, and sexuality” (284).
standards of femininity. Considering they were predominantly women of color, they were burdened with an additional semiotic load of hypersexual and exoticized femininities. Queer men and particularly queer men of color identified with them primarily because their intersectional social position, crossed with racial/ethnic and sexual markers, was likewise perceived as exotic, deviant, and usually threatening. Hence, the site of/around the disco diva, be it material or aural, could embrace queer expression and encourage bonding very practically so.

Indeed, the disco diva has generated a culture or, better, established a cult. Her image is permeated with ambiguities, though, since she embodies a very physical notion of corporeal pleasures and, simultaneously, exists in an extra-social sphere, a pedestal, or even altar, if you like—an apt religious metaphor comprehensive of diva worshipping. Her body and image, as two very semantically charged sites of femininity, become highly coded in terms of gendered performance because of their inflated, unreal proportions. Kutulas underlines that “[d]ivas’ clothes, hair, and presentation reinforced the fantastic and sexual elements of their reputation” (188); she adds that “[t]he disco look was apolitical,” opposing the socio-political awareness and, at times, radicalness of its era (188). Their camp appeal largely emphasized surface over content and aesthetics over politics, favoring the erotics of the image and a complete detachment from reality—as the combination of disco with narcotics culture offered at the time—over an active engagement with their social reality. Disco divas occupied a liminal position between reality and fantasy, reenacting their divine status as musical goddesses.\(^\text{10}\) They worked toward a synesthetic effect that tilted more

\(^{10}\text{Consider the case of Amanda Lear, whose excessively stylized femininity and the mystique around her romance with David Bowie often led to misconceptions of her as transsexual, though those were the attributes that propelled her to cult stardom.}\)
toward sonic pleasure than visual—in fact, they rarely performed live\textsuperscript{11}—thus laying emphasis on their ethereal profile. It was this theatrically fabricated and highly performative construct of the disco diva that ultimately foddered camp culture, as they went on to dominate the queer club sound and serve as imitative templates for female impersonators.\textsuperscript{12}

While the two cases of the torch songstress and the disco diva would steadily inform camp culture, it was the new diva model of the 1980s that would rise to prominence, the cultural impact of which heavily shaped current perceptions of female performers and diva adoration. By shifting balance away from the Classical Hollywood model that stood central within camp corpora, yet by then already considered outdated, the 1980s music diva patterned herself after previous diva models, especially the disco queen, and became object (or subject) of camp appeal. Of key importance was the fact that the new diva was backed by the rise of music television, a major turn not only in conceptualizing and (re)imagining music cultures, but also in understanding notions of performance and performativity of gendered identities within the domain of music. Divas making their debut at the time, such as Madonna, Cyndi Lauper, Annie Lennox, Whitney Houston, and Kylie Minogue, were introduced to their audiences as audiovisual personae whose musical production was highly mediated through dramatic narratives. Becoming the new medium for experiencing music, the music video triggered a paradigm shift in the way music audiences perceived notions of

\textsuperscript{11} Kutulas supports that “[t]he flamboyance of the style appealed to some in the audience but put off others. Yet most people didn’t see disco divas perform live; disco was dance music, not concert music. There were not intimate concert experiences where fans might get to know performers they felt they already knew thanks to liner notes and lyrics. Disco women were all surface glitz; they otherwise conveyed little sense of individuality or personality” (189).

\textsuperscript{12} According to Kutulas “[d]isco queens serve[d] as models for cross-\textsuperscript{dressers}. The sexual ambiguity and role reversals implicit in disco further distanced it from ‘real life’ which meant that the sexual power of disco queens of either gender was somewhat illusory” (189). See also Brian Currid’s “‘We Are Family:’ House Music and Queer Performativity” in Cruising the Performative: Interventions into the Representation of Ethnicity, Nationality, and Sexuality (edited by Sue-Ellen Case, Philip Brett, and Susan Leigh Lester, 1995), and Nadine Hubb’s “‘I Will Survive’: Musical Mappings of Queer Social Space in a Disco Anthem” (2007).
performance and persona.\(^{13}\) In a way, the format of the music video allowed artists to experiment with their onstage/onscreen personae, enacting a variety of roles in different settings and, thus, inhabiting multiple identity positions. Audiences were being exposed to role-playing as an important mode of expressing their own identities in a rather flexible way. More specifically, for queer audiences, Steven Drukman explains that “[m]usic video, a performative form that, by its very nature, exposes identities as necessary fictions, is already imbued with camp” (88), adding that camp plays key role in queer spectators’ fascination with the performative forms of music due to its particularly diverse changeability of roles (88-89). The idea that the music of divas was being visualized in a playful, usually colorful and, above all, theatrical fashion certainly allowed for a diversity of images and personae that helped view identity as role-playing and bolstered spectators’ notions of self-expression.

It is important to note here that music television perpetuated what had already been a cultural standard: namely that music is gendered and genres appeal to audiences by this logic, assuming masculine and feminine topics and aesthetics and thus creating gendered dynamics.\(^{14}\) For instance, genres such as rock would often uphold an aggressive masculinity that is also authentic and politically active, whereas teen pop would usually be interpreted as feminine, non-serious, and apolitical (Biddle and Jarman-Ivens 3). Queer audiences seem to have challenged gendered dichotomies as they would often cross-identify with genres; for example, pop artists and divas, in particular, have been rather popular among gay male audiences, while hip-hop artists and rock divas were rather popular with lesbian ones. However, cross-identification risks turning into another generic stereotype that tends to

\(^{13}\) See the introduction of Simon Frith, Andrew Goodwin and Lawrence Grossberg’s edited volume on Sound and Vision: The Music Video Reader (1993).

\(^{14}\) Biddle and Jarman-Ivens argue that “musical genres are gendered spaces and operate according to highly codified conventions. Genres create gender formations by creating points de capiton (‘quilting points’) within their space between signifiers and gendered meaning” (9).
homogenize and generalize assumptions over what is possibly a collective inclination toward a musical genre. Simplistically and erroneously so, this framing forces a heteronormative understanding of musical taste according to which lesbian taste overlaps with that of heterosexual men, and, accordingly, gay men’s with that of heterosexual women, thereby reiterating binary perceptions already dominant in popular culture.\(^{15}\) Indeed, pop divas may have grown immensely popular with gay male audiences, but one should not assume that every gay man adores pop diva music, or, conversely, that divas only appeal to gay men and heterosexual women. Stan Hawkins argues that “in recent years numerous pop representations have deviated from the rigidity of heterosexual norms, with the emphasis falling on the theatrics of sexual subjectivity” (200). As models of postmodern culture and identity, pop divas favor gender fluidity and sexual assertiveness because practically they were constructed as commercial artists with cross-over audience market and their cultural production needs to be as inclusive as possible.

At the time this new diva model emerged, an out and proud queer culture was still at a niche state and the fact that pop divas brought gendered and sexual multiplicity into mainstream circles certainly encouraged queer visibility. Divas’ camp, a largely esoteric and secretive pleasure up until then, which was discursively extracted from codes and subtexts found in cultural corpora, progressively became ubiquitous in music culture. This was rather affirming for queer audiences and producers who were being accredited with artistic contributions to divas’ enterprises in the sense that they were witnessing their cultural praxes moving mainstream-wise. Alternating between images, divas served as multicultural mediators that, among others, incorporated more vividly queer signifiers of lifestyle and

\(^{15}\) “Denied the conventional ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ positions of spectatorship,” Andrew Ross notes, “and excluded by conventional representations of male-as-hero or narrative agent, and female-as-image or object of the spectacle, the gay male and lesbian subcultures express their lived spectatorship largely through imaginary or displaced relations to the images and discourses of a straight, ‘parent’ culture” (323).
expression. Madonna, for instance, is the case par excellence as she managed, through constant reinvention, to simultaneously address a variety of audiences, queer amongst them. Citing mostly from Latino, African-American, Catholic, and queer culture, Madonna’s persona exemplified the new diva model who was elastic in accommodating multiple roles at once. Madonna’s camp lies at the kernel of transformation, seen as playful art. In this light, divas like her were more open, commercially so, to culturally diverse presentations of persona as a means of approaching their audiences. As such, queer culture heavily informed divas’ perception of gender performance and, by extension, endorsed their flamboyant interpretation of gender, especially their notion of femininity. In addition to that, queer praxes gradually populated the divas’ stage and video performance, a fact that partly rendered the culture itself more visible and solidified divas as queer allies in terms of promoting non-normative sexual and gender diversity.

At the same time, divas bringing attention to queer culture inevitably raises questions of cultural appropriation. Praxes, styles, and fashions nested within queer culture, including, to mention just a few, the practices of drag and camp, queer talk, or the subcultural activities of the leather and S/M scene, somehow found their way into divas’ art presentations. The work of Madonna, Cher, and Annie Lennox, for example, has undeniably borrowed from queer culture’s artistic resources. Borrowing has always been of ambiguous character pointing to issues of authorship, authenticity, and representation and the way these influence the final outcome of a cultural product. One would argue that divas’ borrowing from queer culture is nothing but appropriation since they may often illegitimately decontextualize cultural images and practices for the sake of spectacle. On the other hand, in today’s culture,

as we shall see more in depth in the following chapters, cultural practices are widely shared in mass consumption, thus largely existing in an already decontextualized (or recontextualized) state, and there is little policing over who does indeed appropriate or pay homage to cultural authenticity and why. Divas may resort to queer references as a means of queer-baiting, but they may also acknowledge the act of citation as a tribute to their queer following; in fact, the former does not cancel out the latter. In turn, queer audiences can either endorse or disapprove of divas’ citational practices—although a strategically marketable targeting on the divas’ end ensures endorsement in the overwhelming majority of cases. Philip Auslander emphasizes that audiences play a key role in co-creating a pop persona that will be accustomed to their appeals and attuned with their sensibilities, arguing that “[they] try to make performers into who they need them to be, to fulfill a social function” (115, my italics). Queer audiences, to a great extent, will allow divas to engage with their culture because they need to validate their cultural praxes as contributive to the divas’ creative processes. The latter may also be assigned with the role of cultural ambassadors or advocates, as has been previously mentioned, thus reifying their social role as allies.

Divas wishing to cater to their queer market have more willfully directed their persona and spectacle towards a queer aesthetics and politics. While previous models appeared less engaged, creating a spectatorial distance and setting themselves as objects of appeal, contemporary divas allow themselves to be more interactive with audiences and seem to be more in charge of the character-persona they inhabit. Their camp appeal might derive from audiences’ viewing them as objects of camp, hence it is only a matter of reception, but can as well be a self-conscious employing of theatrics aimed at generating camp pleasure
which will be filtered by the audiences as such.\textsuperscript{17} Also, by immersing themselves in the practices of queer culture, collaborating with queer artists or, of course, being queer themselves, divas become connoisseurs who will eventually get to implement their cultural knowledge into their personae and performances. For instance, the divas treated as case subjects in this research have all involved queer producers, stage and art directors, choreographers, and stylists in their performance projects, thereby adopting a queer aesthetic that seeks to enervate their spectacle with cultural components of the queer community. Moreover, many a time they are active partakers in the queer movement, thus ascribing a socio-political role to their persona. From HIV/AIDS activism to gender diversity awareness strategies, divas have aligned themselves with various social strands of the queer movement perhaps as another market act, albeit one with socio-political valence.

Pop divas and their managerial teams have nowadays come up with novel promotional strategies as a means of meeting their audiences’ needs. Though the music video has remained a primary tool in visualizing music material, the culture of music television so prevalent in the pre-millennial years has to a great extent been eclipsed by digital culture. The relationship between divas and audiences is now largely formulated through online media, thus reinvigorating the ways artists and fans communicate and, importantly, expanding target markets and commercial impact. As seemingly every aspect and product of pop culture, divas have social media presence and their work is mainly distributed via the internet. The usage of socials such as Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and Snapchat, among others, has become a mandatory outreach, giving audiences a sense/illusion of proximity

\textsuperscript{17} Philip Core argues that “camp is in the eyes of the beholder” (7), meaning that one can only interpret a system of signs, postures, images, objects and icons as camp. It can also be argued, though, that one can direct the process of interpretation by intervening into camp’s coding process. This is more feasible when talking about performances of camp, wherein acts can be controlled, dramatized, staged, and generally orchestrated to one’s will.
with their adored artists. Advertising through online media has also enlarged divas’ market radius allowing for global coverage instantly and more easily. With regard to queer audiences, divas are keener on digitally exercising their social role as queer allies by taking to social media and publicly voicing their support. Their celebrity status may often serve positively in broadly raising awareness on issues of gender in/equality and freedom of expression, since they may utilize their influential personae to promote campaigns; a noteworthy example here is Kylie Minogue’s contribution to the gay marriage campaign in Australia.\textsuperscript{18} They may also directly address queer audiences, thereby forging their affiliation with them and creating a sense of exclusivity; for instance, in promoting her \textit{Rebel Heart} album (2015), Madonna partnered with gay dating app Grindr to host a contest out of which winners would get the chance to chat with her through the platform. Last but not least—and this is what this research pays attention to—live performance remains steadily one of the most effective, perhaps even traditional ways of divas approaching audiences, which compensates for the immateriality and distance media culture creates. Concert touring is still regarded as a profitable venture for music artists as well as a direct validation of the artist-audience relationship, and divas have notoriously upped the ante in live performance, embarking on extravagant tours around the globe. In light of this, I would like now to turn to the character of the diva spectacle in relation to queer audiences and, from a global perspective, examine the dissemination of queer culture through arena concerts.

\textsuperscript{18} The “Say I Do, Down Under” campaign promoted marriage equality in Australia to which Minogue openly voiced support via her social media, helped create related merchandise and eventually applauded when the bill passed.
**Queer Audiences: Global Gay Culture, the Arena Tour Spectacle, and Fandom**

Inasmuch as this study concerns itself with international divas, it is important to underline that their affiliation with queer culture and, by extension, notions of gender performance, sexuality, queer aesthetics and politics enclosed in their personae and work meet a global audience, which is diverse and idiosyncratic by default. In arguing that divas are mediators of queer culture, one has to identify this culture as predominantly Western and, in particular, Euro-American-oriented. Therefore, what instructs their personae and performances are perspectives of a Western queer culture which, compared to others worldwide, has occupied more of an epicenter in terms of visibility and documentation. This immediately raises questions of power dynamics in relation to the nature of the divas’ character and spectacle vis-à-vis local receptions. More specifically, European culture as exemplified and perhaps monopolized by the region’s most economically and culturally influential countries, such as Germany, the UK, France, Sweden, and Spain, has served as home for a nascent queer lifestyle and political movement—a proto-queer culture, if you like. European LGBT+ communities currently have a vibrant presence in most European cities and queer tourism and entertainment seem to flourish in metropoles, such as Berlin, Barcelona, Milan, and Amsterdam. In a similar vein, American popular culture, as today’s dominant global trend-setter,\(^1\) has lately been more queer-inclusive, paying particular attention to issues of visibility and representation; consider how the film, music, cable television, and comic book industries are increasingly featuring queer narratives, characters, and styles which serve as fodder for mainstream productions and are then circulated globally.

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\(^{1}\)Richard Pells enumerates the reasons why America has emerged as a global cultural phenomenon and capitalist power, among them being the wide coverage of American media conglomerates; the effective establishing of English as the language of mass communication; the size of American population and its key role in creating a solid domestic market with expansive potential; and, last but not least, the ability of American market to draw ideas from foreign cultures and fashions, repackage them and sell them back (144-45).
The advent of social media has also contributed in disseminating these perspectives of queer living, sometimes ignoring the plurality of queer communities worldwide. Developing in conditions of rapid economy and neoliberal politics can be understood as the principal reason why Western queer culture has emerged as a dominant paradigm. This allowed certain queer groups to exercise their cultural power through investment, literally and figuratively buying their way into today’s mainstream culture and, consequently, (over)projecting specific aspects of queer living.20

As our understanding of a now thriving global gay culture is heavily informed by the Euro-American perspective in the sense that politics, lifestyle, and culture-making are reflective of this particular paradigm, non-Western queer communities are balancing between local politics regarding non-normative sexual and gendered expressions, and the socio-political vocabulary brought along by global gay culture.21 Dennis Altman argues that:

[i]he assertion of ‘Asian’ and ‘African’ values as a counter to what is perceived as imported Western individualistic values is a growing part of nationalist ideologies in a number of countries, and often includes claims that homosexuality is a ‘Western

20 By no means does this argument wish to overlook or downgrade the political struggle of Western queer culture to social and civil achievements. At the same time, one has to take into consideration that certain privileged groups among queer communities, especially white, middle-class gay men and lesbians, managed to largely formulate today’s queer culture due to financial, social, racial, and political benefits. For further reading, consider the works of Steve Valocchi, “The Class-Inflected Nature of Gay Identity” (1999) and “Individual Identities, Collective Identities, and Organization Structure: The Relationship of the Political Left and Gay Liberation in the United States” (2001) as well as Alexandra Chasin’s Selling Out: The Gay & Lesbian Movement Goes to Market (2000).

21 In querying whether same-sex discrimination in many counties is produced either by nationalism or globalization, David Murray makes an accurate point when arguing that “[o]ne could make a a very good case for stating that it is homophobia that has been successfully globalized, not global gay consumer culture” (5). As he explains, “[w]e should also be suspicious of the claim that homophobia is simply produced in relation to the rise of gay and lesbian activism around the globe which in turn results from the arrival of the foreign sociosocial category ‘the homosexual’ via various modalities (tourism, migration, media, the Internet)” (5-6). “In other contexts,” he adds, “the rise of ‘gay identity’ constructed through transnational commodity aesthetics, political activism, and new modes of electronic communication has come to represent, for some, a more cosmopolitan and modern nationalism but has simultaneously created a backlash against this figure who represents, for others, ‘foreign’ sexual values imported through foreign non-governmental organizations and popular culture” (8).
import’, despite evidence of well-established pre-colonial homosexual cultures and practices. (180)

The lexicon of LGBT+ identities along with the political nuances they carry has served as a comprehensive and rather instructive agenda for local nascent LGBT+ movements worldwide that seem to adopt and recontextualize them as best fitting their cultural idiosyncrasy. At the same time, though, it has opened the way to the idea of a governing global gay culture the practices and values of which seem to have taken over. Proposing Argentina and Mexico as two non-English speaking countries whose queer activism was initially part of local struggle and movements, Altman underlines that “commercial pressures and American influence were too strong, and gradually both a gay movement and a commercially gay world emerged in these places, superficially at least with strong American influence” (71). Demonstrative of that is also the fact that Pride celebrations are more and more becoming integral to world queer movements, thus placing the Stonewall riots, the event that was shaped out of queer struggle in America and largely concentrated the gay liberation pulse around it, at the center of global queer history. 22 Stonewall’s importance accrues from and frames the very idea that queer communities rising to resist police harassment and social marginalization is after all a deeply democratic one in its potential to appeal to every oppressed queer individual. However, its emergence in contemporary global gay culture as the epitome of queer struggle risks foregrounding the American experience as quintessential and may, by extrapolation, obstruct local political fruition.

22 It should be noted that Stonewall was one of the many aspects of political gay struggle in America, not the one. As Altman argues, “[m]odern gay liberation was not born alone at the Stonewall Inn, as current mythology (and several films) encourage us to believe. There were simultaneous developments of a new sexual radicalism in California, while the 1968 students movements in Paris and Italy saw the emergence of radical homosexual groups, which drew on the heady mix of radical Freudsinsim, Marxism and anarchism that characterized that period” (2013, 53).
As best indicating the politics and practices of global gay culture, Prides are indeed noteworthy modern structures that have managed to gain cross-over political validation in terms of visibility and longevity. What perhaps makes the tradition of Pride events so widely received is their colorful presentation of a community that celebrates freedom of sexual and gender expression. In most parts, though, Prides’ promotional success is market-driven as they constitute lucrative financial enterprises with the ability to attract large consumer audiences. Apart from groups and organizations joining the, more often than not, week-long celebrations culminating around the march, usually setting up fanfare and LGBT-related market fora, Prides can also boost local economies since they serve as magnets for gay tourism. Currently, private companies and global conglomerates are also joining in with sponsorships and Pride-exclusive campaigns, marking the events as inextricably capitalist-bound.23 Encouraging as it is to acknowledge that Prides are now even blooming in countries where sexual conservatism dominates political and social thought, their consumerist character and their emphasis on a celebratory culture risks mitigating their political potential. Worse, in countries where the queer movement still needs to go through a process of socio-political osmosis, Prides and, by extension, local queer communities will usually be at the recipient end of criticism, ridicule, or even violence.24

The reason why I have drawn attention to the socio-political and economic reality around Prides is to establish a coherent context around the idea of global gay culture not only as a signifier of Western values, histories, and expressions, but also as a carrier of a social

23 Consider campaigns from sporting and fashion industries such as Adidas and H&M, which largely publicize partnerships with LGBT+ individuals in light of Pride events.
24 The Russian LGBT+ community, for instance, has been facing discriminatory constitutional laws on the grounds of amorality; Moscow has consecutively banned gay prides for the past ten years (Amnesty International). In Turkey, Istanbul Pride has been banned since 2015 for security reasons as authorities are concerned over public outbursts against LGBT+ members (Dittrich 2018). It goes without saying that in countries where homosexuality is still penalized, such as Kenya, Nigeria, or Uganda, Prides imagine a utopian act as these areas are still home to homophobic violence; Uganda’s LGBT+ activist David Kato, for instance, was brutally murdered in 2011 for promoting homosexual lifestyle and rights (Gettleman 2011).
stigma associated with notions of promiscuity and camp. First of all, what is inherent about global gay culture is an erroneous assumption that it is a gay male culture. Gay men often come across as disproportionately visible, emerging as perhaps the most privileged group in the LGBT+ community—especially when markers of whiteness and class are factored in—and serving as a sort of prototype for gendered and sexual evaluations. Even the use of the term “gay” in what is defined as gay culture, an umbrella term that stands for LGBT+ culture in general, may imply that it is a culture centered on and around gay men. At the same time, precisely because global gay culture implies male homosexuality, gay masculinity may usually become the primary target of derision. Images of Prides that usually circulate media, especially those occupying a more conservative place on the political spectrum, lay emphasis on a rampant culture personified in the figures of the muscle man and the drag queen. Though these figures represent only certain aspects of queer culture, they serve as fodder for criticism because of their hyper-sexualized and highly gendered profiles. As two polar ends of the popular, if stereotypical, images of gay men, i.e. the hunk and the camp, muscle men and drag queens exemplify respectively the notions of virility and campness, which, in their extremes, are read as threatening by heteronormative culture: the former because it foregrounds a sexually aggressive culture associated with virile masculinity; and, the latter because it embodies the flamboyant and hysterically effeminate side, markers of both decadence and promiscuity.

Returning to the primary focus of this project, similarly to Prides, the diva spectacle, as largely relying on queer aesthetics and, at times, itself being a derivative of queer culture,

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25 Many lesbians identify or come out as gay, despite the fact that lesbian has been established as the equivalent of gay for homosexual women. This is indicative of the fact that gay has been widely used, presumably because of its practicality. The history of the word is marked with the homosexual male subject and, in fact, demonstrates that homosexual identities are built around this presupposition. For more on the history of the terms, see Philip Herbst’s entries of gay and lesbian in Wimmin, Wimps, and Wallflowers An Encyclopædic Dictionary of Gender and Sexual Orientation Bias in the United States (2001)
is crossed with markers of Western-ness as well as preconceptions linked with queer expression. The stage of the diva can indeed serve as a rich ground to construe the social dynamics of queer culture as this is orchestrated around the body of the divas in relation to audience reception and global/local perspectives. First and foremost, the diva spectacle should always be contextualized within the category of the pop music concert the *raison d'être* of which is entertainment. Its very own scope, most of the times, is concerned with the idea of the spectacle which employs theatries of artifice, erotic appeal, and shock value to address its audiences’ sentiments. As such, there is a default principle in its celebratory nature that establishes it as non-serious and lite in content, hence, apolitical. This framework, in fact, follows a strand to the generic division between rock and pop music in which the former is traditionally marked as authentic, politically and socially aware, even with a revolutionary and grassroots edge, whereas the latter is defined by its commercial drive and superficiality. More importantly, this division is gendered since rock exemplifies a masculine ideal as opposed to pop’s feminine character. Think of the way the character of shows by artists such as Roger Waters (Pink Floyd), U2, Red Hot Chili Peppers, are filtered in the public mind compared to those of divas examined in this project. Embellished with queer aesthetics, the diva spectacle is outlined as flamboyant, completely aligning itself with an effeminate/feminized aesthetic and thus severing most of the ties with the masculine-framed rock concert show. In light of this, one would find hard to ascribe political character to the works of artists like Kylie Minogue, and consider it provoking in any other terms than erotic or sexual.

I would like to argue, however, that to assess the diva spectacle as apolitical is to ignore its plurality. Juxtaposing it to the alleged authenticity and hegemonic masculinity of the rock concert may lead to a sexist evaluation of the female-led concert as incapable of
concerning itself with anything other than female sexuality, let alone politics.²⁶ A reason may be that, structurally, a diva show lays emphasis on aesthetics. Diva concerts are built around the idea of a musical show which is usually extravagantly staged; light showcases, huge screens with backdrop extra-concert footage,²⁷ hyperactive, titillating dancer/posers, lavish props, and often unconventional constructions—as we shall see in more detail in the following chapters—comprise the diva stage, turning it into an arena-size theatrical production. In comparing the concerts of Janet Jackson, Katy Perry, Mariah Carey or Jennifer Lopez to those of rock artists such as Metallica or Muse, as well as pop male artists such as Justin Timberlake, Bruno Mars, and Maroon 5, one would soon trace differences in terms of visuals, supporting props, and costuming, with the female concert coming across as notably more elaborate, colorful, and histrionic than its male counterpart. Even concerts by male artists, including U2, Roger Waters, and Michael Jackson, who have time and again come up with daunting productions, seem aesthetically toned-down as opposed to the extravagant spectacle divas offer. Arguably, from their very structural core, female and male concerts follow a gendered division: the former, being ornate and fashioned around the female star, abides by traditionally feminine/ized characteristics of ornamentation, whereas the latter sticks to more minimal and simple structures implying that emphasis should be given to the aural and lyrical content of the show.

The plurality of the diva show, though, lies precisely at its theatricality. The extravaganzas created by divas enable dramatic fluidities on stage, thus allowing divas to

²⁶ Of course, this is also perpetuated with musical genres per se and their lyrical content. The tradition of rock music abounds with politically-charged songtexts as a means of addressing a more mature and socially engaged audience, while pop music, the primary target market of which are young audiences, usually employs narratives of romance, sex, and fun.

²⁷ Examining concert shows both by female and male artists, I have found that pre-recorded material with narrative content featuring the artist and functioning as backdrop video for the concert, appear more in divas’ shows and seem to add meta-textual information on their performing persona. In this way, divas underline the fictitious character of their persona and undergird their live show with narrative power.
morph in and out of roles. Built out of thematic sections, the shows unfold into acts that see artists and their surrounding crew in new settings. Tour shows, including those of Madonna or Lady Gaga, usually even exhibit narrative structures as well, a fact that brings their concerts closer to a musical theater experience. In a way similar to their music videos, diva shows lay equal emphasis on aural and visual showcase. In this way, they can accommodate an array of narrative arcs and themes wherein divas have the opportunity not only to be creative, but also address various topics through performance. Madonna, for instance, has frequently featured political commentary in her backdrop visuals, while Lady Gaga has employed performance art to touch upon body politics and discrimination. More importantly, their alternating between images embodies a postmodern approach of identity understanding, cultivating into their audiences the idea that insofar as identities are constructs, they are, to a great degree, performed.  

Considering that the divas’ audiences largely consist of queer groups, this idea becomes important in promoting an ethos of sexual and gender diversity. Taking also into consideration that a lot of thematic acts pay particular attention to queer expression, drawing from queer scenes and citing related material, the diva show ultimately becomes inclusive, transforming into a space which fosters the notions of queer representation and collectivity.

Since the performed show is part of a world tour, its main concept, content, and ethos are brought in front of an audience which is highly diverse in terms of ethnicity, race, religion, sexuality, and gender. Though some changes regarding the setlist or stage of the

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28 Following the Butlerian notion of performativity, according to which “performativity must be understood not as a singular or deliberate ‘act,’ but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names” (1993, 2), Matt Hills explicates his theory of music fans performing their “fan identity” by distinguishing between performance and performativity: the former “presupposes a willful and volitional subject,” whereas the latter “in no way presupposes a choosing subject” (158). I expand on this point of fan’s gender performance through the praxis of audience drag in the last chapter of this project.
show may occur from time to time, the core structure remains unaltered. Therefore, practically the same show is presented to all audiences. What does significantly vary, though, concerns reception, not production. A Buenos Aires audience, for example, may exhibit different responses to a show than a London one, simply because each locale is crossed by different markers of social identities and politics. For instance, Madonna’s *Confessions Tour* (2006), which featured the notorious act of the singer performing hung on a crucifix, caused quite a stir to much of her Catholic audience in Rome as well as the Vatican. Conversely, Beyoncé catered specifically to her New Orleans audience by inviting on stage a local act as part of her *Formation Tour* (2016). Locales play a key role in world tours and divas, being aware of their shows’ content, may even seek to create a memorable occasion or even controversy, as was the case with Madonna, so as to benefit from publicity. On the other hand, their laying emphasis on the specificity of locales, either by focusing on cultural aspects or even by pushing local boundaries, can often help in bringing attention to socio-cultural aspects that would have otherwise remained unaddressed. Queer culture is one of them since queer expression is central to both the divas’ productions and audiences. Beyoncé’s guest act for the New Orleans show, for that matter, was Big Freedia, a transgender artist from the local rap/bounce scene who performs in drag and helped brought important focus on local queer representation (see more on the third chapter). Exposing audiences whose idiosyncrasy remains attached to a largely heteronormative and patriarchal parent culture to notions and presentations of queerness, manifest through camp or incorporating explicit sexual diversity, diva shows contribute to queer visibility on a global

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29 For example, when being part of a festival showcase, the duration of the show may be reduced. Also, changes in stage structure are often venue-specific, depending usually on capacity. Production teams of a tour typically come with alternative plans of a show (A show, B show etc., where A stands for the designed prototype) so as to meet the prerequisites of a festival or venue event (Baker 2016).

level. The fact that such aspects of the shows challenge local perceptions regarding not only gender and sexual expression, but popular entertainment as well, instills into the diva spectacle a quasi-political character.

In light of this, divas’ queer audiences are welcomed into a performative environment that encourages diversity and expression. This is rather important considering that these shows are also played in areas that have traditionally been antithetical, socially, politically, or even legislatively, to queer communities. The shows of Madonna and Lady Gaga in Moscow, for instance, have strongly been opposed by Russian conservative groups because they allegedly promoted homosexuality (see more on the first and fourth chapters). Despite serving as magnets for conservative criticism, in most parts diva concerts provide queer groups with a sense of inclusion and belonging. Reception of divas from local queer audiences is not simply positive, but vibrantly supported since divas offer open spaces for expression and support to their queer audiences. In a way, the shows create isles of queer temporality and spatiality, allowing for identification and affect, at least for the duration of, and within the contours of the concert. Yet, one should always be attentive to the means under which these spatio-temporal occasions are created: namely, pop culture market economy. For Jack Halberstam, “‘queer time’ is a term for these specific models of temporality that emerge within postmodernism once one leaves the temporal frames of bourgeois reproduction and family, longevity, risk/safety, and inheritance,” while “[q]ueer space’ refers to the queer place-making practices within post-modernism in which queer people engage and it also describes the new understandings of space enabled by the production of queer counterpublics”31 (6). As is also the case with Prides, diva shows are

31 Halberstam sees counterpublics as “spaces created and altered by certain subcultures for their own uses,” such as the appropriation of underground porn theaters by queer men seeking pleasure (186). The writer argues that “there should be a collective project(s) that is rewarded not by capital or visibility, not by the
driven by consumerist operations; hence, their opening of a queer space and time is also underlined with a capitalist ethos and does not effectively abide by Halberstam’s concept in which a process of rupture with the normative is necessary to attain queer spatiality and temporality. Queer audiences are by no means radically breaking any ties with normative reality around them in attending a diva gig; on the contrary, as consumers, they actively partake, along with the heteronormative members of the audience, in the capitalist processes that give birth to divas and spectacles. They do, however, manage to create spaces of identification and belonging, perhaps in a utopian way and momentarily so, by way of escapism, allowing themselves to enter the camp reality of the diva spectacle and express their queerness through their connecting with divas and other queer individuals at that said time of the concert.

Indicative of that is audiences’ camp response to diva spectacles. By attuning themselves with the aesthetic character of the show and with the diva-character presented onstage, audiences engage in a process of camping-up their performance of gender as a means of, firstly, validating their affiliation with the performing diva and, secondly, affirming their own identity. Their position as receivers and producers of camp adds to the idea of queer temporality and spatiality as they seem to actively perform a queer tradition. In fact, their becoming connoisseurs and performers of camp in light of the diva spectacle transcends the temporal and spatial liminality of the concert show by establishing a continuity of queer praxis through the performance of camp. As has been explicated earlier in this project, divas’ performance and posture have a firm basis in the culture of camp and have come to embody a popular manifestation of it. Being simultaneously producers and objects of camp, they infuse their spectacles with parody and theatricalization of gendered market, but by an affective connection with those people who will eventually be the vessels of memory for all we (now) forget” (187).
reality, offering ironic twists and toying with familiar tropes and narratives to a queer effect. In the receiving end, queer audiences do not necessarily identify with the performing divas, but rather with the colorfully queer(ed) reality surrounding them during the particular special event as well as the tools, images, and perceptions diva camp offers. In critically approaching the process of identification of gay male culture with divas, such as Joan Crawford, David Halperin explains that the term itself is not particularly helpful in our understanding of the diva adoration pattern (258-9). Rather, the writer argues, “[w]hat we may be dealing with, in the end, is a specific kind of engagement that somehow mobilizes complex relations of similarity and difference,” a process that “produces fields of practice and feeling that map our possibilities for contact or interrelation among cultural forms and their audiences, consumers, or publics, and that get transmitted from one generation to another” (259). I would like to extend the argument further and propose the diva show and the body of the audience as an actual field of practice—and praxis, in the dramatic sense—that reifies the relationship between divas and queer audiences.

Performing camp, rather than merely absorbing it, is the cornerstone of this very reification. Halperin follows a theoretical tradition of approaching camp through film divas whose audiences were mostly receivers of camp—and if they were producers, they would either be sharers of cultural knowledge/data or they would be actual performers found in the well-known circles of glamorous impersonation. What the camp tradition of the music diva has given is more access to the performative aspects and mechanics of camp, in part due to adding to its popularization and also because of a more engaged artist-audience connection. Another reason is that camp is not anymore the arcane culture shared by the queer few that it used to be, but is widely perceived and enjoyed by many—even non-queer—consumers. It is my contention that its praxis still remains grounded on a queer subject, though, and its
reiteration or performance requires of its producers to actively adopt its aspects, be they mannerisms, aesthetics, discourse or style; hence, to immerse themselves in, and continue the act of queering, perhaps playfully so, cultural texts, images, even identities. Diva fans, for instance, transforming into the diva herself in a praxis that draws from the field of impersonation best demonstrates this immersion into the mechanics of camp. I identify this praxis as *audience drag*, a camp reconfiguration of the gendered self into the onstage diva persona which sees audiences employing the art/craft of drag and the cultural knowledge around the diva as a way to express queerness, but also fandom and collectivity.

By proposing audience drag as a contemporary camp praxis, this project wishes to move away from previous theoretical models of camp whose reception—mainly in the film diva tradition—was largely viewed as passive. Drawing from the field of popular culture and fan studies will help towards approaching audience reception of diva camp as active partaking in circulating, performing, and preserving the tradition of diva worship. Contrary to the idea of passive audiences as inherent to understandings of mass entertainment most famously theorized by the Frankfurt School. Lawrence Grossberg argues that “[a]udiences are constantly making their cultural environment from the cultural resources that are available to them. Thus, audiences are not made up of cultural dopes” (53). This idea nests into fan cultures which, albeit completely aware of their status as pop culture consumers, are seen as moving beyond the seemingly nullifying effect of mass culture in consciously

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32 Richard Butsch argues that “[t]he concept of mass... is a term of the twentieth century, when social critics became less concerned with crowds and more with an inert mass and isolated individuals” (2). Social theory connected to the Frankfurt School framed a passive consumer audience who fails to critically filter its cultural surroundings. Horkheimer and Adorno, as its leading critics, saw mass consumption and the culture industry perpetuating passive consumers, arguing that “[a]s naturally as the ruled always took the morality imposed upon them more seriously than did the rulers themselves, the deceived masses are today captivated by the myth of success even more than the successful are. Immovably, they insist on the very ideology which enslaves them” (134). Elsewhere, Adorno reiterates that the culture industry is ultimately deceptive in “imped[ing] the development of autonomous, independent individuals who judge and decide consciously for themselves” (106).
approaching their objects of adoration and critically navigating through ideological fixity. John Fiske underlines that “[f]andom offers ways of filling cultural lack and provides the social prestige and self-esteem that go with cultural capital” (33). Though fandom is inevitably circumscribed by capitalist/consumerist grids, one cannot doubt that it is a mode of expression that allows space for socialization and self-progress through the processes of collectivity and culture-sharing. Currently, fan cultures appear to be more engaged in cultural production themselves, being active co-creators of pop texts, images, and lifestyles, especially considering the pool of cultural knowledge they have access to through digital culture as well as the prospects for connectivity and instant gratification the latter provides.

As such, diva fans emulate this contemporary, post-passive model of fandom. In what George Ritzer and Nathan Jurgenson identify as prosumption, namely a simultaneous process of production and consumption, absorption of popular culture not only moves away from traditional views of consumers as passive, but, most importantly, challenges the very notion of the “consumer” by introducing that of the “prosumer,” who willingly buys into, as well as (re)produces and shares popular culture.33 The concept of the “prosumer” is vital in our understanding of contemporary fan culture, in general, and diva fans, in particular. In knowingly immersing themselves into the cultural body of the diva through practices such as audience drag, fans not only get to apply, share, and demonstrate their cultural knowledge, but also manage to claim quasi-authorial positions in the way pop culture shapes their identities. Diva worship in its Classical Hollywood stage, for instance, generated a gay

33 Originally drawing from Alvin Toffler' concept of prosumption for which the writer proposed “the rise of the prosumer” as indicative of a capitalist state that sees the processes of production and consumption as ultimately integrated (1980, 265), Ritzer and Jurgenson argue that prosumers are willing to simultaneously produce and consume in what appears a reproductive cycle that ignores effort value parameters (22). Ritzer and Jurgenson apply this model on web usage, indicating that websites like Amazon, Wikipedia and Facebook are to a large—and controllable—extent user-operated in the sense that users are free to sell and buy products, read and edit information, present and view visual material—in a sense simultaneously produce and consume culture (19-20).
male-centered camp culture that allowed closeted gay men to utilize diva trivia as shared codes that helped them identify (with) each other and establish bonds. As Harris notices though, “[b]ecause gay culture is becoming less closeted…the need to seal our furtive communal bond through the secret handshake of Hollywood trivia is disappearing,” adding that “[l]iberation is destroying the need for celebrity culture as a group marker, as a way of expressing tribal inclusion in a private membership club of the cognoscenti” (33). This, however, is demonstrative of a self-conscious queer fan culture that does not solely rely on practices like diva worship to make sense of their communal world and identity. For queer audiences now, diva camp is transparent, meaning that they can see through its mechanisms as well as the pleasures and possibilities it offers. Its consistency and prevalence are indeed less indicative of a need to utilize its codes toward communing one’s covert queerness, as it used to be, but gravitates more towards an acknowledgment of divas as relevant with, and contributive to the formation of queer culture as we currently know it. One will notice how divas still occupy much ground in everyday (Western) queer culture and discourse—from the bar scene to internet memes to the local community center to daily discourse—thereby maintaining their role as cultural mediators that promote inclusion, community, and bonding. Diva camp has in a sense become a joint in the cultural body of queer communities, a sort of an established tradition, if you like, that currently operates on a global level.

**Methodology and Chapters**

In addressing the questions presented earlier here, I will be using specific divas’ international tour shows as primary material for my analysis. I approach live performances as a largely unexplored and fecund terrain for critical study not only as regards the subject matter of this project, which is diva camp and queer audiences, but also in the general sense
of mass entertainment, cultural production, and the politics of representation. More specifically, diva shows are creative amalgams fused out of different genre-strands of performance, such as the rock music concert and musical theater, and also draw from the performative traditions of burlesque, disco, and even the house and rave scene. Therefore, contextualizing them within the broader field of performance, my analysis centers on the live interpretation of divas’ songs and is mostly concerned with staging, showcase, and delivery. Genre specificities foddering performed acts are also of prior importance and will be paid attention to in relation to their historical roots and (re)signification within the diva show. For instance, delving into the disco scene, which is among the most frequent sources of citation for the diva stage, is of primary importance in understanding both its performative lexicon and aesthetic structures as well as its origins in gay nightlife entertainment and the social surroundings that gave birth to it in the first place and, subsequently, marked its decline.

In selecting the examined material, I have set a timescale of approximately ten years, so as to draw from plenty of cases that can corroborate the basic premises of consistency, reiteration, and circulation of the diva adoration model. The ten-year coverage suffices to meet the needs of a manageable research project since a longer one would either require to be extremely selective and frugal over the examined material, thereby entailing the loss of some noteworthy details, or would, conversely, be disproportionally extensive, hence reader non-friendly. What primarily governs this decision, though, is to cover a period of time—starting as early as 2005 with Kylie Minogue’s Showgirl Tour—that can effectively annotate

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34 Performance here is directly connected to Schechnerian and post-Schechnerian conceptualizations of the term (and, by extension, its research field) to include the staging and attendance of social events, such as theater, concerts, sports, and rituals, among others, in which performance encompasses dramatization, audience reception as well as spatio-temporal effects at work. For more, see Richard Schechner’s Performance Theory (1977) and Nathan Stucky and Cynthia Wimmer’s edited volume on Teaching Performance Studies (2002).
the emergence of digital culture and, in particular, the rise of online social media as the leading channel of pop culture dissemination and distribution. While the internet has significantly affected the way music is produced and consumed, live concerts are still privileged to be a reliable source of finance for artists as well as to maintain an aura of authenticity due to their “liveness”\(^{35}\) and the ability to bring performers and audiences in proximity. As Alice O’Grady indicates, “(f)or artists the live event has become the latest weapon in the arsenal against the ubiquity of file sharing, downloads and easy access to music via Spotify and YouTube but, in return, audiences expect the live sound to be as close to the recorded version as possible, and they want a show” (117). One cannot simply overlook the impact digital culture has brought on audience reception as well, since live performances have also increasingly become mediatized events shared both by artists and audiences online, thereby making the newness of each spectacle readily available to the global web.\(^{36}\) Audiences’ recorded material—raw footage, that is—may even provide access to shows or parts of a show that would otherwise be unavailable to audiences as artists will not always record and release concert footage for commercial use. As a matter of fact, this research project has largely benefited from unprofessional online material, thus proving that digital culture can serve as a critical archival tool.

In processing my case studies, I am applying a camp reading of divas’ shows. Of course, the diva spectacle by and large can be characterized as camp in the way, for instance,

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\(^{35}\) Discussing the concept of liveness, Auslander stands critical before the binary opposition of live performance and mediatized culture, arguing that traditional views prioritizing the live over the mediatized form/event by valuing the former as authentic over the latter’s artificiality, seem to invoke clichés and appear obsolete in the modern media-saturated environment (1999, 2-3). It is true though that when it comes to music concerts, the notion of liveness still relies on this presupposition and both performers and audiences do not seem close to abandoning the physicality of the live performance.

\(^{36}\) O’Grady notes that “perhaps due to the improved and increased remote accessibility to such events, attitudes to authenticity of ‘being there’ are undergoing a paradigm shift. We want to experience the event for ourselves, physically, but at the same time we want to record our presence and broadcast it so that others can observe our participation” (120).
musical theater and disco are, since not only does it fuse a variety of histrionic elements and favors flamboyant performances, but it also generates camp meanings through its acts, playing with notions of gender and sexuality onstage as well as with the idea of a camped-up staged world unfolding around the diva. We will see, for example, how Kylie Minogue and Lady Gaga create over-the-top stage environments or how Beyoncé manages to feminize her performances through camp kinesis. Apart from approaching the tour shows holistically, taking into account their main structure, overarching themes, and motifs, as well as social, political, and historical details undergirding them, what I will primarily be focusing on are specific acts within the shows where a camp synergy is at work. By that I mean the effect accruing from a very particular performance, gimmick or narrative that dramatizes around the diva and successfully foregrounds the principal attributes of camp: namely, (gender) playfulness, exaggeration, flamboyance, irony, parody, retromania, and nostalgia, to name just a few. An essential component of the show, the acts are rather important in binding the show together and offer a kaleidoscopic view into the stage of the diva in her various personae, allowing her to smoothly transition from setting to setting and from role to role. Therefore, a critical approach of them is mandatory in helping us understand where the diva camp nests and then extend to the way this becomes communed to audiences.

Aside from utilizing past and present bibliography on camp in order to explore the case studies, I have also drawn from a variety of secondary sources. First and foremost, reviews by professional concert and music critics found on online magazines and newspapers have significantly aided in approaching a concert show. Concert reviews are often

37 Although each one of these attributes may vary depending on the context surrounding camp, it is for the sake of brevity that I choose at this point not to address them more in depth, but rather explore them throughout this research. These characteristics are drawn from the large literature on camp and can be found explicated mostly, but not limited to, in the works of Sontag (1964), Newton (1972), Dyer (1976), Babuscio (1978), Meyer (1992), Robertson (1996), Cleto (1999), and Shugart/Waggoner (2008).
comprehensive in presenting aspects of a show in detail, but also in annotating audience reception. For that reason, I have turned to reviews from a variety of local posts in order to establish as more of a plural and less homogenizing view as possible of what this project treats as global audiences. Furthermore, I have approached creative and stage directors, choreographers, and producers involved with the show-making process. Albeit not novel, live performance is a research field that remains underexplored, considering the cultural and artistic capital that goes into it. As such, the mechanics and structures of a live show are currently shared only by those engaged in its production and critical analysis, thus mainly making available readings of the actual staged performance. I wanted this project to delve deeper into the operations of the spectacle and that partly led me to approach key figures associated with my case studies. Though establishing contact with some of them has been challenging, I have managed to secure interviews with vogue instructor Jamel Prodigy (a.k.a. Derek Auguste), who has been active in the New York ball scene and has collaborated with pop artists, such as FKA Twigs, as well as Kylie Minogue’s long-term art director William Baker, whose contribution to this project was essential in not only helping to explore the persona of Kylie, but also in detailing the process of creating a live show.

Last but not least, my approach wishes to take into consideration the term usage with regard to queer groups and culture, in general. I use the term *queer* to refer to the culture in the general sense, including homosexual, bisexual, transsexual and transgender groups or cultural practices associated with these groups. While the term *gay* may be used interchangeably with *queer*, I try to limit its usage where needed as *gay* often implies *gay male* and may eclipse other groups within the queer spectrum, especially if one takes into account how gay men usually come across as a more privileged and visible sexual
As far as identity politics is concerned, my usage of the *LGBT*+ umbrella term, where applied, will specifically indicate Western groups identified with the said movement and culture, since the birth of a coherent and politicized *LGBT*+ culture has its origins in the Western world. That is the reason why I do not use the umbrella term to refer to non-Western communities and groups; *queer*, as a more open term, is used instead. Also, practices like Pride, for instance, are treated within the *LGBT*+ context as they are largely performed under a very specific socio-political discourse, if not agenda. Conversely, practices such as drag or voguing are addressed as *queer* since their performance are not necessarily attached to a community identifying as *gay* or *transgender*, but are more broadly connected to queer culture. Finally, *queer* is also employed for those historical aspects of the culture that were prevalent prior to the gay liberation movements. *Homosexual* culture is acknowledged as an umbrella term that encompasses queer activity, practices, and lifestyle prior to the politicization of sexual identities, yet it largely fails to embrace concepts of bisexual, pansexual, or transgender expression, let alone being a carrier of clinical/pathologic connotations. Once again, *queer* emerges as a valid general term that covers for all principally because it resonates with the non-normative character of the aforementioned categories.

In structuring the chapters, though all of them center on the camp of divas and the exposition of it onstage, I set diva camp as the axis around which other critical conundrums revolve as well. The first chapter explores the camp of Madonna in relation to the

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38 Here, I concur with Simon Watney’s argument in that “[t]he great convenience of the term ‘queer’ today lies most immediately in its gender and race neutrality. This is only to remark that for many young Americans the term ‘gay’ is widely understood to mean ‘white,’ ‘male,’ ‘materialistic,’ and ‘thirtysomething.’ On the contrary, ‘queer’ asserts an identity that celebrates differences within a wider picture of sexual and social diversity” (52).

39 My use of the + indicator is for the sake of flexibility. Other popular terms use the *LGBTQI* abbreviation, wherein *Q* stands for *Questioning* and *I* for *Intersex* groups. *Q* may also stand for *Queer*, though I do side with the use of the term outside the *LGBT*+ identity spectrum as *queer* is more of a fluid state that often opposes the very concept of identity.
performative construct of the diva-persona. With her performances raising some very important questions with regard to a variety of subject matters, from feminism and pornography to activism and then some, Madonna has for years stimulated research interest with her controversial acts as well as her political advocacy. While one could argue that a Madonna studies project seems anachronistic since most academic interest on the artist peaked in the periods of 1980s and 1990s and gradually faded into the 2000s, the truth is that her performances are still fecund ground for research, especially when factored in are issues of ageism and the music industry as well as nostalgia indulgence and the social media era. Regarding live touring, not only have Madonna’s notorious showcases managed to preserve her status of an ardent arena performer, but have continuously stirred new interest in her persona. As evident in her tour acts, the artist is constantly reinventing herself by changing looks and seeking new music and dance styles; at the same time, though, she cannot help but be locked in her own name brand and the performance features that originally propelled her to stardom. As a result, she often ends up toying with generic themes and narratives already found in her work. This approach is simultaneously indicative of an exhaustive (self-) referential pool as well as a need to nostalgically appeal to her fans through her own image. This is exactly where I trace the roots of her camp appeal and production. Coupled with her drawing from queer scenes and sources, such as vogue and S/M, a fact that still raises questions on cultural appropriation, Madonna’s camp is a consciously queer(ing) approach of performance that wishes to maintain her icon within the diva tradition of queer culture.

Focusing on Kylie Minogue, the second chapter approaches the artist’s camp performance of femininity. Kylie is renowned for her Vegas-style extravaganzas which bring into the arena large groups of queer audiences, especially gay men. Her persona and stage are built upon and fashioned out of a camp imaginary with her hyperfeminine posture being
surrounded with ornate onstage details and embellished with vibrant soundtracks. The latter, in fact, are patterned out of the sounds and sensibility of the disco and dance/house scene, which have been fundamental in formulating queer musical and aesthetic taste. Kylie’s showgirl persona embodies the performed tradition of burlesque, as she toys with her onstage identities and offers a titillating look into her theatrical world. She establishes herself as an object of desire by traditional Western standards, but simultaneously undermines this position by drawing attention to the fictitious nature of her gender performance. Simultaneously, she fulfills a gay male fantasy by overtly drawing from existent camp culture and also by equally laying emphasis on the spectacle of the male body. Studying Kylie’s stage brings attention to an array of conundrums concerning the subject matter of camp and queer culture in general. The camp-macho binary is one of them as it foregrounds notions of effeminacy and machismo permeating gay male culture. Also, Kylie’s relationship with Baker, her creative director who overtly builds the artist’s spectacle upon/through specific queer angles, raises questions with regard to authorial intent and Kylie’s own agential role in her spectacle. As case studies, Kylie’s shows and persona have not until recently spawned academic interest simply because much of her persona was either compared to her contemporary Madonna or presented a lack of political valance. By looking on and around the Kylie spectacle, I wish to delve deeper into a largely underexplored stage persona, who for four decades now shapes and is shaped by queer culture.

In the third chapter, I center on the icon of Beyoncé Knowles and her stage interpretation of camp. Currently, the persona and performances of Beyoncé are at the epicenter of pop culture studies with cultural scholars approaching her icon from a variety of perspectives, especially those regarding race and gender. The artist’s recent projects have vigorously brought matters of racial representation and feminism center stage, reinvigorating
critical dialogue as regards racial and feminist discourse going mainstream. Criticism, in fact, seems polarized, since the artist is either hailed as the new assertive role model of a black woman who is fully in control of what image she is conveying to her audiences, or being criticized for commercializing a feminist/fauxminist aesthetic to promote her work. It is true, however, that Beyoncé is a highly popular artist whose trend-setting and audience-appealing tactics bespeak of savvy marketing. At the same time, her performance art is effective in foregrounding a racial-cum-feminist identity politics. At this intersectional position created by her performance is also where her camp is located. Drawing from both black and white queer culture, her exposition is one of black camp, a critical performance that simultaneously assaults ingrained notions of whiteness and celebrates black vernacular traditions. As a matter of fact, Beyoncé’s case reveals a necessity: namely, the specification of black camp, which in part serves as a critical reminder of a dominant white gay culture, and the need to envision black queer production in camp’s rigidly white past.

The fourth chapter of this research will approach the camp performances of Lady Gaga. Since her debut as an international act in 2008, the artist has attracted critical interest with her outrageous shticks and performance art. The cultural phenomenon that is Lady Gaga would seem a rather well-examined area of research since scholarly debates have been extensive in investigating her persona. Covering a wide spectrum of critical topics, from postmodern art and the avant-garde to materiality and body politics, Lady Gaga’s performances have been provoking, socially conscious as well as controversial and at times incongruous. Her embodiment of a queer aesthetic has also been of utmost importance in her work as she goes on to become a vessel filtering and producing queer art. As a result, a vibrant queer fandom has come to formation around her icon and, being aware of that, Lady Gaga has willfully directed her performance art toward gender-fluid concepts and a politics
of inclusion; as matter of fact, she has been vocal about sexual minorities worldwide both on- and off-stage. Therefore, one would imagine that to talk about Lady Gaga’s camp performance is redundant. Yet, I argue that much of cultural analysis on the artist has been concerned with her early projects and predominantly with her video and celebrity iconography. Her live stage still remains a terrain for critical investigation, especially when it comes to structure and audience immersion. Drawing from musical theater, performance art, and an array of queer scenes, Gaga’s stage is the camp spectacle par excellence which plays with generic conventions in being a faux-concert, namely part-theater, part-gig, part-showcase. Simultaneously, her live performance is supported with dramatic action, placing the artist in a variety of theatrical tasks, arcs, and settings, and thus enhancing the histrionic nature of her persona. My intent here is to present a kaleidoscopic insight into Lady Gaga’s stage camp, updating current views regarding her queer reconfiguration of the staged self as well as exploring in depth her affiliation with queer groups.

In the final chapter, I focus on the cultural body of the audience, always in relation to the diva spectacle. The primary scope of this chapter is to theorize and explicate the praxis of what I identify as audience drag and pay attention to its roots in drag culture. Starting with a historical account of drag as this evolved out of ritual and theatrical practices in the Western and non-Western world, I present a trajectory of its utilization as well as the public perceptions around it up until the time it began being associated with queer communities. Drag as a queer praxis, namely one that is performed within the circles of the community and serves as an entertaining device parodying (hetero)normative culture, can be traced as early as the nineteenth century, more specifically in London’s molly houses. Subsequently, American drag balls and individual drag shows started populating queer nightlife and eventually gave shape to the drag scene we currently know. Audience drag, as a derivative
practice of stage drag, is addressed as part of drag’s transition into a more visible, if mainstream, circle. I also address this praxis in the context of fandom since it stands for an embodied performance that materializes the fans’ adoration with the diva. Also, the transformation of the fans into the performing persona in the public space of the arena inevitably invites questions of space and, more specifically, the spatiotemporal concept known as “the event.” In light of this, the public/private and stage/street binaries importantly affect drag performance and will be given attention to in relation to the figurative and literal openness that audience drag enjoys in the arena space. Ultimately, this chapter approaches audience drag as camp fandom precisely because it employs a queer performance that brings together divas and fans, creating a temporary colorful realm of gender-fluidity, queer visibility, acceptance, and belonging, a queer utopia if you like, that reifies notions of community within the safe environment of the diva spectacle.
Time Goes by so Slowly: Madonna’s Camp(ed) Traditions

Madonna’s great period was 1983-1992. She absolutely changed the world. There’s no doubt about it. And since then, it’s cringe-making… It’s embarrassing… But what Madonna did was to allow young women to flirt with men, to seduce men, to control men. She showed that you could be sexy, but at the same time, control the negotiations, control the territory between male and female.
– Camille Paglia, Reason

It’s crazy, what’s happened in my life and what I’ve been through. If I really think about it, I’ve had an amazing life. And I’ve met so many amazing people… I feel like I’ve survived so much. And sometimes I miss the innocence of those times. Life was different. New York was different. The music business was different. I miss the simplicity of it, the naiveté of everything around me.
– Madonna, Independent.ie

Madonna’s emergence to stardom in the early 1980s coincides with American popular music taking a turn to the phase of New Pop, a novel condition defined by, and forged with the rise of MTV and the music video medium, which becomes the primary format of music reception. Simon Reynolds and Joy Press describe New Pop as a deconstructive force (1995, 317), picking up the baton from previous music movements, such as the early 1970s glam rock and the 1960s countercultural bohemia in the American and British terrains, which fervently opposed traditional rock(-and-roll) values. The 1980s, however, lacked the political valence of the preceding decades, which makes the phase-turned-era-turned-culture of New Pop all the more questionable and its politics of subversion, as Reynolds and Press put it, “precarious and complicated” to say the least (317). Being a decade of a general social backlash, the 1980s witnessed, among other things, Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher’s ultraconservative Right-oriented policies and neoliberal tactics, vacillations of the “second wave” feminist movement, and the AIDS crisis afflicting the gay community before turning to a trans-communal epidemic.\(^{40}\) It is quite ironic, then,

how currently Madonna misses “the simplicity” and “innocence” of those times. In rosy retrospection, those times may really appear candy-coated, but the feeling was rather different when her inflammatory actions of, say, kissing the effigy of a black Jesus or exposing wedding lingerie onstage, met with harsh criticism. For Camille Paglia, probably Madonna’s most ardent academic defender who now opts for disdain, this was when the performer changed the world. She may have pushed boundaries in terms of gender and race—“Express Yourself” (1989) was undoubtedly a call to arms—but her feminist/humanist cause was always contained within and curtailed by a neoliberal consumerist ethos as well as a self-centered drive for profit.

Arguably, Madonna’s challenging of social notions and cultural clichés with overt visual and conceptual expressivity has remained keen throughout her 30-year-long career in the entertainment business. Her “envelope-pushing” efforts were and still are the axis around which her work rotates. What has changed, though, is the chronological and sociopolitical context wherein this work is placed. For instance, the Spinal Tap-like documentary Madonna: Truth or Dare (1991), with a camera following the artist on a daily basis on- and off-stage during her Blond Ambition World Tour (1990), can also be read as a racy reality show, long before reality TV even existed. A celebrity discussing openly her sex life to the point of even releasing a soft-porn coffee-table book entitled SEX (1992), featuring photographic material with her in all kinds of sexual fantasies, was groundbreaking in a post-1980s context when musical artists could only be erotically envisioned by their audience either through their music video narratives and live performances, in which sexuality was

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41 Her forward-pushing agenda ranges from experimenting with musical productions—usually found in alternative genres of pop and rock prior to entering mainstream radio market, such as the ambient rock sound in Ray of Light (1998)—to visual reinventions and sexually provocative performances—as in her on-air kiss with Britney Spears and Christina Aguilera in their joined performance during the 2003 MTV Video Music Awards.
always contained, or via the tabloid culture. One can imagine that an entire erotic novella created and embraced openly by Madonna herself was surely a provocative move, not to mention an ideal media magnet in light of the *Erotica* album (1992). Currently, though, responses vary when Madonna openly provokes the public with overt sexuality, especially when one comes to consider that she is a middle-aged performer in a youth-targeting business; for example, consider social media criticism on the artist’s age that followed her live-streamed French kiss with hip-hop artist Drake during one of her Coachella showcases. Ageism aside, women showing flesh in music performances has currently become a/the norm compared to Madonna’s 1980s and early 1990s peers. What is then the point of a derrière-exposing Madonna now?

Concerning her feminist advocacy, her artistic endeavors have been meticulously examined by scholars and music critics mostly in terms of gender norm subversions. Academic literature and press on Madonna entails some of the most crucial conundrums permeating the ontology of her persona(e) and performances, including the always problematic binary of the Madonna/whore complex along with issues of censorship (Pisters 2004), voyeurism and exhibitionism (Herr 2004), fetishism and objectification (Peñaloza 2004; McRobbie 1988), cultural appropriation (hooks 1992; Robertson 1996), women in business (Gairola 2004), and, currently, ageism (Sullivan 2015; McMahon 2015). Interestingly, there is no clear-cut division in these debates that would allow reading Madonna monolithically. Throughout her career and the long-lasting influence of her icon, she has indeed pushed the envelope as regards sex or artistic expression onstage; yet, she has

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42 Drake’s repulsive response to Madonna’s impromptu kiss generated negative comments on social media audiences, who derided Madonna’s inappropriate for her age behavior (Good 2015).

43 The body of the female performer is becoming more and more exposed if we come to consider the public profiles of today’s pop artists such as Rihanna, Lady Gaga, and Miley Cyrus, to name just a few, compared to female performers of the 1980s and 1990s such as Janet Jackson, Cyndi Lauper, or Whitney Houston.
time and again sustained and encouraged ideological power structures, most notably, white patriarchal supremacy, according to bell hooks (1992, 157), or the inevitably capitalist-bound nature of her work. It has, thus, been intriguing to explore how the approaches behind all these –isms reveal the profound and productive, but still intricate and problematic character of the Material Girl.

In this light, Madonna’s camp is another question which is tangential with the abovementioned themes and is what this chapter seeks to problematize further. With critics of camp long debating on Madonna’s oeuvre (Robertson 1996; Shugart and Egley Waggoner 2007; Hawkins 2004), it is rather axiomatic to argue that the performer’s show agenda is camp-fuelled whether one talks about gender play, irony, theatricality, and parody. As totalizing as this argument may sound, one cannot but acknowledge that the icon of Madonna has been structured upon and cemented with camp qualities. In this perspective, critics have attempted to examine grounds of camp production and reception inhabited solely by gay male subjectivity, thus offering alternative readings against camp’s gay essentialism. For instance, in Guilty Pleasures (1996), Robertson points out the misogynist aspects of camp and recuperates female agency behind camp practices. The camp of glamorous divas has been attractive to gay male subjectivity, yet it has always functioned restrictively against women, putting them on a pedestal of dubious worship and attributing to them passive qualities. Robertson challenged this specific thesis of gay male camp through Madonna and other Hollywood stars highlighting the subversive feminist nuances in their performances of female masquerade. Regarding Madonna’s agency behind the production of camp, the critic suggests that it functions on two parallel lines:

The first predominantly heterosexual pop and/or postmodern style of camp applies to Madonna’s career as a whole – in her extraordinary self-marketing, her changing
images, and her retro-cinephilia. The second, more explicitly homosexual and political style of camp inheres primarily in Madonna’s explicit references to gay subcultures, especially drag and voguing, in her stated identification with gay men, her flirtation with lesbianism, and her AIDS charity work. (119)

Robertson provides accurate remarks regarding Madonna’s career up until *Guilty Pleasures* was written. Twenty years later, however, there are instances where the political nuances of female/feminist camp are still ambiguous. When it comes to camp’s high appeal to queer audiences and female divas exploiting it toward lucrative ends, it becomes rather problematic to sanction such production regardless of it being female- or male-authored.

Madonna is indeed a woman in power who is in control of her own image and artistic creation. Robertson does not fail to see this, too: “no analysis of feminist camp would be complete without an acknowledgement of Madonna’s role in bringing camp to the forefront in a transnational consumer society” (119). Helene Shugart and Catherine Egley Waggoner support that “although Madonna has had and continues to have camp moments, her performance is not consistently camp” and this “may well be a function of the fact that she was and continuous to be an innovator with regard to disrupting the confines of female sexuality in popular culture” (136). Just like Robertson, Shugart and Egley Waggoner underline Madonna’s agency behind her icon and camp in an effort to highlight the feminist politics in the artist’s projects. However, both analyses see Madonna as the sole proprietor behind her production of camp. Madonna may now manage much of her work’s final outcome, always in line though with music market needs, yet there still exist a complex power and business network at work around her. For one thing, queer culture, the primary source of camp production, comprises a large part of this network and its contribution is to be found in Madonna’s fields of fashion and music production, artistic creation as well as
audience attendance. The point of this argument is not, of course, to downgrade the feminist
valence inherent in Madonna’s camp, but rather to reclaim and re-imagine the queer roots of
camp as co-operative in the star construct that is “Madonna.”

The Madonna reader had always had to deal with ambiguities regarding the persona
that eventually led to polarities. Is she Madonna or whore? Is she ultimately in control of her
objectification or is she the pink-ribbed package of pop consumerism? Is her artistic
palette indeed driven by cultural appropriation or simply cultural borrowing or, worse,
copying for lack of original creativity? Is “Madonna” a camp object or an object of camp? Or,
no object at all? Despite the either/or nature of these questions, there is not a single correct
answer; in fact, every answer seems valid because Madonna’s icon remains fluid and flexible.
Each of these, though, and especially those concerning the very essence of her camp have to
be treated contextually. For example, the controversy the release of the video of “Justify My
Love” generated in 1990 resulted in it being banned from music television due to its risqué
imagery of S/M and homosexuality. Consider now the 2012 video of “Girl Gone Wild”
which features Kazaki, an all-gay-male Ukrainian group, dancing semi-naked in tights and
high heels next to Madonna. MTV critic Jocelyn Vena reviewed the video as “the perfect
homage to the singer’s foxy ‘Sex’ book and Erotica days of the ‘90s. Crunchy, sexy and
edgy, the ‘GGW’ clip is certainly the perfect response for anyone yearning for that Madge of
yesteryear” (2012a, italics in text). For, in 1990 Madonna fans might have never seen “Girl
Gone Wild” uncensored or even aired, but in 2012 the video is “crunchy” to the point of
being iconic. As a result, this motion through time creates new spaces to revisit Madonna’s

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44 The song and its accompanying video have been placed under scrutiny, with academics hailing its content as
“truly avant-garde” (Paglia 4, 1992) that manages to highlight Madonna’s “autorepresentation” and
“polysexual eroticism” (Whiteley 149, 200) and her ability to occupy “multiple sexual subject positions”
(Robertson 131, 1996). However, its debut raised many conservative eyebrows because of its porn-tinged
content.
camp with questions arising as to whether her political risqué camp retreated into a
celebrated iconicity, a mere nostalgia, and, by extension, whether the said camp nostalgia
should be treated that simply.

Madonna’s tour history attests to such nostalgia and celebration. Unlike her albums,
videos and singles that incrementally build on her icon, her tours offer a rich and condensed
projection of who “Madonna” is supposed to be. Within a span of two to three hours, the
shows are capable of (re)introducing, glamorizing, and verifying Madonna as the Queen of
Pop in a self-referential and icon-affirming spectacle. Through the processes of sampling and
(re)mixing Madonna’s songs (or her songs with other artists’ songs) into brief medleys, the
shows are created to be reflective of club culture. Intertextuality and pop culture references
lie at the core of her spectacle. Typically, each one of her tours’ audiovisual staging (with the
eception of Confessions Tour that I will shortly address) positions Madonna within current
trends, thereby affirming her designated place in the pop world. Her Sticky & Sweet Tour
(2008-09), for example, opened with Madonna sitting on a throne under the sonic influences
of Timbaland and Kanye West, whose musical projects were both on the spotlight at that
time. As Madonna’s icon is being further ingrained in the spectacle fair year by year, her
tours indulge more and more into a celebratory excess of her icon and its longevity.

Simultaneously, her stage’s camp pastiche derives its power from the past and
explodes forcefully and extravagantly into the present. In every tour show put together,
Madonna makes sure to cite references from queer culture. As is the case with Hispanic and
black culture, the artist makes sure she flaunts her queer affiliations by presenting herself
amidst queer-inflected scenes, such as the disco scene or the drag balls, thereby reaffirming
her lasting relationship with the culture’s histories and origins. In doing so, she cements her
gay icon status, one that exhibits and promotes aspects of the long-established
intertwinement. Of course, the relationship between Madonna and queer fandom is one of mutual adoration: in response, queer groups comprise large of her arena audiences and are a considerable cultural and economic factor endorsing her artistry. Starting, thus, from the Confessions Tour (2006) and moving to the Sticky & Sweet Tour (2008-09), to the MDNA World Tour (2013) to the most recent Rebel Heart Tour (2015-16), this chapter examines Madonna’s camp nostalgia and the queer-associated acts onstage in line with the performed legacy of her camp icon.

DISCOnfessions: Performing “Madonna”

Madonna’s pre-fame story has been retold many times throughout her career, because, according to her, “it is good to look back and tell a story of how a girl from Detroit came to New York” (Hiatt 2015). In her personal realization of the American Dream, a state of mind blatantly challenged in her American Life album (2003), it is admitted that her gay dance teacher Christopher Flynn played key role in exposing Madonna to gay culture. Ever since, her support for and by the community has been keen while one could argue that the development of her career and status as a gay icon are inextricably linked. In addition to that, her longevity inside the entertainment industry has bound Madonna, the individual, and “Madonna,” the icon, into a single person, at least in the public mind. Her identity as “Little Nonnie” Ciccone, the teenage girl from Michigan, has long been surpassed by her status as Madonna/”Madonna.” Philip Auslander “see[s] the performer in popular music as defined by three layers: the real person (the performer as human being), the performance persona (the

45 The album mostly makes autobiographical references that are partly embraced and partly criticized. In the title track, for that matter, Madonna talks about her lavish lifestyle while commenting on how superficial it turns out to be. The first music video for “American Life” (2003), which was initially banned, was an ironic anti-war commentary against George Bush’s governmental policy on the invasion of Iraq at that time time.

46 OUT’s Christopher Glazek suggests that “Flynn introduced the teenage Madonna to a global culture that reached beyond the suburban narrowness of her Michigan upbringing. ‘He would bring me to museums [she admits]. He also brought me to the first gay disco in Detroit, Menjo’s’” (Glazek 2015).
performer’s self representation), and the character (a figure portrayed in a song text). All three layers may be active simultaneously in a given musical performance” (4). Auslander’s explication of the pop performer is vital in our understanding of the Madonna/”Madonna” symbiosis. The fact that the audience has to deal with two or more aspects of the performer’s identity instills into the persona various facades of mystique. Essentially, this layered subjectivity, this power to don different masks and to build each time a different narrative around them is where the power of Madonna’s diva camp nests, namely the interplay of identities.

As Madonna’s artistic palette grows, so does her need not only to reinvent herself, but, most importantly, to reaffirm herself as the chameleonic persona who skillfully evades fixity. The first two decades of her career saw Madonna donning different personae, such as the “Marilyn Monroe” look or the “Marie Antoinette” showcase. In the last decade, however, instead of reinvention, she has settled for either revisiting past personae or acting out “Madonna” in various settings and scenes. For instance, Confessions on a Dancefloor (2005) and its accompanying Confessions Tour (2006) saw Madonna drawing heavily from the 1970s music scene, paying homage to ABBA, and recreating a Saturday Night Fever-ish aesthetic. Unlike, however, Mistress Dita, her alter-ego dominatrix from her Erotica days (1992), or the geisha persona from the Ray of Light album (1998), the performer in the Confessions era rather opted for a Madonna-goes-disco project, which can either be viewed as an inability to creatively reinvent her persona or, quite the opposite, as an attempt to place her icon on the imaginative forefront through the disco scene. “Madonna” is a red-hot, politically-charged persona that can no longer be contained inside other personae. Indeed,

47 With regard to Monroe and Marie Antoinette, not to mention Erotica’s Mistress Dita, Madonna’s personae, just like their archetypes, inhabit sites of sexual controversy, being thus a vital performative device for the artist’s politics of female sexuality and gender parody.
her icon ends up copying itself, in a true Baudrillarlean fashion, drawing referential power from itself. In fact, her persona, which more often than not stands synonymous with controversy, can simply rely on its own power to provoke. Her mechanisms of metamorphosis are now no secret to her audience. It is Madonna, the provocateur, the always Catholic-inspired, the mother, the activist, the business woman, the Kabbalah devotee, the feminist, the poly-sexual behind the mask. The project-like quality behind her reinventions immediately renders such acts as strictly professional. In this light, her inspirations are nothing but a careful study of her social surroundings that aims towards artistic and, by extension, lucrative goals. As her artistic trajectory from 2005 onwards reveals, the performer did not really embraced any other persona, neither on- nor off-stage, but her own. Rather, she acknowledges the legacy she has so far created and chooses to alternate either between acts she’s already familiar with—consider the geisha-inspired martial arts segue of “Bitch I’m Madonna” for the Rebel Heart Tour and the kabuki-inspired performances of “Frozen” and “Sky Fits Heaven” for the Drowned World Tour (2001)—or between scenes that will be host to her own persona—as is the case with Confessions’s disco or with MDNA’s rave. As a result, “Madonna,” the icon, becomes transparent and will no longer share the spotlight with any other personae. If it is an act, then it is certainly one of solipsism.

This, of course, does not seem to prevent audiences from worshiping her; in fact, it is exactly why they worship her for. After all, it is a Madonna show and in her performances egocentrism is raison d’être in the sense that she occupies the center of attention. Yet, Amy Robinson argues that “Madonna has provoked immense pleasure in her fans by courting their identities as a component of her own. At various stages in her interviewing career Madonna has claimed to be black, a man, working class, and a lesbian” (340). What she did, though, was create sites of representation as a means of allowing a wide range of audiences to
identify with her; it is a well-known formula that a lot of celebrities follow in order expand their market targets. In terms of camp, audiences acknowledging such artifice neither obscures the cultural nuances imprinted on Madonna’s manifold identity, even when cultural appropriation is at work, nor reduces the level of pleasure derived from the act of identification with each one of them. Identity, be it gendered, racial, or ethnic, is consciously perceived aesthetically in its performative nature within the context of camp. According to Jonathan Dollimore, “[camp] is situated at the point of emergence of the artificial from the real, culture from nature – or rather when and where the real collapses into artifice, nature into culture; camp restores vitality to artifice, and vice versa, deriving the artificial from, and feeding it back into or as, the real. The reality is the pleasure of unreality” (225). In this sense, to take pleasure in Madonna’s camp is not simply to acknowledge the artifice, but to embrace and enjoy its staged alternative dimension as such, abiding by the rules of role-play governing her camp performance.

The Confessions Tour, as a case in point, an extraordinary set of show that diverges from a typical concert show (even a typical Madonna show), offers a retro-stylized reality with its revival of disco. The tracks in the Confessions album are structured in a DJ-composed set: in sequential order, the ending of one song is at the same time the beginning of the next one. Stuart Price, producer of the album and musical director of the tour, also mixed the music of the show to appear as in a continuous flow. This is the reason why the show is not open-ended or flexible and provides restricted time to interact with the audience. Contrary to most concert shows, Confessions shifts attention from audience participation to

48 Lady Gaga, for instance, promoted her erotic experimentation with other women as bisexuality when releasing her single “Poker Face” (2009), a song that talks about bisexuality, was released. Similarly, despite her celebrity lifestyle, Jennifer Lopez still promotes her “Jenny from the Block” Bronx-born-and-bred profile from the homonymous 2002 song—most recently reaffirmed in 2014’s “Same Girl”—in order to preserve her street culture roots and audiences identifying with that aspect of her persona.
audience immersion; it only devotes little time for sing-alongs, mainly toward the “Hung Up” finale, and out of the twenty two songs performed, there are only three ballads to tone down the show’s energy. Emphasis is instead laid on the disco revival as an experience to be lived like an authentic vivid night at a discotheque. Mash-ups and medleys add more to that, enhancing thus the show’s conceptual form as a gigantic disco dancefloor. In addition, following the recipe of “Hung Up” (2005), Price’s sampling and remixing did not make any musical references to contemporaries, but included only past songs of Madonna meddled with hits from Donna Summer, ABBA, and the Trammps. Strobe lights, synthesizer beats, disco balls, ‘70s attire, and Madonna’s toned Fonda-esque posture re-create disco in its dazzling extravagance. It is not a plain tribute to a bygone era, but a meticulous simulation of a past form of entertainment. The camp of disco’s nightlife adoration is reterritorialized in the Confessions stage whose time-bending reality resonates all through the sound of “Hung Up’s” ticking clock, suggesting that “time goes by so slowly.”

Before delving into the tour’s segments and acts, it is vital to understand the political and historical underpinnings of disco. The disco culture has been strongly associated with the queer community, appearing in the public mind as a stereotypically gay scene, not only because its generic formation owes its existence to the community, but mainly due to its clientele’s frivolous attitude and image-conscious profile (Frank 292). Such downright sexist perception was not erroneous in its entirety, though, due to the fact that the colorful façade of disco was at the time juxtaposed to the edgy authenticity of rock music, a scene and genre oriented around the heterosexual white male consumer.49 Politically, according to Gillian Frank, “[t]wo trends led to the association of music with identity politics and to later

49 As Frank explains, “disco marked a radical departure from the organization, artistry, and sexuality of rock music. While rock music was a medium with an emphasis on the relationship between performer and fans, disco was organized in terms of dancers and recorded music [...] As well, the musical sign of rock music par excellence, the guitar, was no longer predominant or even present” (291).
conflicts between disco fans and rock fans: the emergence of the youth movement in the 1960s with rock as its music and the emergence of the gay liberation movement in the same period with disco as its music” (280). Observing the anti-disco backlash of 1979, Frank explains that disco, largely perceived as “gay and elitist” (278), threatened core values of American rock, including heterosexual masculinity. The homophobic sentiments that disco inspired in fans of rock coincided with late 1970s anti-gay campaigns that sought to curb gays’ socio-cultural ascendance and put them back into the closet (Frank 285-6). Eventually, the social implications of disco were harnessed and soon its momentum was stifled, making room for its offspring that was the dance/house scene.

Culturally, disco exhibited racial and ethnic diversity before crossing over to mainstream American market. Nadine Hubbs explains that “[h]istorical accounts locate disco’s origins in Manhattan clubs whose clientele were African American and Latino, and gay – meaning: gay men.” (232) The collective aspect of the dancefloor along with the anthemic nature of survival and the undisguised sexuality upheld in the songs of predominantly black female artists, such as Gloria Gaynor, Diana Ross, and Donna Summer, instilled into queer subcultures a sense of belonging and social visibility. Taking into consideration post-Stonewall identity politics, such plurality was cemented into one coherent community flourishing in discotheques that developed a common awareness. What appears problematic, though, in the accounts of disco’s social containment is the invisibility of lesbian entrepreneurs and producers. Homosexual men qua men still had more socio-economic privileges than lesbians, a fact that granted them access into entrepreneurship, which, by extension, allowed them to expand and thrive in the nightlife entertainment. Frank

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50 Consider Anita Bryant’s radical-Right counter-activism.

51 In her essay “Disco Knights: Hidden Heroes of the New York Dance Music Underground,” Carol Cooper makes a reference to female disc jockey Sharon White, a prominent figure of the 1970s cult of DJ, who was discovered by producers at the Sahara, a lesbian club (162).
supports that “disco allowed gay men who owned discotheques and who served as disc jockeys and producers to become highly visible and respected within the music scene” (284). In addition, they established a long, everlasting relationship with female performers, especially from the African-American community. However, the popularization of disco, mainly through John Badham’s landmark *Saturday Night Fever* (1977) and its accompanying best-seller soundtrack by the Bee Gees, “made disco safe for white, straight, male, young, and middle-class Americans” (Frank 288), but, at the same time, curtailed its racial and ethnic inflections. Disco’s subcultural queerness was now boxed in a homogenized perception of gayness as effeminate aestheticism, which was further regulated into metrosexual heterosexuality, considering the straight star image of the Bee Gees and Travolta’s impactful character, Tony.

In its revival of the disco scene, accordingly, the *Confessions Tour* carefully stages such homage as celebrating a long-gone tradition, affirming that not only disco lives on and is remembered, but that it is passed on to a new generation of audiences who may have been too young to experience it in the flesh. The show opens with the Equestrian segment, for which Madonna appears as a jockey.\(^{52}\) Prior to entering the arena, she is seen on the video screen with running horses, while her leather-clad horse-simulating dancers emerge on stage. “Future Lovers” has all the disco-essential elements to provide a dynamic start; the song’s explicit allusion to the ‘70s sound production of Giorgio Moroder instantly situates the audience within the context of disco’s futuristic electronica. “Future Lovers’” calling lyrics “Come with me” and “Would you like to try” set the mood for a time-transcending experience into the disco past. With attire similar to her video backdrop, Madonna lands on the stage inside a giant disco ball. Sexuality is soon established as an integral for the show.

\(^{52}\) In sequential order, the *Confessions Tour* begins with the Equestrian segment moving on to the Bedouin, then on to the Glam-Punk and concludes with the Disco.
theme with vivid BDSM imagery, as Madonna wields her horsewhip and casually lashes her bridle-bound dancers. A bondage-themed equestrian disco may appear aesthetically confusing, but the show manages to ground the clandestine unreality of the disco era through an S/M visceral experience and by aligning the disco beat with the earthy power of the horse galloping, inviting animalistic action. As the show’s opening unfolds, Price’s production of “Future Lovers” encloses a well-expected turn to Donna Summer’s “I Feel Love” that familiarly envelops the audience into an authentic disco sound. On “I Feel Love’s” iconic status, Jon Savage argues that Summer’s hit “became an all-time gay classic, a totem of the pre-AIDS era” whose repetitive beat and vocals manage to “obliterate the tyranny of the clock” (2012). The “Future Lovers/I Feel Love” mash-up revels in the celebration of queer love as experienced on the original dancefloor via the stylized, albeit all too extravagant (for the ’70s male body) disco moves and attire. With equal vigor, the disco beats resonate throughout the Equestrian segment in “Get Together,” a disco-vamped “Like a Virgin,” and “Jump.”

For the next segment, the Bedouin, Madonna tones down the beats in favor of more politically-charged performances. Among these, the performance of “Live to Tell” stands out not only due to its subsequent controversy, but rather for the camp effect it eventually creates. Run by the interlude’s confessional tone, Madonna, dressed in velvet red clothing, emerges again on stage hanged on a massive mirrored crucifix and wearing a crown of thorns—indeed, a par-excellence campification of Catholic Christianity. Behind her, counting numbers list African children orphaned by AIDS annually. Toward the end of the song, Madonna steps down from the cross while images of African children and quotes from the

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53 “I Feel Love” (1977) was originally produced by Giorgio Moroder and Pete Bellote for Donna Summer and was characterized as the song that paved the ground for the modern dance scene due to its futuristic synthesizer-based production.
Bible appear on screen. The provocative performance of “Live To Tell” infuriated the Protestant, Catholic, and Muslim world, with religious leaders from Rome and Moscow accusing Madonna of blasphemy, urging boycotts against her concert and calling for her excommunication (CBC.ca 2006; JWeekly.com 2006). What is explicitly ironic about this performance is Madonna’s invocation of her political persona that puns with Catholic imagery. Essentially, her “performing Jesus” act, in concert with her background of charity work and controversial past acts, deflects attention from the actual political content, the AIDS-infected African children, and transfocalizes onto Madonna, the provocateur, and her extravagant theatrics. Furthermore, the decision to stage such performance within a high-grossing entertaining tour risks flirting with the post-colonial stereotypical framing of a helpless, AIDS-afflicted “Third World” by standing in juxtaposition to it as a more often than not costly American spectacle. For, audiences may applaud the artist’s political message, but, in the pleasure of camp, content is obscured by artifice—style over content, in Susan Sontag’s terms—as soon as Madonna moves onto her next act. It would be erroneous to clam the specific performance is not politically aware with regard to the African AIDS crisis. Yet, had the artist simply wanted to raise awareness, she would have sung the ballad just with her video’s illustrative power in order to convey the message. The fact that she chooses to do it on a far-from-negligible, productively expensive and highly coded prop reorients the political nature into the edifices of the iconic, itself raising important questions with regard to the political nature of Madonna’s icon

The artist’s icon is egotistically political in its power to engage its viewer in the process of decoding what is seemingly hidden behind its artifice. In this egocentric sense, Madonna offers up herself for deconstruction, consumption, and satisfaction by the public. To take pleasure in Madonna’s specific performance is to ultimately fetishize her for what
she is expected to sell: controversy and iconicity. She reaffirms her position as a pop fetish through the campification of Catholicism, which is something she has continuously been doing throughout her career as part of her ironic/iconic engagement with religion. In non-camp terms, Madonna is on the cross for African children dying of AIDS; but in camp terms, *Madonna is on a giant disco cross.* Most importantly, the specific performance of “Live to Tell” is permeated by a queer narrative that envisions Madonna as the champion of AIDS-afflicted groups. Since the social history of HIV/AIDS is heavily branded with queer nuances and since Madonna is known to have been vocal against the epidemic through her charity work, the performance is inevitably read from a queer perspective. With the lyrics’ confessional tone illustrating a secret never to be revealed, a concealed malady, or even, a love that dare not speak its name, “Live to Tell” sees Madonna, the gay icon, upon the disco cross, sacrificing herself against the HIV/AIDS signifier, a performance that establishes narrative bridges with the epidemic impacting on the 1980s queer community as well as evoking the figurative death of disco, which in part was an aftermath of the epidemic and its paranoia discourse that mitigated queer nightlife. Camp pleasure, thus, is simultaneously found in Madonna’s glamorously grotesque crucifixion as well as in the queer subtext the symbolic act offers, an act whose semiotic content of *why* it is performed shifts focus on *how* it is performed.

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54 In his seminal work “The Culture Industry,” Theodor Adorno argues that “[t]he fetish character of music produce its own camouflage through the identification of the listener with the fetish” (40). Taking into consideration that we are not talking here about the “listener” as the individual who solely takes pleasure in music, but a live audience, it is only reasonable that the identification with the fetish is amplified; for, music, icon/performer and performance, being in close contact with the audience, enhance the fetishistic pleasure.  
55 Apart from her own name, her album and song names as well as her audiovisual narratives, from *True Blue’s* “La Isla Bonita” (1986) to *Like A Prayer’s* title track (1989), and most recently with *Confessions’* “Isaac” (2005), to *MDNA’s* “I’m a Sinner” (2012) and *Rebel Heart’s* “Devil Pray” (2015) and “Holy Water” (2015), have always toyed with Catholic themes.  
56 “I have a tale to tell/Sometimes it gets so hard to hide it well”; “Hope I live to tell the secret I have learnt/Till then, it will burn inside of me”; “How will they hear?/When will they know?”
The show’s Never Mind the Bollocks segment, or simply Glam-Punk adds more to this point. Drawing her inspiration from the Sex Pistols’ seminal one-off album, *Never Mind the Bollocks, Here Come the Sex Pistols* (1977), Madonna camps all notions and axiomatic traditions that come in hand with the history of punk rock. Having already given a taste of disco in the Equestrian, the Glam-Punk segment is a parody of rock’s heterosexually policed authenticity, a parody that broadens even more the gap between disco and rock, frivolity and seriousness, if you like. Her performance of “I love New York,” in which Madonna worships the city that made her famous, is in stark contrast with the Sex Pistols’ “New York,” a mockery against the 1970s glam rock group New York Dolls, whose transvestite image destabilized rock’s heteronormative core. While disco faced backlash from outsiders, rock started being corroded from within. 1970s glam rock was the colorful cell inside rock’s rigid organism and the culture associated with it. According to Auslander, “the gender-bending of glam challenged both the dominant culture’s standard masculinity and the androgyny favored by the hippie counterculture, for glam did not posit androgyny as a ‘natural’ taste. To the contrary: glam rockers specifically foregrounded the constructedness of their effeminate or androgynous performing personae” (63). Concerning New York Dolls, Van Cagle notes that the group played on androgyny to a camp effect, even if their prime target group was not gay people: “if you claimed to be a Dolls’ fan in New York, heterosexuals assumed you were gay. Likewise… gay people assumed Dolls’ fans to be straight. After all, the Dolls were not representative of the music played in gay nightclubs” (185). Such confusion is evident in the Pistols’ “New York” whose lyrics insist on the faux image of the Dolls, poking fun at their “made in Japan” unoriginality, while, taking androgyny-as-gayness for granted, they reduce them to “faggots” and “pile of shit.”

57 Specifically, some lines highlight the Dolls as “An imitation from New York/ You’re made in Japan in cheese
Madonna’s performance is a camp response to the Pistols’ alleged authenticity and blatant sexism. The performer appears dressed in full leather and sings “I Love New York” with the Manhattan skyline as her backdrop. With lyrics such as “New York is not for little pussies who scream” and the repetition of “Paris and London, baby, you can keep,” Madonna’s story of the East Coast metropolis walks parallel with the city’s motto “If you make it here, you can make it anywhere.” Contrary to the Pistols’ political resistance against British authority—consider their Bollock’s essential singles “Anarchy in the U.K.” and “God Save the Queen”—Madonna’s act celebrates and promotes her cultural origins in such a deliberately plastic way as wearing an “I Heart NY” branded T-shirt. What is also crucial about this performance is Madonna playing the electric guitar, thereby inhabiting a masculine rock position. Examining the performances of Mick Ronson and David Bowie, Auslander views the position of the lead guitarist as the guitar hero, “a position that is coded as masculine in the rock culture” (141), or in Steve Waksman’s words, “a ritual that validates masculine prowess” (1999, 249). In “I Love New York,” Madonna on stage is only accompanied by her band and sings her lyrics firmly in the microphone, transforming her disco dancefloor into a pseudo-rock concert. Towards the end of the song, she engages in a guitar solo and rocks her guitar in the air over her audiences. As a symbol of masculinity, the electric guitar carries the power of the phallus, therefore allowing Madonna to camp up the phallo(go)centric discourses of rock in a mock performance of masculinity. By doing so and chalk”; “You think it’s swell playing in Max’s Kansas;” “You’re just a pile of shit/ You’re coming to this/Ya poor little faggot.” Max’s Kansas City, a hip nightclub in 1970s Manhattan notorious for its famous clientele (Madonna included), cannot escape the Pistols’ critique either. She even apologizes to her London audience, stating: “Now, I know, you people, did not take that song personally. Because New York is a state of mind. It’s not a place. It’s the ‘fuck you’ attitude” (Akerlund 2007). Considering Madonna’s being married to British film director Guy Ritchie, residing in London and flaunting her newly picked-up British accent at that time, such performance becomes even more ironic. In other guitar-led acts, especially in her Sticky & Sweet Tour, Madonna uses her guitar as a phallic substitute to simulate sex in her rock rendition of “Hung Up,” and masturbation in her performance of “Human Nature,” to a similar effect.
she re-invokes the camp imagery of the Dolls in order to debunk the power of the guitar-phallus and toy with the rigidity of rock’s masculine ideal.

The iconicity of Confessions’ Glam-Punk segment draws from the tradition of rock: the electric guitar solo, leather clothing, outspoken lyrics, rigid posture, all serving as Madonna’s symbolic tools. The artist does not simply draw from it, but in fact camps it up, thereby stressing, first of all, rock’s differentiation from the frivolity of disco and, furthermore, underlining the latter as the primary artistic source she aligns herself with. Prior to releasing Confessions on a Dancefloor and embarking on tour, Madonna explained her decision to direct her inspiration toward the disco scene. In an interview for MTV, she admitted: “When I wrote American Life [previous to Confessions], I was very agitated by what was going on in the world around me… I was angry. I had a lot to get off my chest. I made a lot of political statements. But now, I feel that I just want to have fun; I want to dance; I want to feel buoyant” (MTV 2005). In the same interview, she openly embraced her “inauthenticity” as regards her album’s indulgence in intertextuality of, and borrowing from the Pet Shop Boys, ABBA, Depeche Mode, Kylie Minogue, and, most obviously, herself (MTV 2005). Evidently, her tour showcase was expected to exhibit all these references in a way that are, firstly, recognized by the audience as culturally and musically familiar and, secondly, in a way that intertextuality does not eclipse “Madonna,” the icon

As the final section of the Confessions Tour, the Disco segment revels in a bombardment of clichés. Taking into account the show-starter Equestrian, Disco brings the show full circle by reviving the disco camp with all those well-known conventions that prescribe it as such in the public memory. As Andrew Ross argues about Pop camp: “In reviving a period style, or elements of a period style that were hopelessly, and thus ‘safely,’ dated, camp acted as a kind of memento mori, a reminder of Pop’s own future oblivion
which… Pop cannot help but advertise” (320, italics in text). For the writer, “Camp was [is and will be] an antidote to Pop’s contagion of obsolescence” (321). In this light, the show’s camp stands as the antidote for the obsolescence of disco by bringing it back into the limelight. Its staging presupposes that there is a safely dated distance between the show’s present and the disco era in order to generate the retro feeling as effectively as possible. For that matter, the Disco segment is not frugal in its purpose of reminiscence to (re)use everything disco-coded. It is a synecdoche of a resurrection, then, prefiguring Madonna’s already forced resurrection as a cult item.

Another point I would like to raise here, a point that has been given little attention in current analyses of the Madonna phenomenon and will be central to the remainder of this chapter, is Madonna’s very own body. Since time is important in understanding the performer’s camp tradition, it is imperative that one conceptualize Madonna’s body, a muscular, actively contributive, dynamic body, parallel to axes of gender, age, and capital production. The artist’s longevity in the show industry requires from her to retain all these feats that originally propelled her to fame. Madonna exists in the public mind as a performer who continuously ups the ante with every new project she takes on. Apart from controversy and iconicity, durability is also what characterizes her history of performance. Madonna’s show-woman status entails singing, dancing, and acting, a triptych that establishes her body a site of performed and performing action. Though this seems to be “effortlessly” carried out by, say, a 30-year-old female entertainer onstage, expectations are different from a woman in her sixties. In order to keep up with the high energy of her spectacles, Madonna not only has to preserve the quality of the abovementioned triptych, but to once again actively assert her status of a professional entertainer. In the past, she would casually expose her body as part of publicity stints. Now, she continues to do so by framing her body as a body of a certain age,
partly to promote herself as an ardent show-woman with lasting iconic appeal as well as to challenge cultural notions of aging women in the show industry.\textsuperscript{61}

Apart from confronting ageist clichés, though, Madonna’s body is a living, performing and performed memory, indeed a cult item. Her action-packed choreographies and acrobatics onstage attest to her skillfulness as a dancer. However, the combination of her body posture with each setting allows her to smooth her way into the scene’s narrative and augment its physical realness. In the \textit{Confessions Tour}, Madonna’s leotard-clad body in concert with her dancers’ body and the 1970s attire establish the apparent link with the performing bodies on the disco dancefloor. As part of nightlife entertainment, the disco dancefloor is a site of energy that invites bodies to show off their dancing skills, to interact with each other, and, most of all, to express themselves freely. Since disco’s origins were gay, the dancefloor was an inclusive space that allowed queer bodies to embrace their sexuality and be praised at; in other words, to acquire visibility and generate eroticism. Moreover, considering we are talking about the pre-HIV/AIDS era, the queer body had not yet become pathologized through the paranoia discourse and was unashamedly promoted as muscular, sexual, and vibrant.\textsuperscript{62} Here, Madonna’s invocation of the dancing disco body attempts to invite the erotic gaze in a way, though, that is tinted with an aura of retro. The audience is encouraged to look at the bodies on stage in a nostalgic-cum-erotic way, as if they were tangible manifestations of a typical, albeit titillating night at the disco. With additional soundtrack support, Madonna’s body occupies an epicenter and sets itself as the living proof

\textsuperscript{61} Attending the New York Met Gala in May 2016, Madonna stirred up criticism for choosing to dress in a sheer gown that had her breasts and buttocks exposed. Acknowledging that, Madonna updated her Instagram account, stating: “We have fought and continue to fight for civil rights and gay rights around the world. When it comes to Women’s rights we are still in the dark ages. My dress at the Met Ball was a political statement as well as a fashion statement. The fact that people actually believe a woman is not allowed to express her sexuality and be adventurous past a certain age is proof that we still live in an age-ist and sexist society. I have never thought in a limited way and I’m not going to start” (Harwood 2016).

\textsuperscript{62} For more information on the homosexual male body and the club life, consider Martin Levine’s \textit{Gay Macho: The Life and Death of the Homosexual Clone}. 

of the disco past, executing routines of past and present numbers, all meticulously undergirded into a seamless musical performance.

The final segment of the tour, the Disco, effectively stages a disco party around Madonna’s body. The segment begins with “The Duke Mixes the Hits” video interlude.\textsuperscript{63} Featuring Madonna’s past hits such as “Borderline” and “Holiday,” the medley smoothly shifts to a mash-up of “Music” with The Trammps’ “Disco Inferno,” containing elements from Madonna’s True Blue (1986) song, “Where’s the Party.” Additionally, there are instances in the video projection featuring Madonna in a visual and choreographic reference to Tina Turner’s Tommy performance of “Acid Queen” (1975). This retro musical explosion opens up the Disco and sees Madonna’s dancers performing on roller shoes. Also, Stuart Price’s presence onstage throughout the tour is, of course, not coincidental. In order to simulate disco as accurately as possible the persona of the DJ is vital.\textsuperscript{64}

As the interlude fades into the Trammps-based sound of “Music,” Madonna emerges on stage with dancing poses and white flared trousers that make the allusion to Saturday Night Fever hard to miss. She even distances herself from her dancers and moves to the minor stage where she re-creates Travolta’s “You Should Be Dancing” solo routine. “Music,” of course, makes the perfect soundtrack for Madonna’s specific act. Its retro catchy line

\textsuperscript{63}The Duke refers to Price’s alias, Thin White Duke, who appears onstage as a member of the band. Stuart Price adopted various monikers throughout his career, including Les Rythmes Digitales, Paper Faces, Jacque Lu Cont, and the David Bowie-inspired Thin White Duke that appears here.

\textsuperscript{64}Carol Cooper accounts that “[g]ay discos, black mainstream clubs, fashion-trend dens, ‘new wave’ discos, and hip hop parties all squared off against one another during the early eighties. A cult deejay affiliated with a particular club felt constant pressure not only to reinforce his reputation but to protect his steady gig” (161). With regard to the roller-skating performance, Cooper suggests that Gail King, a renowned female DJ of the 1970s scene, “had formed a rollerskating performance group that would tour the local rinks for fun and profit,” proving, first of all, that women, despite being numerically less than men, were quite influential for the disc jockey cult (163). Cooper adds that, thanks to King, “[r]oller disco was a major trend among dating-age blacks and Hispanics, and it took a particular ear to choose the perfect records for skating routines” (163). As part of the Confessions album promotion, Madonna had released a video for the song “Sorry,” in which she had presented her roller dancing skills. Although “Sorry” was performed during the Bedouin segment, it lacked the roller skating choreography. Instead, parts of the video’s roller dance routine were appropriately brought over to “The Duke mixes the Hits” interlude.
“Hey Mr. DJ, put a record on” makes quite smooth a transition from the previous interlude and underlines the quintessential position of the DJ—here framed by Price’s presence on stage—within the disco culture. What is more, “Music” takes camp to a jittery level. Concerning the song’s original production, Stan Hawkins suggests that “the pleasure in ‘Music’ is based around an erotic sensibility that proposes something quite glamorous and technically ambitious” (7). Adding to an already camped-up production Price’s sampling of the Trammps and the visual components of Madonna as Travolta, the final outcome becomes energetically playful and fluidly gendered. Madonna’s performance here stages the multi-cultural and multi-gendered synthesis as this was reified on any given disco night. Backed up by “Music’s” lyrics—“Music makes the people come together/Music makes the bourgeoisie and the rebel”—the act is driven by a carnivalesque-like sentiment, emphasizing, thus, camp’s power to regenerate the disco past and immerse its audience in the carefree nostalgia. As with the disco dancefloor, the Confessions’s stage offers its space for entertainment that is partly derived from the contribution of music/”Music” and partly from the ostentatious movements of the dancer/Madonna at the center of it.

This act of display, for which Madonna flauntingly proves that she is both the king and queen of disco, is energized by disco’s attraction to plasticity, one that is both gendered and eroticized. By the time “Music” is finished, Madonna strips her Travolta apparel onstage and moves to “Erotica,” which has been vamped to fit the segment’s tonality and aesthetic. As the lead single from the homonymous 1992 album, the song was considered to be the racier continuation of “Justify My Love” and “Vogue” not only due to its similar trip-hop

65 The writer asserts that “the technological expertise found in ‘Music’ is responsible for contributing to a style that is camp. Elements of digital editing and computer-based approaches to layering one track over the other are constantly daring and yet cheeky. Often to the point of being over-decorative, it is as if the mix liberates artistic expression from taking itself too seriously” (10).

66 Not to mention here the already existing camp play in and queer projections of the song’s video (2000), with Sasha Baron Cohen’s Omega-male “Ali” juxtaposed to Madonna’s “lesbian goddess” glam image.
production and titillating content, but due to the stylization, textualization, and fetishization—as the -ca suffix indicates—of sex and eroticism. More like speaking words rather than singing lyrics, Madonna makes an ode to S/M experimentation with an accompanying video that introduces her dominatrix persona, Dita, and offers backstage peeks at the infamous photoshoot of her SEX book, released at that time. “Erotica’s” inclusion in the Confessions’s setlist might strike one as bizarre, considering the complete absence of other Madonna songs, such as “Express Yourself” or “Vogue,” that would seem more appropriate for the disco revival. Its staging and remixing, though, compensate for these omissions. The song is performed on tour for the first time in thirteen years, after The Girlie Show Tour in 1993; and, although Confessions imagines the song’s sensibility in terms that are different from The Girlie Show’s S/M and burlesque, it manages to maintain the original exhibitionistic eroticism. During the introduction, Madonna undresses in dim light, revealing a purple-white jumpsuit copied after Agnetha Fältskog and Anni-Frid Lyngstad’s famous outfit during ABBA: The Tour (1979-80). With the Travolta-to-ABBA striptease, “Erotica’s” repetitive lyrics “All over me” and “Put your hands all over my body,” as well as a choreography reminiscent of Jane Fonda’s aerobics, the performance projects Madonna’s body as a disco spectacle. Once again, the artist employs her performing body both to invoke her own beginning in the entertainment industry as a dancer as well as to reaffirm herself as the dramatic core of a scrupulously choreographed spectacle. “Erotica” ultimately fetishizes Madonna by offering up her trained body for voyeuristic pleasure which results from the adoration of a skilled body exhibited for its guaranteed aptitude to entertain by performing

67 In his review of The Girlie Show Tour entitled “Madonna Goes to Camp” (1993), Richard Corliss, explains that, for the show’s opening performances of “Erotica” and “Fever,” “the proscenium stage is fronted with red drapery suitable for a Louisiana bordello; the title promises and delivers burlesque. But burlesque in the older sense of parody, travesty, impudent fun. There is humid sexuality at the start of the two-hour extravaganza (topless acrobat on a phallic pole, Madonna easing a whip past her crouch, dancers gyrating at automassage), but it soon gives way to simpler, sunnier images” (21)
professional staged tasks and, most crucially, for its ability to carry layered structures of iconicity—i.e. ABBA, Fonda, and early 1980s “Madonna.”

After “Erotica,” the Disco continues in rhythmic voluptuousness. Reminiscent of the Latin dance scene as presented in the music of Gloria Estefan and Miami Sound Machine, the dance remix of “La Isla Bonita” exalts Madonna’s long-established affiliation with Hispanic street culture as vital within her simulation of disco. Following that, the performance of “Lucky Star” contains excerpts from ABBA’s “Gimme! Gimme! Gimme! (A Man After Midnight)” (1979) and sees Madonna wearing a neon-glowing cape with “Dancing Queen” written on its back. What is more crucial though—perhaps the most significant component in the structural formation of Confessions—is the performance of “Hung Up.” The song has appropriately been left as the show’s finale with every creative detail of the Disco segment pointing to this climax. Madonna opened the Confessions era with “Hung Up” as the lead single, explaining that “[the song] was, sort of, like the starting point for the rest of the record” (YouTube.com). Price produced the song by sampling ABBA’s “Gimme! Gimme! Gimme!,” while Johan Renck directed the video as a tribute to John Travolta and Bob Fosse. The song’s worldwide success breathed fresh air into Madonna’s iconicity in a conceptual process that distanced her agenda from the politically-agitated American Life toward more joyous image and sound. “Hung Up’s” popularity disseminated a retro, colorful “Madonna” whose camp value is intense and highly persistent. For instance, her pink leotard both in the video and on the album’s art cover along with the notorious scene of her making love to a boombox are highly coded instances of Madonna’s camp that remain widely recognized aspects of her Confessions era. It is this coded reality after all that provides fodder both to all artists’ iconic ontology as well as to their audiences’ perception of their persona(e) in/of a given time. Once such codes are established as
reflections, nuances, or simply reinvention of the performer, they are reenacted in live performances to address the audience’s semantic familiarity with them.

In this light, it can be argued that the performance of “Hung Up” displays cognitive integrity. The sampling of “Gimme! Gimme! Gimme!” in the preceding performance of “Lucky Star” makes known of what is to follow. The ABBA sound may even be misread from the audience as the introduction of “Hung Up.” Price’s mixing arranges “Lucky Star” and “Hung Up” in a long medley undergirded by the signature rhythm of the ABBA track; “Lucky Star,” in a way, gives away the act-finale “Hung Up.” Contrary to other concerts that play with the element of surprise in their encore acts, the Confessions show lets known of its trump card: the audience is aware, but the medley’s effect of delay prolongs the expectation. Toward the end of “Lucky Star,” Madonna gives a brief taste of the finale by singing a brief chorus of “Hung Up” and immediately leaving the stage. The introduction of “Hung Up” eventually kicks in with excerpts from the original video appearing in the backdrop screen. In the meanwhile, two parkour dancers, as in the music video, freerun from the stage into the audience. When the freerunners return to the stage, Madonna emerges once again wearing her iconic leotard and executes the song’s original choreography. The reenactment of the boombox scene, of course, is structured to be the apogee of the performance. During the song’s break, after coquetting and crawling on the floor with her dancers, Madonna rises alone and struts down the runway toward the minor stage, where a boombox is being surfaced to function as the quintessential fetishistic prop upon which the artist will simulate masturbation. The song’s break culminates of course with the masturbatory scene, during which balloons are showering the crowd, a double entendre that immerses the audience in Madonna’s orgasmic climax.
The particular act demonstrates that, despite all the seemingly distractive practices of sampling and intertextuality, “Madonna” resides at the core of the show. Almost performed in ritualistic devotion, the show’s autoerotic act elicits the audience’s cheers, who in turn acknowledge and, by extension, approve of Madonna’s power to iconicize her stage/persona behavior. Being instances of solipsism, acts like the boombox scene rely on performative skills that have little to do with simply executing a choreographed set. As symbolic derivatives of the catwalk culture, the movements are theatrically composed to resemble posing, which is, more often than not, home to female subjectivity. Posing, of course, does not preclude non-female subjects, as we will see with voguing further down. However, it presents femaleness synonymous with femininity, one that is glamorously standardized. Think about, for example, stage runways and the posture of the performer on them in female-led concert shows in juxtaposition to male-led shows. Even when performances by either queer or heterosexual male artists, including the camp flair of David Bowie, Michael Jackson, Mick Jagger or Prince, to name just a few, employ posing, it can be considered to be at least apparent due to the conspicuous gender play. Yet, posing and the (heterosexual) female performer seem to be naturally consonant not only because of the femaleness/femininity conjunction, but also mainly because of its pedestal-positioned history.68 Madonna, here,

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68 The history of women on stage walked along the line of the cult of true womanhood as this can be traced in the 19th century melodrama genre. In his work *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture* (1991), Robert Allen explains that “[t]he melodramatic heroine was, to a large extent, the stage embodiment of the ‘true’ woman, whose spirit pervaded sentimental novels and sermons alike, and whose image was reproduced in paintings, prints, and magazines. She stood somewhere between man [sic] and the angels” (84). The tradition of the melodrama, though, was followed by and in juxtaposition with the one imposed by burlesque. Allen argues that burlesque “presents a model for the sexual objectification of women in popular entertainment. Thus, it can also be seen as a progenitor of modern pornography” (27). Burlesque has come to connote “of the exotic, displayed female body” (26). Hence, the stage has traditionally been a site where female subjectivity was either portrayed as angelical and stripped off of her political power, or as an exoticized object of feminine attributes to be looked at. Arguably, both polarizing traditions have made their way deep into popular culture, which celebrates femininity and encourages that women be worshiped as such. For further reading, also consider Laura Mulvey’s seminal essay on “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975), and Robertson’s *Guilty Pleasures*. 
inhabits the position of the diva on a pedestal; her glamorous femininity appears natural on stage, while her egocentric autoeroticism is comfortably displayed to attract “look-all-you-want” gazes.

Although such position seems to confine female subjectivity in objectified and passive *loci* of power, it is interesting to be viewed at from the perspective of the show(wo)manship tradition. Robertson has commented that Madonna’s camp relies on the performance of femininity as masquerade: “The masquerade mimics a constructed identity in order to conceal that there is nothing behind the mask; it simulates femininity to dissimulate the absence of a real or essential feminine identity” (12). It has the potential to underline and expose the construct of gender as innately hollow by inflating its surface and corroding its core. In its history of caricaturing gender, the masquerade has been a powerful tool in camp’s gender parody arsenal. In terms of stage performance, the practice of masquerading exists within a parental histrionic environment that aids in our understanding of gender performance and constructedness by means of exaggeration. In ways that date back to the pre-twentieth-century burlesque tradition and its travesty of gender roles, the live concert allows the female performer to theatricalize a glamorous femininity. Regarding Madonna, the play of acting out femininity, as this is culturally, socially, and dramatically defined, aligns with the performer’s acting-out of her own icon. She does not simply parody femininity, but rather re-enacts her own persona who mockingly dons various iconic femininities, including hers as well.

The performance of “She’s Not Me” in the *Sticky & Sweet Tour* stands paradigmatic to Madonna’s self-centric indulgence that turns into gendered play. Clips from her past videos appear on the video screen and she starts singing the song, the lyrics of which talk of cheating and of how Madonna is irreplaceable when compared to her boyfriend’s new lover.
Whereas musically “She’s Not Me” is an upbeat funky song, its live performance extends to a more dramatic, even painful delivery. Toward the middle of it, four female dancers appearing as mannequins emerge on the stage. The mannequins are based on past “Madonna” personae, including her “Monroe” from “Material Girl,” the boyish Minnelli-esque persona from “Open Your Heart,” the bride from “Like a Virgin,” and the cone-bra-clad fashionista from “Vogue.” Madonna approaches and disturbs her past selves, stripping off articles and accessories, unbalancing their fixed positions, and calling them “Bitches” and “Wannabes.” She even reaches the point of touching her dancers’ body parts and French-kissing one of them. Although this act may invite readings of self-eroticism, since its Madonna flirting with her own image, it tips the scales toward self-harassment. Deconstructing her past icons is a moment that evidently, albeit briefly allows the audience to take a short glimpse into Madonna’s struggle in the industry, mainly as a female artist. The repetition of the lines “She’s not me” and “never let you forget” watches Madonna assaulting her doppelgangers, taking off their wigs, strangling her “Vogue” persona with the bride’s veil, and finally executing a frenetic dance solo, as the “wannabes” vanish down-stage.

This specific performance has intentionally given access to the ideological construct of glamorous femininity by letting the audience peek through its fissures. In a pure display of self-violation, Madonna declares that She is not her, a She that includes past Madonnas, future imitators, and female celebrity status. As a woman in the performing world, the artist takes a stand to dramatically expose the constant need to reinvent herself in an effort to keep

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69 This impersonation is based on the image of Marilyn Monroe from the performance of “Diamonds Are a Girl’s Best Friend” for Gentlemen Prefer Blondes (1953). The scene of Monroe in the iconic pink dress singing an ode to materialism might as well be the campiest moment of her career, offering up the idol as camp to be consumed, appropriated, and disseminated. Madonna, Kylie Minogue, and Christina Aguilera, among others, emulated the particular scene in acts that accurately exhibit the histrionic nature of Monroe’s glamorous femininity.

70 Consider the MDNA Tour mash-up of “Express Yourself/She’s Not Me” with Lady Gaga’s “Born This Way,” as an affirmation of popular allegations that have the latter plagiarizing the former.
the public’s interest alive. The performance, thus, stands critical against the repression imposed by glamorous femininity upon the artist’s “real” self. Nevertheless, the fact that such opposition to her former images/roles is voiced within her show reveals the irony behind her position as a show-woman. After “She’s Not Me,” Madonna hastily returns to her club culture origins, clarifying any obscurities this performance might have created. She gauchely puts on her mannequins’ discarded wig and jacket and crawls on the runway toward the main stage, as the lyrics of New York-based Indeep’s “Last Night a DJ Saved My Life” (1982) are being played. Her crawling is accompanied by acts of entreaty as she reaches out her hands in call for rescue. Upon stepping on the main stage, “Music” explodes.71 Contrary to its disco-vamped version in Confessions, Sticky & Sweet’s electro-house rendition of “Music,” sees Madonna bringing her past into the present by staging her nostalgia for the ‘80s urban scene. Both Indeep and Fedde le Grand’s samples in “Music” rely on Madonna’s affiliation with the city of New York and Detroit, respectively, while punning with the beginning of her career, mainly via Indeep’s lyrics.72 By being antithetical to “She’s Not Me” in terms of narrative and performance, the visual presentation of “Music” sees Madonna re-embracing her stage self and 1980s musical descent, reaffirming her status as the Detroit-born-and-bred, but inevitably New York-influenced Queen of Pop inside a burst of past Madonna references. After all, it is an all-about-Madonna show.

Such cross-temporal references are indeed inseparable from Madonna’s stage. While the Confessions Tour, an retro-indulging enterprise par excellence, stood out for presenting a full-extra time-travelling experience into a specific moment of 1970s entertainment, the rest of the artist’s tours, conversely, revive a plethora of past moments of entertainment and

71 The song is now remixed with Fedde Le Grand’s “Put Your Hands Up 4 Detroit” (2006) and the video backdrop resembles a subway cab wherefrom actual dancers are coming out on stage.
72 “Last night a DJ saved my life/And if it wasn’t for the music/I don’t know what I would do.”
playfully fuse them with the present. The *Sticky & Sweet Tour*, the *MDNA Tour* and, recently, the *Rebel Heart Tour* derive their inspirations from local and global artists, from mainstream and underground scenes, and, most importantly, from Madonna’s own oeuvre, which is constantly being reconfigured to meet each show’s standards. What is indicative of such borrowing is the amount of intersexual information exhibited. The *Sticky & Sweet Tour*, for example, featured an abundance of musical references, making it perhaps Madonna’s most pop-trivia tour. *The Guardian* reviewer for the show, Kitty Empire, accurately suggests that “[one] do[es] not come to Madonna for dignified austerity, and the *Sticky and Sweet* tour delivers on visuals, pace and sheer physicality,” underlining that “the show radically remixes old favorites and showcases the newer songs from her *Hard Candy* album” (2008). Musical director Kevin Antunes and Madonna’s longtime tour director Jamie King composed the specific show to contain as many audiovisual stimuli as possible, thus making it a truly diverse postmodern piece of spectacle.73

Austerity, as Empire mentions, is not part of Madonna’s f(l)air. As with every pop camp instance, the artist’s fetishistic camp nests within capitalistic grids that will not allow its consumer drive to be otherwise expressed. Camp’s colorful reality here is symbiotic with capital(ist) existence and exhibitionistic affluence. The very essence of camp, Madonna’s staged camp icon and, of course, reception and consumption from her audiences is a triptych that encloses problematic interrelations and makes manifest the nuanced nature of ideological power behind it. Taking also into account that Madonna’s camp(ed) traditions are the live performed history/ies of queer subcultures and scenes—a point I will explicate shortly in the analysis of “Vogue”—it is important to lay focus on the rather disturbing

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73 A case in point is the performance of “Into the Groove” which samples an array of songs, such as New York hip-hop group Run-D.M.C.’s “It’s Like That” (1983), Paris-based electronic duo Cassius’s “Toop Toop” (2006) and Philadelphian funk musician Frankie Smith’s “Double Dutch Bus” (1981), while its backdrop video features Keith Haring’s iconic visuals that became synonymous with New York’s 1980s street culture and AIDS epidemic.
conjunction of such history/ies with a consumerist-nurtured ethos. Margaret Thompson Drewal underlines that “[w]hen corporate capitalism appropriates Camp in its own interests and then poses as its signifier, then the representation bears only the residue of Camp politics” (150). The writer here challenges canonized notions of camp’s politics of subversion, especially when this is being viewed from its exchange value perspective. Drewal identifies capitalism as the patriarchal and heterosexist ideology that regulates and, by extension, eradicates the “gay signifier” when camp practices are corporately appropriated. Yet, it is less accurate from Drewal’s perspective to solely allocate patriarchal power in the exportation of camp. The “pink money” politics of late 1980s and 1990s, for instance, have been fundamental in materializing the objectives of the gay and lesbian movement in tackling institutional homophobia by speeding up the process of bringing LGBT+ cultural lifestyle to a significantly less marginal, albeit inevitably commodified space.74

The capitalistic nature of the production and dissemination of camp within the context of pop culture and, here, global music tours cannot be simplistically defined as either heterosexist or gay-driven.75 It is a non-black-and-white area coordinated by both, as is the fashioning and marketing of Madonna’s icon. In financial terms, it can be argued that the spectatorial nature of “Madonna,” a Material Girl by all means, and her onstage camp are extravagantly fed and maintained in order to keep fueling her status as a gay icon.76 The

74 “Pink money”—“pink pound” for the UK and “pink” or “Dorothy dollar” for the US—refers to the “huge amount of money spent by those of gay or lesbian sexual orientation” (Quest 1998). For further reading on the circulation of capital power as the aegis of the gay and lesbian movement towards social visibility, consider John D’Emilio’s essay on “Capitalism and Gay Identity” (1983) and Chasin’s Selling Out: The Gay & Lesbian Movement Goes to Market (2000).

75 As part of the entertainment industry, global concert shows logically and logistically require large financial support in order to be staged, promoted, and toured. However, the productive cost of each tour rises depending on the creative components behind it. Hence, a show where camp qualities nest automatically ups the ante, since we are talking about extravaganzas.

76 Considering Madonna’s 10-year contract – starting 2007 – with promoting company Live Nation, one can imagine how the icon/spectacle duality is put into numbers; Business Insider’s Peter Kafka scrutinizes the golden deal: $17.5 million dollar: A great advance – money Madonna gets just for being Madonna; $50 to $60
over-projection of queer culture in her tour projects may indeed validate the capitalistic essence of camp, yet it also proves the tendency to materialize, economically and politically speaking, the culture’s artistic and social history on stage. In order to approach the subject as such, one has to conceptualize camp historically from the perspectives of production and reception, both as a camped history, for which camp attaches, contaminates and re-proposes perspectives of culture, i.e. Madonna’s camping of Catholicism, as well as a history of camp, the presumably original perspectives of history that are rooted in time as queer-coded and usually queer-exclusive camp, i.e. the disco. The distinction between the two, of course, is far from simple due to the always subjective fluidity and complexity of camp. The exposition of this coalesced relationship between the camped history and the history of camp is vitalized through forms of tradition, the power of which lies in addressing queer audiences with a past that has become empowering—if purloined—history and identity-bolstering cult item via its iconization. The remainder of this chapter will explore camp’s historical mapping by turning to the practice of vogue and Madonna’s appropriation/borrowing of it.

The Legacy of “Vogue”

The camp practice of vogue, for that matter, is another shared tradition that is frequently performed on the contemporary music stage. A wide array of divas has incorporated the intricate dance and its accompanied culture in their show routines, thereby acknowledging it as a form of queer spectacle. Madonna’s engagement with vogue onstage,

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77 Kylie Minogue has included voguing in most of her tour shows; Lady Gaga’s performance of “Black Jesus + Amen Fashion” for the Born This Way Ball tour (2011-13) is another case; Rihanna’s latest Anti World Tour (2016) featured the dance during its house music-based segment; also, FKA Twigs hosted vogue showcases for her Congregata shows (2015), including a battle showcase among well-known voguers for her New York gigs.
in particular, has developed in parallel with the history of her involvement with the vogue scene as this originates in her seminal song and video of “Vogue” (1990). Not only has “Vogue” been a landmark in Madonna’s worldwide career, but it was also fundamental in widely consolidating her status as a queer icon. Ever since, the artist has included the song in her trajectory of tours, always approaching it with different creative moods for each show, yet never abandoning its quintessential camp proponents. Nevertheless, her dealing with voguing and its ballroom culture origins and, by extension, her exploitation of its queer potential appears problematic. Most academic criticism sees Madonna’s dealing with the vogue scene as cultural appropriation and commodification of an originally subcultural practice that, due its marginal status, dwelled and operated from a dynamically counter-(hetero)normative position (hooks 1992; Harper 1994). Almost thirty years after the song’s initial impact, though, Madonna seems to have left her own imprint on the cultural evolution of vogue, presenting it as an inextricable part of her icon and stage. It is worth laying focus on Madonna’s specific staged tradition which seems to have partly shaped the performer’s affiliation with her queer fandom as well as demonstrates queer culture’s acknowledging of pop artists’ immersing themselves in queer practices that heavily inform their performance.

Historically, voguing has been a street dance practice established by working-class queer Latino and African-American groups in the 1960s. Its name derives from the eponymous fashion magazine due to the fact that voguers’ contortions emulate fashion models as if walking down the runway or posing for a cover shot. Within the context of the ballroom contests, voguers would impersonate a certain role/character, such as the suburban lady or the butch businessman, in what is known as categories and would come to drag balls to compete each other on “realness”—the ability to present each character in the ballroom as

For further analysis on the vogue performances of Minogue and Gaga, see Chapter 2 and Chapter 4, respectively.
accurately and realistically as possible. Progressively, these competitions have included an array of categories which in turn have helped separate voguing into three distinct major showcases: Old Way, New Way, and Vogue Femme (Bailey 2012; Prodigy 2016). While each category has its own features—for instance, Old Way entails clean-cut geometrical posturing, whereas New Way relies more on agile and flexible moves—all three center on the performance of gender. Vogue Femme, for that matter, is the category in which the performer has to effectively display a feminine character by acting out the signifiers of femininity as truthfully as possible. Vogue’s treatment of gender roles has acquired a central space in queer theory due to its ability to underline and present the social percept of gender as performative mainly through drag performance (Butler 1990; Harper 1994; Senelick 2000). It has indeed served as a political site to investigate the performativity of gender, yet its potential to critically oppose normative structures and effectively challenge the systemic materiality of gender remains rather ambiguous.

Theory-wise, vogue’s camp politics of subversion have entered academic discussion from the very moment the scene was brought to a mainstream forefront. Gender scholars have underlined the parodic efficacy of vogue and drag performance to imitate and reproduce conditions of gendered expression, while, simultaneously, challenging a perhaps utopian notion that these performances can overthrow or fully deconstruct the actual gendered order as this remains culturally, socially, and historically ingrained. Judith Butler, for instance, has undertaken an analysis of Paris Is Burning (1990), Jennie Livingston’s documentary on Harlem voguers and the ballroom scene, to further explicate why drag’s alleged subversion in fact reiterates normative gendered structures, despite its seemingly effective exposure of the ideology of gender. The writer stresses that:
“Realness” is not exactly a category in which one competes; it is a standard that is used to judge any given performance within the established categories. And yet what determines the effect of realness is the ability to compel belief, to produce the naturalized effect. This effect is itself the result of an *embodiment* of norms, a *reiteration* of norms, an impersonation of a racial and class norm, a norm which is at once a figure, a figure of a body, which is no particular body, but a morphological ideal that remains the standard which regulates the performance, but which no performance fully approximates (1992, 129, my italics).

In Butler’s argument, one also has to factor in the aspect of performance as spectacle. As a quasi-drag show, indeed a staged performance, vogue’s competence is limited within the contours of the stage/dancefloor where the body is called to perform and imitate relying on an already existing reservoir of socially established gendered codes; hence, the embodiment and reiteration of norms. Both performers and receivers of vogue are exposed to gender-bent realities onstage, but what happens outside of this always-already theatrical environment is more complex. The stage’s theatrical representation of reality juxtaposes itself with the actual one, therefore framing gender parody as solely stylistic, stripping it off of its potential to radically destabilize social gender offshore. As Philip Brian Harper argues about the *Paris Is Burning* stars and extends to the ball world in general, “when Realness queens exit the ball milieu, which constitutes a type of imaginary realm, they must – to all appearances, at least – conform to the norms of the larger social context that effectively constitutes the symbolic order” (97). In this sense, the basic premise of subversion serves little if we are to restrict analysis within the argument of performance on stage/dancefloor and performance in a broader social environment.
While in the actual sense of the performance, vogue still remains a nebulous critical territory, its political valence should be sought elsewhere. If attention is paid as to the culture and legacy of gender fluidity that vogue has established through its years of subcultural and mainstream existence, what emerges is a cultural history that operates its own queer reality and has significantly foddered queer culture’s understanding of gender performance. In this light, vogue has to be examined as a durable camp tradition which bears instantly recognizable queer signifiers that read gender as a performable and imitable. These signifiers reside in camp’s extravagant conceptualization of gender, style, and an attitude that can best be described as smug. Precisely because these signifiers rely on an essentialist perception of gender and coded behavior, they can easily be mimicked and showcased. Vogue may in part fail to serve as a radical critique of gender, yet the conspicuousness and effortless decipherability of its signifiers allows its queerness to be visibly manifest. Its power lies on the surface, the bodily exterior. Through its spastic movements—bent wrists, flexible limbs, and ferocious strutting—the voguing body fleshes out the quintessential campness, that is, effeminacy. Andrew Britton explains that “[c]amp always connotes ‘effeminacy,’ not ‘femininity’” (138). The writer adds: “[b]eing essentially a mere play with given conventional signs, camp simply replaces the signs of ‘masculinity’ with a parody of the signs of ‘femininity’ and reinforces existing social definitions of both categories” (138). Effeminacy, thus, is the process through which a body of any gender is given dramatically feminine attributes; in short, femininity is the source, the stereotypically fixed tank wherefrom camp draws in order to feminize the body. Vogue’s effeminacy is explicit because its camp-fueled choreographic presentation manages to visibly feminize the performing body.
Effeminacy, though, has always stood stereotypically connotative to quondam perceptions of the gay male body. More like anathema, effeminacy led toward framing homosexuality as “faggotry” which in turn drove a plethora of gay men to consciously and subconsciously internalize masculinity, usually perceived as white and Western, as the antidote against their sissy profiles so as to blunt homophobia and smoothly integrate into heteronormative reality. By redressing this precise image of the gay body, vogue invokes effeminacy as a means of outspokenly flaunting the said faggotry, a faggotry that entails ethnic and racial markers, as well. It proudly re-instills voice into the exorcized effeminate man in order to both underline queer men’s embodiment of machismo as hypocritical and designate “the camp” to a more central place within queer culture. Ironically, it exploits the power of the stereotype to re-energize the effeminate body and celebrate sissiness with a sported in-your-face attitude. Being performed by a plural corpus of bodies—bodies that can be male and female, transgender, bisexual, white and non-white, young and old—vogue’s camp valence dwells on the ability to revive and channel the signified campy homosexual by and through the performance of effeminacy. In fact, its essentialist, albeit queer-forward language bears the inclusive quality that makes it easily understood by and widely appealing to a global audience who has taken to venerate vogue as a queer tradition. After all, that is exactly what Livingston’s voguers, representing a subcultural caste of marginalized queer groups, claimed to dream of.

Importantly, vogue’s language was introduced to a mainstream audience via two key mediums: Livingston’s documentary and Madonna’s “Vogue.” The former presented voguers within the Harlem ballroom milieu and was the first to document the vogue scene and its on- and offstage reality. Livingston helped shed light on the marginal life of Harlem’s gender outcasts by providing insights into the drag practices within the contests and the
Houses. The documentary was a welcome addition to queer theorists’ investigations on gender performance and performativity, yet issues of cultural authorship emerged with regard to Livingston’s auteristic and at times sentimentalized approach of the vogue queens. In her review of the film, bell hooks underscores:

Jennie Livingston approaches her subject matter as an outsider looking in. Since her presence as white woman/lesbian filmmaker is “absent” from Paris Is Burning it is easy for viewers to imagine that they are watching an ethnographic film documenting the life of black gay “natives” and not recognize that they are watching a work shaped and formed by a perspective and standpoint specific to Livingston. (151)

On a par with hook’s argument, Butler maintains that Livingston’s “white Jewish lesbian from Yale” status stands in juxtaposition with the voguers’ status quo, by presenting her documentation of the ball culture as the vehicle of desire which promises to rescue voguers from marginal oblivion and will lead them to worldwide recognition (1992, 133-135). In these readings of Paris Is Burning, one comes to realize that inasmuch as the vogue scene came into the cultural forefront, it came so by means of exoticization, being presented as not an ideal, albeit significantly glossed-over culture whose lifestyle celebrated the convergence of sexual, racial, and ethnic Otherness. Livingston’s gaze into the spectacular stage presence of the voguers and its further juxtaposition of it with their problematic offstage daily life led

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78 Houses in ball culture are the collectives formed by voguers. The structure of the Houses has been of great interest primary because its social formation resembles a biological familial home: a House consists of a Mother, a Father, and the Children. Houses often receive their names after famous fashion houses, such as the House of Prada and the Houses of St. Laurent. For a concise account, consider Marlon Bailey’s work on Butch Queens up in Pumps: Gender, Performance, and Ballroom Culture (2013, Livingston’s documentary (1990) and my essay on “Strike a Pose, Forever: The Legacy of Vogue and its Re-contextualization in Contemporary Camp Performances” (2016). Consider also Ryan Murphy’s FX series Pose (2018-) which deals with ball culture and the Houses.

79 Harper’s critique corroborates Butler’s reading of Livingston’s authorship, arguing that “[w]hile the impact of Paris is Burning may depend on how successfully it renders ball culture generally recognizable the intervention thus effected is registered specifically as that of the filmmaker, who is accordingly interpelled as a figure of some social standing, rather than that of the queens in the drag-ball circuit, who clearly are not” (99).
to idolizing the glamour of vogue and placed it central in the public reception of queer African-American and Latino communities. Its glorification of the balls’ lifestyle and the voguers’ breakthrough success, not to mention its inability to conceal the performers’ wide internalization of the 1980s American materialist ethos and suburban life aspirations, seem to obscure the parameters under which the documentary lays focus on the subversive edge of vogue. Ultimately, *Paris Is Burning* provided clear glimpses of the scene’s future engagement with, if deep submerge in, the mainstream pop industry which, in turn, capitalized on the subculture by turning it into spectacle.

This is the precise axis around which Madonna’s “Vogue” revolves as well. Its Old Hollywood-inspired video featured Madonna dancing and striking poses among voguers, while her Gaultier conic bra left its own mark on her fashion experimentations and has time and again stood synonymous with her icon. Significantly, Jose Gutierez Xtravaganza and Luis Xtravaganza, members of the renowned House of Xtravaganza, choreographed “Vogue” and subsequently assisted Madonna in the creation and staging of her *Blond Ambition World Tour* (1991), as explained in the tour’s documentary, *Truth or Dare*. The artist’s collaboration with the Xtravaganza duo was a declared proof of Madonna’s close contact and cultural junction with the underground queer scene. Similarly with Livingston’s documentary, though, the immense popularity of “Vogue” and its trend-setting choreography bespoke of Madonna’s blatant exploitation of a subcultural expression for lucrative goals. Her pre-vogue plundering of the Hispanic and black culture already burdened her history of cultural appropriation and “Vogue” seemed to pile on, despite its being co-created by actual members of the ball culture. The song was brought over into the pop music market by conveying an all-inclusive “Strike a pose/ There’s nothing to it” message. Although the discourse behind

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80 The film’s cinematic highlights here include Willi Ninja’s career in the showbiz industry and the emotionalized approach of Venus Xtravaganza’s death and thus the ineffability of her suburban family dreams.
the lyrics might appear egalitarian, it has, in fact, carefully erased the ethnic and racial nuances that gave birth to the practice of voguing in the first place. The lyrics “It makes no difference if you’re black or white/ If you’re a boy or a girl” along with the overwhelmingly white profile of both Madonna and the Hollywood stars narrated throughout the songtext seem to perpetuate the singer’s “blond ambition” behind her alleged affiliation with the cultures her project cites from. Nevertheless, in Madonna’s contemporary performances of “Vogue,” it becomes evident that the artist did not actually stripped voguing off of its cultural markers, but, rather, managed to fit herself along its evolution, creating, thus, a legacy of vogue that has been mutually foddered by its initial creators and “Madonna,” the icon, alike—most likely due to her highly influential appeal.

Being one of her signature songs, “Vogue” is almost always included in every one of Madonna’s tour stage. For each tour, the song is appropriately reinvented to match the show’s aesthetics; yet, there are certain characteristics that remain stable and manage to preserve its camp philosophy when performed. Flair and pomposity along with the inevitably extravagant wardrobe and the gender-fluid playfulness are integral in every performance. Two more key constituents that camp infuses into vogue are retromania and intertextuality, further proving the point that camp onstage has to address the audience’s familiarity as regards the position of the performance and the performer, of course, into the world of pop. The Sticky & Sweet rendition of “Vogue,” for instance, places the performance of the song in the Pimp segment of the show, which is “a mash-up of 1920s deco and modern gangster style” (Brown 2008). The musical production of the song contains elements of the singer’s duet with Justin Timberlake, “4 Minutes” (2008), and Timbaland’s “Give It To Me” (2007), two

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81 During the song’s bridge, the lyrics invite the glamour of Classic stars: “Greta Garbo and Monroe/ Dietrich and DiMaggio/ Marlon Brando, Jimmy Dean/On the cover of a magazine/ Grace Kelly, Harlow, Jean/ Picture of a beauty queen/ Gene Kelly, Fred Astaire/Ginger Rogers, dance on air/ They had style/ They had grace/ Rita Heyworth gave good face/ Lauren, Katherine, Lana too/ Bette Davis, we love you.”
chart-toppers of their respective years that attribute to “Vogue” a sonic contemporaneity. As far as wardrobe is concerned, Madonna and her dance troupe are dressed in total black leather-and-lace-based couture, a highly stylized approach of S/M-attire. What should not go unnoticed here is that the conceptualization of “Vogue’s” wardrobe is an onstage nod to Kylie Minogue. During her Showgirl: The Homecoming Tour (2006-07), Minogue incorporated “Vogue” in a mash-up with her Fever song “Burning Up” (2001), the performance of which was also approached with an art deco-cum-S/M perspective. By acknowledging Kylie’s tribute, Madonna’s response to cite Showgirl’s fashion was not simply an act of borrowing. The intertextuality of the performance highlights the importance of camp to be shared onstage as a means of targeting same audiences: here, queer audiences.

In addition to that, Madonna’s body invites queer readings. The execution of a vogue choreography requires sharp movements motioned by swift, flexible hands that are mainly used to frame the performer’s face as if posing for a photo shoot. In the beginning of the performance, Madonna follows a ritualistic routine that sees her suggestively putting her hand microphone in her underwear so as to release her hands for her solo voguing act. As was the case with the electric guitar in the Confessions Tour, here again the artist plays in double entendres: the microphone is used as a penile substitute, a dildo, and is left protruding through her underwear while she is executing her solo. Unlike the guitar position which allowed Madonna to usurp a masculine position of power, the microphone as dildo here camps up the performance in a rather different way. To flaunt her microphone/penis is to highlight the plasticity of the phallus in a genderfuck effect. June Reich argues that

82 Both songs are produced by Timbaland and Timberlake; “Give It To Me” was a collaboration of Timbaland with Timberlake and Nelly Furtado, while Madonna’s Hard Candy (2008), which the tour promotes, was produced by both men almost in its totality. One would argue that the Pimp segment pays musical homage to Hard Candy’s hip-hop-based musical producers, including productions by Pharrell Williams and Kanye West as well as a noteworthy reference to Britney Spears’ R&B sounds of that time.
“[g]enderfuck, as a mimetic, subversive performance, simultaneously traverses the phallic economy and exceeds it” (264). The writer adds that “[t]he play of masculine and feminine on the body and/as the text, subverts the possibility of possessing a unified subject position” (264). Leich allocates subversive power to the genderfuck politics of the dildo as this exists within lesbian sexual performances of butch-femme role-play. Madonna toys with the sexual conventions of queer sex in a rather risqué manner, further binding her vogue performance as well as her own persona with camp poetics. The genderfuck effect foregrounds queer subjectivity through Madonna in the camp union of vogue’s effeminacy—as connotative of the effeminate queer man—with the dildo signifier—as derivative of lesbian sexual practice.

Madonna managed to effectively repeat the exact genderfuck effect in the performance of “Vogue” for the MDNA Tour, which brought the reality of the spectacle in collision with the actual reality. “Vogue” was the opening act for the tour’s Masculine/Feminine segment and, appropriately, the whole act relied on gender play. Introducing the segment was a video interlude of Madonna reenacting “Justify My Love.” As in the original video of the early 1990s song, Madonna is seen performing a stripping act inside a hotel room. She is playing with the camera lens, at times inviting the voyeuristic gaze, while at others deflecting it from her body back to the viewer using props, such as a magnifying glass, a mirror, and a mask. Having established exhibition and voyeurism as its central themes, the segment transitions into “Vogue,” whose gender spectacle is now placed in the mystique already imposed by “Justify My Love.” The way gender is exhibited in the performance alludes to an act of exploring one’s curiosity. The set is built on black-and-white visuals with the lighting simulating flashing cameras. Also dressed in black-and-white attire, dancers appear in drag—some of them even have their faces covered—and start taking poses in sync with the flashing lights. Madonna emerges carrying the mask that appeared in
the preceding video. What is interesting to pay attention to here is her costume: she sports a suit-and-tie ensemble combined with a Gaultier-designed corset with conic bustier which exaggerates an hourglass body figure. Her combed-up hairstyle and makeup in combination with the suit make an apparent allusion to Marlene Dietrich’s androgynous style, while the corset is worn over the suit like an exoskeleton.

Reading the above set as the ideal host for a gender-bending performance would be an understatement. Madonna draws power both from her fashionista icon via the cone bra and from Dietrich’s camp icon, whose heterosexual profile was not only time and again questioned, but her style exemplified the lesbian chic of the 1920s. Here, Madonna underlines femininity as purely stylistic to be worn as an exoskeleton; and all of that firmly positioned within “Vogue’s” drag spectacle. The apparent genderfuck effect through dragging and voguing exists here in symbiosis with a tradition of camp manifest through the signifiers of Dietrich and the cone bra as well as the dramatics of drag and vogue per se. It is an extravaganza baptized in camp and an epitomical showcase of ball culture. The performance does not hold back from overplaying the camp factor to such a degree that it eventually manages to escape the show’s reality. As a matter of fact, in February 2016, four years after the MDNA showcase, the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras paid a video tribute to Madonna which featured two hundred dancers in a classic “Vogue” routine. According to Attitude’s Ben Kelly, “the Mardi Gras organisers say it is ‘a heartfelt tribute in recognition and respect of Madonna’s support for our LGBTQI communities throughout her career’” (Kelly 2016). For the performance, “the dancers were accompanied by a Madonna impersonator dressed in one of the MDNA Tour outfits… Also featured in the video are some drag queens performing ‘Express Yourself’ and a group of children who recreated the ‘Material Girl’ video” (Kelly 2016). Instances like the aforementioned tribute reveal how
Madonna’s icon has been contributive in the socio-artistic evolution of queer culture worldwide. Moreover, despite the iconic aura of the original performance of “Vogue,” the Mardi Gras dancers recreate a relatively recent reinvention of it as this was showcased in the 2012 tour, proving Madonna’s enduring appeal to, and cultural communication with queer audiences.

As has been apparent throughout this research, camp has to be treated idiosyncratically and contextually. Reception of diva camp—here, Madonna’s camp—may vary depending on socio-political context. The MDNA rendition of “Vogue” was indeed an iconic moment for the Australian LGBT+ community and was certainly not out of context. At the time, Madonna’s Rebel Heart Tour was on the road and was about to visit the Australian territory for the first time in twenty-three years (the last tour which did so was The Girlie Show in 1993). It was the buzz around Madonna’s highly promoted and anticipated tour in Australia that gave the Mardi Gras organizers the opportunity to host the specific tribute by celebrating Madonna’s tradition of tour performances in light of her arrival. The sharing of Madonna’s camp appears to be at home in the Australian community’s perception of queer culture. Conversely, the same performance and show received quite the opposite welcoming in MDNA Tour’s stop in Russia in August 2012. Following the political turbulence around the guerilla performances of feminist punk band Pussy Riot, who fervently opposed Vladimir Putin’s anti-LGBT+ policy and were due to face the court of law at the time, Madonna voiced her support both for the band’s political art and for the Russian LGBT+ community. The tour show met with conservative criticism for being a “gay propaganda” that morally opposed traditional Russian values.83 The alleged homosexuality-

83 Pussy Riot’s activism and Madonna’s support for the group were part of the political background connected with Vladimir Putin’s policy to regulate LGBT+ cultural promotion and maintain Russian traditional family values. The political turmoil culminated a year later, in June 2013, with Russian government passing the LGBT
promoting show was decried by the Russian Orthodox Church, while the US embassy in Russia warned an issue calling for possible eruption of violence outside the concert (Elder 2012). In terms of idiosyncrasy, therefore, it becomes clear that reception within both the Australian “Vogue” tribute and the Russian anti-queer atmosphere point to camp’s inescapably queer-inflected nature. This brings me back to the argument that vogue and, by extrapolation, camp’s gender play is indeed an explicitly queer-colored praxis and language that is recognized for what it is. Madonna’s performance, thus, politicizes this specific aspect of “Vogue” which is conspicuous precisely because of its inextricable association with the queering of gender and its assertively flaunting poetics.

Regarding vogue culture, such instances are apt demonstration of how pop culture has come to shape the history of a marginal art form and its surrounding experiences. Despite being antithetical in their reception of vogue’s camp, both incidents have come to filter its queer language through Madonna’s icon. Madonna may have initially appropriated vogue from the ballroom culture, but she is currently an inseparable part of its history. As a result, she can (re)generate camp which is solely based on her own iconic legacy. Most recently, the Rebel Heart Tour included two vogue performances that celebrated Madonna’s camp treatment of Catholicism and the Hispanic culture, respectively. The first performance was a mash-up of “Vogue” with the Rebel Heart track “Holy Water” (2015), for which female dancers dressed as nuns performed a pole-dancing routine with Madonna fondling their bodies; the performance culminated with male dancers joining them to simulate an orgy-like version of the Last Supper. The second performance, Rebel Heart’s lead single “Living for Love” (2015), was not based on “Vogue,” but it featured a vogue choreography. The song was remixed to acquire a house-music vibe and its staging was a re-enactment of the music

Propaganda Law according to which any “non-traditional sexual relations” promoted from any source, either media and inter material or gay pride rallies, would be federally punishable. (Elder 2013).
video, in which a traje-de-luces-clad Madonna appeared as a matador fighting minotaur-
resembling dancers. The vogue routine here bears a feminist subtext because of Madonna’s
inhabitance of the traditionally male subject position of the bullfighter and the symbolic
slaughtering of the aggressive male minotaurs. Considering the singer’s lesbian-esque
flirtation with the nuns and her campification of the matador figure, one can argue that,
despite the fact that Madonna seems creatively derivative as regards her drawing from an
already exhaustive referential pool, vogue serves as a constitutive basis in highlighting her
camp(ed) tradition. Voguing offers its camped-up body language to queer Madonna’s
approach of the Catholic and Hispanic narratives, successfully dramatizing the performed
acts with the theatrics of gender.

In seeing how vogue and, by extension, camp praxes vitalize the diva stage, one has
to be constantly aware the means by which these praxes are materialized. As part of popular
culture and spectacle consumption, divas’ reproduction of camp is and will inevitably be
commodity-oriented and mass-mediated. Speaking about Madonna’s cultural transactions
with the African-American culture and her seemingly subversive gender politics in the early
1990s, hooks has argued that “Madonna is not breaking with any white supremacist,
patriarchal status quo; she is endorsing and perpetuating it” (163, italics in text). The critic
has also added that Madonna’s “white girl” profile “is that position of outsider that enables
her to colonize and appropriate black experience for her own opportunistic ends even as she
attempts to mask her acts of racist aggression as affirmation” (159). The artist’s relationship
with queer culture seems to reiterate patterns of identify colonization and cultural
appropriation. As a matter of fact, this argument in part stands valid about other gay icons,
such as Kylie Minogue and Lady Gaga, whose cultural relationship with queer culture is one
of transaction, as well. However, one has to consider a counter-argument to hooks’ view:
first of all, cultures do not belong only to insiders, especially if one comes to think of today’s
global sharing of cultures across all forms of media; and, secondly, the commodification of a
culture is a two-way process that equally concerns producers and receivers of culture.
Performers like Madonna and Kylie may indeed appropriate or borrow from queer culture as
outsiders, but this process is not something that queer consumers do not approve. Had it been
otherwise, we would not have been talking of celebratory acquiescence, but of unsettling
disdain against the said appropriations. Quite the contrary, as the Sydney Mardi Gras tribute
indicates, audiences sanction this cultural exchange between divas and queer praxis, simply
because divas are also an inextricable and revered component of camp culture. In fact, divas’
pedestal-placed position within queer culture proves that as much as they rummage through
its practices for inspiration, themselves are being used and consumed, in response, as
spectacles.

With reference to vogue and divas’ interaction with the ball culture, Derek Auguste,
also known as Jamel Prodigy, a member of the legendary House of Prodigy, underlines how
important the contribution of gay icons has been for the scene. In the interview I conducted
with the artist, he explains that “the exposure that artists, like Lady Gaga and FKA Twigs,
have created for the ballroom kids is doing amazing things… They can actually think what
they’ve been doing and turn it into dollars; they can turn it into fashion; they can turn it into a
career. And those are the things we were told that we couldn’t do younger as creative artists”
(2016). It is not coincidental that the careers of contemporary vogue performers, such as
Benjamin Milan, Leiomy Maldonado, or Prodigy himself, has at some point been propelled
through their collaboration with pop music artists, as was the case with prominent scene
figures, including Jose Xtravaganz and Willi Ninja, in the 1990s. Prodigy even attests to the
fact that not only do voguing Houses still retain strong kinship among them, but also that
some of them are even strictly developed as production companies—the Haus of Gaga stands exemplary of that. Here is exactly where the lines between politics and spectacle are blurred. For, performers may seem to capitalize on subcultural praxes, yet they offer to the communities the much-needed visibility by sharing and disseminating their culture. As Dick Hebdige once argued:

As soon as the original innovations which signify ‘subculture’ are translated into commodities and made generally available, they become ‘frozen’. Once removed from their private contexts by the small entrepreneurs and big fashion interests who produce them on a mass scale, they become codified, made comprehensible, rendered at once public property and profitable merchandise. (357, my italics)

Hebdige accurately describes the lapse of subcultures to fixity, once they become commodities. However, it is the codification and comprehensibility that help in rendering subcultures visible and widely understood. The subcultures’ permafrost state certainly drives any counter-dominant force that may derive from the liminal margins into conformism, as part of an assimilative process that diffuses the said force into a larger, mainstream, if you like, site of reference. However, the subcultural residue left becomes a time-resisting mark that is and will be acknowledged for what it is, becoming, thus, an era-traversing signifier, a fixed cultural insignia.

Madonna’s case proved that as much as she appropriated/borrowed from the culture of vogue, she did not manage to render the culture frozen. She did position her icon, though, inside its queer history by means of citation and by rules of market. Nevertheless, vogue’s democratic perception of a gender-bent reality is a resilient queer signifier that can never be obliterated by instances of appropriation. To appropriate a culture after all does not equal its demise qua some original authenticity. On the contrary, vogue and the ballroom culture
currently enjoy a central place within queer culture and appeal to a variety of audiences. Prodigy adds: “We don’t have to play victim anymore. Our story has far surpassed Paris Is Burning. We’re here and we’re here to stay” (2016). Furthermore, the existence of vogue within the touring spectacles of diva performers establishes a global network of audiences who approve and celebrate the legacy of diva camp on a par with its queer politics and poetics. It is interesting, though, to lay focus on the conundrum of agency in relation to the position of the diva and her power to channel and share the rhetorics of this legacy. As we will see in the next chapter, diva’s production and exposition of camp is indeed a multi-authored process that, among other things, it has to rely on the audiences’ familiarity with the diva’s shifting icon.
LaLaLas and WowWowWows: Approaching Kylie

Boy George: “[Kylie] put the amp in camp!”

Kylie Minogue: “I put the amp in camp? Maybe I put the K in kamp.”

—GLAAD Media Awards 2014

“I change characters when I do a photo-shoot. I’m like the eight-year old with the dressing-up box. It’s kind of avoiding being me – rather than being captured, I become a new character and let that take over.”

—Kylie Minogue, Kylie Naked: A Biography (190)

Introducing Kylie Minogue for the GLAAD Media Awards ceremony in 2014, Boy George highlighted the singer’s advocacy for the LGBT+ community. Kylie then proceeded with a speech which referred to her relationship with the community throughout her 30-year-long career, partaking in the Awards’ 25th anniversary and GLAAD’s celebration of LGBT+ visibility in the media. The Australian performer’s music is widely known in the Eurasian territory, while over the last decade she has crossed over to American audiences mainly as a gay icon. From playing popular gay clubs, such as London’s G-A-Y and New York’s Splash, to headlining Pride parades, such as the 2012 Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras, Kylie has made her icon synonymous with contemporary gay culture. In particular, her audience nowadays is mostly comprised of gay men. Essentialist as this might sound, Kylie’s demographic results from, and attests to the modus operandi of “pink money” and despite claiming that she has denied offers by record companies to market herself toward the “pink” direction (Geen 2016), the economic and cultural core of her icon arguably blooms within and nourishes in return “pink” capitalist operations. While Kylie asserts how she has been adopted by the gay community (Geen 2016), this pronounced relationship is certainly more
complex. Revisiting the diva worship pattern, it becomes clear that the “adoption” of Kylie abides by a vast camp tradition which sees gay men glorifying (heterosexual) female celebrities. Upon acknowledging their gay icon status, the latter respond by progressively, partially or completely (re)orienting their spectacular politics toward their allotted direction.

As a case in point, Kylie’s stage presence and persona serves as a fecund ground where gay politics and the subject matter of camp converge. Boy George may have recognized the amp in Kylie’s camp, yet Kylie’s spontaneous, albeit accurate response that she has put the K in kamp acknowledges a distinct trademark and personal devotion to her production and preservation of camp. In terms of artistry, Kylie’s sound mostly inhabits a generic dance zone, ranging from Euro-pop and electropop to synth-pop and disco, while her limited balladry consists of dramatic piano-based pieces or trip-hop productions. In what appears to be a surplus of ultra-pop sound, one finds Kylie’s cheerful and erotically teasing lyrics that portray themes commonly found in contemporary pop songtexts, such as partying/nightclub life, attraction, love, and sex. Her image, however, is the key constituent in fusing sound and lyrics into a coagulation of pop camp as perceived and exhibited by her contemporaries, including Madonna, Pet Shop Boys, and Eurythmics. By alternating between roles—perhaps the quintessential camp component—Kylie has moved from the girl-next-door profile, as established by her role as Charlene in the Australian TV series Neighbours (1986-88) and her first singles (“Locomotion,” “I Should Be So Lucky”), to the sexy adult (“Better The Devil You know,” “Shocked”), to the defining sex symbol (“Spinning Around,” “Can’t Get You Out of My Head,” “Slow”), to the cult diva (“Wow,” “All the Lovers,” “Dancing”). The longevity of her career has allowed Minogue to play with

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84 Cleto underlines that kamp, as a stylistic variation of camp, is a word that circulates gay slang in Australia and New Zealand, although carrying the exact same meaning and connotations (10). Considering that Kylie is from Melbourne, Australia, her mentioning of kamp makes a noteworthy pun that acknowledges both the Australian version of the slang term as well as her signature “K” behind it.
profiles without, however, deviating subversively from the pop mould of image reinvention. Unlike Madonna, whose initial transformations were promoted via controversial identity politics, Kylie’s metamorphoses are rather limited within the flexible marketability of her persona and display an apolitical devotion to reinvention. This is precisely, though, where the (c)amp of Kylie resides and what will be the central argument of this chapter.

Prior to exploring this argument further, it is important to posit Kylie’s reinvention tactics in juxtaposition with that of Madonna’s and the influence the latter exerted upon her. Image reinvention and role-playing have been key concepts in the construction of pop icons, especially ever since the rise of music television established image as equally important to sound. Madonna’s cultural impact in the 1980s helped shape the contemporary music stage not only with regard to reinvention, but also in terms of sound and image, performance, sex, and fandom. Her politics of gender and sexuality, as tantamount to her chameleonic and indeed rapid changes of style, rendered her reinventions rather fluid in nature and, by extrapolation, allowed her to glide though fixed identities. Hence, Minogue’s first appearance in the pop scene in the later years of the 1980s would inevitably be filtered through the already established and perhaps leading female performer of her time. Regarding camp, the basic axis that gender and identity are histrionically understood and performed is a core dynamic that permeates both artists’ personae. In this sense, Kylie’s refashioning of identity contains the same political dynamic that Madonna’s camp has in its deconstructive qualities of gender. When I argue though that Kylie’s reinventions are apolitical is not to adopt Susan Sontag’s view on the apolitical character of camp. By juxtaposing Kylie’s camp

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85 Madonna does not stand out because she was the first one to infuse her style with sexual and gender politics, and thereby occupy multiple identity grounds. Before her, Annie Lennox, David Bowie, Michael Jackson and even Cher had successfully adopted a postmodernist understanding of the multiplicity of identity. Madonna was rather the one to up the ante in terms of velocity and popularization of her reinvention tactics by employing a radical politics of pornography against what was a conservative mainstream media environment.
with that of Madonna’s, one sees that Madonna’s camp accrues from an oppositional stance against an adversary as part of her political stage—as in her mocking inhabitance of the male rocker position (see first chapter); whereas Kylie’s camp, as we will see further down, makes no specific political statement against any sort of agency. As Marc Brennan argues, “Kylie as a performer, like most pop performers, is about spectacle. What possibly makes her unique is the degree to which she is portrayed as having fun in her performances. It is this that in turn signifies a sense of innocence” (182). Revisiting her own words in the epigraph, it is understood that Kylie’s spectacular transformation are representative of her “innocent” play. Her camp thus stands for entertainment and escapism. It is a camp praxis that views the stage as a playground whereupon identities are part of its carnivalesque. This playground, however, through its allegedly apolitical innocence, can serve as a potent space of cultural critique since it invites layered readings that connect Kylie’s diva performance with understandings of gendered mechanisms, queer art, and the erotics of the spectacle.

This aspect of camp that Kylie personifies is to a great degree a result of her collaboration with William Baker. Being her longtime creative director, her “gay husband” as she herself notes in her White Diamond documentary (2007), Baker has played a significant role in Kylie’s exportation of camp. It is important therefore to acknowledge Baker’s sensibility and artistic taste behind the performer’s profile and stage. In my interview with him, the director commented that his work with Kylie is in its base influenced by Madonna: “I think that everything in pop music done by a female [artist] is influenced by Madonna really” (Baker 2016). Baker’s perception of Kylie’s persona is certainly mediated through, and perhaps modified by, the impact Madonna had had on him as a teenager: “If I hadn’t seen Blond Ambition when I was at school, I don’t think I would do what I do today, because that’s what makes me want to do it. And that’s what formed my way of looking at a
show” (Baker 2016). Evidently, Kylie’s stage becomes more akin to Madonna’s from the middle of the 1990s onwards and, specifically, from the *Intimate and Live Tour* (1998) for which Baker is officially credited as the creative director. Baker extends the Madonna influence to the structure of Kylie’s shows: “The modern pop concert experience was created by [Madonna] really and her *Blond Ambition* show. That’s what I think has become the template for the theatrical kind of pop show which is split into sections that pretty much everyone copies or everyone is inspired by” (Baker 2016). Apart from the act-led motif of the shows, Baker notes that Kylie’s stage fashion is another area that Madonna has influenced. His collaborations with the likes of Jean Paul Gaultier and Dolce & Gabbana have a prerequisite that Kylie’s tour costumes bear the iconic flamboyance that Madonna’s wardrobe does (Baker 2016). To trace this supposed ubiquitousness of a Madonna-esque aesthetics over Kylie’s stage is to conceptualize Baker’s understanding of what comprises an iconic spectacle and thus prefigure him as the artistic (gay) authority behind the spectacle of Kylie. In light of this and along the lines of camp production and reception, this chapter will also investigate the power of the gay male gaze upon the stage and body of the diva.

Drawing largely from the gaudy pool of burlesque and Classical Hollywood, but also paying homage to a tradition of camp iconicity, the tour shows of Kylie Minogue are the par-excellence ground wherein diva camp fully materializes. Kylie herself is a persona who embodies the poetics of diva worship within contemporary queer culture. Kylie’s queer and, more specifically, gay male audiences, not very dissimilar in composition to those of Madonna in terms of age or gender, disclose a relationship with camp that is importantly different from past forms of diva worship. As Daniel Harris indicates:

86 David Bowie’s *Glass Spider Tour* (1987), however, is credited to have innovatively functioned as the act-divided template upon which subsequent tour shows were based (Youngs 2009).
87 Gaultier’s high camp fashion, for that matter, has created an array of designs favored by both artists, including the notorious cone bra and some of the over-the-top head-pieces.
For gay men under the age of 40, the classic film star has become the symbolic icon of an oppressed early stage in gay culture in which homosexuals sat glued to their television sets feasting their eyes on reruns… For the contemporary homosexual, who prides himself on his emotional maturity and healthiness, the use of the diva to achieve romantic fulfillment through displacement is the politically repugnant fantasy of the self-loathing pansy whose dependence on the escapism of cinema must be ritually purged from his system. (22)

Although Harris’s argument partly holds true considering gay men’s pre-Stonewall engagement with Hollywood camp, the writer does not account on how contemporary gay culture has sought means of escapism elsewhere. As has been explicated in the introductory section of this research, music divas have now largely replaced the model of the film star in the diva worship tradition. As contextually different from its predecessor, the music diva camp appeals to a generation of queer consumers who are generally more immersed in an open, ubiquitous, and self-conscious queer culture (at least by Western standards). Kylie’s camp, for that matter, exemplifies more of a celebratory turn to diva worshipping, rather than a guilty pleasure of a vicarious identification. Undertaking thus an analysis of Kylie’s tour stage from the *Showgirl: The Greatest Hits Tour* (2005) and *Showgirl: The Homecoming Tour* (2006-07), to the *KylieX2008* tour (2008), to the magnum opus of *Aphrodite: Les Folies Tour* (2010) to the most recent *Kiss Me Once Tour* (2014-15), this chapter examines how Kylie’s persona and stage actively materialize camp as a cultural form of entertainment.

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88 When the tour moved to North America, it was renamed into *KylieUSA2009*, alternatively known as *For You, For Me*, due to being Kylie’s first ever headlining tour in the region. Because of that, the show was rather a retrospective enterprise of previous Kylie tours, fusing elements from the *X Tour* and *Homecoming*, as a recapitulation of her oeuvre to be showcased for the American audience. *For You, For Me* does not deviate significantly in content from the previous tours. Some noteworthy exceptions include Kylie’s new costumes, the revamping of some acts, such as the X-lectro Static segment, and the cinematic and musical references to Hollywood camp classics, such as *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) and *The Sound of Music* (1965). Segments or acts of this specific tour are not discussed in this chapter mainly because some of them will be addressed within their original productions.
that reflects and simultaneously nourishes contemporary queer culture’s ideals, mentalities, and expressions with regard to the queer self and community.

**The Cult of the Showgirl**

As a pop phenomenon, Kylie has significantly evaded academic scrutiny and this is evident in the limited literature referring to her persona and stage. Gerardo Rodríguez-Salas and Sara Martín-Alegre ascribe this non-interest to the over-emphasis laid on Madonna’s body of work (2010, 157). The writers argue that Madonna’s provocative persona and phallic femininity stand in stark contrast to what Kylie embodies: “[Kylie] has been practically ignored by academia due to the generalised perception that she represents precisely the kind of bland femininity that Madonna challenges” (157). In the same vein, Lee Brannon underlines that “[s]ince the arrival of Madonna, and the resultant critical and academic interest, women in pop are often unfairly compared to this post-feminist juggernaut” (178). Essentially, according to the writer, “[p]op princesses, unlike Madonna, do not always attempt to be subversive, they often don’t write their own lyrics, they may not challenge the male gaze, and they rarely upset established institutions. In short, pop princesses give cultural critics very little to write about. Easy to denigrate, difficult to celebrate” (178). What both Rodriguez/Martin’s and Brannon’s arguments imply is that Kylie’s ultra-feminine persona fails to be radical in the performative manner that Madonna realized and, for that reason, it poses a non-threat to patriarchal gender norms, thus dealing no analytic merit.

With that being said, theorization of Kylie’s camp is apparently limited as well primarily because the artist’s camp performance, when viewed in the context of stereotypical gender reiteration and, of course, under the always problematic rubric of the consumerist-bound nature of her pop spectacle, appears devoid of subversive potential. The surprisingly
exiguous critical sources on Kylie’s camp per se, which mostly argue in favor of camp’s
deconstructive qualities, restrict their analysis to Kylie’s postmodern stylizations of gender
and those musical references of her that are rooted in disco and its frivolous aesthetics.
Janice Miller makes a small reference to Kylie’s camp as part of her case subject that is the
camp act of Scissor Sisters. Miller remains simplistic in reiterating Sheila Whiteley’s
generalized view of Minogue’s Barbie-doll image and the rather unexamined argument that
even Kylie herself “admits that her appeal to gay men is that they love to brush her hair and
dress her up” (Whiteley 63). Elsewhere, Brannon identifies Kylie’s camp as an aspect of her
disco revival for the Light Years album (2000) and rushes to define Camp Kylie as simply
From a Deleuzian perspective, Sunil Manghani concentrates on the technical visuality of
Minogue’s tours and remains static in explaining how the post-Intimate and Live shows are a
reminder of Kylie’s camp homage to her gay following (2015, 253). The reason why these
arguments cannot provide us with a comprehensive view of Kylie’s camp appeal is because
there is the need to solely attribute deconstructive power to camp as a device of subversion,
whereas its function as a communicative discourse and performed tradition remains
practically unstated—or, in the case of Manghali, rather vaguely defined as homage.

As has been previously argued (Bergman 1993, 13), camp in its pre-Stonewall usage
was deployed as a secret language of “passing” among homosexual men who dared not risk
exposure. In this context, camp was more of an intra-communal code of communication that
brought gay men closer (through a common identification, for example, with the pleasure
derived from sharing knowledge on a Hollywood melodrama or reciting lines from the

89 Minogue has been associated with the American band, particularly, with frontman, Jake Shears, who has
produced songs for various Kylie albums, including “I Believe in You” (2004), “White Diamond” (2006) and
“Too Much” (2010). Scissor Sisters is renowned for their flamboyant performances and titillating lyrics.
repertoire of a camp icon like Bette Davis), rather than a radical form of politically queer antithesis against the heteronormative grammar of dominant power. Richard Dyer supports that “[c]ulture is not for the main part done in order to say something or make a point, and queer culture is in this no exception. The processes of cultural production in Western society are primarily concerned with pleasure, with making things that are enjoyable and giving vent to the need to speak, to express and communicate” (2001, 9). To try to read Kylie’s camp as a subversive form of gender parody will only take us as far as arguing on her bland masquerade of hyperfemininity, which to a great degree is compromised with the marketability of her sexuality. To revisit, however, her exposition of camp as a form of shared pleasure is to, firstly, highlight her poetics of camp with the resilient quality of a performed cultural tradition, and, secondly, approach and explain the appeal of camp to her queer audiences less from a strictly polemical position, as expressed by those who usually rush to crown camp’s politics with queer subversion, and more from an emotion-based one.

First and foremost, in its exposition of camp, the stage of Kylie has accommodated a variety of queer-associated acts, scenes, and even covers from the musical canon of gay culture—consider her live cover of Judy Garland’s “Over the Rainbow” for both Showgirl tours. As Kylie’s showcases demonstrate, disco, the paradigmatic gay musical experience (as described in the previous chapter), remains a primary source of artistic citation for the diva stage. Kylie has made her name synonymous with the disco scene not only in her late 1980s beginnings, when the echoes of the disco era were still audible, but, most significantly, in her millennial comeback with the Light Years album. This period has come to mark Kylie’s departure from the indie-based sound of deConstruction Records and her complete turn to

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90 Following the lukewarm commercial and critical success of her Impossible Princess album (1998), Kylie left deConstruction and signed with Parlophone, a move that saw her immediately reaping the benefits of her
dance-pop productions. Importantly, *Lights Years* and its lead single “Spinning Around” (2000) re-popularized the disco sound and aesthetic, and attracted a new generation of queer audiences to Minogue’s fanbase. As a result, each one of her tours reserves at least one section dedicated to Kylie’s disco roots. With regard to continually staging disco acts within the tour shows, Baker explains how he understands the sound of disco as a “fundamentally gay music” (Baker 2016). Upon acknowledging its origins from the gay clubs and its connection to Kylie, the director feels the need to balance between fitting disco acts within the shows without, however, risking turning Kylie into “a nostalgia artist” (Baker 2016). “How many times can you re-do this?” he asks (2016), even though he is aware he has creatively differentiated every new act from a past one without deviating from the camp essence of disco. As evident in Kylie’s tour history, acts incorporating disco are not just a plain homage to the era, but a synthesis of camp spectacle that is mainly based on camp’s power of intertextuality.

For instance, the Beach Party segment of the *KylieX2008* tour\(^91\) attests to Baker and Minogue’s need to revitalize the theatrics of disco with an abundance of camp references. The segment begins with a video interlude featuring Kylie’s dancers as semi-naked sailors whose accentuated poses and hypermasculine profile allude to the homoerotic art of Tom of Finland.\(^92\) Kylie appears and starts flirting with the sailors on a deck as a reenactment of Quentin Crisp’s scene from camp classic *The Naked Civil Servant* (1975). Dressed in sequined nautical attire, Kylie and her sailors are then propelled via a deck-like prop onto the new deal as *Lights Years* brought her again atop the British and European charts and, thus, back into the public eye.

\(^91\) The sequential order of the tour segments is: Xelectro Static, Cheer Squad, Beach Party, X-posed, Naughty Manga Girl, Starry Nights, Black Versus White, and Encore.

\(^92\) Tom of Finland serves as the pseudonym for mid-20\(^{th}\) century Finnish artist Touko Valio Laaksonen, known for his highly eroticized gay male graphic art. The art of Tom of Finland now stands synonymous with the pornographic hypermasculinity exemplified by his graphic characters.
stage to perform “Loveboat” from *Light Years*. When producing the album in the late 1990s, Kylie described what she wanted it to sound like in four words: “poolside, beach, cocktails, and disco” (Brennan 181). Eventually, the album has been reviewed as “a shiny, sparkly, early noughties disco record” that has acquired a “camptastic” status (Levine 2010). And this is the precise camp feeling the specific segment cares to bring into the *X Tour*. Following “Loveboat” is a cover of Barry Manilow’s “Copacabana” (1978) for which Kylie and her dancers recreate the actual narrative of the song. Registered to the segment’s tonality, “Copacabana” also draws distinct lines between the song’s showgirl and Kylie’s showgirl profile. The Beach Party concludes with the signature *Light Years* track, “Spinning Around,” the song that preluded Kylie’s millennial comeback and return to form. The performance of “Spinning Around” takes place amidst the setting of a cocktail bar and palm trees that previously propped “Copacabana,” thus effectively realizing both the theme of the segment and Kylie’s joyous feeling of *Light Years*.

As much as Baker would like not to see Kylie becoming a nostalgia artist, the degree to which nostalgia permeates her stage is far from dismissible. Camp after all, as a postmodern recycling and recyclable form of cultural distribution, is nostalgia. Angela McRobbie argues that “[l]oss of faith in the future has produced a culture which can only look backwards and re-examine key moments of its own recent history with a sentimental gloss and a soft focus lens” (142). Arguing however against this Jamesonian “gloomy

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93 Penned by Minogue, Guy Chambers and Robbie Williams, the song’s cheesy lyrics illustrate the glamorous life upon the loveboat with “Martinis and bikinis.” The songtext also features some lyrics in French, such as “Quest ce qu’on va faire” and “We’ll sail on with savoir faire/ Su la mer” which may be a nod to the dolce vita of Saint-Tropez. Perhaps the raciest moment of the song that adds more to its tongue-in-cheek frivolity are the following lines: “Have an Havana/ Pass me a peach/ Rub on some lotion/ The places I can’t reach.”

94 Manilow’s song talks about the tragic love story of a showgirl named Lola who was performing at the nightclub Copacabana and fell in love with the bartender, Tony. One night, a mobster-like character, named Rico, tries to seduce Lola and ends up fighting and killing Tony. Thirty years later, Copacabana became a disco and Lola, as the tragic heroine, sits there devastated by her lover’s death and still wearing her showgirl costume.
prognosis of the post-modern condition in this ‘mass flight into nostalgia,’” the writer underlines that nostalgic acts are indeed capable of having depth and their pastiche exists in a rather celebratory character (142). Unlike postmodern pastiche, though, as Pamela Robertson argues, “camp redefines and historicizes... cultural products not just nostalgically but with a critical recognition of the temptation to nostalgia” (1996, 5). Kylie’s multilayered camp act, here, employs a poetics of nostalgia with semiotic depth without falling into mere pastiche. This depth is quite entertaining as well as instructive to her intergenerational queer fanbase. The erotica of Tom of Finland and the film on Quentin Crisp’s life, for instance, are culturally and chronologically relevant in the sense that their status and history may now be known only to a specific minority of art connoisseurs. By fusing them with her stage and persona, Kylie (re)popularizes and thereby affirms an already existing camp legacy. The nostalgia politics of her stage here imagines Kylie’s disco soundtracks as indispensible from the camp imagination, while her persona serves as the familiar instructor that guides her audiences through the layered iconicity. In order to effectively build on camp nostalgia, her mediating role requires a firmly established basis and connection with the repository of camp, something that Kylie has achieved by bringing (part of) her own personal narrative into the dramaturgy of her stage.

Taking into consideration that the majority of history’s camp icons embodied, to a certain extent, dramatic narratives of loss, death, and survival is to further approach Kylie’s appeal as one. Being a minority culture, queer culture entails a long history of pathologization which became inevitably inscribed both into queer subjectivity and into its accruing social identities. From the nineteenth-century “homosexual species” (Foucault 1978, 95), Contrary to Fredric Jameson’s perception of pastiche as “blank parody” (Postmodernism; or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism, 1991), Robertson supports that “if we understand camp to have been always mere ‘blank parody,’ we simply dehistoricize and ‘postmodernize’ camp’s parodic and critical impulse” (5, italics in text).
43) to the epidemic propaganda of the eighties (Levine 1992), Western queer culture is permeated with discourses of a medicalized and fragile corporeality. Regarding gay men, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick stresses that “[a] very specific association of gay male sexuality with tragic early death is recent, but the structure of its articulation is densely grounded in centuries of homoerotic and homophobic intertextuality” (210). Notions of homosexuality as pathologic and, specifically, the homosexual (male) body as aberrant exist as ideologically constructed patterns that have largely infiltrated popular culture and, by extension, queer culture, whose absorption and dissemination of images are deeply socially and psychically connected with a tragic sense of reality and self.96 As a result, popular culture icons adored by queer culture in part seem to foreground and perpetuate tragic narratives as central parts of their built iconic appeal. A broad history of queer icons attests to the aforementioned narratives which are more often than not cinematised into mythical proportions through the media and tabloid lens.97

Kylie’s icon appeal has too, in part, relied on her personal tragic narrative of breast cancer. The artist was diagnosed in 2005 while touring with *Showgirl* around Europe; as a result, the tour, which was scheduled to move on to Australia, had to eventually be cancelled. Her diagnosis was immediately and massively made known to the British and Australian public before going global, and led to an instant increase of broadcasts on breast cancer and health topics as well as mammogram bookings (Chapman et al. 2005). Upon undergoing surgery and chemotherapy, Kylie went on a hiatus and decided to abstain from the industry

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96 As byproducts of this ideological construct, consider the trope of the “sad young man” in the mid-20th century popular culture as illustrated in Dyer’s essay on “Coming Out as Going In: The Image of the Homosexual as a Sad Young Man” (*The Culture of Queers*, 2002). Also, consider the disempowering effect of the epidemic rhetoric in the 1980s upon the “empowered” model of the 1970s macho clone as described in Martin Levine’s essay on “Fearing Fear Itself” (*Gay Macho: The Life and Death of the Homosexual Clone*, 1998).

97 Consider, for instance, the tragic/ironic end of Marilyn Monroe, the epitome of an extremely dramatic femininity proved deeply fragile, or James Dean, the archetype of American virility brought to death by what was a very “masculine” sport; and, likewise, the somatic decadence and grotesqueness that usually accompany rehabilitation narratives, as the likes of Elizabeth Taylor or Amy Winehouse indicate.
before resuming *Showgirl* in 2006. The revamped show, named *Showgirl: The Homecoming Tour*, mostly maintained the basic elements of the previous show, but was significantly affected by Kylie’s cancer experience, especially in terms of production. The interludes were slightly extended to allow further rests, while the overall itinerary of the tour included short-term residencies in few Australian and British arenas, contrary to the wider geographical coverage of the 2005 version.\(^98\) Accordingly, her onstage icon acquired a more professional and, perhaps, more nonchalant character regarding performance and kinesis. The fact that she had lost her hair while in treatment gave Baker and Minogue the opportunity to experiment further with her onstage outfits by alternating between wigs and headpieces, creating thus a rapid array of chameleonic images imbued with a Cher-esque aesthetic. The two-hour extravaganza\(^99\) saw Kylie changing into eight different characters, moving from her Vegas-inspired showgirl persona in the Homecoming segment, to a leopard-print cat-woman in Athletica, to a torch singer in Dreams, among others, before finishing her Encore segment in casual style with a simple hat that was eventually taken off to reveal her post-chemotherapy hair.

This symbolic final act of taking a bow and losing the hat as suggestive of the existence of a human being underneath the glittery costumes signifies Kylie’s genuineness in front of her audiences. This is the central topic of *White Diamond*. A derivative of the backstage documentary genre, *White Diamond* follows the construction and itinerary of the *Homecoming Tour*—“a symbol to her recovery” (Baker 2007)—and Kylie’s personal post-cancer journey. Being the director, Baker felt that it was time to “rip the surface away” and go beyond the public’s perception of her, namely her being “[a] result of *Neighbours*, ‘I

\(^{98}\) For a more explanatory analysis on the differences between *Showgirl* and *Homecoming* consider Salas/Alegre’s article (2010).

\(^{99}\) In sequential order, the tour segments are: Homecoming, Everything Taboo, Samsara, Athletica, Dreams, Pop Paradiso, Dance of the Cybermen, and Encore.
Should Be So Lucky,’ Michael Hutchence,\textsuperscript{100} gold hot pants,\textsuperscript{101} ‘Can’t Get You Out of My Head,’ cancer” (Baker 2007). \textit{White Diamond} presented post-cancer Kylie as a highly professional, albeit fragile woman who manages to balance between the demands of her showbiz persona and be the ordinary human being who runs barefoot on the beach. Despite Baker’s attempt to peel off the surface, though, and present this everyday aspect of Kylie, the documentary rather rounds off the edges by sentimentalizing views of the artist as a human being through its cinematography and further emphasizing her feminine fragility—e.g., through the sharp antithesis of the heavy costumes over her petite and still in-recovery body; or the scene, among others, of her being carried in Baker’s arms following the interruption of one of her Manchester shows due to a respiratory infection.

Instead of allowing a deeper critical look into Kylie’s life, \textit{White Diamond} hardly rips any surface away, when, in reality, it seems to inflate the mythology around the showgirl. According to Salas and Alegre, “this peculiar postmodern product produces an illusion of intimacy with the star while at the same time thickening the screen protecting her privacy” (158). Being an account of \textit{Homecoming}, it is inevitable that the documentary lays heavy emphasis on the production of the tour. Kylie’s image is mostly positioned within wardrobes and boudoirs, on the stage, and next to musicians and fashion designers. If anything, it is a deeper look into the life of a showgirl, where the backstage ground functions as a mythologized space of glamour. It is a disclosure of the out-of-view territory where the ordinary girl transforms into the showgirl prior to emerging on stage. Despite the fact that

\textsuperscript{100} The frontman of Australian rock group INXS and former love affair of Minogue in the early nineties. Hutchence’s rock profile has been acknowledged as a significant influence on Kylie’s creative turn towards a more sexually confident persona in her \textit{Rhythm of Love} album (1990) (Barron 52). Hutchence’s death in 1997 impacted Minogue on a personal level, while, on stage, she has paid homage to his icon by incorporating a cover of INXS’s “Need You Tonight” (1987) in her \textit{Kiss Me Once Tour}.

\textsuperscript{101} The notorious gold pants in “Spinning Around” that were partly responsible for Minogue’s millennial comeback and media labeling her a sex symbol.
Salas and Alegre argue, defensively enough, against viewing Baker as the man who is “making her into a gay man’s fantasy of femininity” (160), they do not account on how, from a camp perspective at least, the ideological discourse of White Diamond points to an iconic narrative—it is, after all, a Portrait of a celebrity—of Kylie as a White Diamond: an epitome of white glamorous femininity so endlessly adored within camp culture. The documentary exudes a strong camp appeal in the sense that, firstly, it revels in a profusion of glamorous onstage and post-stage images. Secondly, it sets Baker on a hierarchical pedestal to be acknowledged and identified by other queer men as a creative role model, further perpetuating the cliché of an excelling gay man in the performing arts. Thirdly, its attempt to delve deeper into Kylie and present her as an ordinary human presupposes her status as an already mythologized state of stardom. Last but not least, Kylie’s diagnosis evokes cultural narratives of the sick person as the “queer,” a person who is of no use by standards of (re)productive heteronormativity. However, abiding by camp culture’s envisioning of a dramatic mystique surrounding pop icons, the documentary accentuates and transcends Kylie’s struggle by proposing her world of glittery costumes as recuperative of the threat of cancer—a breast cancer, for that matter, which, first and foremost, jeopardizes her femininity and, by extension, her career and life.

Kylie’s cult of the showgirl is indeed a dense camp discourse which has its roots in a performance of femininity that is deeply instructed by the burlesque tradition. Burlesque, for that matter, is a key source for Minogue’s onstage perception and performance of glamorous femininity, as is evident in her show acts where burlesque elements are virtually omnipresent. Based on the tradition of the Las Vegas scene and the Parisian Folies Bergère, Kylie’s costumes and performances are a noteworthy exposition of her icon’s camp that verify and cement her showgirl status. Claire Nally aligns burlesque performance “with camp, with a
heavy criticism of hetero-normative genders, and ultimately with the queering of identities” (625). With regard to traditional burlesque, Kylie’s is a rather bastardized version of its source in the sense that it does not contain either strip acts or radical nudity. It does, however, contain elements of playfulness and humor that are energized by her sexuality. Coupled with her hyperfeminine performances and extravagant role-play, these elements comprise the core of her shows, therefore directly linking her camp praxis with the burlesque tradition. According to Nelly:

the standard historical burlesque costumes of oversized fans, comically large ruffles, bustles, corsets and bows of nineteenth century were often a clear satire of upper-class fashion, social mores and sensibilities, as well as a dramatic and deliberate display of the female body. Similarly, the modern co-option of these sartorial accoutrements implies a studied reflection on femininity. (622)

Committed to the glamorous femininity and the theatrical discourse that surrounds it, Kylie’s burlesque can certainly be acknowledged as a careful study on femininity as well as a generic platform that can highlight the tongue-in-cheek character of her textual catalog.

*Showgirl* and its revamped version, *Homecoming*, attest to Kylie and Baker’s vision of fully embracing the star’s embodiment of a burlesque showgirl. Both tours construct Kylie’s profile as such by placing her on the center of a diverse stage, which is elaborately structured to convey a lavish quality and is home to a variety of scenes and styles. Immersed in a retro, art deco aesthetic, both shows present Kylie dressed in blue and pink plumage respectively and being surrounded by her dancers who sport underwear and oversized plumage on their backs. Every new style adopted for each act carries important signifiers of glamorous femininity: from the *gitana* figure in the flamenco-inspired performance of

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102 The pink-colored plumage in *Homecoming* may as well be a nod to her cancer survivor status.
“Please Stay” for Showgirl’s What Kylie Wants, Kylie Gets segment, to the Barbarella-esque space queen in Homecoming’s Dance of the Cybermen segment, Kylie inhabits roles that are stereotypically erotic and overplayed through hyperfeminine body language. Largely informed by burlesque, these femininities are more often than not home to exoticized ethnic representations as well, which is another overlapping discourse between burlesque and camp. From Showgirl onwards, Kylie has preserved this aspect of the showgirl persona by performing ethnic femininities—Aphrodite, as a case in point, was the focal point of the homonymous album and tour. Most of these femininities are approached from a rather playful-cum-sensual perspective as indicative of the neo-burlesque genre and its female-to-female drag perspective, and not in the sense of eroticization, or sometimes pornification, usually found in classic burlesque performances. Kylie’s performance of exotic femininities tilts to a drag aesthetics whose camp is imbued with burlesque’s high glamour and its risqué appreciation of gendered reality.

The X Tour’s Naughty Manga Girl segment is another spectatorial instance employing this racy aspect of Kylie’s showgirl poetics. Overviews of the tour underlined Kylie’s stage as “a whole lot of fun, veering between sexy, sophisticated, futuristic pop and

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103 Showgirl is divided into eight segments: Showgirl, Smiley Kylie, Denial, What Kylie Wants, Kylie Gets, Dreams, Kylieque, Minx in Space, Encore.

104 With regard to film, Jack Babuscio’s essay on “Camp and the Gay Sensibility” (1976) supports that certain films’ camp aesthetics is being instructed by the “realms of the exotic or subjective fantasies” and places emphasis on Carmen Miranda’s performance of “The Lady in the Tutti-Frutti Hat” (choreographed by Busby Berkeley) in The Gang’s All Here (1943). Similarly, Robertson’s essay on “Mae West’s Maids: Race, ‘Authenticity,’ and the Discourse of Camp” discusses how Mae West’s burlesque and blues songstress profile are sustained by an appropriation and performance of black femininity (qtd. in Cleto 1999).

105 In her book Burlesque and the New Bump-n-grind (2004), Michelle Baldwin argues that “[b]y the late 1920s, burlesque was synonymous with striptease, explaining why, despite its rich history in comedy and satire, most anyone today equates the word burlesque with stripping. Strippers were the main feature in burlesque, and the rest of the program—the comics, the variety acts—was there to fill out the show” (9, italics in text). The rise of the neo-burlesque movement in the 1990s barely made any impact because, as Baldwin explains, “[i]t simply was, to most people, synonymous with modern pole and small-stage stripping” (24), while “[p]erformers, audiences and the press... referred to it as performance art, or female-to-female drag, or just creative striptease” (27). Progressively, though, it acquired a more egalitarian attitude toward the female body and sexuality, by embracing a multitude of gendered, ethnic, racial, and corporeal subjectivities.
the cheesy Saturday night talent show aesthetic” (Pollock 2008). The performer herself is described as “relaxed and particularly playful,” while the “camp element is kept to a minimum” (Adams 2008). Although hardly can it be argued that the X Tour keeps the camp element to a minimum, the array of adjectives referring to Kylie’s performances by both reviews points to a sexy, cheesy, and playful show. The Manga segment, which fuses elements of Japanese popular art in its citations of the genres of kabuki and manga, stands paradigmatic to Kylie’s playfulness. The dramatically elaborate art of kabuki merged with the whimsical aesthetics of manga produce a highly stylized performance of femininity that is simultaneously flirtatious and cartoonish. The opening act of “Come into My World” (2001) sees the artist emerging in a kabuki mask-veil only to reveal, shortly after, her manga-based outfit. Kylie welcomes the audience to her Japanese-themed world whose propped washitsu106 visual setting and hanami-inspired107 petal blizzard establish a transcendental atmosphere for the song’s electronic sounds. This ambient, grandiose, almost trance-imbuing act of “Come into My World” is juxtaposed to the ensuing performance of “Nu-Di-Ty” (2007), a self-consciously noisy act which is where the Naughty Manga Girl materializes. With regard to its production, music critics reviewed “Nu-Di-Ty” as “a grating, baffling mess” (Ewing 2007), “the bitter aftermath of a sugar rush” (Hughes 2008), and “presumably intended to sound coy and sexy, but it makes you think of Adrian Mole getting his ruler out” (Petridis 2007). Illustrated as a complete joke, “Nu-Di-Ty” in its live performance does not even try to eschew its critics’ derision; instead, it deliberately embraces its failing status.

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106 Traditional Japanese interior decoration.
107 Hanami is the traditional Japanese custom according to which people gather outdoors to watch the bloom of the cherry blossom in springtime.
Voicing her titillating lyrics in staccatos and squeaks, Kylie teeters nervously through her stripped male and female dancers and occasionally covers her eyes with her palm embarrassingly. In brilliantly camp manner, she concludes the performance by addressing a “Dooitashimashite” (“You are welcome” in Japanese) to the public and letting off a mischievous giggle.

As a fusion of its source genre with drag and burlesque, Kylie’s Manga Girl produces a queer effect that is central to the artist’s camp. The image of the Manga Girl has its roots in the Japanese shojo manga genre. According to Maana Sasaki (2013) “[t]he ‘shojo’ in shojo manga directly translates to ‘young girl.’ The word further implies a character that ‘personifies desirable feminine virtues,’ embodying elements of kawaii (cuteness), naiveté, and sexual immaturity” (5). Drawing also from kabuki and its traditional androgyny as is evident in the male-to-female onnagata performances, Kylie’s act is powered by female-to-female impersonation and is dependent on a cross-cultural—albeit from a Western perspective—history of performed femininities. The convergence of manga, kabuki, and burlesque instills an almost child-like sexual naivety in Kylie’s persona who takes guilty pleasure in watching her semi-naked dancers engage in erotic poses during “Nu-Di-Ty.” Kylie inhabits a position of sexual limitation—also signified by her elaborately elegant couture which leaves only small parts of her body exposed—and remains on a solely voyeuristic stance toward her dancers’ exposed bodies. In fact, this position that veers between sheer elegance and a self-undermining sense of femininity is fundamental in

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108 “Nu-Di-Ty” illustrates Kylie’s physical desire to see her lover perform a striptease: “Flash it in fashion with me/ Skin to skin, body to body/ Dare to bare, let me, let me see/ Nu-di-ty”; “Time to strip down/ Just pop that zipper for me and let the thing out”; “One button at a time/ Who cares who sees tonight.”

109 As indexed in Samuel Leiter’s Historical Dictionary of Japanese Traditional Theatre (2006), “onnagata, also oyama, [are] the ‘female person’ actors who play girls and women in kabuki. Women were banned from kabuki in 1629, so young men who occasionally had played women before, now took over their roles exclusively […] The onnagata represents an idealization of femininity and even influenced women’s behavior and styles during the Edo period” (296-7).
delivering the camp effect. According to June Reich, “[c]amp is the celebration of passionate failures. The triumph of theatricality over substance, it is cynical, ironic, sentimental, pleasure-seeking, naively innocent, and corrupting” (263). The Manga Girl’s trickster-like disposition generates a camp act that does not only inflate traditional femininity (as dictated by the manga and burlesque tradition) by turning into a cartoon bubble, but, importantly, it allocates pleasure upon this playful moment of inflation. The performance of “Nu-Di-Ty” is this exact moment when the Manga Girl realizes her non-alpha position within her world and her inability to cope with the imposed standards, but embraces her failing status and turns it into a celebration.

When asked how Kylie manages to preserve her relationship with queer audiences through the years, Baker replied that “she has a very gay sensibility” (Baker 2016). In Baker’s view: “When she was starting out as a performer, all her songs were about being second best: “I Should Be so Lucky,” “Got to Be Certain,” “Hand on Your Heart”… It’s all about not being the super-strong… I think it’s definitely like a kind of vulnerability to Kylie… that gay people are attracted to” (Baker 2016). The gay sensibility that Baker attributes to Kylie is to acknowledge her persona as more than adequate for him as a gay man to identify with. It can be argued that Kylie’s sensibility sufficiently addresses her queer audiences through the emotional basis that constitutes the state of being queer in today’s culture. In light of this, her sensibility acquires an emotional basis that expresses emotions and desires of a queer subjectivity. One has to be cautious, though, over the plural nature of queer subjectivity. Being queer entails more than gendered and sexual categories as it is a psychic state crossed by a spectrum of social-cultural signifiers, such as race, ethnicity, and class, and is thus expressed variably across a widely applicable model, such as audience reception. Kylie’s camp cannot possibly exert its sentimental appeal equally to all queer
groups. Historically so, queer groups have evolved rather diversely and, as a result, have each developed an idiosyncratic understanding as to what pertains to their embodied living of queerness. For instance, British gay men’s queer experiences and lifestyle may come as tellingly different to those of queer women of color in America. Yet, what practically binds the state of being queer into more coherent a category are those characteristics that define the very basis of queerness, one of them being its cross-culturally imposed failure to realize heteronormative standards and values. Therefore, to be “second best,” as Baker underlines, or to perceive queerness and gayness as a state of vulnerability are notions deeply ingrained in the ideological configuration of queer subjectivity as the polar and indeed defective end of a normalized heterosexuality.

To take pleasure in Kylie’s camp is to turn the imposed failure, be it sexual or gendered, into a celebration. For queer men, who comprise much of Kylie’s fanbase and whose socially expected role in terms of gender expression and sex stands in stark contrast with what camp culture offers, means to come at war with those imposed standards of (Western) masculinity that equates male subjectivity with masculine power. It is, thus, to derive power from a seemingly disempowered position, that of camp’s effeminacy. Such power however resides rather regulated within the contemporary politics of gay identity. According to David Halperin:

[the] basic problem with the political functioning of gay identity nowadays is that in the course of claiming public recognition and acceptance of the fact of homosexual desire (sometimes at the expense of gay sex, to be sure), the official gay and lesbian movement has effectively foreclosed inquiry into queer sensibility, style, emotion, or any specific, non-sexual form of queer subjectivity or affect or pleasure. (77, italics in text)
Halperin’s premise that social visibility and acceptance as promoted by the modern gay and lesbian movement comes at the expense of queer subjectivity, along with its desires, emotions, and pleasures, is indeed legitimate as regards contemporary gay male culture. The need to reconcile two purportedly contradictive qualities—the gendered conformity leading the way of a contained image of socially visible homosexuality versus the queer colorations of gay culture that are still met with discomfort and cringe-making attitudes by inter- and intra-communal politics—results into confusion. This confusion makes itself manifest in the antitheses permeating contemporary gay male culture and its struggle to make polar ends meet as found in the binaries of: muscle culture versus camp culture; urban versus peripheral communities; institutional approval of gay marriage versus the socio-spatial concealment of gay flirting and sex. This is, of course, not to overlook the sociopolitical progress being achieved through the politics of the movement, but to highlight, perhaps emphatically through the either/or nature of these dualisms, the ambiguities nested within gay culture and their imprisoning ideology.

To celebrate camp and its performed tradition involves sentimental devotion to a practice that is still rooted in shame both within and out of queer culture. With regard to Kylie’s camp, Baker explains how it has always been a part of her and how her relationship with it appeared problematic for her record label: “a constant battle that we had with Parlophone[^110] is that camp is like a bad thing. People think it’s a bad thing. Parlophone were famously unsupportive of [Light Years’s] ‘Your Disco Needs You’ and really didn’t want to put the Kylie and Dannii duet on the Christmas album.[^111] Just because they hate camp.” (Baker 2016). Baker does not elaborate further on Parlophone’s disapproval of camp, yet he

[^110]: The British record label accommodating Kylie from 1999 onwards.
[^111]: The allegedly ultra-camp song “100 Degrees” that Kylie recorded with her sister Dannii for the *Kylie Christmas* album (2015).
points out that “they would argue, in their defense, that she’s better than that” (Baker 2016). Although, ironically, Baker has overlooked the fact that Kylie’s production of camp, especially in her live shows, remains vivid, he makes quite an important remark on the label’s attitude toward it. If we extrapolate the physiognomy of Parlophone to an institutional source of (artistic) control, we come across the unsettling paradox that permeates the nature of corporate power to openly criticize camp as a degraded artistic form and simultaneously invest in and capitalize on it. Camp’s embracing of its low, lite, and shame-ridden nature, though, underscores its liberating effect to be entertaining and exert appeal. Baker stresses that he loves camp glamour because it is fun and acknowledges it as part of gay culture’s legacy (Baker 2016). It is after all how the director has for years energized Kylie’s performances with camp poetics. With that in mind, it is now time to lay focus on Baker’s contribution to Kylie’s camp and see how his individual sensibility has come to shape the performer’s stage.

**Spectacular Athletica**

Baker initially started working as Minogue’s stylist prior to becoming the creative director behind her persona and stage. Although the two share different opinions with regard to Kylie’s performances, they eventually came to agreement by combining their personal tastes as far as the final outcome is concerned. Baker, for one, admits that he would rather invest in the theatrical aspects of a show, such as choreography, props, or costumes, while Minogue tilts the scales in favor of a more band-oriented production (Baker 2016). This is a quite important statement in dealing with the matter of agency in camp production. As part of Kylie’s production team, Baker, following Minogue, holds perhaps the second most important position as the creative director—alongside Steve Anderson, the musical
director—in the sense that literally every aspect of a show, performance, or album-based artwork is filtered through him. It is his sensibility that pours through the stage and posture of Kylie and his creative moods that are engaged in the conceptual process of turning an aural project into an audiovisual one. This is not, of course, to downgrade Kylie’s investment in her own persona. She is in charge of selecting, writing, and producing her music, a process over which Baker has limited say, and, in fact, she is the one to finalize decisions about her shows. Theatricality, though, is not always a domain that Kylie prioritizes; according to Baker, she really enjoys those segments of her shows where she interacts directly with her audience and her band (Baker 2016). As a case in point, following the lush *Aphrodite Tour*, Kylie decided to celebrate her silver jubilee in the music industry with the *Anti Tour* (2012), a minimalist production that included only her band and her back-up singers and was played for a total of seven dates in small British and Australian venues.\(^{112}\) The typical extravaganza that Kylie’s persona has been associated with is without a doubt connected to Baker, who relies largely on his personal taste and sensibility for the structural process of a show.

In this light, the camp of Kylie takes shape under the productive aegis of a gay male authority. Regarding the deliberate production of camp and the intentions of its “author,” Fabio Cleto queries whether the camp icon of stars, such as Mae West, Tallulah Bankhead, or Marlene Dietrich, to name just a few, was a result of a self-aware cognition of camp production instructed either by themselves or by a directorial figure or, rather, a result of the viewer’s perception (27). The complexity of this conundrum, which has its roots in the deliberate vs. naïve debate that Sontag posited, cannot be addressed monolithically. Realizing the complex nature of the authorial intent, Cleto argues that:

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\(^{112}\) The *Anti Tour* completely omitted hit numbers that made Kylie famous, such as “I Should Be So Lucky” or “Can’t Get You Out of My Head” and, instead, incorporated songs that had never been performed live before or were only known to the hardcore base of Kylie’s fandom.
we can’t really settle whether each of [these camp icons] made a conscious deployment of the camp fascination strategy… or if they were articulating that strategy in spite of themselves, be that through an exercise in camp decoding (either retrospectively or contemporary), or through the assignment of ‘stage directions’ that promote the star as camp icon, without her/his being conscious of that. (27)

Indeed, it is rather reductive to attribute authorial power either to the camp icon or to the directorial figure that is undoubtedly a vital component in the structural “script” of the stage. On the other hand, it is impossible to solely place emphasis on the outcome itself as disengaged from its source, following the Barthean logic that overlooks the contribution of the author’s sensibilities and their projection upon the textual/performative surface. As Cleto maintains, “the director’s ‘choices’ should be inscribed within the cultural horizon in which his/her subjectivity, and the personality of the star, is produced along with the artifact” (27). Camp thus can as well be a cultural exponent of its director’s personal taste and perception which, in our dealing with Baker’s authorship, are socially, historically, and sexually marked as “gay,” bearing both the qualities inherent in the queer/gay subjectivity and those dwelling in the gay identity as forged by the sociopolitical discourse of the LGBT+ movement in the Western world.

The production of camp can hardly be identified as a process through which one decides how camp signs are formed into line or how camp posture is achieved. Having gender performance as its formational axis, camp is a system of interrelations that accrues

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113 In his seminal poststructuralist piece on the “The Death of the Author” (1967), Barthes pointed out that “it is language that speaks, not the author; to write is, through a prerequisite impersonality (not at all to be confused with the castrating objectivity of the realist novelist), to reach that where only language acts, ‘performs’, and not ‘me’” (144). Barthes wished to release the textual discourse from the allegedly hegemonic nature of its (modernist) author arguing in favor of a more liberated textual production whose exploration from the reader will not necessarily include “the important task of discovering the Author beneath the work” (147). However as upheld by critics of Barthes and the post-feminist thought on the private as political – see Camille Paglia’s Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence in from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson (1990)—a literary text and, in our case, a performative/audiovisual text, is rather unimaginable without the subjectivity of its author.
from the interaction of gay male subjectivity and the state of being gay/homosexual within a traditionally gendered environment and its accommodation of strict gender complementarity. To be able to produce camp may vary and can derive from an extensive engagement with fields of camp interest that are not necessarily gay in the cultural sense—as was the case with Mae West and her performative dependence on burlesque which eventually produced a camp legacy with feminist underpinnings (see Robertson 1996). The ability, though, to intrinsically perceive and create camp praxis presupposes a social and psychic identification with homosexuality/gayness/queerness, namely the acceptance of the queer(est) self and an embodied practice of queer viewing of the world. Arguably, to talk about the intrinsic quality of queer viewing, also known as the queer/gay gaze, might sound as anachronistic in its evocation of an essentialist reading of queer perception as an asset that gay men are born with—a “qaydar”-esque sensibility—when, in fact, it is socio-culturally and ideologically learnt. As Brett Farmer argues, “[h]omosexuality is a central determining paradigm in modern, Western cultures, and many subjects articulate their desires, make their meanings, and live their lives, whether in part or whole, whether centrally or peripherally, through it” (10, italics in text). As with every stereotype, there is a grain of truth in the relation between being gay and the queer/gay gaze, not as much in the sense that one has a queer eye, say, for style, musical taste, and interior architecture (as mainstream shows like Queer Eye for the Straight Guy uncritically demonstrate), but more in the sense that homosexuality and gayness in contemporary culture materialize themselves through an established network of queer desires and coded traditions that are inter/intra-communally cultivated. In this view, the production of camp is filtered through the state of being gay, which, in its desires and meaning-making processes, eschews from traditional, read heteronormative, gendered expectations as well as foregrounds the poetics of homoerotic attraction.
Due to its parodic nature and denotation of effeminacy, camp is largely detached from the gravity assigned to erotic attraction and sexual arousal. Nurtured by a variety of popular media, be they online dating platforms, the gay porn industry, or films and TV series, cultural input regarding the sexual relations between queer men in contemporary culture is growing upon a perpetuation and idealization of Western notions of masculinity. From the clone image of the 1970s to the post-HIV/AIDS rise of the gym culture onwards, a discernible majority of the aforementioned media portrays the modern gay man taking pride in his masculine profile and eroticism. Consequently, the erotics of the queer gaze is largely informed by the (homonormative) image of a Western virile gay male who stands a paradigmatic model of sexual attractiveness. The macho gay male functions both as an aspiring subject position as well as an object of desire to be conquered—in plain terms, gay men are instructed to be and to have masculine males. By extrapolation, effeminacy and every social expression associated with it, including the arts of camp or drag, are construed as the polar, anti-erotic end of (gay) masculinity and are usually limited within the domains of spectacle. Halperin illustrates this polarity in his schema of beauty and the camp:

The traditional split between camp and beauty, or between humor and glamour, coincides specifically, with the old sexual division between queens and trade: that is, between effeminate and virile styles of performing male sex and gender roles… Since effeminacy is a turn-off, whereas masculinity is exciting, queens are attracted to trade, but not to each other. (205)

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114 Consider the plurality of images of gay men saturating the pages of gay press, such as *Attitude* or *Out Magazine*; the muscular men featured on promotional online banners of major hook-up apps, like *Grindr* or *PlanetRomeo*; and the macho porn actors starring in productions from the vintage porn of *COLT* (*COLT Studio Group*) to the contemporary *Men at Play*. 
Despite the seeming incompatibility of the split—as upheld in the notorious ideal of masc4masc\textsuperscript{115} in online dating communities—the relation of the polar ends is not always antithetical. Halperin explains that: “[t]he polarity between camp and beauty, though strict, is not absolute… Drag queens and muscle boys always perform together; each of them requires the presence of the other” (210). Therefore, with regard to the production of camp, I would like to argue that the poetics of erotic attraction as deeply curved by, and based on the notion of masculinity functions as an oppositional, albeit accentuating force—a foil\textsuperscript{116}—for an effective staging of camp.

Turning to Kylie’s stage, one sees how Baker’s camp treatment of it is based on this mutually-foddered relation in which masculinity becomes foil for camp. For Kylie, the epitome of (hyper)femininity and camp glamour, what functions as foil are the male dancers surrounding her on stage. The muscular and, more often than not, exposed bodies of the dancers stand in stark contrast to the elaborate costumes adorning Kylie’s body. Conversely, her female dancers in most shows usually intermingle with the male ones, but there are times when they either occupy the position of a supportive chorus wherein Kylie is the female in lead, or are completely absent from the stage. The shows display a noticeable presence of

\textsuperscript{115}In online dating platforms, masc4masc stands for “masculine man asks for same,” an expression reflective of exclusionary practices internalized by men who pride themselves on being macho and are repelled from those who exhibit feminine characteristics.

\textsuperscript{116}Helene Shugart and Catherine Waggoner also use the term foil along with anchor as a critical tool for the configuration of camp. The writers argue that, for their case subjects, anchors and foils “serve as contextual cues for alternative perspectives, helping to define the performance as critical and potentially subversive. In particular, foils are those characters that serve as the contemporaneous backdrop against which camp emerges as such; fairly ubiquitous and conventional in their representations, they provide the contrast that throws into relief the ‘campiness’ of those performances. Anchors are contemporary characters that also serve to define camp performances, albeit via ironic congruence rather than contrast and furnishing additional critical fodder and dimension” (58). I wish to align myself with their use of the word foil in the sense that the performance of camp and, here, Kylie’s camp, is indeed set against a contrastive force. However, Shugart/Waggoner focus on a specific contemporaneous character. By their logic, the foil for Kylie’s camp would be the person that Kylie is always juxtaposed to, namely Madonna. I want to differentiate my use of foil, here, arguing in favor of a less contained—if itemized—position of camp contrast that Madonna would fill, and extend it to a more open notion, that of masculinity, which can be found in multiple contrastive characters.
male dancers; segments that feature Kylie interacting solely with them seem to outnumber those where she performs only with her female crew.\textsuperscript{117} Most importantly, male dancers frequently reenact roles that are based on the performance of masculinity and appear on acts that reinforce their position as objects of the erotic gaze. In other words, men in Kylie’s world employ their masculine profiles as part of a spectacularized fantasy. Though, here is precisely where the staging of macho masculinity, as inscribed on the dancers’ muscular posture and as juxtaposed with Kylie’s glamorous femininity, allows for a reading of it as a stylized performance of gender; it follows the logic that insofar as camp performs femininity through masquerade then its polar end, machismo, is equally theatricalized. One can always assume that Baker is creating a sexualized image of male subjectivity on stage by projecting any personal desires and views upon the male body; spectacles after all are built upon and amplify the erotics of the body as a means of attracting their audiences’ gaze. Yet, by simultaneously employing camp poetics here, onstage masculinity is in large part underlined as histrionic.

In \textit{Homecoming}’s Athletica segment, for instance, the image of the macho male becomes blatantly eroticized by being posited as the object to be looked at. Athletica is introduced with the “Butterfly” interlude in which a male dancer acts out a solo demonstration of gymnastic skills, performing backflips and somersaults. He eventually strips into his speedos and leaves, only to join moments later a quartet of men in their underwear, who emerge on stage into a shower-like prop. Amidst the sound effects of dripping water, the four men stand in a row and simulate taking a shower, while at the other

\textsuperscript{117} There are, however, exceptions here where Kylie is solely surrounded by her female dancers on stage, as in the \textit{Les Folies} version of “Slow” for the \textit{Aphrodite Tour}. There is also one instance where the performer shares the lead role of the showgirl with a female dancer, as was the case in the performance of “Copacabana” for the \textit{X Tour}, in which, as we have seen, Kylie was rather inhabiting the position of the singer-narrator, whereas her showgirl dancer was the protagonist of the enacted narrative.
end of the stage there is a man seated on a bench, putting on a pair of trainers. The scene is a simulation of a gym locker room, indeed a homosocial space that has time and again served as a prominent trope of a highly eroticized environment in gay male pornography and erotica. The dancers in the shower stand with their backs against the audience, establishing a scene where the audience occupies a voyeuristic position. When the dancers finish showering, they turn suggestively to invite erotic gazes. Interactions between them are limited and carefully remain on a homosocial level, being expressed through “manly” handshakes after the shower. The scene effectively stages social interactions among men in sports that strictly prohibit the expression of any homoerotic sentiment. As Roger Horrocks argues, “homoeroticism… links with the intense homophobia and misogyny which has existed in male sport. These attitudes express an unconscious ambivalence: as well as asserting the true ‘manliness’ of sportsmen, they also seek to bury the homoerotic and ‘feminine’ desires of men with each other” (152).

As in the arena of male sports, the simulated shower scene on Kylie’s stage ensures that the fragility of the exposed male body in what appears to be a sensitive moment repels any associations with homosexuality. The movements of the dancers are dynamic, nonchalant, and sturdy, carefully structured upon what indicates a stereotypically manly posture.

Juxtaposed to that is Kylie, who emerges on stage delicately positioned on a pommel horse. More interestingly, her ensemble consists of a leopard-print catsuit paired with high-heels and red boxing gloves that feature her initials, proposing thus a highly-stylized concept of sportswear. “Red Blooded Woman” is performed (with a brief intermission of “Where the Wild Roses Grow”) followed by the performance of “Slow.”

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118 Kylie’s duet with Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds that appears in the band’s album *Murder Ballads* (1996). The lyrics and video of the song imagine Cave as a criminal character that has murdered his lover, Kylie, who appears as an apparitional figure. Kylie’s gothic fragility here creates vibrant contrasts when mixed with the lustful femme fatale from “Red Blooded Woman” pointing to her rapid interplay between female/feminine characters.
Both being singles from the *Body Language* album (2003), the songs illustrate Kylie’s lustfulness for her male partner. “Red Blooded Woman’s” lyrics envision Kylie as an action-driven woman who tries to follow her heart and not get hurt, but her sexual drive, ignited by her lover, is overwhelming.\(^{119}\) Similarly, the sensual synth-pop melody of “Slow” is embellished with Kylie’s cooing vocals that hypnotically ask her man of interest to join her in a slow dance and read her body language, thereby establishing clear connections between dancing and sexual intercourse.\(^{120}\) The live performances in Athletica abide by the mid-tempo composition of the songs and unravel rather leisurely. The dancers surrounding Kylie exhibit their toned bodies in physical tasks, lifting weights and performing push-ups. The performer erotically interacts with them, waving her hand to her face as if to ease off the heat and casually grinding on their bodies while they are exercising. Both acts envision the contrast between Kylie’s slinky femininity and the dancers’ muscular physicality as a terrain of animalistic, albeit simulated power play, which is invigorated by Kylie’s feline persona and the exaggerated bodybuilder physique of the dancers. In this blatant juxtaposition, the queer/gay gaze reads both power corpuses as stylized performances, but is encouraged to identify with the camp diva and thus revel in the sight of the performed machismo, further acknowledging the masculine male body, which has already clarified of its authentic—read heterosexual—masculinity, as a generative site of sexual desire.

\(^{119}\) The song’s pre-chorus mentions: “‘Cause I can’t focus, I can’t stop/ You got me spinning round round (like a record)/ I can’t focus, it’s too hot (inside)/ You’ll never get to heaven if you’re scared of getting high”; and the chorus culminates as such: “Boy, boy, let me keep freakin’ around/ I wanna get down/ I’m a red blooded women/ What’s the point in hanging round/ Don’t want to keep turning it down/ This girl wants to rock with you.”

\(^{120}\) The song’s verses imagine Kylie sensually approaching her lover: “Trackin’ on these feelings/ Pull, focus close up you and me/ Nobody’s leavin’/ Got me affected/ Spun me 180 degrees/ It’s so electric” and “Don’t wanna rush it/ Let the rhythm pull you in/ It’s here so touch it”; the chorus – “Slow down and dance with me/ Yeah, slow/ Skip a beat and move with my body/ Yeah, slow” – is minimal, allowing space for the percolating electronic beats to unfold.
This position of viewing and identification may derive from the ideological confining, if banishment, of queer male subjectivity into the seemingly passive locus of femininity, because of queer men’s failure to effectively embody heteronormative values of masculinity. As Steve Farmer accurately notes, “[t]here is no gay man who has not at some stage been aware that, in the eyes of the dominant culture, he is not a ‘real man’” (200). Drawing from Freudian theory on paternal/maternal identification, Farmer “suggest[s] that phallic masculinity is cast contradictorily in male homosexuality as both an object of desire and an object of denigration. Or, to put it another way, masculinity is for male homosexuality the object of a desire for its denigration” (201, italics in text). This complex position has its basis on the performance of gay sex and the sociosexual presumptions the act of anal penetration creates within what is considered to be a dominant phallic reality. In popular consciousness, according to Farmer, “more than any other ‘sign’ of male homosexuality, [anal]ity] marks the gay subject’s flagrant difference in a phallic economy, that which sets him apart from other men” who are placed within that economy as agents rather than receivers of penile penetration (205). It is socioculturally mandatory that a man, in order to be a “real” man, exclusively performs from a phallic position and rejects any identification with the penetrated anus, which “has strong psychosexual associations with a ‘feminine’ passivity that is anathema to patrocentric masculinity” (205). Essentialist as it might sound, to identify with a stereotypically feminine position of viewing is culturally imprinted upon the gay gaze. Within the absolutist reality of traditional genders, to identify with the feminine/female subject equals seeking pleasure by turning the erotic gaze at a

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122 The deeply rooted association of anal penetration—and, by extension, every sexual act performed on the corporal area of the anus—with gay sex cursorily prefigures the recipient subject as a homosexual subject. As Farmer explains, “Freud was adamant in his belief that anality is central to the homosexual subject’s libidinal alignment with a maternal position, arguing that the anus is the organ through which the homosexual subject forges his psychic ‘identification with women [and] his passive homosexual attitude to men’” (206).
masculine/male one. It is expected that the female gaze, as complementary to the male gaze, seeks to eroticize and project upon the male body values, roles, and standards that are configured on the basis of masculinity. Therefore, the cultural ideal of the erotically-appealing male, the heteronormatively constructed as such, reflects all those traits that are traditionally established, by exclusion, as non-feminine: i.e. muscular body and feats, virile posture, authority and seriousness, among others. The gay gaze aligns with the female gaze in the sense that the established cultural standards of masculinity have historically been ubiquitous, offering little flexibility as to what should be interpreted as erotically masculine by any gaze turned at men.

These ideological underpinnings that have further promoted gay identification with the feminine subject and thus came to formulate the cultural basis of gay gaze are to be found in popular culture. In particular, Classical Hollywood representations of femininity and masculinity were instrumental in the configuration and dissemination of social genders that eventually foddered the queer/gay gaze. Originating in the cinematic body of work, early camp and diva worship were the primary vehicles upon which the gay gaze learnt to envision its fantasies and desires, which were usually created out of narratives of intense psychosocial conflicts. This is evident in the pre-Stonewall culture’s large repository of camp classics, most of which belong to the genre of melodrama. Films, such as All About Eve (1950), Gilda (1946), A Streetcar Named Desire (1951), and Sunset Boulevard (1950), exhibited the pathos of fallen divas or femme fatales whose disposition was typically threatening to their social environment and needed either to be contained or punished. Camp has long found pleasure in

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122 Cinema has long served as the screen onto which the construction and projection of gender materializes. In her seminal work on Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction (1987), Teresa De Lauretis has argued that “the construction of gender today through the various technologies of gender (e.g. cinema) and institutional discourses (e.g. theory) with power to control the social meaning and thus produce, promote, and ‘implant representations of gender’” (18, italics in text).
the rich queer ground created by the assimilation of codes and signs of melodramatic narratives where women displayed verbal wit, like Bette Davis in *All About Eve*, or were strong, desirable characters, like Rita Heyworth in *Gilda* (Finch 1999; von Moltke 1999). Significantly, the divas of melodrama engaged in epic romances with *jeunes premiers* who, in the queer male consciousness, were constructed as the objects of desire (Bronski 1985; Farmer 1995). The enjoyment of camp and diva worship was guilt-ridden not because queer men simply wanted to identify with the diva at the center of attention and legitimately express their sexual and emotional desire for the leading male. Rather, it was driven by an unattainable identification with the mythological proportions that Hollywood discourses ascribed to the notion of masculinity—as emblematically exemplified by Marlon Brandon’s alpha male Stanley Kowalski—a status incompatible with the impaired masculinity of the queer male. This failure, though, to emulate the standards of masculinity may as well be, to paraphrase Farmer, “[gay man’s] greatest political strength” in the sense that the sexual objectification of the male image by the gay man is an inherently transgressive act that places men in the position to be looked at, a position long inhabited by female subjectivity (213). Although the cinematic queer/gay gaze can allegedly be regarded as the foundation of the contemporary queer viewing of the gendered spectacle, in the discursive reality of these Hollywood classics such transgressiveness remains off-screen because it is performed retrospectively by the viewer.

123 Though, one has to be conscious of the mechanics of objectification since both men and women have occasionally set themselves up for eroticization, willfully reflecting the traditional attributes ascribed to their gender. Regarding the objectification of men, however, Farmer insightfully extends Laura Mulvey’s position that “[a]ccording to the principles of the ruling ideology and the physical structures that back it up, the male figure cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification. Man is reluctant to gaze at his exhibitionist self” (Mulvey 1975, 12). The writer argues that “[b]ecause the male gaze is largely defined as active, powerful, and penetrative, the homosexual look of desire at the male body in the classic ‘feminine’ role of passive object—a reversal that ‘traditional heterosexual [masculinity] cannot survive.’ This is why the gay male look of desire is so troubling to a phallic male economy” (213).
To employ camp and inject its parodic praxis into the reality of the stage, conversely, provides an appropriate terrain where the transgressive act of gazing at the male subject is materialized through live performance. Returning to Kylie’s stage, masculinity does not have the close-ended, rigid qualities that are upheld by the Classical Hollywood macho male. Baker at times endorses the ideals of masculinity so as to inflate and thus hollow their already magnified proportions from within. Not very much unlike *Homecoming*’s Athletica, the *Aphrodite: Les Folies Tour* has dealt with the exhibition of the masculine male albeit from a classical perspective. Drawing inspiration from the Ancient Greek goddess of love and the burlesque tradition of the Parisian Folies Bergère as well as the “aquamusicals” of showgirl Esther Williams (Empire 2011), the *Aphrodite Tour* embellishes Kylie’s electronic pop sounds with the aesthetics of Greco-Roman antiquity combined with Busby Berkeley-esque concepts. With production costs reaching approximately £20 million, the world tour received rave reviews for being a lavish “theatrical spectacular” (Collinson 2011) that sees Kylie as the “supreme authority” of “arena kitsch” (Power 2011). With regard to *Aphrodite*’s display of camp and the male form, the concert critics’ verbose descriptions were not modest in seeing Kylie’s muscular dancers as the flaunting feature of the show. *The Guardian*’s Kitty Empire states that the tour embodies “the ancient Greece of widespread man-love, one in which male dancers, barely clad in Dolce & Gabbana, are frequently entwined, dangling on rope swings or playing bongos on each other’s bottoms” (2011). Reviewing *Aphrodite*’s stop at Dublin’s O2 (now 3Arena), *The Telegraph*’s Ed Power sarcastically states that throughout the show Kylie “perched atop a gold Pegasus and rode a chariot pulled by hunky centurions whose six-packs glistened so fiercely it was a wonder Dublin’s entire supply of baby oil hadn’t been exhausted” (2011). Finally, reviewing the show in Liverpool’s MEN Arena, Dawn Collinson
of *Liverpool Echo* illustrates that “Kylie appeared dressed as the Greek goddess of love, flanked by her army of muscular gladiators” (2011). What these reviews indicate is that there was no purpose whatsoever on Kylie and Baker’s behalf to restrict the show from pompously exhibiting the male dancers’ physique.

In fact, the dancers’ muscular bodies were further stylized to mirror and simultaneously camp up the mythological qualities of the classical male body. From togas to gold lame speedos and skin-tight underwear, the dancers’ attire is fashioned on Ancient Greco-Roman clothing style and is importantly kept to a minimal level so as to highlight their toned muscles. More importantly, they are a consciously kitsch configuration of body adornment that undermines the authentic, simple, and minimal character of classical masculinity. In a variety of acts, such as the opening number of “Aphrodite” and the performance of “I Believe in You,” as well as in most of the show’s visual backdrops, the male body is presented as statuesque in posture and rather bulky in motion. As Dyer explains, the popular masculinist perception of the male body derives from the tradition of bodybuilding which, in its fundamental basis, relied on the ideal of the classical Greek body (148-150). The writer argues that “[t]he built body presents itself not as typical but as ideal. It suggests our vague notions of the Greek gods and the Übermensch” (Dyer 151). The heroic muscular body has infiltrated and influenced Western popular culture to a great degree via mythologizations of the male form that were largely derived from the repository of classical Greek and Roman representations of deities and heroes. Significantly, Dyer argues that classicism is a “specific, strongly white representational tradition” and “[e]qually, many of the formal properties of the built body carry connotations of whiteness: it is ideal, hard, achieved, wealthy, hairless and tanned” (150). The discourse of this ideal has permeated gay culture in its adoption of the social codes surrounding the muscular male body as best
exemplified by the post-Stonewall clone image of the 1970s and its subsequent influential role in the rise of modern muscle culture. According to Martin Levine, “[t]his image heralded the masculinization of gay culture. Gay men now regarded themselves as masculine. They adopted manly attire and demeanor as a means of expressing their new sense of self. They also adopted this look to enhance their physical attractiveness and express improved self-esteem” (Levine 1998). Instead of simply residing on the passive site of gazing at the Hollywood ideal of the macho male, the urban gay man decided to be one by structuring his lifestyle upon the mentality of an unapologetically sexual body that instantly affected his social reality—the gym, for instance, quickly emerged as a space of queer interaction and socialization. With regard to race, Levine stresses that the clone was mainly middle-class and white, whereas gay men of color, such as black and Latino, were the minority groups that abode by the model only because of their rough and authentic working-class masculinity (Levine 10-11, 82). As a representational model, therefore, the muscled male body expresses white masculinity as the Western cultural ideal. It is precisely because masculinity is perceived as a means of cultural representation, though, that ultimately makes it performative.

As evidenced in the Aphrodite Tour, classical masculinity provides the basis for the eroticization of the dancers’ muscular bodies. However, Baker does not choose to simply set the male body up for the sexual gratification of the queer/gay gaze. Instead, as was the case with the Manga Girl, Kylie is once again placed as the mischievous camp character—this time through the amorous nature of Aphrodite—to disturb the static posture of the male dancers. In the performance of “Wow,” Kylie and her priestess-resembling vocalists watch the male dancers, who appear as Spartan gladiators, performing war-training routines. Driven
by the sexual narrative of the song. Kylie moves through the gladiators and caresses their bodies. In response, some of them slowly raise the shields held in front of their genitals as if to simulate erection, working a comic effect. Eventually, Kylie enchants the dancers with her melodic performance and sends them dancing and hopping around. The imagery of the Greek warriors and, by extension, the heroic war discourses abundant in classical antiquity have forged masculinity with impenetrable seriousness and carefully constructed ideals of discipline and self-restraint—consider, for instance, Odysseus’ encounter with the Sirens in the Homeric narrative. The performance of “Wow” here debunks the seriousness of these heroic discourses by employing Aphrodite as a camp vamp to upset and thus undermine the seemingly adamant qualities of classical masculinity. Discussing the shame-ridden treatment of camp and its juxtaposition to muscle culture, Baker expressed his frustration: “I think it’s all bollocks! I think the muscle culture is just like another clone, another ideal of the mustache and leather jacket from the seventies… I’m a really big fan of the art and the kind of legacy of underground gay culture… I love all that and I think it’s all really important” (2016). To therefore address masculinity with camp fun offers a valuable critique with regard to gay culture’s internalization of masculinist behavioral patterns, which, at times, become intolerant and phobic toward non-masculine gender expressions.

On the other hand, Baker’s endorsement in the eroticization of masculinity could just as well reflect a corporate need to attract more audiences by offering stripped muscled male bodies as mere eye-candies for voyeuristic pleasure. It is quite complex, though, to simply overturn the discourse of ingrained masculinity, especially when bound by and with the consumerist rubrics of the spectacle, without first endorsing it. Baker seems to be aware of that complexity when he utters his disidentification with the muscle culture. Classical

124 The chorus states: “When you walk/ The rhythm when you’re dancing/ Every inch of you smells of desire/ You’re such a rush/ The rush is never-ending/ You got it/ You’re wow, wow, wow, wow.”
machismo in the *Aphrodite Tour* is simultaneously an upheld ideal and a parodied notion. Kylie’s male dancers, as the bearers of the notion of masculinity, are not simply to be looked at, but they are on stage to be toyed with. Baker manages to gaze at masculinity from a more flexible position by deploying the playfulness of camp. This becomes more evident in his treatment of masculinity for the *Kiss Me Once Tour*. As a matter of fact, the Dollhouse act, also known as the Dizzy Kiss segment,\(^{125}\) is again based on masculinity as foil for camp. This time, however, the interplay between camp and macho relies on an already plasticized version of gender. As a medley of Kylie’s late eighties songs, including “Hand on Your Heart,” “Never Too Late,” “Got to Be Certain,” and “I Should Be so Lucky,” Dollhouse opens with female dancers dressed as Barbie dolls, sporting pink attire and plastic blond wigs and interacting playfully with each other. Dressed in a pink frilly frock, Kylie emerges on stage next to two motionless male dancers who resemble Ken dolls. While performing, Kylie rearranges the postures of the male dolls, gracefully touching their buttocks and faces before passing them over to her female crew. The transition from “Hand on Your Heart” to “Never Too Late” sees Kylie gradually stripping down to reveal pink garters and crinoline, while her female dancers simulate housework with retro vacuum cleaners and ironing boards. For “I Got to Be Certain,” the Barbie dancers strip the Ken dolls to their underwear, performing sexual acts on them and taking pictures of their naked bodies, while the latter run embarrassed backstage. In the final act of “I Should Be so Lucky,” the male dancers return with pink bath towels wrapped around their waist to assist Kylie on taking a bath in a tub filled with feathery froth, as a visual reference to the song’s original video.

In its simulation of household life, the Dollhouse segment is Baker’s radical camp parody of the cult of domesticity and his queer viewing of gender. As the female dolls, Kylie

\(^{125}\) In sequential order, the segments of the *Kiss Me Once Tour* are: First Kiss, Secret Kiss, Dizzy Kiss, Lick Kiss, Aussie Kiss, and Encore.
and her dancers perform from and thereby upset the position of the suburban housewife—the foundational rock of reproductive heterosexuality and the traditionally aspiring model of the ideal of the post-War Western middle-class home. Camp praxis is further invigorated by the glamorization of those housework aspects, such as cleaning and ironing, which are conventionally perceived as trivial. The Dollhouse is set as the quintessential space of femininity wherein Kylie and the Barbie dolls, literally and metaphorically, are made to be at home. On the other hand, the Ken dolls are placed within this female-run space as mere objects of utility; their passive status is highlighted by them being used as sexually subservient to Kylie and the female dancers. The sexual objectification of the male image, though, is not by any means executed in the penetrative sense that Mulvey or Farmer ascribe to the male and the queer gaze respectively. With the parodic aegis of camp, Baker here decompresses the alleged seriousness of objectification cast by the transgressive queer gaze and transforms the macho dancers into boy-toys. In addition, doll-playing, a children’s game to be practiced by pre-adolescent girls, envisions Baker as the directorial puppeteer that occupies a position traditionally dwelled by young females, who, through the practice of playing, are encouraged to reenact stereotypical femininities and thereby aspire to a heteronormatively-ordered social role. By doing precisely what males are not supposed to do—conservatively speaking, boys should not play with dolls—Baker could be seen as disturbing social stereotypes by giving himself, an adult gay male, the social space of the stage to enact doll-playing. Authorial intent thus allows him to employ camp power in order to manipulate and thus destabilize gender norms imposed by the simulated reality of the doll game.

Despite this effective camp treatment of genders, the subject matter of the creative director’s authorship must always be approached cautiously. Acknowledging that Dollhouse
was “camp as tits,” Baker was candidly positive when I asked him whether he has to convince Kylie to do things, such as be part of a concept, and asserted that the performer initially expressed her disapproval of the Dollhouse medley: “In [the] Kiss Me Once [Tour], she really wasn’t into the Dollhouse… I think in the end she got it. You know, she takes time to process things. But that was one she really wasn’t into” (Baker 2016). As previously stressed in this chapter, Baker and Minogue may take different approaches on the visual content of the performer’s stage. Baker maintains: “I always think she works better when things are kind of more theatrical and darker and that’s a constant battle I have” (2016). Kylie’s musical extravaganzas indeed work better for her due to the fact that a theatrical(ized) environment, contrary to the minimalist template of the classic rock gig, is more apt for the staging and accentuation of her camp icon. It is impossible or, to be precise, it is thought impossible to imagine Kylie outside of the camp glamour that has for years nurtured her stage persona. Although Baker’s instrumental role in her production of camp might raise concerns over an authorial instrumentation of what appears to be a gay fantasy world, what must be taken into consideration is that Baker in collaboration with Minogue is rather meticulous in gauging the components of the audience, which, according to him, “is predominantly gay” (Baker 2016).126 The gay audiences’ lasting investment in the cultural icon of Minogue attests to the fact that Baker’s creativity, which derives from his own tastes and desires as these accrue from his personal experience from, and engagement with contemporary queer culture, seems to resonate with them.

Being a Western gay man, Baker can be regarded as an insider of queer culture who manages to draw from a large repository of camp. This statement, however, appears problematic when one factors in issues of race and ethnicity in camp production as

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126 Kylie does have a large gay fanbase, but also another large part of her audience are heterosexual women well.
juxtaposed with the multiethnic nature of Kylie’s spectatorship. What we have seen so far in the production of Kylie’s stage, whether this is the camp tradition of burlesque or the performances of Western masculinity or, even, Kylie’s blond bombshell profile per se, inevitably promote camp as a default-white, urban queer practice. Of course, one cannot simply accuse Kylie of blatantly promoting whiteness. Rather, issues of race largely go under the radar in the sense that Kylie’s white persona seems to eclipse any racially nuanced camp traditions, such as disco, whereas Baker’s sensibilities might reflect a cultural input of the British and American camp paradigm, as is evidenced by the shows’ intertextual references. It is important thus to move beyond the seemingly white legacy of the tradition of camp and the dissemination of an allegedly white urban gay culture as dominant. In light of this, it is vital that gay icons dealing with the praxis of camp and being engaged in the diva worship tradition from a non-white perspective are equally acknowledged as contributors to the cultural formation of contemporary global queer culture. With that said, I would like now to turn to the next diva case that is Beyoncé Knowles.
We Flawless: Beyoncé’s Politics of (Black) Camp

“Diva is the female version of a hustler,”

“Is glamour a sense of power?”
— bell hooks (2016)

Over the past five years, African-American performer Beyoncé Knowles has progressively become the focus of critical analysis. Cultural critics usually focus on issues of feminism, race, and celebrity/media semiotics to approach Beyoncé and her cultural production. Her performances can indeed be a fecund ground for readings on identity politics, gender, and sexuality, and thereby provide an interesting, complex look into the relationship Beyoncé’s audiences have developed with her. Addressing the artist’s body of work has time and again posed challenges for contemporary scholars who appear to be divided as regards her either being dismissed for colluding the consumerist agenda of “imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy,” to quote bell hooks (2014); or her being haloed as a black woman who is the agent of her own image and potentially serves as a model of empowerment. Critical debate on Beyoncé more often than not entails her pop treatment of feminism, namely, the way she promotes herself as an advocate of feminist politics while simultaneously presenting a sexualized image of the black female body. What permeates current Beyoncé readings is the surfacing and compromising need, if trend, to approach her as the modern intersectional advocate of feminist discourse. Though, this is exactly the point where conundrums emerge: can an affluent heterosexual married black woman speak from a critically feminist position? Can her feminist advocacy co-exist with traditional
understandings of gender and sexuality? Are there effective ways to approach the artist’s work without overlooking the issues of class and celebrity status? Finally, as the epigraph states, is her glamour a sense of power? If Madonna has come to signify an ambiguous face of post-feminist politics of the late 1980s and 1990s, then Beyoncé definitely represents the updated version of it in terms of intersectional identity politics, digital media marketing, and gender performance.

Although this chapter, as was the case with the previous ones, focuses on the camp icon and live performances of Beyoncé, the nature of the abovementioned questions are central in understanding both the artist’s oeuvre and the subject matter of diva camp per se. Beyoncé’s stage is not what one would typically characterize as camp—at least not conspicuously. Contrary to Madonna, let alone Kylie, Beyoncé’s shows keep the camp element to a minimum; her stage rather underperforms in terms of flamboyance, being minimal in props in order to allow space for choreographic routines, whereas her wardrobe ranges from risqué leotards to glittery bodysuits and evening gowns that are not necessarily pompous in the sense that Lady Gaga’s are, for instance. Technically, her spectacles involve typical structural devices, such as visual backdrops, pyrotechnics, and even a water stage (Formation Tour), but they rarely make use of the camp factor, as is the case with Kylie’s or Madonna’s over-the-top extravaganzas. Therefore, apart from specific visual corpora in her career that explicitly played up the camp factor, as was the collaboration with Gaga on the pulp-esque video of “Telephone” (2010), or the introduction of the pin-up persona of “B.B.

Homemaker” for the video of “Why Don’t You Love Me” (2010), one would argue that most of her performances can hardly be related to the subject matter of camp at all. The reasons why Beyoncé’s camp remains clandestine may vary. As of now, the artist has not overtly connected her persona with queer culture the way the rest of the divas explored here have done so. Queer audiences, though, comprise considerable parts of the artist’s fandom and her icon seems to have largely been embraced by queer culture itself. Beyoncé currently enjoys some sort of a regal status in celebrity culture—even her latest public appearances tone up her queenly divine character—a status that is forged with diva qualities and is where the camp pleasure of her icon lies. The artist’s diva camp exists in the ways she stages her body politics and within the coded praxes these politics carry, revealing of a great pool of referential connections with black queer and camp culture.

Beyoncé emerged in the music scene as a member of R&B group Destiny’s Child in the mid-1990s. Ever since, a distinctive feminist discourse has permeated her songtexts and performances. From the group’s empowering hits “Independent Woman, Pt. 1” (2001) and “Survivor” (2001) to the solo anthems “Single Ladies (Put A Ring on It)” (2008), “If I Were a Boy” (2008), and “Run the World (Girls)” (2011), the artist has engaged in a performative dialogue with her female audiences by being vocal about the gendered challenges today’s women face. In the course of her career, Beyoncé has increasingly identified herself as a modern-day feminist and arduous supporter of the economic equality of the sexes; in fact, she is best known for employing an all-female band on stage, named the Suga Mamas, when the majority of concert crew bands are male-oriented. Inextricably linked with her feminist

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128 In her essay on “Beyoncé as Aggressive Black Femme and Informed Black Female Subject,” Anne Mitchell argues that Beyoncé’s High Femme performance of the Betty Page-inspired “B. B. Homemaker” is an ironic twist of the 1950s heteropatriarchal suburban femininity (45-46).

129 Images of Beyoncé reaching the media often portray her as a queen, a goddess, or a priestess. Consider her official photoshoot during her second pregnancy in 2017, her 2017 Grammy Award performance, and her dramatic entrance for her 2018 Coachella showcase.
advocacy within her work is the politics of race, since the artist deploys her audiovisual agenda from the organic position of black female subjectivity. In particular, the release of her sixth studio album, *Lemonade* (2016), saw her making a political and aesthetic statement by placing urban and peripheral black culture center stage. In doing so, the artist materialized this movement with particular emphasis on black womanhood and sexuality juxtaposed with narratives of Southern tradition and storytelling. What is important to underline, though, is that as much as her performances openly address a (black) female audience, they also appeal greatly to a considerable portion of queer male consumers. What I will argue is that the artist’s corpus of feminist discourse and racial politics often co-exist with a camp sensibility, enticing thus a queer audience. This intersection of camp, race, and feminism will help in gaining a better understanding of the cultural affiliations of the diva with queer culture by laying focus on the camp expositions of her stage. The scope of this chapter is to examine both the performances of Beyoncé from a camp lens in an effort to trace queer traditions behind her body politics as well as investigate camp’s relation to black (queer) culture.

Queer audiences do populate Beyoncé’s arenas, a fact that she has made sure to pay attention to. Though minimal, the artist has hinted on her relationship with her queer fanbase. In an interview with *PrideSource*, she states: “I’ve always had a connection. Most of my audience is actually women and my gay fans, and I’ve seen a lot of the younger boys kind of grow up to my music” (Azzopardi 2011). The elements that form her affiliation with the community, however, point to a network of codes and practices that appear to be long-established within the cultural exchange of queer men with pop divas. As has already been made apparent with Madonna and Kylie, Beyoncé reiterates as well a familiar diva portrait since her life and icon have been promoted by the media and herself as a typical celebrity narrative which is glossed with the aura of the spectacle and, simultaneously, with a
controlled approach of her private life as an everyday story of a young woman. As a case in point, her HBO autobiographical film *Life Is But a Dream* (2013) is a narrative of success that presents Beyoncé as the glamorous and independent entertainer who, through hard work and with an assertive personality, has now been able to seize her own female American Dream. Interspersed with footage from her professional endeavors are instances where the artist shows her diva/bossy moments and plenty of others where she carefully allows herself to be fragile in front of the camera, especially when discussing issues of depression and motherhood. The film is representative of how the rest of the showbiz media illustrate her icon. Her fans are more often than not bombarded with images of her onstage glamorous persona, whereas their accessibility into her offstage life depends on how she manages her public/private affairs and to what extent she chooses to have these affairs exposed. From music to video to performance, all mediums surrounding the construct that is Beyoncé rely on a mythologization of her that mostly derives from her play on sexuality, femininity, and instantly catchy songtexts. These features are ultimately the elemental basis that has cemented her diva status.

From the beginning of her career with Destiny’s Child, Beyoncé was often promoted as standing out from the group, thus creating early enough a self-dependent persona who is in the lead. According to Simone Drake, Beyoncé’s father and manager Matthew Knowles was responsible for the public image of the group and, by extension, his daughter’s distinctive position within it: “Matthew Knowles arguably decided early on that Destiny’s Child would be a crossover group. And just as Dianna Ross eventually pulled away from the Supremes to take center stage, Beyoncé was also destined to be a solo pop icon” (84). Years after the group’s disbandment, the artist made a savvy marketing of her thoroughly discussed separation from Destiny’s Child by reenacting the role of Deena Jones for the film adaptation
of 1981 Broadway musical *Dreamgirls*. Greatly inspired by Ross’s departure from The Supremes, the musical narrates the story of Deena who succeeded in establishing herself in the music industry as a solo performer upon her separation from the Dreamgirls group. Beyoncé’s leading role in the film not only played on the media obsession surrounding her relationship with her Destiny’s Child peers in the late 1990s and early 2000s, but strategically managed to equate her with disco diva Ross, thus prefiguring her persona’s iconic status. Significantly, after two highly successful solo albums, *Dangerously in Love* (2003) and *B’Day* (2006), the final Destiny’s Child album, *Destiny Fulfilled* (2004), in the years between, and various cinematic endeavors, *Dreamgirls*—itself a medium with profound camp basis—functioned as a milestone in Beyoncé’s transition from the young R&B star to the now mature, dramatic black diva.

Rather incremental in character, this transition saw Beyoncé’s career being significantly influenced by her personal life and her taking steps toward building an independent brand name. Among those noteworthy moments in her life that redefined the public perception of the “Beyoncé” icon was her marriage to hip-hop mogul Jay Z (Shawn Carter) in 2008. In the same year, she managed to found her own production company, Parkwood Entertainment, placing herself as the creative director in every final outcome of her projects (Lieb 77). Explaining how tense her family life had become having her father as her manager and how this affected her on a career level, she also decided to part ways with Matthew Knowles in 2011 (Burke and Knowles 2011). Finally, she gave birth to her daughter, Blue-Ivy Carter, in 2012 and thus embraced her new social role as a mother, a fact made evident in the post-birth projects of *Beyoncé (The Visual Album)* (2013) and *Lemonade*, and further enforced with her second pregnancy in 2017. While keeping intact her persona’s

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130 The genre of musical theater has long been considered a camp genre *par excellence* because of its often gaudy display of acting, singing, dancing and a long tradition of extravagant stages.
thematic core, namely, a racy-cum-trendsetter R&B sound and image, she gradually reduced the number of media interviews given and TV appearances made, relying almost exclusively on the online reproduction of her promotional campaigns via her personal social media platforms. In addition to some widely broadcast performances, including the 2011 Glastonbury Festival with her being the first African-American female artist to headline, two Super Bowl Finals (2013 and 2016), two 15-minute-long performances for MTV (2014 and 2016) and a 10-minute-long Grammy performance in 2017—when regular performances usually last four to six minutes—and, of course, leading Barack Obama’s inaugural ceremony twice (both 2009 and 2013), Beyoncé has succeeded in placing her icon almost out of reach by presenting herself as the unsurpassable contemporary black diva. It is the unattainable status of the Beyoncé fantasy that nurtures her diva politics and makes her brand not only highly marketable, but also considerably influential.

Beyoncé’s public appeal is a result of her performative language. She constantly manages to visualize her songs in ways that make them easily imitable to her audience. Coupled with tongue-in-cheek lyrics, her performances highlight a choreographed and expressive body language that makes use of mannerisms and movements found in black female and queer culture. As this chapter further explicates, her onstage presentation of (black) femininity is instrumental for her exposition of (black) camp. Cultural references to queer icons and other aspects of queer culture are also an essential part of her stage. By examining Beyoncé’s tour acts, from *The Beyoncé Experience* (2007), to the *I Am… World*

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131 As a case in point, consider the unexpected release of the *Beyoncé* album in 2013. Beyoncé secretly engaged in recording sessions and video productions throughout the year without making any public comments on the forthcoming project. The unannounced album was launched midnight on iTunes on December 13, 2013, with Beyoncé simply posting a video of the album cover on her Instagram account and a caption that read “Surprise” (Cupid and Files-Thomson 95). *Beyoncé*’s overwhelming sales within the first two days of its release proved that Beyoncé and her management team had not only strategically made use of the shock value, but had heavily relied on the concrete public image and fanbase the artist had built over the past few years. The artist followed the same marketing tactic for the follow-up *Lemonade* as well as her studio collaboration with Jay-Z, *Everything Is Love* (2018).
Tour (2009-10), to The Mrs. Carter Show World Tour (2013-14), to the On the Run Tour (2014), to the most recent Formation World Tour (2016), attention will be paid to Beyoncé’s camp praxes and how these are nourished by camp culture and endorsed by queer audiences. Moreover, by underlining those elements drawn from queer culture, this chapter will attempt establishing a historicized connection between black female culture and queer culture, an allegedly white-oriented culture, in order to better understand the latter as a deeply nuanced and colorful one.

Staging “Queen Bey”

Observing Beyoncé’s kinesis and behavior on stage, one soon notices how her body posture and facial expressions instill a swaggering attitude in her performances. In most of her tours, her entrance into the stage is executed in a rather similar way. As happens with every opening act of a show, the entrance of the performer relies either on the element of surprise—for instance, Kylie’s Kiss Me Once Tour introduced a showgirl-costumed female dancer as a Kylie decoy prior to the emergence of the actual Kylie—or on a climactic and pompous introduction—consider Madonna’s landing on stage inside the giant disco ball for the Confessions Tour. Based on the latter, Beyoncé has developed her own trademark entrance by gradually building on the anticipation of the audience and then allowing herself some time on stage before bursting into the opening number. Sometimes strutting in, sometimes emerging onto the stage, the performer always makes use of the dramatic fog effect and slowly materializes before the audience. The atmospheric effect is utilized not only to accentuate Beyoncé’s curved silhouette, but also to signify and, through its consistent employment, solidify her icon’s spectral disposition by establishing a necessary distance with the audience. After making her way to the stage, she will lock into a mannequin
position and there is usually no music heard in the background in order to further intensify anticipation. As a technique popularized by Michael Jackson, namely, in his iconic slow removal of the sunglasses, the long pause and pose theatrically underline Beyoncé as a performer who acts leisurely and wants to impose an air of dominance on her surroundings by affirmatively drawing all attention to her stage presence.

Throughout her tour history, the artist has employed the abovementioned technique as the spectacular device that best introduces her audience to her stage world. Renowned for being a perfectionist when it comes to show production, the performer has played on her professionalism and bossy behavior as an acknowledgment of the media hailing her as “Queen Bey” and her fanbase as “The Beyhive.” *The Mrs. Carter Show* is best exemplary of the artist internalizing and performing her queenly status. Foregrounding the image of Queen Elizabeth I, a promotional video for the tour featured Beyoncé as a queen and surrounded by her subjects and entertaining court. The video starts with the servants assisting Beyoncé don her regalia, which include a golden metal crinoline, a scepter, and a crown. Solely produced in slow motion, the visual narrative depicts the performer and her followers entering a court hall and striking poses in front of the camera. The video coincided with the online appearance of a song entitled “Bow Down/I Been On” (2013), which framed Beyoncé as a skilled, independent business woman. With lyrics such as “I’m so crown” and “Respect that/ Bow down, bitches,” the song affirmed the artist’s success in a rather aggressive way and,

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132 Alternative options may sometimes include the use of percussion and marching drumbeat or the special effect of the alarm sound.
133 Backstage accounts have often portrayed the artist as a strict business person. In her MTV documentary *Beyoncé: The Year of 4*, she is presented as a workaholic who confesses that: “I’m a workaholic and I don’t believe in ‘No.’ If I’m not sleeping, nobody’s sleeping” (Burke and Knowles 2011). Likewise, the post-production scenes in the documentation of the *I Am... World Tour* show her punning on the idea of being robotic about her work: “When I work, I don’t eat, I don’t use the restroom. I’m like a machine. I forget that other people have to eat and other people have to use the restroom” (Knowles et al. 2009).
alongside the show trailer, contributed to a successful marketing of the upcoming tour. A similar version of the video later served as the visual accompaniment of the opening segment of the show. The backdrop video illustrated a coronation scene during which Beyoncé is seen walking with her followers into the throne hall. After being crowned, she would stare directly into the camera/audience as her subjects took a bow. As soon as the video concluded, Beyoncé’s dancers that featured in it appeared with similar attire on the live stage. Although trading her regalia for a sequined athletic outfit when onstage, Beyoncé would make her dramatic entrance and pose before commencing with her performance of “Run the World.”

What is important here is that in the tour video Beyoncé appears with her skin painted white evocative of Queen Elizabeth’s “mask of youth.” The concept to fully immerse herself in the persona of Gloriana not only renders Beyoncé’s approach excessively theatrical, but, most importantly, marks it with political valence as she has chosen to toy with Elizabethan standards of beauty, which significantly valued the whiteness of a woman’s skin as symbol of chastity. In addition, her leisure in the preparation scene as referential to Elizabeth’s progressively painstaking process of beautification and dressing makes Beyoncé’s performance consciously camp in the sense that she revels in the plasticity and aloofness of her title. Juxtaposed with the follow-up performance of “Run the World,” a song ridden by African beats emphasizing percussion, and Beyoncé’s glam sport style, the act creates a camp response not only with regard to the Elizabethan aesthetic and etiquette, but also to her performance of race. Camp has had a durable adoration for regality and its conflation with

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134 Released in April 2013 online, the song had also sparked rumors about Beyoncé’s upcoming album. It wasn’t until the following December though that Beyoncé was officially released. However, the “I Been On” part of the song did not make the final cut, while the “Bow Down” part was incorporated into “Flawless” (2013).

135 Queen Elizabeth I was renowned to have taken more and more time to prepare every day as years went by. With regard to the notorious “mask of youth,” the heavy lead-based cosmetics used are said to have poisonous effects on her skin, adding to the ever-grotesque mythology around narratives of beauty. For more on the Queen’s court life, see Anna Whitelock’s Elizabeth’s Bedfellows: An Intimate History of the Queen’s Court (2013).
high-brow art is what initially directed camp critics toward following Christopher Isherwood’s conceptualization of camp as High vs. Low (see Introduction). The aristocracy and the elite expressed their cultural superiority through the conspicuous exhibition of affluence, especially that specific kind of affluence coded in their culture as “taste.” In fact, upper-class status was regularly displayed with an aesthetic commitment to camp decorativism. As Susan Sontag argues, “[a]ristocracy is a position vis-à-vis culture (as well as vis-à-vis power), and the history of Camp taste is part of the history of snob taste” (64). Being a result of class distinction and the feeling of superiority, snobbery has marked camp sensibility in terms of attitude and a need to distinguish oneself from what is thought to be common or, for that matter, low-brow. Sontag had identified aristocratic posture and mannerisms as the camp expression of homosexual men in the pre-Stonewall period when “Notes on ‘Camp’” was written.

With camp’s popularization and relocation in postmodern pop significantly challenging the gap between high and low art, those elitist attitudes such as snobbery and superiority, and camp’s fad with regal/aristocratic taste also entered the audiovisual discourses of pop. Honorific names in pop music, for example, have their base on the camp aesthetics of royalty and have always been called upon to imagine the icon of a performer

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136 From the baroque movement (and especially rococo’s playful twists on it), to 19th century Victorian dandyism, and, even earlier, to the 17th century aestheticism of Louis XIV and the architectural art of the Château de Versailles, camp culture exemplifies a self-consciously ultra-decorative culture. As a matter of fact, Beau Brummell and Oscar Wilde were key figures in popularizing dandyism and its devotion to style and etiquette (Booth 72). As far as the French monarch and his Palace are concerned, Booth states that “Louis XIV’s well-known policy of diverting the nobility from politics by means of fetes and other such Versailles entertainments (Walpole called Versailles ‘a toy’ and ‘a garden for the great child’) – in effect, the policy of maneuvering the nobles into the margins of French life made Versailles a paradigm of high camp society” (76).

137 In particular, Sontag queries: “But since no authentic aristocrats in the old sense exist today to sponsor special tastes, who is the bearer of this taste? Answer: an improvised self-elected class, mainly homosexuals, who constitute themselves as aristocrats of taste” (64).
atop a social hierarchy.\textsuperscript{138} Performance-wise, royalty has time and again been employed as an artistic theme, borrowing all the elements of camp in terms of pompousness, affluence, and superiority: from her 1990 MTV “Vogue” performance as Marie Antoinette to her being seated on a throne for her entrance in the \textit{Sticky & Sweet Tour} to, finally, her emulation of Cleopatra for the 2012 Super Bowl performance, Madonna is perhaps the most popular case in point.\textsuperscript{139} As a derivative of European high culture, however, camp royalty largely conflates its characteristics and, by extension, the sociopolitical space of upper-class with whiteness. Camp is a cultural mode that was made popular by white, middle-class homosexual men who, aspiring to social ascendance, adopted upper-class mannerisms.

Juxtaposed to this white elitist root, though, is another branch dealing with the trope of royalty that stems from the contours of black culture. David Evans identifies a performance of royalty nominalization from African-American blues singers, typically of poor and/or working-class background. King and prince were titles attributed to male singers (e.g. King Solomon) whereas queen and empress were reserved for female singers (e.g. Bessie Smith as the Empress of the Blues) (Evans 200). Taking into account that most African-American performers at the time rose to fame amidst harsh socioeconomic conditions and within racist milieus, one can imagine that honorifics were probably attributed by them or by their audience as an acknowledgement of their talent and popularity, but could as well serve as a subversive (self)proclamation against the notions and practices of white high culture. It is interesting, thus, to see how the white European aspect of the trope correlates with the black and working-class aesthetic.

\textsuperscript{138} Consider Madonna as the Queen of Pop, Britney Spears as the Princess of Pop, Elvis Presley as the King of Rock’n’Roll, Michael Jackson as the King of Pop etc.

\textsuperscript{139} Similar references abound in visual pop culture: consider Michael Jackson’s art cover for his \textit{Dangerous} album (1991), Christina Aguilera’s promotional photography for her fragrance “Royal Desire,” and Rihanna’s Basquiat-inspired crowning as part of the promotion of her \textit{ANTI} (2016) album.
Drawing from both traditions, Beyoncé’s camp performance of royalty delivers a playful twist on the idea of high white culture by mixing it with her performance of race. Being excessively stylized and mainly static to signify the posh Elizabethan attitude, Beyoncé’s performance in whiteface—a reversal of blackface—comes in stark contrast with “Run the World’s” energetic and aggressive movements. As a reenactment of the choreography executed in the song’s original video, The Mrs. Carter routine draws from dance styles found in jazz, urban/street genres, and South African culture (Vena 2011). Beyoncé’s solo act of the iconic shoulder moves alludes to dance poses popularized by voguers, thus always preserving her performative symbiosis of race with gender. Her onstage performance is a highly inflected one that draws signification from the grassroots “realness” of black culture. In this light, it can be argued that her employment of camp becomes racialized and is then channeled to parody white elitism. Beyoncé’s regal swag accrues specifically from this intersectional point that her performance of camp proposes, resulting in a distinct black camp style. “Run the World’s” lyrics also add to the artist’s swagger by aggressively stressing Beyoncé’s narrative of success and verifying her status as the Texan girl who worked hard to succeed in the showbiz industry.140

The literal staging of Beyoncé as a queen here and, by extension, her camp treatment of it would be referentially irrelevant had it not been for the image of the Queen Bee to cite from, as well. An enduring stereotype within the post-slavery imagery of African-American culture, the Queen Bee stands for the self-assertive and usually aggressive black woman. Exploring the social underpinnings of the stereotype in mythic and vernacular discourses, L. H. Stallings argues that the myth of the Queen Bee is based on the actual insect and its

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140 In particular, the lines “Boy, don’t even try to touch this/ Boy, this beat is crazy/ This is how they made me/ Houston, Texas, baby” and “I think a need a barber/ None of this niggers can fade me/ I’m so good with this/ I remind you I’m so hood with this”
mating behavior (172). “The Queen Bee figure,” the writer explains, “surfaces in early twentieth-century Black Harlem Renaissance social life and folk culture” (171). Often presented as an emasculating matriarch and hypersexualized female, being the equivalent of the threatening black man, the disposition of the Queen Bee exemplifies deviance, for, as Stalling notes, “[i]n its most denigrating critique and evolution, the [image] becomes the depiction of two stereotypes: the lascivious Black woman and the welfare mother who has children by different male partners, although she never marries one” (174). Her aggressive nature, both in sexual and political terms, cannot be contained by her social surroundings and is, in fact, perceived as a threat. Her non-normative characteristics, namely being unable to ascribe to her social role as a woman, i.e. as socioeconomically inferior to her male partner by early twentieth-century ideals, and precisely because her f(l)ailing womanhood undercuts any notion of powerful masculinity, can foreground feminist aspects in Queen Bee’s image, who is alternatively presented in certain discourses as “economically and sexually independent and free” (Stallings 175). In this framework, Beyoncé’s title and performance of “Queen Bey” is historically grounded since it becomes culturally signified with the marginal poetics of black womanhood, as this has been shaped by the dominant culture, though in the strictly performative sense, since Beyoncé’s celebrity and wealth status are by far distanced from the socioeconomic conditions that gave birth to the original Queen Bee image.

As is the case with her archetype, though, the body of “Queen Bey” becomes a focal point and indeed a dense site of discourses. Beyoncé’s body has been instrumental in promoting her icon ever since her debut. Destiny’s Child offered a successfully packaged and highly sexualized image of the black female body via an array of songs and music

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141 Stallings identifies this figure as the Bad Man/Nigga (173).
videos. As a solo performer, Beyoncé continued this consumer-friendly marketing, yet managed to instill into her persona a socially aware discourse via the rubrics of feminist advocacy. It still is rather ambiguous whether the artist’s feminist body politics is radically subversive or whether feminist readings of it have become more inclusive and more adaptable in hailing Beyoncé’s sexualizing tactics as a demonstration of black female agency. Noel Siqi Duan notes that “[b]lack women in American history, through slavery and servitude, have not been in ownership of their own bodies or capital. They are either undesirable or hypersexualized” (58). On this basis, the writer is correct when arguing that “Beyoncé’s body, consequently, is undeniably linked to her success as a capitalist, as a woman who has succeeded within the current structures of patriarchy and who herself espouses an ableist, neoliberal view of self-determination” (59). It truly is a positive view when Beyoncé is celebrated as a black woman who owns her body and inculcates it with political potential. However, this politicization is not by any means unsettling any ideological grids that have for centuries operated to police and commercialize the black female body. Is it therefore effective to critically consider Beyoncé’s authorship in spite of her endorsement of feminism’s primary adversary—namely, the patriarchal control of female sexuality?

For what is worth, Beyoncé’s body politics have invigorated dialogue among feminist and gender theorists. Although continuous theorization of the black female body has only perpetuated its ontology as an object of scrutiny, it has helped underline its political nature. What appears to be rather unfruitful an argument, however, are those post-feminist readings of Beyoncé that mistakenly crown the artist’s control over her own sexual body as an act of

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142 Worldwide hits include “Survivor” (2001), whose video features the R&B trio dressed in animal-print bikinis in a jungle setting, and “Bootylicious” (2001), whose celebration of the black female bottom led to the popularization of the title word – a portmanteau of “booty” and “delicious” – and its first entry in the *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary* as of 2002 (Collins 26).
subversion against patriarchal structures. For instance, Marla Kohlman supports that “[r]ather than bemoaning the fate of the ‘black female body’ as a commodified entity, Beyoncé, and other performers like her have found a way to become an integral part of this process of commodification and reproduction” (37). Reflective of the predominant feminist critiques within Beyoncé studies, Kohlman’s view rushes to defend and promote Beyoncé’s authorship as a black woman by comfortably downgrading the importance behind the process of commodification. Audre Lorde was once adamant when arguing that “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.” (112, italics in text). Re-appropriating patriarchal-friendly images as a tool against patriarchy itself is a conveniently non-exhaustive way to apply a feminist reading over Beyoncé, a fact that problematizes contemporary mainstream feminist rhetoric per se and its neo-liberal rationalization of the notion of authorship. Capitalist positions of Beyoncé’s cultural production remain rather camouflaged under the seemingly positive image of feminism that the artist upholds. Nevertheless, since contemporary feminist and gender theory only provides us with a specific political lexicon that can help us critique the ever-adapting power structures, one might indeed have to at least acknowledge Beyoncé’s power to promote black womanhood and imagine it in positions previously inaccessible.

To perceive Beyoncé’s body politics not as radically subversive against patriarchal and commodifying practices, but as a vehicle that carries the minoritarian black female subjectivity to an epicenter aligns with the political potency that camp carries. As previously explicated elsewhere in this project, camp seizes images already found in dominant culture in a rather playful, albeit always questionable way. Camp’s parasitical relationship with consumerist pop is not an act of subversion against pop’s ideological patterns, but rather a process that highlights queerness within a hetero-dominantly gendered environment. That is
a process that has progressively and significantly added to perceiving contemporary pop as a colorful canvas full of queer colorations. As Helene Shugart and Catherine Waggoner put it, “the mere fact that camp has been commodified as a sensibility does not necessarily entail a qualification of its critical rhetorical potential” (42, italics in text). Through its witty appropriation of images, tropes, and practices, camp’s praxis of critical potential—Shugart and Waggoner would opt for “resistive readings” (48)—lies in its power to release tension from highly sensitive and oppressive corpora. As a subcultural strategy, the performance of camp can effectively be employed by its subject to elasticize and self-parody its seemingly oppressed position and thereby recuperate part of the agency it has been stripped off by the dominant culture.

If one was to establish a common ground between camp and Beyoncé’s exposition of pop feminism, it becomes apparent that both aim at this specific recuperation of a never-granted agency through tension release. As evidenced in most of her performances, Beyoncé’s sexuality is the core agent behind her feminist politics, a point elaborately explicated within Beyoncé readership (Drake 2014; Trier-Bieniek 2016). By focusing on camp, though, I want to argue that her performances underscore her sexuality in a rather playful and parodic way. While performances, such as “Partition” (2013), present sexuality in a self-consciously pornographic and serious way, there are acts, such as the introductory video for The Mrs. Carter Show discussed above, that employ sexuality through camp relief. A case similar to Mrs. Carter’s staging of “Queen Bey,” albeit being a more

143 “Partition” is a song usually performed in a strip-club theme act, referencing influences from Parisian bordello and Las Vegas burlesque acts. The song’s bridge is a feminist nod to Julianne Moore’s character in The Big Lebowski (1999), citing in French: “Est-ce que tu aimes le sexe? Le sexe. Je veux dire, l’activité physique. Le coût. Tu aimes ça? Tu ne t’intéresses pas au sexe? Les hommes pensent que la féministes détestent le sexe. Mais c’est une activité très stimulante et naturelle que les femmes adorent” (translation: Do you like sex? Sex. I mean, the physical activity. Coitus. Do you like it? Aren’t you interested in sex? Men think that feminists hate sex. But it’s a very stimulating and natural activity that women love) (Hobson 19).
definite demonstration of Beyoncé’s camp fun, is the performance of “Get Me Bodied” (2007) for *The Beyoncé Experience* tour. The specific act is introduced with a video depicting a bumblebee and a Beyoncé voiceover that states: “One who is too curious in observing the labor of bees will often be stung for his curiosity. So stand back, ’cause the ‘Queen Bey’ is about to sting” (Wickham 2007). The performer then emerges in a black-and-yellow robotic armor and helmet, a costume that draws connections with the body colorations of the bumblebee. The body-enclosing cast slowly unfolds to reveal the singer in a similarly colored fringe outfit. Beyoncé then descends to the main stage and is joined by her dance crew to perform the song.

A rhythmically upbeat song, “Get Me Bodied” offers its bounce and R&B sounds for a high-octane performance. What is noteworthy, however, is how the song and, by extension, the performance in *The Beyoncé Experience* places attention upon the body—the black female body—by trading a corporeality scrutinized by the scopophilic gaze in favor of a one that is contagiously choreographic. As is evident by the song’s title, the artist establishes a playful mood by breaking the rules of grammar: “body” as a noun becomes a participial adjective and has the ability to receive discursive energy; to “get somebody bodied” would roughly translate as “to get somebody moving/shaking.” In addition to that, there is a vital camp substructure responsible for effectively decompressing the semiotic burden the black female body usually carries. Part of the dance routine of “Get Me Bodied” is a reenactment of “The Rich Man’s Frug” as it appears in Bob Fosse’s 1969 film adaptation of *Sweet Charity* (1966). For the song’s music video, Beyoncé fused her own persona with the jovial character of the musical, Charity Valentine. Dressed in similar 1960s attire while always

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144 The robotic ensemble may have partly been inspired by Minogue’s opening act for her *KylieFever2002* tour, where she introduced her futuristic Kyborg persona in a similar metallic armor which was slowly being removed to lay emphasis on the performer’s revealing outfit.
maintaining a black feminine aesthetics, Beyoncé as Charity cheerfully performs the Frug with her dance crew under the beats of “Get Me Bodied.” The music video was used as a backdrop throughout the live performance, placing thus Beyoncé’s emulation of Charity alongside the already introduced and essentially racialized “Queen Bey.” As part of the choreography, Beyoncé calls her audience to act out specific dance moves that she calls out throughout the song. Most of these moves rely on a performance of gender that originates in African-American tradition and the performativity of black womanhood. For instance, Beyoncé imagines her audience as female and invites them to “pat [their] weaves,” “pose for the camera,” “do the Naomi Campbell walk” and “snap for the kids.” All the said dance moves foreground a glamorous performance of black femininity and are marked with a camp flair: patting one’s weaves,\(^\text{145}\) Campbell’s iconic strut, and the practice of snapping\(^\text{146}\) are highly popular practices among African-American queer communities and are commonly found in Vogue Femme performances.

Camp indeed brings forth the queer roots within Beyoncé’s oeuvre and one can definitely trace elements that establish vertical and horizontal connections between queer and African-American culture. Black expressivities in conjunction with black vernacular are conjured up in the performances of Beyoncé to celebrate the notions of blackness and femininity. Although one would argue that the artist’s work mainly focuses on black culture, which is not false in its entirety, performances like “Get Me Bodied” attest to the fact that there is also a large pool of references derived from white (gay) culture as well: *Sweet Charity*, as a generic Broadway product, is only one out of many. Upon referencing such

\(^{145}\) Derived from African-American slang, to pat one’s weave is used to signify that a woman who sports an extravagant hairdo has to be careful when fixing her hair; instead of scratching, she relies on patting her hair in order not to mess up her appearance (*Urban Dictionary*).

\(^{146}\) The literal snapping of the fingers is performed by black queens/divas and underlines a camped-up reenactment of black femininity (Johnson 2003b, 180).
cultural works within her own brand, Beyoncé creates a potent corpus of black camp by projecting onto it both her icon as well as practices and traditions drawn from her racial background. She then goes on to resell these intertextual performances in a highly black-inflected way which can, in fact, serve as a means to create nuances within the usually default terrain of white culture. As the audiovisual canvas of “Get Me Bodied” illustrates, Beyoncé’s camp simultaneously celebrates black women and black queer men by placing their culture center stage. Apparently, the abovementioned performance has created a catalog of acts where Beyoncé repeats similar upbeat patterns accompanied by well-known referential motifs that are both entertaining and political in character. The queer undertones and camp vitality resonant within the performance of “Get Me Bodied” indeed became the creative harbinger of the artist’s most popular and culturally impactful hit to date: that is, “Single Ladies (Put a Ring on It)” (2008).

In order to delve deeper into the discursive and performative legacy that “Single Ladies” has set in motion both within Beyoncé’s oeuvre as well as across her audiences, it is of prior importance to contextualize this body of work in relation to the artist’s diva camp poetics of her alter ego, Sasha Fierce. The artist’s 2008 album, entitled *I Am... Sasha Fierce*, manifested her decisive turn to embrace a camp-infused aesthetics as first expressed in “Get Me Bodied” and *The Beyoncé Experience* tour. The album features two contrastive sides: the softer *I Am...*, embellished with fragile ballads, and the more aggressive *Sasha Fierce*, which introduced the artist’s sexually audacious alter ego under rough R&B and club sounds. Its creative concept relies on black-and-white themes, offering sharp antitheses of Beyoncé’s persona that can be traced in the history of the female melodrama genre,¹⁴⁷ as is evident from...

¹⁴⁷ For more information on the conventions and themes of female melodrama consider Peter Brooks’s “The Melodramatic Imagination” and Pam Cook’s “Melodrama and the Women’s Pictures” both found in *imitations*
the multiple, albeit analogous thematic binaries: madonna/whore, passive/aggressive, white/black, marriage/singlehood, girl/diva. The alter ego has been structured upon a mould of deviant sexuality, projecting stereotypical representations of black female promiscuity and brassiness, albeit coupled with an impeccable sense of style. Importantly, the corpus of Sasha Fierce, as the moniker indicates, is permeated by potent camp/queer undertones. Sporting haute-couture leotards, pulled and swept-back hairdo, and dramatic make-up, the persona embodies an ostentatious version of black femininity inextricably linked with an aesthetics of drag and its perception of gender as masquerade. David Hajdu suggests that “[t]he persona that Beyoncé has constructed for Sasha Fierce – a slithery dolled-up parody of a club girl – would certainly make a true drag act if it had a glimmer of self-awareness or irony. It has none” (132). Sasha Fierce may not carry a drag queen’s devoted investment in self-parody, her dead seriousness, though, does not prevent her from becoming a source of camp pleasure. As Sontag underlined, “Camp is the glorification of character… What the Camp eye appreciates is the unity, the force of the person” (61). The gravity and authority Beyoncé has exerted over her theatricalization of Sasha, veering from the soft girl-next-door profile to the assertive diva and managing to uphold both roles with equal rigor, prove that Sasha is an enhancement of Beyoncé’s icon who simply takes over as a stage act where the artist already feels at home.

Beyoncé’s professionalism with her is further supported by performative gimmicks that have been instantly embraced by her audiences. By instilling in Sasha elements of hypersexual femininity and swaggering wittiness, the artist made her body politics a language to be learnt. This is nowhere better apparent than in the audiovisual corpus of

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*Sashay* and *fierce* are widely popular slang terms within gay communities. They both envision a performance of swagger.
“Single Ladies,” which officially presented Sasha to the public through its instantly attractive lyrics and choreography. Music critics were quick to highlight the song’s catchy rhythm and compare it with female empowerment anthems the likes of Aretha Franklin’s “Respect” (1967) and Gloria Gaynor’s “I Will Survive” (1978) (Crawford 2009). Its viral and cultural impact, though, including YouTube parodies, celebrity cover versions, and perhaps the campiest moment in millennial gay culture, namely Liza Minnelli’s rendition of it in *Sex and the City 2* (2010), relied on the seeming simplicity that Beyoncé adopted for its execution. According to choreographers Frank Gatson and JaQuel Knight, Beyoncé was again inspired by Fosse’s *Sweet Charity*: this time the “Mexican Breakfast” number served as the performative template, with Beyoncé and her two dancers re-creating Shirley MacLaine’s lighthearted routine in an extremely minimal setting. As was the case with “Get Me Bodied,” Beyoncé once again infused the allegedly white camp tradition of musical with African-American tradition: elements of J-Setting, a Southern dance style developed by female students in Mississippi and popular among African-American gay men, are traceable in the choreography (Herndon 2010). The notorious routine is mostly based on simple and easily imitable movements with emphasis laid on the twirl of the hand and the sassy facial expression that accompanies the songtext’s call to “put a ring on it” (“it” being the finger). In the music video and throughout the *I Am... World Tour*, Beyoncé would wear a metallic glove—perhaps a symbolic act of Sasha’s iron defense against the matrimonial ring—that further underlined the flamboyant twirl of the hand. “Single Ladies” is a multi-layered audiovisual text with its vital camp basis found almost in every layer: the bent wrists, the nod to the musical’s generic gaiety, the J-Setting poses, the fierce attitude, the iconic outfit, and on top of these, the tongue-in-cheek language.
As a cultural artifact, “Single Ladies” has lent its performative language for the creation of strong female/feminine communities. Though the songtext is open to interpretation of a pseudo-feminist discourse, since one might argue that as much as it celebrates female singlehood, at the same time it promotes availability for the next man of interest, its impact has been considerable precisely because of its theatrically cheeky nature. The ability the song has to instantly signify an ostentatious femininity when performed will certainly grant it the status of camp classic over the course of years (if not yet). Its power to overtly feminize the body through its movements partly rests in Beyoncé’s performance of femme poetics through the persona of Sasha. Being ultra-feminine and self-aware, the character of Sasha deploys femme-ness fused with abrasive style and black urban slang. Despite the fact that Beyoncé’s celebrity status seems to be quite dissonant with the urban and, more often than not, working-class milieus, Sasha’s performance draws from their cultural pool both the aggressive attitude and the street-smart lexicon in order to authenticate her narrative of success, following the discourse of street “realness” that abounds in the works of both male and female hip-hop artists such as Tupac Shakur, Jay Z, 50 Cent, Missy Elliott, and Lil’ Kim. Beyoncé’s “urban queen realness” is ambiguous, to say the least, yet her attempt comes across as deliberately plastic. Sasha is a self-proclaimed diva and remains a conscious stage act, a camp artifice whose sole purpose is to entertain. It could be argued that her purpose is rather apolitical and perhaps unable to effectively emulate a feminist model. Much like a drag act, though, Sasha’s critical power lies at the said self-proclamation of her diva status, the role-playing of which offers an assertive camp mask that serves both a defensive and an offensive purpose.

The performance of “Diva” (2008) for the I Am...World Tour is indicative of such self-proclamation. Contrary to the camp fun of “Single Ladies” and “Get Me Bodied,”
“Diva’s” camp plays on the idea of seriousness and swagger. Introducing the act is a video vignette where Beyoncé is seen wearing a mechanical-like suit with leopard-print details. She is robotically walking on a snowed plateau and when the camera focuses on her, she takes off her protective visor to reveal her face, which momentarily transforms into an aggressive leopard’s head. The vignette concludes with her shedding tears, as the performer emerges on the live stage. Surrounded by dancers posing as mannequins, the Beyoncé/Sasha is clad in a metallic leotard that emits flickering lights from the area of her loins. In the song’s riffs, she declares her diva status with technologically-altered voice, while in the chorus she composedly utters her own definition: “Diva is the female version of a hustler.”

With the poetic aid of African-American slang, the songtext of “Diva” indeed aligns Sasha with hustlers, the quintessential figures of illegal and shady activity, while presenting her bragging about her achievements. In terms of performance, the choreography, emulating the one originally executed in the music video, entails expressive hand movements as well as catwalk strutting and posing with hands on waist, head kept upwards to indicate superiority, and rigid facial expressions to signify seriousness.

Beyoncé’s conceptualization of a mechanically feminine body for “Diva” invites post-human reading of corporeality that imagine an artificially constructed body—that is, a female body—that incorporates and simultaneously transgresses cultural standards of

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149 According to Collins, “the female hustler, a materialistic woman who is willing to sell, rent, or use her sexuality to get whatever she wants constitutes this sexualized variation of the ‘bitch’” (128). The fact that one has to specify a “female hustler” presupposes that, connotatively, the word indicates a male subjectivity. A hustler relies on typically masculine attributes of aggressiveness and street-smartness, whereas a “female hustler” is obliged to make transactions in sexual terms. Interestingly, Beyoncé’s “Diva” draws both from the masculine and feminine discursive strand of the image of the hustler.

150 The lyrics state: “I done got so sick and filthy with Benjis I can’t spend,”“I’m a diva, best believe her, you see how she gettin’ paid?/ She ain’t calling him to greet her, don’t need him, her bed’s made.” Benjis, here, is an African-American slang term for the hundred dollar bill which features Benjamin Franklin (Urban Dictionary).
femininity. Based on Donna Haraway’s seminal concept of the cyborg, Susana Loza explicates the term fembot (femme and robot) which, at this point, applies rather aptly on the praxis of black diva. Loza defines the disco/house diva as fembot due to her femininely erotic disposition and technologically-propped sound: “the fembot is the feminised machine that rearticulates and encapsulates the worst in sexual stereotypes. Her anatomically exaggerated attributes reassure the liberal humanist subject that not all dualities need give way,” unlike Haraway’s cyborg that epitomizes a bodily fusion of dualities (351). In this light, Beyoncé’s performance indeed embodies stereotypical representations that accrue from the strictness of the male/female duality, with the artist’s persona sticking fervently to the artificial presentation of the latter. In fact, this may also evoke cultural misconceptions of a constructed female body attaining the status of desirable by mean of adornment and beautification, as opposed to the natural, raw male body. Yet, the fembot Sasha toys with the idea of artificial femininity to a camp effect, presenting her realization of it in a theatrically exaggerated manner that underlines its ironic twist.

More importantly, the plastic performance of “Diva” is a mould that binds together cultural elements of black womanhood under the rubrics of camp. Being a black female and feminine body, the body of Beyoncé stands as a discursive corpus that bears manifold corporeal histories of racialized female subjectivity. Her invocation of animalistic sexuality signified by Sasha’s metamorphosis into the leopard as well as the allusion of the desolate plateau to a terra incognita marks her body with cross-temporal references of black female corporeality from the African past to the years of chattel slavery. The black female body has

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252 As defined in “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century” (1991), Haraway argues that “[t]he cyborg is a kind of disassembled and reassembled, postmodern collective and personal self” that manages to challenge “[t]he dichotomies between mind and body, animal and human, public and private, nature and culture, men and women, primitive and civilized” (163). Although it does melt some of the above dichotomies, Beyoncé’s diva icon is arguably not the androgynous morph that Haraway conceptualizes. It retains its feminine nature as this is vital for a femme performance.
for centuries fascinated the Western world, which would often view it as exotic, earthly, and highly sexual; consider, the early nineteenth-century case of Saartjie Baartman, or, later on, the twentieth-century performances of Josephine Baker. Fascination, however, has always co-existed with a history of racial oppression wherein the black female body has time and again been subjected to narratives of trauma, violence, and sexual degradation, and has been cooped up in images of lecherousness and deviance. The American popular imagery, as a matter of fact, abounds with figures of jezebels, sapphires, and welfare queens. From the position of camp, though, Beyoncé’s Sasha act glamorizes the black body in a way that not only stresses feminine iconicity as a pure ideological construct, but also assertively plays on images and histories of black womanhood. The clean-cut robotic posing in “Diva” adds more to the artificiality of femininity and, perhaps, serves as an allegory of a defensive/defiant

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152 Also known as Hottentot Venus, Baartman was brought in Europe as an African specimen to be exhibited in freak shows for her large buttocks and genitalia in front of a usually inquisitive Western eye (Wallace-Sanders 18). She would later become a case subject for anthropological studies epitomizing the ontology of the black female body as deeply and inevitably violated.

153 Playing on the idea of the already exoticized black female body, Baker, an African-American performer residing in France, was a standard act at the Parisian Folies Bergère. She became famous for her “danse banana” for which she would wear a skirt made out of bananas so as to further signify her African descent. Beyoncé has acknowledged Baker as an influential icon for her stage persona and paid homage to the banana dance in her performance of “Deja Vu” (2006) for the 2006 Fashion Rocks! fundraising gala (Mitchell 47-48).

154 According to Collins, “[t]he institutionalized rape of enslaved Black women spawned the controlling image of the jezebel or sexual wanton Black woman,” designating their bodies “as sites of wild, unrestrained sexuality that could be tamed but never completely subdued” (56). Jennifer Baily Woodard and Teresa Mastin corroborate that the stereotype of Jezebel, also known as siren, “represents negative portrayals of the Black woman as bitch or whore,” a representation that was perpetuated because “[w]hite males fostered this image of Black women during slavery to excuse their [acts of] sexual abuse and rape” (272). The character of the Sapphire is imagined as an emasculating woman who, stripping her husband off of his alpha role, departs from the conventional male-led familial environment and takes control; as a result, her inhabitation of both traditionally male and female positions has turned her into an “unfeminine matriarch” and has generated frustration toward herself and her family (Wally-Jean 2009, 70). Finally, the welfare queen is an updated version of the breeder woman in the years of Southern plantation economy; as Woodard and Mastin argue, “[t]his new version of the welfare mothers as breeding animals who have no desire to work, but are content to live off the state, positions Black women as a costly threat to political and economic stability” (273). In the course of time, the images of Jezebel, Sapphire, and welfare queen have been reconfigured into new stereotypes, retaining, obviously, part of their semantic burden: according to Joan Morgan, “the myths of the superwoman, the mammy, the jezebel, and the sapphire have metamorphosed into the contemporary figures of, among others, the ‘Ghetto Bitch... Hoochie Mamma... Skeezee... Too independent... Don’t need no man... [and] Waiting to Exhale’ women” (qtd. Springer 1069); “the older myths justifying slaveowners’ brutality against Black women metamorphosed into contemporary conservative welfare myths” (qtd. Springer 1069).
mechanism that highlights the right of a survived body to claim its ontology and celebrate it now, even in an overtly swaggering and superficial way.

Ultimately, Beyoncé’s performance and, by extension, her icon itself manages to braid intergenerational black female corporeal experiences under one: the celebratory corporeality of the black diva. Born out of the disco era and later transferred to the house music scene, the figure of the black diva has always been a spectral figure, a fierce mother embodying gendered, racial, and sexual narratives. Investigating the queer house scene, Brian Currid identifies the image and sound of the black diva as central for its development: “[t]he voice of the black diva is essential to any generic definition of House music. The pleasures around her disembodied voice on the dancefloor can be described as identificatory – a channeling if you will of the fiercenesss and soulfulness of her gospel-inflected singing style” (186-7). Although rarely has Beyoncé’s live sound incorporated elements from the house scene, her posture and attitude, as already pointed out, draw from black disco divas, such as Dianna Ross and Donna Summer. In addition, the artificiality of her performance of “Diva” as well as the robotic effect on her voice and choreography foregrounding her diva body as the hybridized fembot entity manage to reflect a necessary narrative multiplicity that allows for layered readings. It is such artificially constructed femininity, though, that has for years nurtured the tradition of camp and has succeeded, through its celebration within queer subcultures, in becoming a victorious and sexually-assertive site/sight of expression. The image of the black diva who stands as a survivor of a sexually and racially oppressed body provides Beyoncé’s icon with vital communal power.

155 In fact, she has established performative connections with both: apart from her Ross-inspired role as Deena Jones discussed in the beginning of the chapter, the artist has sampled Summer’s “Love to Love You Baby” (1975) in her own song “Naughty Girl” (2003) instilling into the later the sensual eroticism and disco sounds of the former.
Undoubtedly, it is under the camp-baptized ontology of a diva, be she a glamorous Hollywood icon or a fierce drag queen, that gay communities in part have come and are still coming together. As a black diva, Beyoncé inhabits the intermediate space between black/female culture and queer culture. Her being a source of camp pleasure derives from this position and her ability to enrich her stage with praxes enclosed within both cultures. Her icon retains its camp qualities not only due to its theatricalized environment, namely the terrain of performance, but especially due to the effect this environment exerts upon the subject matters of race and gender: that is, to expose their ideological fabrication. Therefore, to approach the artist’s performance as camp is to read her treatment of gender and race as performable through and through. On this very basis, Beyoncé herself can be viewed as an agent of camp. Albeit promising, this fact alone may be insufficient to let us draw an assumption over Beyoncé’s camp appreciation by queer audiences, let alone lead to conclusions as to her camp’s potentiality to serve an effective cultural critique. Camp per se, after all, has been a subject of ambiguous nature, mainly because of its superficial and sometimes apolitical nature. In order to delve deeper, one has to look into the joints of Beyoncé’s camp where African-American (female) culture interacts with queer culture. What accrues from this interaction, as we shall see shortly, is camp’s power to ritualize practices of queer culture as a means of forming communal bonds.

**Slay Trick: Black Women and Gay Men in Formation**

What characterizes Beyoncé as a leading figure in the contemporary pop music scene is her power to popularize her products through trendsetting. Her songtexts are abundant in catchy lines that allow her audiences to instantly identify with and often internalize their vocabulary. Beyoncé’s lyrics have always pointed to a direct memorable status, a fact that
has only been amplified in the social media era and its visual culture of memes. One would remember how B’Day’s “Irreplaceable” (2006) popularized the catchphrase “to the left, to the left” and made it synonymous with breakup. Years later, Beyoncé’s “Drunk in Love” (2013) was prevalent in internet memes for the use of the word “surfboard,” while the same album’s “Flawless”—discussed further down—popularized a pop politics of gender equality with its wide usage of the title word (hashtagged as #flawless in media platforms, like Twitter and Instagram) and the self-assertive line “I woke up like this.” Most recently, Lemonade’s impact was felt through the seeming ubiquitousness of the word “slay” from “Formation” (2016), and the sassy phrases “Boy, bye” and “Becky with the good hair” from “Sorry” (2016). Taking advantage of the power of meme culture to rapidly disseminate trends, Beyoncé and her production team knowingly capitalize on the popularity of each catchphrase; the tour merchandise from The Mrs. Carter Show and Formation Tour, for instance, featured all kinds of memorabilia such as hats and T-shirts with imprints of already popular lines, including “Surfboard,” “I woke up like this,” and “Slay all day.”

What is important, though, is that each catchphrase is also expressed with a body movement, becoming itself a performative language. For instance, “Irreplaceable’s” “to the left” is performed with both finger indexes pointing to the left side of the body, in the way Beyoncé did in the song’s music video and repeatedly in every tour performance of it, while “Sorry’s” “Boy, bye” is again performed with a hand movement as if to order someone away.

156 Merriam-Webster defines meme as “an idea, behavior, style, or usage that spread from person to person within a culture.” In the social media era context, of course, the idea of the broadness of culture is tandem with instant global sharing of information and trends.

157 A duet with Jay Z, “Drunk in Love” expresses Beyoncé’s physical desire for her man of interest. Specifically, in the second verse, the lyrics state: “Boy, I’m drinking, I’m singing on the mic ’til my voice hoarse/ Then I fill the tub up halfway then ride it with my surfboard/ Surfboard, surfboard/ Graining on that wood, graining, graining on that wood/ I’m swerving on that, swerving, swerving on that big body Benz/ Serving all this, swerve, surfing all of this good good.” Surfboard probably indicates having intercourse in a shower setting, with the “graining on that wood” pun aligning the regular use of the word “wood” as the actual material of a surfboard with “wood” as a slang term for male erection.
The gestures that Beyoncé reenacts for each phrase underline a performance of femininity and, by extension, expressivity found in black female and queer culture. As has been made evident throughout this project, a camp understanding of femininity has for years nourished queer subcultures and underground performing communities. Inasmuch as femininity is permeated by additional markers of, say, race or ethnicity, its camp performance will also adapt accordingly. Historically speaking, E. Patrick Johnson argues that:

black gay men adopt more tropes of black femininity than black masculinity. One reason might be a general connection to black women as another oppressed minority… Origins of particular vernacular terms, phrases, and gestures, for example, are often disputed between the two groups because they are performed within both. (2003a, 89-90)\(^{158}\)

By employing these gestures in her performances, Beyoncé draws from both cultures and thus brings their minoritarian practices alongside her (hyper)visible icon. At the same time, however, she openly marketizes these practices by making them available within the economy of her spectacle.

Two performative pieces of Beyoncé’s work that outline this conjunction of black female and queer cultures are “Flawless” and “Formation.” First and foremost, “Flawless” is a self-branded feminist manifesto that quickly gained popularity via the social media. The song consists of two parts, “Bow Down” and “Flawless,” while a quote from Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s TED speech on “We Should All Be Feminists” (2013) serves

\(^{158}\) The other possible explanation, as Johnson indicates, “may stem from black gay male misogyny” (90), which is prevalent in the camp culture in general (see Robertson 1996). The writer adds that “[t]he fact that black gay men choose tropes of black femininity to perform may suggest that black masculinity or masculinity in general is a more stable, fixed construct and therefore is not susceptible to appropriation” (90). Consider, here, for example, how popular the figure of the drag queen is in comparison with that of the drag king, a fact that points to the always alluring and playful theatricality of femininity as opposed to the serious and minimal discursive nature of masculinity.
as its interlude. Similar to “Single Ladies” and “Diva,” “Flawless” features a memorable and easy-to-copy choreography, whereas its swaggering lyrics point to a readymade self-assertive anthem; Beyoncé invites her audience to shout “I woke up like this”—stylistically pronounced as a vernacular “dis”—twirling her hands in front of her face. Feminism-wise, music and cultural critics have questioned Beyoncé’s pop treatment of it and the song’s overall political effectiveness. Michelle Carroll noted that despite the fact that through “Flawless” the artist has brought mainstream attention to feminism, the song presents an oversimplified version of the movement’s message and even fails to fully incorporate Adichie’s call to collective action (2015). Furthermore, it can be argued that aside from Adichie’s quote, “Flawless’s” songtext appears to offer a challenged approach of gendered reality, especially if taken into consideration are lines such as “Bow down, bitches” and “Momma taught me good home training,” which only seem to perpetuate a heterosexist and patriarchal evaluation of female subjectivity. What I would like to argue, though, is that by revisiting “Flawless” through the discourse of camp, the subject matter of feminism finds an alternative and indeed queer route to successfully emerge.

Beyoncé’s take on feminism with “Flawless” has invigorated academic dialogue that witnesses a dichotomy concerning the core values of the movement. This dichotomy derives from the artist’s contradictory stance of occupying spaces of feminist advocacy and, at the same time, performing under the surveillance of the scopophilic gaze. While there are those critics who argue against her effective incorporation of feminist discourse in her work—most notably hooks and her critique of the artist as an “anti-feminist” and a “terrorist” of gender (Trier-Bieniek 2016)—there are those who have acknowledged the artist’s ability to present her stereotypical framing of black womanhood as a performative device that wishes to hollow the said framing from within. An intersectional model of feminism sees multi-
vocality and agency in seemingly confining positions and images that are controlled by patriarchal power grids. According to Kohlman, “[i]ntersectionality highlights the ways in which categories of identity and structures of inequality are mutually constituted and defy separation into concrete categories of analysis” (34). The writer underlines that “[b]y noting the ways in which men and women occupy variant positions of power and privilege across race, space, and time, intersectionality has refashioned several of the basic premises that have guided feminist theory as it evolved following the 1950s” (34). Beyoncé performs from various ambiguous positions, such as the female hustler, the aggressive black woman, or the vamp, which, when viewed through the lens of intersectionality, appear to instill agency in the artist’s conscious choice to inhabit them. However, one has to be very cautious over, and specific as to how conscious choices are formed, especially in a culture that has for centuries promoted particular images of femininity, sexiness, beauty, and deviance as well. An intersectional approach of Beyoncé’s diva camp, which deliberately utilizes well-known and at times formulaic expressions of character-femininity, may as well enclose a flexibly political valence, but this does not make them any more immune to patriarchal ideologies which they stem from. Rather, the intersectional power of Beyoncé’s camp should be sought for in the conjunction of queer, black, and female culture that fuel her performances.

Whereas dealing with themes of confidence and perfect imperfections, “Flawless” as an audiovisual corpus is, in contrast, highly stylized, both aesthetically and discursively. In the music video, Beyoncé appears in black and white urban setting, surrounded by female and male dancers whose street style draws influences from punk and rockabilly aesthetics. The artist herself sports denim shorts with plaid shirt and the hip-hop-acustomed bling, thus positing her persona in a street-smart working-class position, as she casually did with Sasha, and perhaps saluting a lesbian sensibility—via the stereotype of the plaid-shirted dyke. Her
doing so points to a need to authenticate both her affiliation with street subcultures and her radical-ish invocation of feminism. As far as the lyrics are concerned, the song is a display of material accumulation, a theme Beyoncé has frequently explored in her oeuvre.\textsuperscript{159} Performing from a privileged status wherein her diamonds are flawless and her husband’s record company is flawless too, the artist deliberately embraces the incongruity resulting from the collision of her capitalist-haloed position with the “realness” of the working class. She flaunts her street fabulousness and places a siren call to her audience to follow her steps. “Flawless” is concerned with the adoration of sleek surfaces and donning of masks; its discourse is ultimately all about embracing pure artifice. Examining “Flawless” as potent feminist critique, Parul Sehgal draws the necessary connection between the word “flawless” and the subculture of drag: “[t]he idea of beauty as performance – and as successful gender performance – is not what’s new… ‘[F]lawless’ has been part of drag argot for years” (2015). Featured in Seghal’s article is historian of drag culture Joe E. Jeffreys who argues that the word dates back to the underground culture of the 1960s and is probably associated with drag mother Flawless Sabrina, an iconic performer who was in close liaison with William Burroughs and Andy Warhol (Sehgal 2015). By evoking a history of camp, “Flawless” is an exclamation that perfectly resonates with a performance of plastic, yet accomplished femininity. Its camp appeal relies on witty responses and theatrics of self-parody against the imposed gender construct, therefore becoming an ironic feminist invocation crowned with queer poetics. Deliberate or not, the song and, by extension, Beyoncé’s usage of camp slang encloses a queer dynamic in the sense that it utilizes a discursive mechanism against

\textsuperscript{159} Consider other songs, such as B'Day’s “Ring the Alarm” (2006) and “Upgrade U” (2006), I Am...Sasha Fierce’s “Diva,” 4’s “Countdown” (2011) and Lemonade’s “Formation” (2016) and “6 Inch Heels” (2016) to name just a few.
gendered evaluations of beauty and is simultaneously linked with a culture, i.e. that of drag, that has so fervently challenged the very notion of gender.

From a racial perspective, “Flawless” establishes communication with black culture in a way that camp’s dealing with race is culturally grounded. Upon releasing the song as a single in 2014, Beyoncé wrote additional lyrics and had rapper Nicki Minaj as a featured artist. During its final stop in Paris, the *On The Run Tour* saw the two artists joining forces on stage. Minaj is a performer whose public persona has been connected with an oversexualized representation of the female body, yet her approach usually tilts to camp parody. Her frequent experimentations with her icon include a Barbie-doll character fashioned out of Harajuku culture girls\(^{160}\) and an alter ego, named Roman Zolanski, a frenetic British gay man living inside her (Vena 2012b). Minaj’s contribution to “Flawless” simultaneously amplifies the song’s camp quality and verifies its street authenticity, this time relying on the artist’s rap background. The remixed version toys with the singers’ celebrity lifestyle and indulges in explicit sexual references, themes of materialism and, yet again, regality; Beyoncé’s new verses state: “These thots\(^{161}\) can’t clock me nowadays/ You wish I was your pound cake\(^{162}\)” while Minaj announces: “The queen of rap slayin’ with Queen Bey/ If you ain’t on the team, you playin’ for team D.” In its display of camp, “Flawless” here once more foregrounds Beyoncé’s image of the Queen Bee. Revisiting Stalling’s work, it becomes specific that:

\[\text{[in any Queen Bee myth, sexuality becomes power to be wielded for protection, a door to independence and pleasure, and a marker of criminality and outlaw status.}]\]

\(^{160}\) Renowned for its playful fashion and stylistic trends, Shibuya’s Harajuku district in Tokyo exemplifies Japan’s image-conscious teen culture.

\(^{161}\) African-American derogatory term, closely related to “whore” or “slut.” “Thot” might be an acronym of “These Hoes Over There.”

\(^{162}\) African-American slang term imagining a person being the source of sexual pleasure for another. “To pound” stands for having intercourse, while “cake” usually alludes to the buttocks.
The potency of her sexual desire, perceived as abnormal by mainstream society, makes her murderous seductress. (173)

Queen Bee’s outcast social status and thereby her developed sense of antagonism in a hostile patriarchal environment are the cross-sectional point of her performance of aggressive sexuality with camp’s performance of gender as a counter-hegemonic strategy. Beyoncé and Minaj’s “Flawless” is simultaneously nurtured by both power positions, providing ironic narratives that are nonetheless spaces of empowerment for sexually non-normative subjects to occupy. An intersection of camp poetics, race, and feminism here proposes an elastic understanding of identity that appeals similarly to a spectrum of racial, sexual, and gendered spectators.

Not very much unlike “Flawless,” Lemonade’s “Formation” addresses Beyoncé’s fierceness in consonance with her cultural background, notions of black womanhood, and queer discourses. Textually, the song proves to be repetitive of cliché themes such as materialism already found in the artist’s songwriting agenda. Nevertheless, by tracing her heritage in the Deep South and highlighting her Creole roots through post-Katrina images of the city of New Orleans, the artist produced “Formation” both as an intergenerational homage to black female power and as an indictment against police brutality over African-American individuals. Importantly, the music video lays emphasis on the city’s queer culture by incorporating footage from That B.E.A.T. (2012), a documentary on the dancing culture of bounce and its affiliation with the city’s queer community. The featured act of bounce queen Big Freedia in the song’s lyrics further consolidates the visibility of the city’s queer culture. In addition, “Formation’s” reiteration of the exclamation “Slay” wishes to place Beyoncé at the heart of contemporary queer culture by employing yet again a slang term (closely related to and sometimes interchangeable with “fierce”) that hails a swaggering personality. As
reviewers Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley and Caitlin O’Neill put it, “[f]emme and fabulous, Beyoncé’s “Formation” celebrates the art of black femininity in every kind of body brave enough to own it” (2016, italics in text). The song met with general critical acclaim because, as an audiovisual project, it manages to render multiple minoritarian subjects visible in a rather celebratory and inviting way.

Forged with camp expressivity, the performance of “Formation” for the homonymous world tour exemplifies a communal attempt to bring together racial and gendered subjects. More specifically, the tour’s stop in New Orleans in September 2016 gave the city’s queer culture the opportunity to emerge central within the Beyoncé spectacle. Being the introductory and perhaps the tour de force act of the show, “Formation” here opened with local celebrity Big Freedia. The artist’s queer/drag profile and her association with the bounce scene of New Orleans undergirded the performance with a vital and, most importantly, local camp flair. By emulating Beyoncé’s antebellum-inspired fashion, Freedia emerged on stage to perform her spoken vocals as featured on the song. Her lines are call-outs derived from the bounce scene; in particular, she announces: “I didn’t’ come to play with you, hoes/ I came to slay, bitch/ I like cornbread and collard greens, bitch/ Oh yas, you besta believe it.” The wide usage of black queer vernacular here indicated by slang terms such as “hoes” and “yas,” as well as the allusions to Southern cuisine ascertain Freedia’s regional authenticity and further bind Beyoncé’s icon with a grassroots sensibility. With regard to bounce, Matt Miller explains how “[l]ocal music critics dismissed bounce as apolitical ‘rap-lite’ with crude ‘sex and violence’–based lyrics meant to entertain an underclass in pursuit of pleasure and escape,” yet he stresses how it has served “as a forum for the critique of prevailing attitudes and practices within and outside of poor and working class black communities” (7). Freedia’s profile, in particular, is representative of how bounce,
notwithstanding its crass lyricism and stereotypically gendered narratives, upholds a queer aesthetics and critique by flaunting queerness in the fiercest of ways.

In an allegedly masculinist and homophobic scene that is rap, the figure of the “sissy rapper” has emerged as a respected and visible position. As Miller argues, “[t]he character of the ‘sissy’ has a long and rich history within African American vernacular culture, and the participation of gay performers in New Orleans rap builds on similar efforts in the city’s popular music scene dating back to the early twentieth century, if not earlier” (156). Led by sexually explicit lyrics and a distinctive call-and-response performing style that originates in the convention of rap battles, the performances of “sissy rappers” usually entail an antagonistic relationship with performers who fervently disavow homosexuality, including closeted individuals wishing to pass as heterosexuals (156). Arguably, the image of the “sissy rapper”—here, Freedia’s drag rap—attests to a performed black camp tradition that has developed in a significantly different way to the dominant—read white—camp culture. Sissy rap/bounce evokes a history of homosexuality and effeminacy that deviates from the elitist canon of Broadway musicals and Hollywood diva worship, and remains bonded to the working-class art-making of the African-American community. Miller notes that just as sexual orientation influenced the artistic personae of “sissy rappers,” so too did their attachment to New Orleans’ grassroots insularity (170). Beyoncé’s decision to feature Freedia and the subculture of bounce in her pièce de résistance can be viewed as part of the wider recognition black queer culture has gained over the years. Simultaneously, though, this localized performance of camp is a manifestation of how the artist centralizes black cultural praxes around her icon in order to authenticate her own performance of black camp.

“Formation” indeed stands as a visual amalgam created from all shades of African-American culture: from the revival of the plantation mansion to the contemporary
ghettoized/policing cityscape, to the performance of bounce and the vernacular. Alongside the authenticity and communal call they sought to bolster, these images become highly stylized through the icon of Beyoncé. Expectedly, the artist cannot fit the image of an ordinary black woman. Quite the contrary, she is the café-au-lait diva who fuses her signature leotards with antebellum fashion, who repeats almost ad infinitum that she slays, and is a force of nature, an African goddess with the power to sink a police car, the representation of institutionalized state power. Her making manifest of her superiority is accompanied by a glamorized exhibition of black culture. The visual and discursive characteristics of it are thus promoted as authentic, real, and always with a swagger. “Formation” embodies blackness in a solely performative way, by marking it as attractive, imitable and, most of all, marketable. Despite the fact that blackness per se cannot be fully comprehended and expressed through means of performance—as Johnson suggests, only the “living of blackness” can become “a material way of knowing [it]”¹⁶³—popular culture products like “Formation” offer a significantly glossed-over racial reality.

Because of the wide impact of “Formation” and, later on, its parent album, criticism was directed to the conundrum of cultural appropriation. Specifically, critics focused on the appropriation of black female culture by white gay men. Although clearly not something that can be deemed an emerging phenomenon, the cultural debate seems to have remained unresolved because of its complexity: namely, the socially, politically, and historically different power networks permeating both cultures. In July 2014, an Op-Ed article on Time, entitled “Dear White Gays: Stop Stealing Female Culture” written by black female graduate

¹⁶³ In Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity (2003), E. Patrick Johnson argues that “blackness does not only reside in the theatrical fantasy of the white imaginary that is then projected onto black bodies, nor is it always consciously acted out; rather, it is also the inexpressible yet undeniable racial experience of black people—the ways in which the ‘living of blackness’ becomes a material way of knowing” (8).
student Sierra Mannie, triggered a barrage of responses with regard to the topic. Mannie opened her article by stating: “You are not a black woman, and you do not get to claim either blackness or womanhood. There is a clear line between appreciation and appropriation” (2014). She also stressed that:

\[
\text{[a]t the end of the day, if you are a white male, gay or not, you retain so much privilege… [T]he black women with whom you think you align yourself so well, whose language you use and the stereotypical mannerisms you adopt, cannot hide their blackness and womanhood to protect themselves the way that you can hide your homosexuality. (2014)}
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Following Mannie’s piece, the 2015 National Union of Students Women’s Conference in the UK requested that white gay men stopped appropriating black female culture and underlined white gay males as a privileged group within LGBT+ communities (Apple 2015). Counter-argumentative pieces were also written on various online platforms, including a direct response to Mannie’s article (again featured on Time), entitled “Dear Black Women: White Gays Are Your Allies, So Don’t Push Us Away” (2014), penned by Steve Friess, a white gay man from Detroit, whose allegedly patronizing tone was met with backlash.\footnote{164 Time magazine issued a third article featuring Friess and Courtney Jones-Stevens entitled “A White Man and a Black Woman Hug It Out” (2014) which illustrated a dialogue between the two over Mannie’s and Friess’s article.}

Although both sides of the debate made valid points with regard to white gay men internalizing elements of black culture and to the actual extent this is happening, the issue of appropriation per se largely remained phantasmal. In order to understand how appropriation works one has to investigate both the direct interactions between the communities and, more importantly, the indirect mechanisms that allow the sharing of culture, namely the commercialization of it via mainstream pop market and social media. In the long tradition of
camp, there have been instances when indeed cultural appropriation and cultural borrowing, or even appreciation, as Mannie underscores, were hardly indistinguishable; a case in point is Madonna’s infamous engagement with voguing culture in the early 1990s (see first chapter). As a queer praxis, camp is a performance of gender, a theatricalization of its surrounding environments, and, ultimately, a mimetic strategy employed to parody ideological constructs. For instance, white suburban womanhood and white glamorous femininity have frequently been targets of camp parody, whose treatment of them walks a thin line of sexism and misogyny, but, at times, their performative discourse has been called upon to reveal fissures on heteronormative social structures as well as to make manifest of queer understandings and livers of gender. Similarly, black womanhood has too been part of camp’s arsenal, used both by (white and black) gay men and (black and white) women as a means of generating irony or in order to evoke narratives of empowerment against patriarchal ideology.\textsuperscript{165} Apart from the contemporary scenes of vogue and bounce, a tradition of black camp can in fact be traced in the early twentieth century black female stand-up comedy of the chitlin’ circuit, a descendant of the vaudeville and burlesque scene, as well as in the period of Harlem Renaissance wherein one finds the origins of drag ball culture.\textsuperscript{166} As a matter of fact, black female culture and gay culture have been in cultural exchange and communication for over a century now.

To return to Beyoncé, her icon has been fundamental in the projection of black female and queer culture to the wider gay male culture worldwide. The way, however, this

\textsuperscript{165} Consider the performance of black womanhood by Mae West as explicated in Robertson's work on "Mae West's Maids: Race, 'Authenticity,' and the Discourse of Camp" (Cleto 1999); and, Shugart and Waggoner's essay on "Macy Gray: Venus in Drag" an analysis of Gray's performance of blackness and gender parody (2008).

projection comes across points to its inevitable glamorization as is the case with every pop culture icon and narrative. As a result, elements comprising Beyoncé’s work, such as African-American camp slang or the aesthetics of black femininity, are mediated through her persona and, of course, are marketed accordingly. Maciej Widawski identifies stylization amongst the important features of the slang and its popularization, an argument that, besides linguistics, also applies to the audiovisual work of Beyoncé. According to Midawski, “[p]eople imitate someone else’s way of speaking for various reasons such as to identify with a style or an attitude” (112). By popularizing elements of black culture, both female and queer, Beyoncé renders them commercially available. As hooks underscored in her review of Lemonade, “[v]iewers who like to suggest [the album] was created solely or primarily for black female audiences are missing the point. Commodities, irrespective of their subject matter, are made, produced, and marketed to entice any and all consumers” (2016). The idolization of black womanhood through a camp poetics becomes a stylized corpus that Beyoncé requires from her audience to acknowledge and imitate. Through this practice of imitation, namely the sharing of culture as disseminated and absorbed via Beyoncé’s mediator-icon, the black camp experience, much like its white counterpart, is offered up for grabs.

Notwithstanding its consumerist-driven character, this process of imitation can serve both as a feminist and conspicuously non-white device against patriarchal structures which may usually be white by default. According to Stallings, “[b]oth Black women and gay men have historically been oppressed within the United States, and they have produced cultures from this particular position. Each group forced Western societies to reconsider their axiological categorization of gender” and their community and identity formation is always juxtaposed to, even haunted by, the “rigid fabrication of white masculinity” (119). With that
being said, Beyoncé’s performed intersection of camp, race, and feminism functions as a model of empowerment for both groups. To pat one’s weave and to twirl one’s hands as an indication of a flawless femininity or to identify with a history of social fierceness by exclaiming “Slay” can practically and effectively fortify a position against heteronormative rigidity itself. Considering how gendered standards impose a system of behavioral codes and expressive lexicons, the highly theatrical language and posture that Beyoncé’s performances enclose, allow her audiences to challenge, even transgress the said imposed system; imagine, for instance, how the artist’s queer male fandom, by employing the camp praxes of twirling and posing, challenges the very notion of masculinity, according to which men across most cultural and racial maps are supposed to behave or move in a very specific manner (such as to be sturdy and grave in expression and, by no means, signify effeminate body posture). Beyoncé’s camp praxis provides her queer audience with the performative tools necessary in expressing and vocalizing their queerness, thus making her icon an ultimately interactive and instructive one.

Furthermore, in terms of race, the artist drawing from African-American tradition and practices and fusing those elements with white heterosexual or gay culture creates a cultural amalgam that, although mixed white-inflected corpora, it bears marked racial components that can effectively bring forth a black aesthetics of performance. Her inclusion of black queer culture, in particular, in her work helps lay emphasis on the praxis and social character of a doubly oppressed culture which still remains vulnerable to phobic attitudes both inter- and intra-communally. In fact, Beyoncé allowing for the visibility and celebration of a distinct black camp creates racial porousness on the more often than not white surfaces of the dominant gay culture, while simultaneously laying emphasis on the queer legacy of black culture. Even camp’s canon of typically white cultural production acquires a more nuanced
perspective and opens a more inclusive performance of queer communal bonding. The work of Beyoncé demonstrates that, despite the imposing social reality of gender and race, the tools required for its construction can also be utilized, not to overthrow it, but, at least, make it more flexible. The artist’s camp is audacious enough to revel in its own plasticity and market economy, but, simultaneously, its audacity accrues from the fierceness against its narratives of oppression.

To conclude, Beyoncé’s icon is that of an artist that has taken a turn toward bridging communities across gender and racial generations—perhaps unintentionally so. While her performances would tilt to a more frugal display of visual camp, they are historically informed by being rooted in queer African-American practices. With a steadily increasing appeal in the social media world, Beyoncé manages to offer a spectacle that speaks the language of the millennials without severing any ties with traditions and scenes of the past, thus managing to balance between younger and older audiences as well. Although her feminist politics remain nebulous and will certainly prompt academic interest for as long as her icon retains influential cultural power and relevance, it is noteworthy how audiences identify with her and incorporate her performative vocabulary into their own expressive lexicon. Her “Beyhive” is a diverse and indeed expressive community of fans that remains loyal to their “Queen Bey.” Interesting as it is to see how camp permeates the relationship of the diva with her fanbase, I would like now to turn to the artist that has married her identity politics with her performance of camp. For when it comes to queer audiences and, in particular, queer youth, Lady Gaga and her Little Monsters stand synonymous with the current model of creating community through pop.
Camp Romance: A Gaga Aesthet(h)ics

“And thus began the beginning of a new race. A race within the race of humanity. A race which bears no prejudice, no judgment, but boundless freedom.”

—Lady Gaga, The Manifesto of Mother Monster, “Born This Way” (2011)

“And so Dada was born of a need for independence, of a disturb toward unity. Those who are with us preserve their freedom. We recognize no theory.”

—Tristan Tzara, Dada Manifesto (1918)

In the now long history of camp, no other widely appealing, contemporary artist has so fervently baptized their persona with the queer aesthetic as Lady Gaga. Her decade-long popular oeuvre has accommodated a variety of performances, acts, and publicity stunts that, more often than not, have challenged established pop(ular) conventions and has thus made Gaga’s name synonymous with over-the-top theatrics. Obtaining her moniker from Queen’s song “Radio Ga Ga” (1984), the persona that is Lady Gaga (her birth name being Stefani Joanne Germanotta) has been welcomed by critics and audiences alike as a harbinger of an alternative—read futuristic—approach to pop that successfully combines dance music with sexual politics undergirded by an outlandish sense of fashion. Simultaneously backed by the music and fashion industry, each promotional move of the artist instantly turns into a much-discussed event. Coinciding with her late 2000s debut has been the rise of the social media era which, not surprisingly, has equally contributed in augmenting her popular appeal and circulating her art on a global level. Although her experimental approach to performance and the socio-political valence inherent in her work finds artistic lineage in performers such as David Bowie, Grace Jones, Björg, even Madonna it is important to argue that Gaga has been
the new-age artist that has reinvigorated the art of making pop socio-politically meaningful and managed to spark intergenerational interest, with an apparent focus on youth culture, across musical genres, gender expressions, and racial and ethnic backgrounds.

The performer first impacted onto the music scene in 2008. A born-and-bred New Yorker, Germanotta received classical piano and ballet lessons at an early age, while she briefly attended NYU’s Tisch School of the Arts before deciding to drop out. She would later intermingle with the underground New York scenes where she would play the piano and regularly strip down to her underwear as a performed surprise gimmick to attract her audience’s attention. Her subsequent body of work, in fact, attests to an array of cross-temporal artistic influences from the New York scenes and actively involves the shock value as a means of promoting her persona. Evidently, Gaga’s understanding of performance is deeply informed by the striptease and drag cultures, retaining close proximity with queer scenes, such as those of leather and S&M. Since the beginning of her career, her performance art has been in consonance with the promotion of LGBT+ rights and feminist advocacy. In turn, queer communities have positively responded to the persona by establishing loyal fanbases with vivid expressivity and, as we will see further down, a distinct camp flair. In terms of marketing, multiple were the occasions when Gaga directly addressed her queer following, at times presenting herself as an integral part of the community, both through a LGBT+-focused agenda as well as by paying homage to the vibrancy of queer culture per se.

The cultural phenomenon that is Lady Gaga has added to the visibility of queer culture. Taking advantage of her influential status as an international celebrity, the artist has engaged in queer activism, participating in rallies, campaigns, and Pride parades—most famously, advocating for the repeal of the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy of the U.S.
Military through her infamous meat dress shtick at the 2010 MTV awards ceremony. Performance-wise, Gaga constantly draws from the pool of queer art and praxis. Her creative team, the Haus of Gaga, is an assemblage of visual artists, producers, choreographers, designers, and stylists, modeled on Andy Warhol’s Factory. The conceptualization of Gaga’s tours as Balls in combination with the nomenclature of the Haus and the familial structure of Gaga’s fandom (i.e. she is Mother Monster followed by her Little Monsters) attest to a cultural affiliation with the ballroom scene and the culture of voguing Houses. Furthermore, her work and persona have time and again convoluted the nature of gender and sexuality, vacillating between personae additional to her always-already constructed one, and thus proving how flexible socio-cultural identity categories can be. At a time when rumors ignited about her intersex or transsexual status, Gaga would fuel them by appearing in drag as Jo Calderone, her male alter ego (Halberstam 2012).

Due to the wide impact the poetics and politics of the artist have made over a relatively short period of time, cultural criticism on Gaga has been extensive, though not exhaustive. Scholars and music critics have undertaken analyses of the artist, dissecting her persona(e) and performances from the perspectives of identity politics (Gray 2012), queer theory (Humann 2012; Hawkins 2016), gender and sexuality (O’Brien 2014; Geller 2014), fandom (Torrusio 2012; Bennett 2013), postmodern art (Lush 2012; Moore 2013), consumerism and digital age production (Auslander 2014). In relation to camp, critical interest has been profound, most of the times focusing on Gaga’s music video history (Horn 2012; Hawkins 2014) or fashion peculiarities (Gary and Rutnam 2014). However, her stage performances and, specifically, her tour extravaganzas have received, at best, moderate interest as far as a theoretical examination of Gaga’s camp is concerned—with the exception of Katrin Horn’s thorough camp reading (2012) of the revamped Monster Ball Tour (2010-
11). In concert reviews, the camp of Gaga is either addressed in terms of style or not at all, precisely due to the fact that it is all too conspicuous. As with the case of Madonna and Kylie Minogue, though, this chapter seeks to examine and problematize the conspicuousness of Lady Gaga’s camp in an attempt to, first of all, deal with her rather underexplored tour history, update the emergent gap of academic criticism in the post-Monster era and, last but not least, place her production of camp along the lines of a performed tradition and queer temporality within a global context.

Gaga’s stage is renowned for its extravagance and cutting-edge technology. Structurally, a Gaga concert derives its conceptual form directly from the genres of opera and musical theater, though references may also allude to eastern theater genres such as noh and butoh, and also builds its acts upon performance art, all meticulously adapted for the arena environment. While most arena shows following the act-led format present specific narratives for each separate act under a dominant theme or aesthetic, Gaga’s shows (with few exceptions that will be addressed throughout this chapter) are driven by an overarching aesthetic and narrative, which unfolds gradually with each new act. This means that, just like a conventional piece of musical theater or drama, acts are supposed to be well-integrated into one another. Indeed, her show acts are not necessarily limiting in fitting multiple songs within them, but can range from a quick medley to a one-song act, usually signified by a costume change. However, if an outfit change signals the beginning of a new act, judging by the rapidity of Gaga’s transitions to each new look within the two-hour span—an average number of costumes worn in a Gaga show often ranges from seven to nine—it is well understood that dividing her shows into clear-cut sections is a rather challenging task. It is
precisely due to this velocity and fluidity, however, that her shows can support an almost seamless narrative, as in the integrated musical format.167

In concert with the postmodern sensibility of her music videos, the narratives of Gaga’s shows are self-referential and intertextual in nature. As Iddon and Marshall argue, “Lady Gaga’s output is firmly embedded in an intellectual pop culture tradition. Her music videos are intertextually linked to icons of pop culture intelligentsia like Alfred Hitchcock and so on... and they are open to multiple interpretations” (2). The way she brings an overload of pop trivia into her work not only requires from her audience to be familiar with the breadth and depth of popular culture, but, most importantly, to acknowledge Lady Gaga’s constructed relevance as inextricably linked with pop itself. For instance, the music video of “Born This Way” (2011) incorporates an array of pop culture references: from Hitchcock’s Vertigo (1958) prelude to the futuristic surrealism of Fritz Lang’s Metropolis (1927), and from the visual homage to Michael Jackson’s “The Way You Make Me Feel” (1987) to the rhythmic similarities with Madonna’s “Express Yourself” (1989). Likewise, her shows are a pop panorama of texts that smoothly blend with, and provide edge to the flow of the performed narrative. Due to the bombardment of meta-textual information, acts within her shows may end up coming across as incongruous to an unfamiliar viewer. Nevertheless, despite the frequent superfluity of certain acts, the coherence of the overarching narrative, which is time and again recalled throughout each show, remains undisturbed.

What is interesting about these narratives is their coupling of the rubric of storytelling with the format of the musical theater. David Annandale explains that “[s]torytelling is an important part of Gaga’s work, whether in the form of monster battles in concert, the stories

167 As opposed to the tradition of musical theater in the pre-Oklahoma! period, wherein the plot is interrupted by musical numbers providing comic relief or melodramatic accentuation, the integrated musical—commonly referred to as book musical, because it is based upon the libretto—has the musical numbers propel the narrative action, therefore displaying continuity (Taylor and Symonds 14).
in the videos, or the mythology of Gaga’s life” (149). Each of the artist’s extravaganzas presents its narrative in the form of a musical fairytale wherein Gaga is the first-person narrator. Elements of fantasy are also omnipresent within the shows, adding extra flair to an already lavish spectacle. From unicorns to fairies to female deities, Gaga makes sure her stories are always camp-inflected. In fact, the interplay of Gaga’s camp with the genre of fairytale/fantasy deserves analytic focus, since her stage successfully highlights queer nuances within the latter through performed revisions. Most significantly, not only does camp inject a carnivalesque aesthetic into each fantasy narrative, but also inflates the dramaturgy of the stories toward a moralistic end. As is the case with the genre of melodrama in stage, film or television utilizing means of excess to present and preserve, perhaps sensationally, the moral high ground, camp here stylizes and magnifies ironies inherent in Gaga’s narratives so as to challenge socially constructed truths around issues of gender and sexuality. It is here that we talk of a camp aesthet(h)ics. For the sake of relevance, what will be treated under the rubrics of camp must have a queer specificity or, at least, be open to queer interpretations.

By romanticizing narratives of Otherness, the camp aesthet(h)ics of Gaga glamorizes a culture of misfits, underdogs, and “monsters” on stage. Her multi-layered shows exhibit a generic connection to the performative tradition of avant-garde theater, playing on elements that are found in the Theatre of Cruelty as well as the Theatre of the Absurd and its camp manifestation in the Theatre of the Ridiculous. Gaga utilizes the parodic praxis and language of the aforementioned theatrical traditions in order to shed light on outcast lifestyles. The fact that her performance indulges in the aesthetics of camp bespeaks of a nostalgic attraction to the dynamic past of queer culture and the political potential intrinsic in its subcultural praxis as expressed through pop culture artifacts and urban communities. The camp politics of Lady
Gaga, closely related to the expressive mantra of the Dada movement, imagine an illogical world, “the beginning of a new race,” where boxed identities and labeling should be treated as nonsensical. At the same time, much like other diva camp praxes, Gaga’s act materializes by and within the marketized sphere of her own pop brand. It might as well be argued that, since Gaga’s persona and performances are inextricably bound to be consumer-driven, it is only profitably reasonable that the camp factor is amplified as a means of queer-baiting gay audiences. She nonetheless actively embodies a queer ethos in her fervent support and dramatization of non-normative genders. This chapter, therefore, will deal with what I define as camp aesthet(h)ics by delving into Lady Gaga’s tour shows, from *The Fame Ball Tour* (2009), to *The Monster Ball Tour 1.0* and 2.0 (2009-11), to the *Born This Way Ball* (2012-13), to *ArtRave: The Artpop Ball* (2014), to the latest *Joanne World Tour* (2017).168

The Fantastic Stage and the Gendered Self

After the international success of her breakthrough album *The Fame* (2008) and its hit singles, “Just Dance” (featuring Colby O’Donis), “Poker Face” and “Paparazzi,” Lady Gaga started gaining cultural momentum while formulating a solid fanbase. Whereas *The Fame* intended to present Gaga to the public and stimulate consumers’ interest—the theme of fame was an end in itself after all—its follow-up, *The Fame Monster* (2009), a rebranding of the 2008 album with an additional eight-songs setlist, sought to establish Gaga as a culturally and politically aware performance artist by repackaging her persona from the vain blonde starlet to the dark eccentric genius. The signature songs of the album, including “Bad Romance,” “Telephone” (featuring Beyoncé), and “Alejandro,” saw Gaga immersed in her

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168 The *Cheek to Cheek Tour* (2014), supporting the homonymous collaborative jazz album with Tony Bennett will be briefly touched upon throughout this chapter. The specific tour follows the music hall format and eschews the arena spectacle aesthetics. The praxis of camp here is limited to Gaga’s outfits with the show itself being consciously minimal as informed by the classical/jazz tradition.
A stylized profile of the “mad artist” which actively contested traditional perceptions about gender and sexuality. The audiovisual canvas of the Monster hits epitomized surrealist narratives of Otherness, embellished with a potent gothic aesthetic. Gaga’s embrace of the notion of the monstrous Other incorporated identity politics that bespoke of non-normative romances, a failing sexuality, and gendered insecurities. As a milestone for the artist’s career, The Fame Monster proclaimed Gaga as Mother Monster and her fans as her Little Monsters. While it is interesting to see how Gaga inhabits and, by extension, campifies the image of the “mad artist,” a conventionally masculine position as illustrated in the genres of horror and science fiction,\(^{169}\) it is of equal interest to see how her stage adapts to the said campification by utilizing elements of the fantastic.

Upon the first showcase of the album in The Monster Ball Tour, the performer followed the typical act-divided format.\(^{170}\) Two LED screens on each side of the stage and a smaller one in the middle instilled into the spectacle a sense of perspective. A runway set across the stage presented some of the acts in a linear movement, as if they were televised events; as a matter of fact, this cubicle-like structure of the stage alludes to a television box. The New York Times review of the performance at Radio City Music Hall stated:

> The staging layered more complications onto the songs, placing Lady Gaga in otherworldly realms. She first appeared behind a scrim showing a computerized grid, with a lighted costume that made her more of a collection of white dots than a body: a figure in an electronic universe, like a digitized pop star. (Pareles 2010)

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\(^{169}\) According to Peter Hutchings, “the mad artist has become a stock figure in the horror genre, although he (or more rarely, she) has often been overshadowed by his cousin, the mad scientist. Both share a concern to shape reality according to their own self-centered vision, no matter what the consequences for the people around them” (2009, 22). From the murderous artist in Mystery of the Wax Museum (1933) to the emblematic genius insanity of Hannibal Lecter in The Silence of the Lambs (1991), all of Hutchings’s examples attest to a tradition that is conspicuously male-dominated.

\(^{170}\) The Monster Ball Tour incorporated six different acts entitled Birth, Desert, Forest, Egypt, City and Monster Ball (Encore).
Gaga herself described the show as “an avant-garde-performance-art-fashion installation, put in a blender and vomited on a pop show,” with the basic concept being that the box-like stage functions as a garage where Gaga and her friends experiment with music (Montgomery 2009). In the entirety of the show, Gaga alternates between looks, yet there is no specific narrative that binds the show together. The abstractedness of the interwoven acts might as well serve as a symbolic representation of digital reality as this is being constructed from, and, by extension, saturated with images by electronic/social media. Gaga feeds her onstage reality with those core themes that permeate and formulate contemporary consumer culture: namely, sex, violence, and vice. The conceptualization of these themes relies on metaphors of monstrosity, an apt motif that can perfectly underline the consuming nature of the aforementioned instincts.

Most importantly, the dramatization of this metaphor is perhaps inevitably expressed through a gothic aesthetic that is simultaneously linked with camp. Gaga here embodies a monstrous femininity the performativity of which remains a thematic arc throughout the history of camp.¹⁷¹ For instance, the performance of “LoveGame” (2009) explores the theme of sex and sees Gaga transmogrifying into a skeletal creature. The song itself is a synthpop club number that illustrates the artist’s physical desire; upon its release, it quickly garnered criticism for its sexually ambiguous lyrics: “Let’s have some fun/ This beat is sick/ I wanna take a ride on your disco stick.” As in the song’s video, Gaga holds an actual stick with an illuminated crystal with which she repels her sexually voracious dancers. Reveling in the song’s risqué absurdity, the performance becomes a grotesque camp praxis wherein Gaga in her glittery exoskeleton costume wields the phallic disco stick as a weapon against sexual

¹⁷¹ David Bergman argues that the grotesque female body holds a central position in camp, especially in the performance of drag wherein queens overemphasize feminine features on body and face (102). The cinema of camp, such as Sunset Boulevard (1950), What Ever Happened to Baby Jane? (1962), and Mommie Dearest (1981), also showcases monstrous women that usually border on insanity.
consumption. Inspired by the 1980s disco scene and with its video citing references from Michael Jackson’s “Bad” (1987), “LoveGame” includes strong queer undertones. In the history of queer culture and, specifically, gay male culture, penile intrusion constituting a sodomitical act has always been demonized by heterodominant discourse. In relation to the 1980s underground scene and the pathology of HIV/AIDS which wrought more of a psychological and physical havoc upon queer communities and in part signaled the end of disco (Levine 1998), anal sex became a source of anxiety for queer men who viewed sexual abstinence as the best means of precaution against the virus. The performance of “LoveGame” here possibly evokes a queer memory, albeit in a rather eroticized and certainly abstract way. Ironically, toward the end of the performance, Gaga loses her disco stick and abandons her skeletal body in the arms of her dancers as if to highlight sexual indulgence as ultimately consuming.

Although much of what is described above may only be part of a moral narrative viewed from a perspective that is mainly informed by the Western and American history of queer culture, one cannot dismiss the fact that Gaga’s performed stories make manifest their moral in a highly graphic way. The spectacle of the grotesque here, always a vital force for Gaga’s stage, provides the poetic aid in making a story luridly dramatized. Grotesqueness, especially in Monster Ball and later on in Born This Way Ball, serves to glamorize Gaga’s eccentricities by presenting familiar tropes to the audience. Gaga’s alleged artistic insanity and identity politics of marginality are here aligned with a history of outcast personae that became iconic within popular culture. Reviewing the tour’s stop in Toronto’s Air Canada Centre, Kelly Nestruck draws the connection between Gaga’s extravaganza with book musicals, highlighting influences, among others, from Sweeny Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street (1979) and The Phantom of the Opera (1986) (2009). Both Sweeny Todd and
the Phantom are unstable personalities driven by obsession; the artistry of both, namely barbering and composing, is expressed through human pain and death in a traditional gothic manner.

Likewise, Gaga in *Monster Ball* presents herself as the tortured artist who stages her battles with obsession in grotesque acts. Similar to the abovementioned gothic musicals, here too the moral outcome of each story has to be made manifest through a cause-and-effect principle. As dictated in the dramatic conventions of melodrama, punishment is reserved for acts transgressing the socially imposed boundaries and, of course, in the patriarchy-ordered melodramatic imaginary, these acts are most of the times gendered.\(^\text{172}\) In a rather stylized manner, Gaga’s moral stories enclose the principle of (self-)punishment, thus prefiguring her acts as inherently transgressive and, by extension, foregrounding her mad-artist profile. Consider the performance of “Paparazzi” wherein a latex-clad Gaga is suspended from her hair which remains tangled in large rings attached to an iron bar. Two dancers control the movement of the bar, hence Gaga herself, across the runway.\(^\text{173}\) By involving bodily pain in the performance, the artist here explores the theme of fame, thereby signaling the extent to which fame torturously invades the privacy of corporeal reality. Drawing (post)dramatic technicalities from the Theatre of Cruelty as well as the body art of Marina Abramovic and Yoko Ono, Gaga presents the world of celebrity lifestyle as a surrealist gothic inferno that culminates in her screaming to her audiences for rescue amidst frenetic camera lights. It should be kept in mind that although her narrative acts are guided by the transgression and punishment principle, it is ensured there is some sort of redemption following—as we shall

\(^{172}\) More specifically, Marcia Landy states that “the hero’s conflicts involve escape from society, while the heroine’s conflicts involve confrontation with society often in terms of failure resulting in her accommodation to the status quo or punishment for transgression” (196).

\(^{173}\) An alternative performance of “Paparazzi” in *Monster Ball* features Gaga with extremely elongated braids that dominate the stage. Pursuing her are her dancers who wield oversized pairs of scissors which, ultimately, force upon Gaga’s elongated hair.
see in both narratives of the Monster Ball and Born This Way Ball further down—a cathartic end to her dramatic journey that throws her acts of violence into relief.

Gothicism, as the dominant trope here, appropriately accommodates Gaga’s monstrous treatment of fame, but, importantly and through its stylization, it manages to underscore by means of camp irony the impact of showbiz politics upon the female body. Similarly to Madonna’s frantic assault on her past images in Sticky & Sweet Tour’s “She’s Not Me” (see first chapter), Gaga’s performance here takes on the construct of glamorous femininity. It can as well be argued that, as fame impinges upon Gaga, she revives a gothic tradition of mad women in which female subjectivity dwells on a sane/insane border. Exploring the history of mad women in the genre of gothic, Karen Stein underlines that “[i]n their Gothic narratives women reveal deep-seated conflicts between a socially acceptable passive, congenial, "feminine" self and a suppressed, monstrous hidden self” (123). Yet, according to the writer, some gothic heroines take their socially-branded condition of madness to be an opportunity for exploration of their inner self, “a stage on the journey toward self-knowledge” (124). In deliberately promoting her persona as borderline mad, Gaga wishes to make over-the-top statements with her shticks in an effort to render her performance art a socially aware project. Although it remains nebulous as to whether and how the real self behind the Gaga persona treats mental instability as self-exploration, it is true that her onstage self glamorizes madness in order to expose the irony behind the themes she acts out as well as effectively market her art by romanticizing its dark eccentricity.

When the artist and her production company decided to upgrade the Monster Ball Tour from theater stage to arena in a relatively short period of time, Gaga would further play on her “mad artist” persona. Whilst in the first version of The Monster Ball, the artist promoted the revamped show as a completely reworked stage with new acts whose concept
was the brainchild of Gaga and her Haus. When she pondered on her risky decision, she dramatically replied: “I’m throwing out the [original] stage. My team thinks I’m completely psychotic. But I don’t fucking care” (Montgomery 2009). Years later, one of her statements in a documentary about Arthur Fogel, the CEO of Live Nation Entertainment (Chapman 2013), sparked media interest and helped sustain her self-foddered myth of psychosis: Gaga claimed that the decision to revamp the tour allegedly led her on the verge of bankruptcy simply because she wanted a revolutionary production to attract Fogel’s attention. The arena-scale production was almost twice the size of the original one, incorporating a main stage and a long runway that extended to a smaller stage reaching into the audience. Divided into four segments, the show was conceived of as an electro-pop opera with a New York setting wherein Gaga and her friends are en route to the imagined Monster Ball. Gaga’s onstage presence was backed by an array of extravagant props, including a large urban setting with fire escapes and neon signs, a subway car, and a replica of Central Park’s Bethesda Fountain which spurred blood. Unlike the original production and despite having been conceptualized in a very short period, the revamped show displays thematic integrity and a coherent narrative, successfully blending musical performances with actual dramatic action.

A truly camp spectacle, Monster Ball 2.0 epitomizes the idea of theatrical(ized) concert. With its Manhattan cityscape, the show bears a notable resemblance with Broadway productions, such as Hair (1975), West Side Story (1957), and Rent (1994), which also featured the urban background of New York. Its storyline, though, establishes the most obvious allusion to The Wizard of Oz. Much like Dorothy and her friends, Gaga wanders in

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174 In sequential order the segments are: City, Subway, Forest, and Monster Ball. Usually, “Bad Romance” serves as the Monster Ball finale/encore. On selected dates, Gaga performed “Born This Way” after “Bad Romance” in order to promote her then-upcoming homonymous album.
her Manhattan-inspired fantasy world; instead of dreamscaping to the Land of Oz, Gaga explores nocturnal underground New York. Concert criticism drew out the similarities between the two productions and mainly complimented the gaudy configuration of the stage in terms of fashion and props (Montgomery 2010; Petidis 2010; Concepción 2010). Interestingly, camp as the dominant aesthetic that binds the show together is hardly addressed in these critiques. The closest evaluation of the show’s camp factor, but still without any lexical, let alone theoretical reference to camp, is Dan Aquilante’s unenthusiastic review, according to which, “[the show] was Broadway for the deranged” and “Gaga’s attempt to paint the grit and glitz of NYC was cartoonish” (2010). Yet, camp praxis is exactly what Aquilante’s critique illustrates: a surreally inflated world that reaches the point of ridiculousness wherein derangement is inscribed upon a Dorothy-like Gaga in the most outrageous fashion. Gaga here performs the campiness of her icon thereby aligning her persona and her show with the queer tradition of a camp classic like The Wizard of Oz. Horn makes a well-put argument in comparing Gaga’s extravaganza with the MGM musical, underlining not only the interconnected elements of their camp appeal to queer audiences, but also Gaga’s continuation of Judy Garland’s gay legacy (85-89). Most importantly, according to the writer, “[the show] evokes community, kinship, and non-biological family ties of the freaks and outsiders, in this case known as Little Monsters, into a Broadway show-act” (89). The reworked Monster Ball represents an exposition of camp culture on a global stage which, despite its commercial drive, proposes itself as an allegorical Land of Oz, a dreamland where queer individuals and, practically, any other marginalized group come together to form communities. Fans gathering at the concert venues started responding to the camp praxis of Gaga fashioning themselves into the star persona and thus creating a colorful
community that not only followed Gaga thereafter, but, most importantly, exemplified and celebrated the queer spectrum of her spectacle (see more on the fifth chapter).

The camp of the show per se, perhaps ostentatiously, but still inevitably so, celebrates queerness in the most flamboyant manner. Horn notes that, by equating herself with Dorothy/Garland and at some point with Disney’s Tinker Bell, Gaga proposes a camp viewing of the world where gender is exposed as always-already performative and is being reduced to wigs and costumes (92). Gaga’s fantasy world is indeed a queer utopia that exemplifies a gender-spectral configuration of reality. In this utopia, the allegorical Monster Ball, apparently the Foucauldian heterotopia that exists “somewhere over the rainbow,” is a cathartic, celebratory telos in a long journey filled with the monsters of insecurity (as performed in “Dance in the Dark”), sex (in “Monster”), fame (“Paparazzi”), and vice (“So Happy I Could Die”). What Horn’s critique, let alone the rest of the show’s critiques do not pay attention to is how camp glamorizes the queer history of New York by centralizing it around Gaga. While her showcase points to a mythologization of the city’s subculture by proposing it as paradigmatic upon a center stage and presents a queer experience that is monolithically urban, the show succeeds in preserving an underground past and dramatically reintroduces it to younger queer generations. From the house scene-influenced “Dance in the Dark” to the Warhol-esque “Vanity” performed in a Fame-inspired showcase, the city’s queer legacy is inscribed on every act of the show.

175 In the performance of “So Happy I Could Die,” which illustrates the artist’s addiction to alcohol and is nuanced with lesbian undertones, Gaga is raised on a platform in her living dress, a costume made by the Haus, which is composed of electronically motioned garment and accompanied wings. It is here where Horn establishes Gaga’s resemblance to the Peter Pan creature.

176 For a thorough explication of these acts consider Horn’s essay.

177 The song pays homage to female icons that died young, such as Princess Diana, Marilyn Monroe, Judy Garland, Sylvia Plath, and six-year-old beauty queen JonBenét Ramsey. Male icons, including Liberace, Jesus, and Stanley Kubrick, are also referenced in the song. For the performance here, “Dance in the Dark” samples Cece Peniston’s “Finally,” a popular 1990s dance anthem that was quickly embraced by gay audiences and, as a result, was later featured in the setlist and subsequent musical adaptation of Priscilla Queen of the Desert.
It is the Park segment, however, that best dramatizes queer underground New York. As in *The Wizard of Oz*, Gaga and her friends here are struck by a twister. After she is left alone to perform “So I Happy I Could Die” in the flamboyant living dress, she announces that the twister has taken her and her friends to “the deepest, darkest part of Central Park.” The segment is then introduced with a video vignette where Gaga appears in leather couture and with antlers on head, dancing amidst thorny threes. When the performer and the dancers emerge on stage, they are all dressed in fringed black costumes that resemble animal coats. Within a space that has already been signaled as ominous, the stage transforms into a gothic version of Bethesda Terrace with its angelic Fountain transfigured into a blood-pouring pool. The segment begins with the song “Monster,” wherein Gaga illustrates her physical romance with a carnivorous lover and for the performance of which she is being sexually ravaged by her dancers. In a simulation of gang rape, Gaga’s fur coat is ripped apart and her body is painted in blood. The performance of “Monster” is then followed by the Dionysian act of “Teeth,” which, similarly staged as an orgy, visualizes innuendos about oral sex and sees a leather-clad Gaga inviting her lover to “take a bite of [her] bad-girl meat.” The segment culminates with the performance of “Alejandro”; here, the artist bids farewell to her fictional lovers whilst rinsing her body with blood paint from the Fountain. In consonance with the

(1994) as well as in Kylie Minogue’s performance of “Spinning Around” for the *Homecoming Tour*. As a result Gaga’s song traces a camp lineage across a variety of popular culture corpora.

178 Included in non-standard editions of *The Fame*, “Vanity” talks about Gaga’s fascination for glamorous lifestyle and image-making, abiding by the concept of its parent album on the Warholian understanding of fame. In the revamped *Monster Ball*, “Vanity” follows “Beautiful, Dirty, Rich” (2008) and is performed by Gaga and the dance crew in the City segment. Gaga is scantily dressed in a bikini and her dancers are in 1980s-inspired street attire, including rugged leather jackets, and ripped jeans. By drawing the parallels with the street culture of New York during that decade, the act creates strong ironies by juxtaposing the bohemian lifestyle of Gaga and her dancers with the pursued glamorous scene of neon-lit Manhattan, as was the case with the performing arts students in Alan Parker’s *Fame* (1980).

179 A costume with wing-like extensions that operates on kinetic technology.
explicit homage to homosexuality in the song’s video, the live version of “Alejandro” lays emphasis on a choreographed romance between dancers and concludes with a male couple from the crew kissing.

The staging of Central Park as a gothic site that is queerly eroticized is significantly informed by the city’s subcultural past and present. First and foremost, the broader area of the Park has traditionally been home to sexual subcultures, serving as a space of erotic intermingling and community-building. Drawing from its urban history, pop culture corpora, such as Miloš Forman’s film adaptation of Hair (1979) and William Friedkin’s Cruising (1980), have quite assertively established Central Park as a sexually charged scene that allows marginal queerness to emerge: Hair envisions the Park as a naturalist haven for countercultural bohemia, while, manifestly darker, Cruising proposes a psycho-dramatic view of the Park’s perilous queer activity. Tony Kushner’s Angels in America, though, is what appears to be most closely associated with the Monster Ball’s Park segment. Rather falling between Forman’s psychedelia-driven depiction and Friedkin’s grotesque configuration, Kushner’s “gay fantasia” has queer Central Park and, in particular, Bethesda Terrace with the angel statue as a point of reference, a space of conflict and resolution that definitely queer up established notions of Christianity. Similarly, Gaga’s Park segment explores queer sexuality via the gothic setting by garishly underlining a moral story with a non-traditional twist. After the twister, Gaga’s Dorothy character lands on into the Park only to mingle with what legitimately appears to be a lurid saturnalia culture. Strongly influenced by the gore genre, the narrative sees Gaga falling prey to the sexually voracious creatures,

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180 “Alejandro” is a melodramatic mid-tempo song with Hispanic influences, the chorus of which envisions Gaga saying goodbye to three male figures, Alejandro, Fernando, and Roberto. The video of the song features Gaga in a Nazi-inspired setting—perhaps paying homage to musical Cabaret (1966)—and incorporates erotic scenes between her male dancers. In close proximity with Madonna’s play with Catholicism, “Alejandro’s” ultra-camp video also sees the artist leading a funeral procession, appearing as a latex-clad nun, and swallowing rosary beads.
ultimately transforming into one herself by succumbing to their instinctual appetite. In the “Alejandro” act, she finally comes to terms with her nature and, as she is being baptized in the blood pool, focus is shifted upon the emerging queer romance between the dancers as perhaps symbolic of a redemptive finale.

Interestingly, The Monster Ball’s Park is linked with and perhaps ritualizes, in camp manner, New York’s queer tribes. George Chauncey’s historical account of the city’s queer subcultures reveals a tribal categorization of men who have sex with men into fairies and wolves. In the common lexicon of queer culture, the fairy stands for the effeminate homosexual whose sexual disposition and gender performativity derives signifying power from the camped-up expression of heterosexual femininity. Locally, according to Chauncey, “[t]he prominence of the fairy in turn-of-the[-twentieth]-century New York and his consistency with the hegemonic gender ideology of the era made him the dominant—and most plausible—role model available to boys and men trying to make sense of vague feelings of sexual and gender difference” (49). As the dominant model of openly expressed homosexuality, the archetype of the fairy not only provided queer men with a socially performed role upon which each of them comparatively formulated their notion of masculinity, but also significantly added to the public perception of homosexuality, a perception still holding strong inter-generationally and cross-culturally. Attributed with an intermediate, third-sex status, the archetype is a corporeal understanding of homo-sexuality, indeed a radical one when posited against conventional discourses, which results from the combination of masculine traits with feminine expression—“a woman’s spirit in a man’s body,” as nineteenth-century queer European intelligentsia comprehended it (Chauncey
Chauncey notes that in the history of queer New York, fairies would usually be inextricably tied with cruising cultures, sharing public spots and street lexicon with female prostitutes. Inhabiting a feminine position also meant performing a sexually passive one. Homosexual men could express their fairy status either by means of transvestism that aided in fashioning out a social persona, often relying on the image of period female celebrities—Mae West was among the commonest drag inspirations—or via camped-up body language, such as limp wrists and swishing (60-61). As a result of their identification with the “weaker” sex, not uncommon were instances of violence against them; according to Chauncey, “[s]uch violence served a more instrumental purpose in reinforcing the boundaries between fairies and other men” (60). It is made understood here that the violence against the fairy body, i.e. the quintessential body of camp, serves as a reminder, indeed a brutal one, of camp being a practice vulnerable to social contempt because of its radical potential to unsettle patriarchy-ordered gender divisions.

Juxtaposed to the image of the fairy is that of the wolf. At the opposite end, the wolf is the male who identifies with a hypermasculine role and, by extension, assumes a sexually active position. In the culture of cruising, virile men would often make no distinction between female or male sexual partners when in need of tension release. Chauncey, in fact, underlines that women may have originally been substituted for fairies in sexual encounters, because the latter could attract cruisers by offering certain performed sexual acts, such as fellatio, which were rather uncommon among, and not really favored by, female prostitutes (85). However, unlike this downright phallocentric approach of some men to instant gratification, wolves were not only renowned for their sexual prowess but were often associated with the cultural logic of pairing. Out of the tribal classifications of queer

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181 Chauncey’s argument draws from theoretical and literary texts of continental queer figures, such as Karl Ulrich, Edward Carpenter, Magnus Hirschfeld, and Marcel Proust.
subcultures, wolves, also known as “husbands” or “jockers,” according to Chauncey, “abided by the conventions of masculinity and yet exhibited a decided preference for male sexual partners” (87). The writer asserts that “[w]olves combined homosexual interest with a marked masculinity” and would usually opt for young and effeminate partners, such as punks and fairies (89). Interestingly so, the relationships developed between these two groups were not of sexual interest only. Intimacy and long-term relationships—termed “marriages” by Chauncey (90)—were not uncommon, especially among the vagrants of the city, and were rather a queer reflection of heterosexual coupling, adhering thus to the social economy of gendered roles—i.e. the feminine fairy and the masculine wolf. A truly queer form of kinship, the intimate relations between wolves and fairies could as well extend beyond the culture of cruising. Arguably, the social stigma imprinted upon such bonding in early twentieth-century New York could not have been eradicated and the extent to which these intimate relationships could have been tolerated remains unexplored. However, perhaps due to an already liminal class position, the fairies and wolves, unlike the homosexual elite of the city, did not run any risk of losing privileges attached to their social status when being connected in public.

Gaga’s staging of the Park seems to invoke this cult of fairies and wolves and, importantly, invests in the ethical story accruing from this queer match. Both appropriated from the fairytale genre, the figures of the fairy and the wolf in queer culture serve as sexual archetypes of androgyny and carnal instinct, respectively, thereby illustrating, possibly in the most basic way, the binary nature of queer male sex. Similarly, the Monster Ball’s segment envisions Gaga in the position of the fairy who has been lost in Central Park, and her dancers as the predatory wolves who are after her. The acts of “Monster” and “Teeth” make the allusion even more palpable: “Monster” portrays Gaga’s love interest as “a wolf in disguise”
with evil eyes and paws, “a monster in [her] bed,” while prior to every performance of “Teeth,” the performer announces that she needs applause from the audience, otherwise she could die, like Tinker Bell. Although mostly dramatizing a culture of rape that is resultant from that of cruising, the Park derives maximal benefit from the staged allegory by paying attention to queer intimacy as performed by the two dancers for the finale of “Alejandro.” The act effectively underscores that in the heart of an allegedly voracious culture, whose high sexual drive expresses the pathos that results from the normative pressure impinged upon queer sex, forms of intimacy can also be attained. “Alejandro” imagines and acts upon the queer romance after the climactic series of sexual drama presented in the previous acts, thereby proposing a cathartic world of queer bonding—even in its conventional dyadic form—beyond purely sexual terms and highlighting the moral inherent in Gaga’s camp aesthet(h)ics.

In the remainder of the storyline, Gaga will battle her own demons, materialized in a grotesque angler fish prop, and will eventually arrive at the Monster Ball with her accompaniment. As Gaga’s first attempt to explore a storytelling narrative dramatized upon a fantastic stage, Monster Ball 2.0 succeeds in delivering a moral on marginality and sexual expression to its audiences. Scoring a commercial triumph, the tour became a milestone in binding Gaga with a camp-fueled notion of spectacle. Its garish play with the genres of gothic and fairytale saw the artist’s experimentation with grotesqueness making a felt appeal to her fans who heavily invested, both financially and emotionally, in the artist’s new phase. The end of The Fame Monster era was rather smooth, since a few months prior to concluding the tour, Gaga already announced a new monstrous era, therefore furthering her play with the well-established gothic formula. Picking up the baton from The Fame Monster, the follow-up 2011 album, entitled Born This Way, a peculiar mix of electronica with metal sounds and
rock-and-roll, heralded “the beginning of a new race,” the Little Monsters’ race, at the epicenter of which Lady Gaga epitomized what Halberstam accurately describes as “an erotics of flaws and flows” (xiii). The album with the homonymous lead single and video foreground queerness and LGBT+ rights by figuratively drawing from Gaga’s underdog success story. The cultural impact of *Born This Way* pointed to a liberating body politics expressed through the flaunting of freakish sexualities and gendered transformations. At the same time, its commercial impact was synonymous with Gaga’s strategic glorification of a culture of misfits. The success of the album may as well accrue from the openness applied to the term “misfit”; in Gaga’s “Born This Way” (2011) lyrical lexicon, it stands for any human being, “black, white, beige,” “gay, straight, or bi, lesbian, transgender life,” who feels or has felt “outcast, bullied, or teased.” Practically, Gaga’s musical mantra here touches upon the essences of human insecurity and queers up traditional narratives of creation, thus offering a rather empowering and convincingly marketable body of work that nonetheless is well-supported with a non-normative ethos.

With its goth-cum-glam aesthetic, the *Born This Way* era out-camps its predecessor in terms of fashion, technology, and the deliberateness of Gaga’s moral message to her audience. The artist and her creative team drew from the 1980s music scene, amplifying the artist’s glam rock profile from *The Fame Monster* to a chic metal persona with an evidently pop apprehension of goth and punk. *Born This Way* exhibits a heavy metal sensibility that has been contemporaneously adapted to fit the early 2010s electronic dance music (EDM) trends. Similarly, Gaga’s look invited a meticulous ornamentation of body and attire, favoring influences from the biker and leather cultures. Most notoriously, the artist toyed with her physical image by adorning her body with prosthetics resembling protruding bones, horns, and scales, which were largely influenced by both performance artists, such as Orlan
and Stelarc, as well as the rock acts of Alison Cooper and Motley Crüe. Germanotta also introduced her male alter ego, Jo Calderone, an Italian-American macho pianist who was allegedly Lady Gaga’s lover. Creatively, the era also cited references from the dancefloor phases of artists such as Madonna, Michael Jackson, and Whitney Houston, but also followed a tradition of male rock as established by Bruce Springsteen as well as its theatrically-tinged form found in the work and persona of Freddie Mercury. Gaga’s mining the above scenes and artists for creative output exemplifies the postmodern nature of her work, which tries to marry seemingly incompatible elements—for instance, the machismo of heavy metal with the gaiety of bubblegum pop. Always crucial in her oeuvre, her politics of gender here is once again extravagantly staged, this time, though, through a technologically reformulated body. What her Born This Way performances demonstrate is the irony inherent in an enhanced and/or compartmentalized body that deviates from biological norms, yet is carefully placed in a camp context.

That having been said, the promotional tour for this era, The Born This Way Ball tour, is a spectacular narrative that visualizes the conceptual ethos of its parent album, paying tribute to the diversity of Gaga’s Little Monsters. Housing a highly intricate stage with imaginative props and a rapid interchange of acts, the show is a lavish enterprise of mammoth proportions and remains one of the most extravagant productions in touring history alongside U2’s 360° Tour (2009-2011), Roger Waters/Pink Floyd’s The Wall Live (2010-2013) and Madonna’s Sticky & Sweet Tour (2008-2009).\(^1\) Gaga and her team created a setting conceived of as a medieval castle, named the Kingdom of Fame, which incorporated multistoried towers and rotating structures, therefore allowing the artist to cover

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\(^1\) As of 2015, online press places Gaga’s production amongst the most expensive concert tours ever created, including the shows of Madonna, Roger Waters, U2, and The Rolling Stones. The Born This Way Ball cost $2 million to create and $1 million per venue set-up (Drughi 2014; Erbar 2015).
as much of the vertical space of the stage as possible. With an immersive concept similar to Kylie Minogue’s Splash Zone for the Aphrodite Tour, The Born This Way Ball featured the Monster Pit, a trapezoid space consisted of the stage and its extended runways, the purpose of which was to bring the audience closer to the spectacle. The artist promoted the Monster Pit as the highlight of the show by establishing a contest-like convention according to which the person to arrive first in each played gig would be granted with the “Monster Pit Key,” a Gaga-modeled clef that supposedly unlocks the Pit space inside the arena (Mitchell 2012a). As with the previous tour, fans were also encouraged to dress up for the Ball in attire that now incorporated Gaga’s recently introduced looks, thus carrying on an established cosplay tradition. With a sturdy cult/camp following, the tour attests to an engaging experience for which Gaga attempts a breaking of the fourth wall by creating an interactive spectacle that extends well beyond the stage and nests into the audience. Forged with queer allusions and symbolic valences, the show transforms the arena into a space of acceptance wherein Gaga’s Little Monsters identify with the diva’s ethos of inclusivity and freedom of expression.

As a continuation of the performer’s Monster repertoire, the acts of The Born This Way Ball are heavily based on the genres of gothic and science fiction. However, Gaga upped the creative ante for this tour by mixing a space opera narrative with a medieval setting, resulting in an excessive and absurd use of the respective genres. In the show, Gaga appears as a persecuted renegade of an extraterrestrial colony, G.O.A.T., who fortifies herself in the Kingdom of Fame and seeks out for creative inspiration as a means of confronting her adversaries. Gaga first introduced the futuristic concept of G.O.A.T. in the video of “Born This Way” (2011), in which she was portrayed giving birth to the race of Little Monsters in outer space. Expectedly, birth-giving is central in the concert show as well. 

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183 See more on cosplay in the fifth chapter.
184 The abbreviation stands for Government Owned Alien Territory.
since its concept best highlights Gaga’s Mother Monster figure and her cosmogonic vision of a world freed from discrimination, bias, and prejudice, thus becoming an essential starting point of the staged narrative. What is important to underscore here is that it is almost impossible to distinguish between the acts of the show, although, depending on the brief instrumental interludes, they can roughly be estimated to five (encore included). Due to the sequential narrative and rapid change of props and costumes—sometimes serving as a second backstage space, the interior of the castle perfectly facilitates this motion of changes—the acts smoothly blend into one another, providing theatrical coherence. In terms of aesthetics, following the audiovisual palette of the album, Gaga presents her Gothic alien persona in outlandish costumes fashioned out of leather and latex couture with strong metallic tinges as expressive of her heavy metal and S/M affiliations.

*Born This Way Ball* exemplifies the hyperbole of camp not only with its over-the-top stage, but, importantly, because it sets this stage as a portal to an imagined queer world. Through its network of intertextual and polysemous acts, the show’s incorporation of fantastic elements figuratively and literally addresses a queer subjectivity. Once again, Gaga stages a storytelling spectacle with its performed moral pointing to a camp utopia. As Michael Bronski has argued. “[b]y making things not what they are, camp can also be camouflage to provide an outlet or protection” (43). For the writer, “[c]amp is a product of the imagination. On some level, it is a way to obtain power in one’s own life. On a deeper level, it is the ability to see beyond what is clearly evident; to grasp a reality beneath or totally separate from what is taught” (43). Gaga’s Kingdom of Fame and the accompanied Monster Pit stand for this flamboyantly configured reality that serves as an alternative—read queer—*topos*; in there, the embodied self with its conventionally gendered representations and sexual identities goes topsy-turvy. Establishing referential connections with sci-fi themes
of monstrous genesis, outer space, and alien life, the show plays up its narratives of Otherness, wherein queerness is welcomed as part of one’s biology, contrary to the centuries-old public perceptions of the queer self as deviant, repulsive, even alien. Here, the image of Mother Monster and her Little Monsters (in all their queer glory) populating both the stage and the space of the arena are the actual reification of Born This Way’s moral of acceptance and freedom of expression. The stage becomes a cosmic womb giving birth to androgynous figures with Gaga reenacting a birth-giving scene on a giant prop of legs in fishnet stockings for the performance of title-song “Born this Way.” The show allows for symbolic readings that connect the stage and the Monster Pit with the womb, thus undergirding the show’s narrative and aesthetic with mythological, even archetypal discourses. More importantly, the polysemy of the concepts highlights the show’s flexibility to accommodate queerness as a broadly understood mode of being. For instance, unlike Monster Ball’s New York, Born This Way Ball does not localize queer experience within the predictable spectrum of queer urbanity. Whereas in Monster Ball the genre of gothic was employed to propose New York’s Central Park as the quintessential subcultural topos, reiterating the popularly known image of the specific location as the Gay Gotham, in Born This Way Ball the politics of space are not so much culture-specific, but rather genre-related. In this way, the show manages to broaden the scope of queer appeal by playing with the open-endedness of its genres.

As the space of dramatic action, the Kingdom of Fame undoubtedly dominates the show. Being perhaps the most recognizable and indeed emblematic site of reference within the genres of gothic, romance, and fantasy, the castle, as an artistic formula here, draws from

185 It can as well be argued that Gaga toys with Jungian archetypes of motherhood, emulating the Terrible Mother that Jung identified with the dark qualities of destruction, seduction, and deviance—as exemplified by the mythological figures of Lilith and Kali, among others, who were associated with the underworld and the abyss (2003, 15-16). Cf. Four Archetypes: Mother, Rebirth, Spirit, Trickster ([1972], 2003) and The Collected Works of C.G. Jung: Volume 9, Part 1:Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious (1969).
its generic conventions and provides semiotic relevance to the staged narrative. As best articulated in romance and gothic fiction, the castle has traditionally been a literary convention that acquires signification through manifold purposes, serving both as a terrain of functionality whereupon narrative action unfolds as well as a symbolic locus wherein the fictional heroes explore psychological conflicts. More specifically, as regards Gaga’s invocation of monstrosity, according to Norman Holland and Leona Sherman, the castle represents the most distinctive gothic trope: “[it] is a nighttime house—it admits all we can imagine into it of the dark, frightening, and unknown” (282). Based on Freudian thought, the writers also assert that “the castle admits a variety of our projections. In particular, because it presents villains and dangers in an archaic language and mise-en-scène, it fits childish perceptions of adult threats” (282, italics in text). In addition, the space with its “midnight revelry, violence, battles, confusing noises and disturbance” may point to subconscious fears and fantasies of childhood, while, in Western cultures, its iconicity has more often than not been associated with “an idealized past epoch of social history (a nostalgia for romance, chivalry, Christian goodness, and divine order)” (282). Both aesthetically and symbolically, the Kingdom in The Born This Way Ball realizes the signifying power from its cultural archetype. Apart from its visual configuration, Gaga’s castle, powered by technology, is staged as a microcosm that remolds, converts, and illuminates itself, functioning thus as a living prop that can dramatically emphasize each performed act. Permeated with a Gaga aesthetic, its stored material is, of course, conceived of in surrealist fashion. Through its imagery, Gaga’s castle not only amplifies the artist’s play with fantasy, but, perhaps significantly, allows her to house her camp praxis in a decidedly symbolic environment.

Appositely, through the concept of the Kingdom, Gaga’s engaging with the subject matter of camp and, by extension, her politics of queer representation propose a staged
reality, which, precisely due to its gaudy and surrealist treatment of the gendered/sexual order, becomes consciously detached from normative molds. It can as well be argued that the show itself refuses to abide by the established conventions of the concert spectacle format, as its scenic construction and thematic composition prove. The *Born This Way Ball* tour is a deliberately faux concert, faux opera/musical, ultimately verifying its flexible comprehension of generic labeling; its queering of standardized perceptions is where the camp of Gaga resides. Indeed, the Kingdom is an anything-can-happen space: within the two-hour extravaganza, Gaga emerges out of a giant eggshell with ram horns on her head (in “Bad Romance”), becomes a tele-operated apparition (in “Bloody Mary”), and is forced down a meat grinder (in “Poker Face”). Toying with every idea of biologic essentialisms, Gaga wishes to celebrate a grotesque body by putting it through absurdist onstage tasks. While these acts attest to how Gaga employs the power of camp to challenge the very ontology of the human body, there is also an array of camp acts in *Born This Way Ball* that are queer-dictated in their evocation of a gender-spectral fantasia.

The opening act of the show calls upon the camp of a queer imaginary by means of fairytale symbolism. Gaga makes her dramatic entrance on the stage mounted on a mechanical unicorn and heading to the castle. The artist atop the robotic prop is being carried by two dancers in ritual-like motion along the runway circumference of the Monster Pit. Dancers following the procession hold futuristic machine guns and flags that read “G.O.A.T.” Dressed in elaborate metallic attire with a black veil that conceals her face and falls to oversized shoulder-pads giving the impression of wings, Gaga introduces her Gothic alien image and performs the opening song, “Highway Unicorn (Road to Love)” (2011). Taking
into account the popularity of equestrian themes in female-led acts.\textsuperscript{186} Gaga’s performance here adds to the tradition of the female performer within an equine imagery. The history of hippodrama, a fusion of circus spectacle and melodrama that established the onstage equestrian theme, attests to a male-dominated canon, as evident in popular productions of the nineteenth-century European and American stage, such as \textit{Michel Strogoff} (1880) and \textit{The Country Fair} (1889) \textsuperscript{(Benham 168; McArthur 20)};\textsuperscript{187} a notable exception to the male rule was the production of \textit{Mazeppa, or The Wild Horse of Tartary} (1910) in which actress Adah Isaacs Menken executing a notoriously risqué performance, riding naked on stage. \textsuperscript{(Banham 168)}. However, the image of the female horse-rider, as popularized by the English legend of Lady Godiva and arguably the physicality of Menken, have stood for a feminist symbol that effectively subverts male power. Performance historian Kim Marra argues that in late nineteenth-century American women of upper-class upbringing who started engaging in horse-riding eventually “mothered the turn-of-the-century generations of women who entered college and professions in large numbers, successfully advocated for suffrage, and, in the theatre world, gained unprecedented levels of respectability as well as stardom” \textsuperscript{(2014, 113)}.\textsuperscript{188} Elsewhere, Marra elaborates that the image of the equestrienne became a source of anxiety and desire for men, who were simultaneously threatened and aroused by the assertive female horse-rider \textsuperscript{(2012, 508)}. While it is evident that the feminist model of the equestrienne is also, unsurprisingly so, placed under the scrutiny of the scopophilic gaze,

\textsuperscript{186} Consider Madonna’s Equestrian segment in the \textit{Confessions Tour}, Kylie Minogue’s pommel horse performance in \textit{Homecoming} as well as her performing atop a golden Pegasus in \textit{Aphrodite Tour}; and, finally, Katy Perry’s Egyptian-themed performance of “Dark Horse” in her \textit{Prismatic World Tour} (2014-15).

\textsuperscript{187} Focusing on \textit{Mazeppa}, McArthur alternatively defines the spectacle of the hippodrama as “equestrian melodrama” (20).

\textsuperscript{188} Marra’s performance-lecture on “Horseback Views: A Queer Hippological Performance” is a noteworthy piece wherein the author stages a history of female equestrianism and connects it with her queer sexuality. Her essay on “Riding, Scarring, Knowling: A Queerly Embodied Performance Historiography” \textsuperscript{(2012)} revisits “Horseback Views,” extending on her experiences of trauma in conjunction with her lesbian identity and horse-rider status.
especially if one takes into consideration the emblematic nudity of Lady Godiva and the circulation of her eroticized image across popular culture corpora, the performance of Gaga powered by the surrealist praxis of camp resists any eroticization.

Gaga astride on the unicorn becomes a queer subject of fantastic embodiment. Her metallic costume and veil covering most of her body ultimately frustrate any enforced voyeuristic attempt. The artist clad as a Gothic alien overshadows her human form and tilts more to an animal-like figure. In addition, her conscious choice of playing with the mythology of the unicorn than that of any other type of horse brings thematic integrity to her stage. Similar to the consonance of the golden Pegasus with the Greco-Roman aesthetic of Kylie’s *Aphrodite Tour*, the mechanical unicorn here is best fit for the sci-fi and Medieval concepts of the *Born This Way Ball* tour. Gaga had already introduced the unicorn imagery in her video of “Born This Way,” placing it in conjunction with a pink triangle; both images are symbolically used by the LGBT+ community as signifiers of uniqueness and memory.189 Coupled with the lyrics of the performed song,190 Gaga’s opening marks the point of entrance into a fantasy world which is unapologetically queer. By establishing a camp tone from the very beginning, the introductory number in combination with the imposing castle perfectly demonstrate that the rest of the show not only eschews subtlety, but wishes to altogether leave normative reality behind.

As a matter of fact, this imagined reality deals with corporeal subjectivity and the gendered self in quite outrageous ways. The artist’s camp Kingdom envisions corporeality in

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189 Both the unicorn and the pink triangle abound in the tradition of Pride parades. The unicorn’s elusive and benevolent nature is metonymic of a queer utopia. More tangibly, the pink triangle which had been used in Nazi concentration camps to mark suspects of homosexuality has been reclaimed by LGBT+ communities (Plant 1988).

190 The lyrics illustrate Gaga riding her unicorn in the open road: “Ride, ride with her top down, baby, she flies,””She’s just an American riding a dream”; and the chorus: “We can be strong, we can be strong/Out on this lonely ride/ On the road to love.”
fluidity by celebrating a play of transformation(s). The body of Gaga, as the central body of
the spectacle, is a shape-shifting body that ignores traditional markers of identity, be it
gender, sex, ethnicity or race. She glides through identity modifiers, inhabiting thus
multifarious subject positions. Those positions that are energized by camp, though, do not
simply imagine a body beyond gender or ethnicity or race, for that matter. On the contrary,
such markers are deliberately inflated and their fluidity streams out of an excessive
theatricality. The proposed body of camp is manifestly gendered, molded out of feminine
constituents/attributes. In a reversal of normative reality, camp does not envision gender
inscribed upon the body, but rather designates a body to a fantastic gender, a gender of
histrionic analogies whereupon the body flexes into shape. Progressive as it is to think about
camp’s plastic/morphing potential, it does have to be reiterated here that this histrionic
treatment of gender relies on the social history of the marker and what is a conventional
given, namely those attributes that (have) come to constitute the notion of femininity as
tantamount to femaleness and its socio-cultural variants. The camp body and, by extension,
the camp reading of a body transcends traditional notions of corporeality and promotes what
is allegedly a pumped-up, parodic view.

Under this premise, the camp body of Gaga may seem to abandon corporeal reality
when experimenting with bodily transformations, but, in fact, opts for one where the body is
still gendered, or otherwise marked, yet absurdly so. Consider here the artist’s animatronic
transfiguration into Mother G.O.A.T. As soon as the introductory number of “Highway
Unicorn” concludes and Gaga enters backstage, the castle opens up to reveal its interior
spaces. An illuminated prism with a facial replica hovers above the main stage. The
prismatic visage soon transforms into a corrupted form of Gaga’s face, carrying monstrous
features; with prosthetic horns, Gaga’s face is a self-referential nod to Mother G.O.A.T., the
evil persona she introduced for the music video of “Born This Way.” With Mother G.O.A.T. alluding to pagan and occult horned deities, Gaga once again draws from and queers up mythological imagery as a means of maintaining thematic coherence of the show’s narrative arc. For the duration of the concert show, the prism of Mother G.O.A.T. serves as the narrator as well as Gaga’s antagonist and occasionally appears between acts to propel the musical narrative. Eventually, in the performance of “Paparazzi” toward the end of the show, Gaga once again uses her disco stick and kills Mother G.O.A.T. The simulacrum speaks in a dramatically slow and ominous manner and her English bears a strong French accent. Her transcendence of bodily form, however, does not signify the erasure of her gender: her prototype is Gaga; her communicative ability is vocalized by Gaga (in the form of pre-recorded material) whose voice is already familiar to the public; and, ultimately, her identification as Mother inevitably delineates her female sex. The artist could altogether dismantle the traditional sex/gender correlation here, since the disembodied form of Mother G.O.A.T. allows such creative opportunity. She maintains the correlation, though, but she manages to camp up the performance of femininity through the dramatic gimmick. In addition, her invocation of an ethnic Other, here the French Other, not only sharpens the dichotomy between a friendly Gaga and the G.O.A.T. adversary, but importantly, relies on the stereotype of a feminized French culture and the stylistic connection of the language with camp aesthetics. The staging of Mother G.O.A.T. as an otherworldly creature is thus

191 From the American perspective, the viewing of French culture as a feminine one has been a prevalent stereotype. According to Todd Reeser, “US culture has coded French culture as effeminate in its imaginary, in part because French masculinity is regarded as effeminate, as a way to masculinize itself by opposition” (183). “Such codings, however,” Reeser suggests, “often imply the imposition of one nation’s definition of masculinity onto another where it may not apply. An American may view French masculinity as effeminate because of, among other traits, its attention to clothing when, in a French context, an emphasis on dress is considered a culturally sanctioned form of masculinity and not necessarily effeminate” (183). In terms of discourse, Booth draws the connection between camp and the literary style of préciosité, mainly identified with Molière’s Les Précieuses Ridicules (1660). Booth argues that “[u]nderstanding préciosité in terms of a comedy, we are perhaps apt to forget that it was partly a serious-minded movement concerned to refine and
heavily modeled out of distinct human and cultural markers but is effectively campified by means of parodic exoticization.

The simulacrum indeed invites a posthumanist reading with regard to Gaga’s treatment of a disunified and digitized body. Nevertheless, the posthuman body does not necessarily preclude gendered or racial or even ethnic embodiedness. As Sherryl Vint argues, “[t]he human body, like the human subject, is a product of both culture and nature. Both body and subject must maintain a sense of natural and stable boundaries by continually marking out the distance between what is self and what is not” (17). For Gaga, to play with the notion of futurism, both in terms of spectacle and social critique, is to involve her body in the process despite the seemingly radical modifications of it. Camp also cannot and should not be ignored from any discussion on the artist’s over-the-top shtick. As was the case with Beyoncé’s embodiment of the fembot in the performance of “Diva” for the I Am… World Tour (see third chapter), here too Gaga imagines a grotesque, albeit still feminized replica of herself, though one that is monstrously configured and, being a Mother, potentially threatening because of its reproductive ability. Her performance as Mother G.O.A.T. demonstrates that the praxis of camp, due to its performative utilization of gender, cannot in any sense omit corporeal expression; for camp, the body becomes the stage upon which gender is dramatically acted out. It is essential that the prismatic Mother G.O.A.T. retains.

to clarify the French language. Some of its more extreme refinements and ‘clarifications’ may now seem silly and affected, but we should be wary of calling them camp on that account” (73, italics in text). The writer adds that “French critics make a useful distinction between mainstream préciosité and coquetterie, the latter being the fun-loving and irreverent aspect of préciosité that required poets to exercise their ingenuity in writing elegant banter to amuse salon guest… This sort of good-humoured commitment to the marginal migh justifiably be called camp” (73, italics in text). “To be precious, then,” Booth concludes, “is not the same as to be camp—but there is a vein of camp behaviour that is precious and is characterised by a humorous fastidiousness and mock-feminine hypochondria” (73).

In her critique on technology and subjectivity, Vint supports that “we need an embodied notion of posthumanism if we are to return ethical responsibility and collectivity to our concept of the self. The body occupies the liminal space between self and not-self, between nature and culture, between the inner ‘authentic’ person and social persona” (16). Even in discussions on the real self and the persona, which upon this division is instantly drawn as phantasmic, the notion of corporeality is not to be factored out.
some sort of corporeal signification. Of equal importance here is the contribution of technology for Gaga’s stage which is fundamental for the materialization of such intricate concepts. It only makes sense that the incorporation of elaborate mechanics can only amplify the performing potential of the show and the artist’s delivery while, interestingly enough, it effectively plays up the camp factor through the surplus of extravagant contrivances employed.

Undoubtedly, technology is a driving force behind the spectacle of *Born This Way Ball*. Gaga’s performance, in fact, relies on it both practically and aesthetically. The utilization of technology, as a matter of fact, provides alternative approaches to viewing and staging the body, adapting it to the dictates of the fantastic setting. Envisioning therefore a digitized corporeality calls upon the aesthetic power of technology to intervene and creatively remodel the body. The performance of Mother G.O.A.T. epitomizes the compartmentalization and digitization of the body as crafted out of a gothic and sci-fi fantasy. Acts usually vary in contextualizing the technological body, affirming thus both the plurality of it as well as Gaga’s imaginative concepts toward embracing fluidity. For instance, the performance of “Heavy Metal Lover” invites the aesthetics of technology to imagine a hybrid form, a mechanical body. This particular act sees Gaga transforming into a motorbike: by fusing her body with a tricycle prop, the artist recreates on the live stage the artwork from the cover of the *Born This Way* album. With the song Gaga addresses her sexual indulgence into the culture of heavy metal and pays homage to the underground scene of New York. For the dramatization of the song, a leather-clad female dancer rides the

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194 The song’s risqué lyrics graphically describe Gaga’s sexual explorations of the scene: “I want your whiskey mouth all over my blonde south”/“Tonight bring your friends because a group does it better/ Why river with a pair? Let’s have a full house of leather.” Her illustration of the New York scene includes references to local rock group Dirty Pearls and the Rivington Street bars.
Gaga-bike while performing erotic activities on it. The simulated intercourse between the dancer and Gaga here foregrounds the praxis of lesbian sex, simultaneously invoking the queer biker scene, wherein bikers, both female and male, act out a butch aesthetic as an appropriation of an allegedly masculine—read heterosexual male—culture. At the same time, the female rider making love to Gaga’s mechanized body constitutes a fetishistic approach to the materiality of the biker cult and, by extension, to its accruing power dynamic. Simultaneously glamorizing the queer scene and camping up the machismo of the biker image, “Heavy Metal Lover” introduces Gaga’s part-human/part-machine body as a sexually charged site upon which the erotics of queerness is enacted.

Both the performance of Mother G.O.A.T. and “Heavy Metal Lover” explore by means of technology the power of camp to play with the theatrics of the gendered body. Steve Dixon corroborates that “[p]erformances by the proponents of flesh and metal symbiosis can be sited frequently within the aesthetics of camp by virtue of their theatrical and computational codes of high-artifice and excess, and through their celebration of ‘monstrous’ transgression” (22). Undertaking analyses of performance art works by artists such as Guillermo Gómez-Peña, Stelarc, and Momoyo Torimitsu, and within the frame of what he identifies as metal performances—best exemplified in cyborgian narratives, robotic concepts, and portrayals of the mechanized body—the writer proposes the term “metallic camp,” a performance-specific ideological and aesthetic play of camp with the abovementioned themes, wherein “metallic” bears denotations with regard to physical substance, as well as connotations of loudness, aggressiveness, and resistance (15-16). As best explanatory for the stage and acts of Gaga here, the concept of metallic camp is an apt motif that expands and elaborates on camp’s specific treatment of the technologically configured reality and the gendered body within it. “Metal performances,” Dixon concludes,
“exalt in the conjunction of the hard and the soft; the natural and the technological; the metal and the meat,” fusing purely contrastive material to underscore ironies inherent in the antithesis, in analogy to camp’s conjugation of the serious and the parodic (40). Gaga’s spectacle of the techno-body grounds this fusion of dichotomies: her exposed derriere on the tricycle prop versus her metallic limbs fused with the bike’s façade, namely the natural versus the artificial; the fetish with the physical versus the fetish with the material; and perhaps most importantly, the human versus the Other.

Arguably, the imagery of metallic camp appears inextricable with the overall camp panorama of the *Born This Way Ball* stage. The show advocates for a plural body, one that acquires critical potential through each new signification. Mostly risqué in nature, Gaga’s camp body veers from ambiguity to assertiveness, to pornography and theatricality, to exoticization and rebelliousness. For instance, the camp juxtaposition of the mechanical with the natural body simultaneously repelled and invited eroticization in each respective act, without thus clinging to either/or positions. As per Haraway’s manifesto, wherein it is established that Western cultures are permeated with corporeal and mental dualities that the high-tech culture has eventually challenged (177), Gaga’s cyborgian body, simultaneously too physical and too metallic, wishes to transgress binaries, which is what ultimately marks its queerness: a body that stands for potent camp irony, successfully merging political valence with playfulness and femme posture with robotic performance.

In what can be legitimately defined as the highlight of the show, the segment with the performances of “Americano,” “Poker Face” and “Alejandro”—henceforth referred to as the Meat segment—epitomizes the said irony of Gaga’s camp body. Precisely due to its staged critique, but also because it is carefully placed toward the end of the show’s setlist after an
intimate piano medley, the Meat segment functions as an amalgam of Gaga’s most recognizable high-energy pop tunes with ethnic and queer vibrancies. Introducing the Meat act is a Spanish guitar solo for which a simulated wedding ceremony takes place: the bride’s face is fully covered with a thick veil and when the bridegroom tries to lift it, he seems appalled. The bridal couple reenacts a melodramatic conflict as Gaga enters the main stage to perform “Americano.” Wearing a variation of her infamous meat dress, the artist exits the castle suspended alongside hanged meat carcasses, while her chorus of female dancers appears similarly dressed. Shortly after, the artist’s crew of male dancers enters in military attire, carrying machine guns and acting violently against the female crew. Gaga’s main role here is to stand as a performing narrator while occasionally joining the female chorus. In the meanwhile, the bride has left the stage and the bridegroom joins the male chorus in their brutal acts. For the staged narrative of the song, the female dancers skillfully strip the military crew off their arms and turn them against them, chasing them off the stage. The dramatic finale of “Americano” sees the bride returning onstage with a machine gun; having her veil lifted, she reveals her male identity and vengefully shoots the bridegroom dead.

“Americano” explores the dramaturgy of camp in assaulting patriarchal power. Bearing strong feminist undertones, the performance benefits from generic melodrama in its reversal of power dynamic and instills agency into the female/feminine subjectivities in a deliberately simplistic way. At the same time, the theatrics of drag are utilized in the manifestation of a camped-up performance of gender through the shock value. In particular, the striptease act in a traditional drag show culminates with the revelation of the performer’s male identity. By setting up a female illusion and subsequently letting it collapse before the audience, the revelation of the “man” behind the drag as the effet de surprise cuts across any

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295 All of Gaga’s concerts feature a piano-based segment where the artist tones down the rhythmic choreographies and theatrical acts in favor of a ballad and/or acoustic repertoire.
gendered stabilizations.\textsuperscript{196} Here, although the stripping act is limited in the lifting of the veil, it does qualify as a critical surprise ending, especially when put in the context of homophobic and sexist abuse as presented onstage. Importantly, “Americano” bears potent queer resonances in its narration of a lesbian love story developing in the barrios of Los Angeles. \textit{Rolling Stone}’s Jody Rosen identified the song, “[a] disco-fied showtune with a pronounced ‘Latin’-flavor, complete with flamenco guitars and castanets,” as “the campiest song Gaga’s recorded yet” (2011). “Americano’s” generic mixture of techno with musical theater lyricism and mariachi sounds exemplifies a markedly stylized and joyful pop text that is simultaneously carved with political nuances in its takes on gay marriage and immigration law. As a continuation of \textit{The Fame Monster} tradition, the \textit{Born This Way} track follows the conceptual camp of the previous era’s “Alejandro,” encompassing a Latin melodrama with bilingual stylizations and Gaga at the epicenter of a queer romance.\textsuperscript{197}

Nevertheless, contextualizing “Americano” in the Meat segment as the introductory act inevitably strikes one as bizarre. Considering the thematic coherence of previous performances, including “Highway Unicorn” and “Heavy Metal Lover,” a Latin-inspired wedding ceremony with a meatpacking imagery amid the Medieval castle seems incongruous, to say the least. While the staging of “Americano” could perfectly stand outside the \textit{Born This Way} aesthetic, its incorporation into the show’s concept is rather challenging for the audience who might struggle to establish any sort of connection between Gaga’s futuristic

\textsuperscript{196} In her ethnography of the American drag subculture, Esther Newton argues that “[t]he trick in stripping is to look and move as much like a ‘real’ stripper as possible and create the same erotic effects on the audience, to sustain the illusion of ‘reality’ down to the bra and g-string, and then, as a climax, to ‘pull’ (slip off) the bra, revealing a perfectly flat chest. Since gay audiences know for a certainty that the drag queen has a flat chest, strip is more often seen in the straight shows” (45).

\textsuperscript{197} Closely related with the performed scenes in a musical theater piece, “Americano’s” songtext is vivid in its illustration of the Latina romance and the queer imaginary: “I met a girl in east LA/ With floral shorts as sweet as May/ She sang in eights in two Barrio chords/ We fell in love, but not in court”; “In the mountains, las campanas están sonando/ Todos chicos (chicas) y los chicos (chicas) están besando” (which translates: “In the mountains, the bells are ringing/ All the boys (the girls) and the boys (the girls) are kissing”).
transformations and the act’s carnal vicissitudes. On top of that, the follow-up performance of “Poker Face,” although thematically attached to “Americano,” seems to perpetuate the ambiguity of the overall segment. Before commencing with “Poker Face,” Gaga performs a musical monologue in which she states: “In 1978, Larry Flint declared that women will no longer be treated as meat on the cover of *Hustler* magazine, but in *The Born This Way Ball*, meat is precisely how we treat them.” In the meanwhile two of her military-clad dancers coquet with her and strip her dress into a meat bikini. Ultimately, the performance of “Poker Face” is delivered by Gaga submerged in a meat-grinder prop. The act culminates with the male dancers forcing a bottomed-up Gaga down the grinder. “Alejandro” eventually rounds off the Meat segment and sees the male crew engaging in homoerotic activities, while Gaga re-emerges positioned on a meat couch, wearing military attire and having two machine guns attached to her bra as extensions of her breasts. In a yet another self-referential act, the artist here evokes the queer imagery as well as her gun-bra costume from the “Alejandro” video.

Although one could argue that the exposition of the meat metaphor in the overall segment provides fertile soil for a politically charged performance, it ends up being incongruous when juxtaposed with the show’s conceptual integrity. However, it is this incongruity as firmly based on the poetics of camp that best foregrounds Gaga’s stage as a moral battleground. The artist’s showcase binds together the dramatics of camp with performance art, a curious mixture of playfulness, surrealism and political edge. In exploring the denotations and connotation of meat onstage, Gaga’s acts draw from the work of performance artists such as Marina Abramovic and Carolee Schneemann. The former’s *Balkan Baroque* (1997) addressed issues of memory, pain and loss caused by the Yugoslav Wars; Abramovic would be seated on a pile of cattle meat, rinsing the animal bones and singing folk dirges as an intra-cultural homage to those sacrificed during the war.
period. The latter’s *Meat Joy* (1964), which Gaga’s segment is more akin to, envisions an orgiastic performance where female nudity and sexuality are brought center stage in order to challenge patriarchal perceptions of the female body; with an affinity to Dionysian rituals, the performance revels in the rawness of the meat and its various forms, simultaneously becoming emotionally and politically charged. By equating the meat with the human, the body art of Abramovic and Schneemann wishes to underline not only the materiality of the flesh and its exposed vulnerability to the scrutinizing gaze, but also its feminist assertiveness to function as a celebratory corpus that survives and transcends narratives of violence and sexism. The Meat segment of *Born This Way Ball*, which musically and theatrically expanded on Gaga’s MTV meat dress shtick, aligns the artist with the ethnic and intergenerational legacy of *Balkan Baroque* and *Meat Joy* by dramatizing an ironic performance that collaboratively houses the visceral effect of the meat with the political edge of queerness.

Unlike Abramovic’s and Schneemann’s projects that rely on the critical valence of their performance art to explore the meat concept, Gaga chooses camp as her performative device, thereby instilling into the seriousness of her subject matter the kitsch of the genres of musical and melodrama. The Meat segment is a multivalent act that raises questions on the—American—politics of gender, sexuality, and ethnicity, and addresses them with camp irony. The juxtaposed dynamics of power, i.e. vulnerability and oppression, is absurdly magnified. In the framework of metallic camp, the collision of elements—namely those positions of gender and ethnicity behind the antithetical allusions of the meat and the machine guns or, simply, Gaga’s flesh in the giant grinder—reifies the artist’s camp aesthet(h)ics: that is, the delivery of a moral story whose political gravity, merging reality and spectacle, is amplified by stylized irony and extravagant theatrics. Here, Gaga vacillates between positions of power
and identification: she is simultaneously a Chicana lesbian for “Americano”; a piece of meat in the grinder for “Poker Face”; and an armed combatant femme in “Alejandro.” Not only does camp motorize this vacillation, but, importantly, contextualizes it into the overarching concept of the Born This Way era to move against traditional archetypes of identity and opt for a vision of gender as role play. Thus, the specific medley may seem to deviate from the narrative structure of the show, yet it remains steadfast to the ethos of the plural self embraced by Gaga onstage. After all, the fact that the artist’s stage consciously supports a surrealist approach of the self that is simultaneously backed by conventions of the fantastic proposes camp incongruity as the show’s raison d’être.

**Free Bitch, Baby: Queer Youth and the Politics of Childishness**

Arguably, the thematic narrative and conceptual staging of Born This Way Ball was effective in challenging traditional views on gender and sexuality. As a matter of fact, the show upped the ante of what Gaga had already set in motion throughout her previous years of performing and touring. Taking into consideration the global outreach the tour had in promoting its radical staging and theatrics, it cannot be dismissed that its identity politics would impact differently across its diverse and idiosyncratic audiences. The queer material as well as the risqué subject matter of the Born This Way Ball performances stood as rather challenging for the conservative spectrum of Gaga’s international itinerary. As was the case with Madonna’s MDNA Tour, which was met with backlash in Russia because of an allegedly explicit homosexual agenda, Gaga’s tour similarly met with resistance for its overtly homosexual and pornographic content. More specifically, the tour’s stop in Jakarta’s Gelora Bung Karno Stadium had to be cancelled due to harsh criticism and threats extended to the artist by Islamic groups in Indonesia (Prendergast 2012). In particular, what was
targeted were her “provocative choreography and support for gay rights” with conservative and religious authorities proclaiming the artist as “a devil’s messenger” and “the destroyer of morals” (Prendergast 2012). In the same vein, earlier on, preceding the tour’s grand opening in Seoul were protests from South Korean Christian groups against Gaga’s subject matter which was deemed as “obscene” (Mitchell 2012a). This bias against the yet-to-be-revealed show was grounded in the premise that Gaga’s persona and overall attitude would have an immoral impact on the young audiences attending her performance (Mitchell 2012a). As a result, the production team, settling between the protesters’ request and not cancelling the concert, decided to rate the show as an event for adult audiences only.

Lady Gaga has time and again employed pornographic shticks as a means of marketing her persona and, of course, many a time capitalized on her appreciation by her queer audiences. At the same time, however, she has been an ardent promoter of free sexual expression and retained the queer core of her work strong. What is important to underline here is that her revolutionary promotion of gender fluidity and the theatricalized identity has been embraced by her queer fanbase. The conservative allegations impinged upon Gaga’s promotion of homosexuality indeed express not only a concern over homosexuality as social behavior and sexual practice, with all the connotations and specificities that are culturally inscribed upon these terms, but also a deeper fear that exposure to a seemingly homosexual lifestyle, culture, or discourse might negatively influence those exposed. To be more specific, in the abovementioned cases of the Seoul and Jakarta performances, this “negative influence” stands for a perception of an inherently abnormal homosexuality with the contagious potential to dissolve heteronormative structures. It is legitimate that this perception of a tainting homosexuality, when viewed in the broader context of globalized interrelations, is simultaneously linked with the notion of a libertine Western culture whose championing of a
liberal politics of gender and sexuality could not possibly gear with the cross-culturally varied non-Western identity models. What is more, in both incidents and especially the latter, “those exposed” had been equated with adolescent audiences. By placing these audiences on the pedestal, conservative groups targeting Gaga wished to highlight the vulnerability of the youth exposed to Gaga’s corrupting spectacle. What is presented to be at stake here is the development of a youth that deviates from the established social morals and cultural norms; hence, the vision of a future generation which is homogeneous in accordance to the dictates of heterodominant culture.

Always connoting an optimistic socio-political future, youth is bound to be protected and preserved for the sake of a Utopian reality that is yet to come. When the prescribed ethos of the youth is jeopardized and, therefore, the vision of the future is automatically seen as unstable, if ominous, the need to police the youth and the cultural input they receive becomes imperative. Historically, according to Michael Nevin Willard, “‘youth’ have been located within a logic of moral reform,” being contained in safe spaces due to the common assumption that “if left unsupervised, youth will become immoral or delinquent” (470). Inextricably bound to that, however, is the notion of youth as dynamic producers of culture(s) whose creative power comes with the need to harness it. In commercial terms, youth culture lies at the epicenter of market interest not only because of their ability to generate, circulate, and digest lifestyle and trends with considerable velocity, especially in the social media era, but also due to the catalytic intermediateness of their age in the formulation of core tastes and sensibilities that are based on social, cultural, and political stimuli they receive from their milieu. Willard speaks of a change in the status of youth:

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198 Willard’s essay focuses on the culture of skateboarding and its spatial history within the urban context. The writer uses spatial containment literally—youth in enclosed spaces versus those skateboarding in the openness of the city—and metaphorically, as is the case with my argument, to theoretically draw on containment and social behavior.
from a life stage to be contained and protected… to one where coming of age matters much less because youth already engage in labor that, in addition to producing subcultural values, is already a highly sophisticated form of techno-scientific, information management, and value-producing labor within the global information economy. (471)

To incorporate youth in the processes of labor production and culture-making is to instill agency in their supervised status of adolescence, an agency that is inevitably gauged by means of capital, especially when youth consumption is equated with investment and target markets. What the constructive strand of culture-making points to is a status of youth as makers and consumers of ideas and morals.

Under this premise and to return to Lady Gaga, the challenge her concert and image brought upon the host cities of Seoul and Jakarta demonstrate that the youth’s buying power of an allegedly queer culture might altogether prove fatal for conservative morals. Even though Gaga’s radicalness is a meticulously staged performance and her impact rather a playful projection of a truly queer culture, it still manages to contest established rigid norms regarding gender and sexuality. The queerness of Gaga’s stage and the political reaction this triggered with regard to its corruptive potential of young audiences is indeed a thrash against patriarchal standards and reproductive futurism. As Lee Edelman put it in his astute and rather controversial critique of the heteronormative culture, reproductive futurism “impose[s] an ideological limit on political discourse as such, preserving in the process the absolute privilege of heteronormativity by rendering unthinkable, by casting outside the political domain, the possibility of a queer resistance to this organizing principle communal relations” (3). In his work, Edelman argues on how the quintessential image of the Child is chastised and upheld in social and political discourse, since it stands for the vision of the hopeful
future and is in fact the *sine qua non* future which humanity is vowed to protect. For the writer, the Child has always been the pinnacle of reproductive heterosexuality and is in fact a fantasy that is culturally and historically perpetuated. Not only has the Child come “to embody for us the telos of the social order and come to be seen as the one for whom that order is held in perpetual trust” (11), but also “[it] marks the fetishistic fixation of heteronormativity: an erotically charged investment in the rigid sameness of identity that is central to the compulsory narrative of reproductive futurism” (20). Edelman proposes that queerness and specifically the non-reproductivity of queer sex functions as a catalyst, a rupture for the reproductive scheme sanctified by heteronormative discourse (17). Drawing from Lacanian theory, the writer ultimately links queerness with the death drive: “queerness embodies this death drive, this intransigent jouissance, by figuring sexuality’s implication in the *senseless* pulsions of that drive” (27, my italics).

While Edelman’s critique may come across as radical, the idea of a queer rupture of heteronormative ideology by means of ecstasy, as this is commended via the instinctual drives of death and sex, is relatable here and resonates within the performed ethics of Lady Gaga. The camp character of her oeuvre coupled with the absurdist nuances of her persona indeed proposes a rupture of the commonsensical evaluation of gender and sexuality. The artist’s extravagant realities, as proposed throughout this chapter, embody a break from the conventional, a transcendence from the (hetero)norm to the surreal, to the GaGa. The promoted notion of creative expression that allows her to play with and distort the gender binary and, by extension, any category of identity is that exact moment of freedom that Tristan Tzara imagined in his abstract theorization of Dada, as described in the epigraph. The message Gaga conveys to her audience, especially to the queer spectrum of it, is this moment of abandoning the sensible and surrendering to the senseless, which is not exactly the joy
derived from the spectacle or the experience of concert-going, but rather the *jouissance* that Edelman sees in imagining identity as a no-future, a dynamic queer-driven force that exists in the moment, outside the frame of provision. Indeed, Gaga’s queer affinities endorse a fanbase and youth culture that celebrates the breaking of identity barriers and the temporary formation of a deeply democratic kinship. In other words, Gaga’s spectacular politics celebrate community-making as an act that relies on a collective consciousness whose notion of identity spills over or even leaps beyond the boundaries of conventional categorization. As Gaga takes pride in calling herself a “free bitch,”<sup>199</sup> we witness at once an erotically charged status with the transgressive potential to channel this sexual energy toward a liberated sense of self. In this light, it would be interesting to see how Gaga embodies and communicates the rapture/rupture of this status to her audiences especially through the poetics of camp.

Gaga’s performative agenda after the monstrous era of *The Fame Monster* and *Born This Way* saw her return to her retro-futuristic aesthetics rooted in her debut album, *The Fame*. Evidently, the 2013 *ARTPOP* album appeared to deviate from the canvas of *Born This Way* and titled more to the aesthetics of *The Fame* in terms of image and stage performance; interestingly, *The Fame* seemed more akin to *ARTPOP* rather than to its *Monster* extension. What both *The Fame* and *ARTPOP* promoted was a self-referential image of Gaga whose Warholian treatment of celebrity invoked a sense of identity that revels in its own plasticity. Abiding by the postmodern ethics of pop art, the albums uphold the idea of the fragmented self as well as the preeminence of the copy over the original. Most importantly, the notion of futility is central here: what indeed pervades the discourses of both celebrity and pop is this idea of the exhaustible and replaceable text and/or persona contextualized within the rapid interchangeability of marketable trends and recyclable fashions. *The Fame*, for instance, was

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<sup>199</sup> Both “Bad Romance” and “Dance in the Dark” feature a variation of the lyrics “I’m a free bitch, baby.”
indicative of a Bowie-meets-Warhol project that was unapologetically derivative of the pop art movement and was permeated by the discourses of fame and sex in its entirety. With its nightclub-made anthems, the album celebrated the self-absorbed consumption and façade of celebrity lifestyle, presenting Gaga as a superficial and utterly futile persona that served as a heavily advertised, transitory pop act, a true Warhol(ian) superstar soon to be exhausted. In the same vein, ARTPOP, deemed by Gaga as “a reverse Warholian enterprise,” played with corpora of world art and carefully placed them under Gaga’s ultra-pop microscope. The project also cited references from the 1990s rave psychedelia as well as from the Dada and Expressionism movements, particularly from their post-1960s resurgence, as expressed in the performance art of Yoko Ono and Marina Abramović.

In Gaga’s Fame and ARTPOP performances, futility cannot help but be connected with the idea of temporariness, while postmodern citation indicates a glorification of the remodeling of past corpora brought into the present. The poetics of camp are critical here in foregrounding superficiality and artifice as two important driving forces in the conceptualization of a vain selfhood. Gaga’s pop art projects are attracted to the past and are built for the present; their relation to the notion of futurity is limited in their play with futurism which, again, in a postmodern manner, is energized via a retro aesthetic. As with Edelman’s queer rupture of reproductive futurism, Gaga’s camp corpus, toying with the idea of temporality, proposes the here-and-now of performance, be it the actual stage show or the performativity of identity. Role-playing, as this is employed through camp, points to the idea of experimenting with the social self as a farce, a nonsensical comedic/dramatic treatment of situations, images, and identities. Camp’s comeditization/dramatization of reality and

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200 For the promotion of ARTPOP in 2013, the artist opted for reverse psychology marketing, according to which she would announce in the album’s commercial trailer that “[Lady Gaga] is over” and “no longer relevant” (Thorpe 2013). Influenced from Warhol’s work to render pop as art, Gaga announced that she would “bring art culture into pop in a reverse Warholian expedition” (Thorpe 2013).
idea of not taking oneself seriously oppose conventional expectations of the social self that it evolves and grows mature, in a conceptual framework that imagines and perhaps requires some sort of progressive linearity. In the context of a gendered reality, traditional gendering similarly requires from the social self not only to abide by the strict dichotomy of the gendered standards—boys or girls—but also to develop in accordance with the future expectations of these standards—boys to men, girls to women. In light of this, camp’s decided queer play rejects seriousness and serves as an absurd break in the sequence of established gendered identities.

Gaga’s camping up of gender, which, as has been made evident here, is energized by pop culture trivia and queer practices, upsets the alleged progressive linearity through its farcical poetics. Consider, for instance, Gaga’s performance as Candy Warhol for The Fame Ball Tour. Inspired by Warhol’s transgender muse Candy Darling, Gaga filmed a series of vignettes featuring her Candy persona that served as visual interludes for the show. In them, the artist appears in an interrogation scene reminiscent of the interview scene for the finale of Warhol’s Women in Revolt movie (1971), starring Darling. Initially, Gaga’s image and posture resembles Andy Warhol while she introduces herself as “Lady Gaga”; as the vignettes unfold, Gaga is presented in her signature hair bow and has her face covered with sheer leggings. Her slow, almost robotic-like manner of speech indicates a challenged stream of consciousness in her tone as she narrates, in repetitive motion, to the man who interrogates her how “pop ate [her] heart” and how she craves for the fame. In other shots, the artist casually brushes her hair in front of the mirror, appears with pink blood-like stain on her shirt holding a yellow plastic gun, and has her pantyhose-covered face applied with lipstick by her

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201 The three vignettes, entitled “The Heart,” “The Brain” and “The Face,” are home-made art films that were first showcased during The Pussycat Dolls’ Doll Domination Tour (2009) where Lady Gaga served as the opening act. Also known as Crevette Films, Gaga named the series after crevettes (shrimps in French), claiming that “shrimps are small, but decadent and tasty, which is how I think my films should be.” (Barton 2009).
interrogator. For the last scene, the man asks her: “What did Pop say?” and she replies that “He needed a new face.” Ascribing Pop with a male pronoun here makes an interesting, yet ambiguous statement: “He” capitalized foregrounds an authorial or revered figure as in papa (father) or even Pope, which by Gaga standards at the time, it could as well refer to Warhol and his esteemed status in the pop world. Following that, the interrogator asks her to introduce herself to the world and she says “Candy Warhol,” but when the man corrects her and asks of her real name, she responds in an oblique manner, saying she does not understand the question.

Representative of the artist’s Fame phase, the short clips bear a colorful aesthetic and, when put together, they present a small narrative of the Candy persona. While the clips were used as interludes between acts, the songs comprising each act were not always fixed. The Fame Ball, being Gaga’s debut solo tour, was rather a collage project whose pieces could as well be compartmentalized and reassembled. Therefore, the videos did not necessarily introduce a new concept for every new act, but rather bound the show together in what appeared to be a pop-music-fashion showcase. As a result, the structural theme of the show verified its pop-art lineage and, in it, Gaga starred as the new face of Pop. Importantly, as is indicated in the videos, the artist identifies Pop with the male pronoun—as in the phrase “Pop ate my heart… He downed the whole thing in one efficient gulp.” Conversely, her persona vacillates between feminine/effeminate identifications, either resembling Andy Warhol or performing as the faceless Candy Darling with the blond wig and the red lipstick. By employing a camp approach of her persona, Gaga manages to unsettle the conventional

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202 While one could argue that technically the setlist begins with “Paparazzi” and concludes with “Poker Face,” the in-between arrangement of the songs, even those seemingly standard slots after the interlude videos, could occasionally be subjected to changes. This can be explanatory of the show’s smaller scale production which titled toward a small club-like gig show as compared to Gaga’s future arena enterprises, and, thus, allowed flexibility.
orders of logic and age. Her covered face effectively eliminates any accurate time framing of her persona: she embodies the past through Warhol and heralds the future in being the new face of the showbiz industry; simultaneously, she brings these visual accounts into the present setting of the show. In addition to that, her ultra-feminine persona is carefully juxtaposed with the male figures of the interrogator and that of Pop, while her proclamation that she has lost her heart and brains perpetuates the stereotype of the blonde celebrity bimbo.

In finding artistic lineage with the ethos of pop art and the queer affiliations established in and around the Warholian collective, Gaga’s pop camp here underlines the constructedness behind the artistic persona who consciously embraces imitation and derivativeness as critical devices for her camped-up performance.203

Akin to the concept of Candy Darling for *The Fame Ball*, *The ARTPOP Ball* explored the absurdist nature of Gaga’s pop art. While deviating from the dark concepts of the two previous tours, *The ARTPOP Ball* saw the artist returning to her bubblegum pop roots as first presented in her debut tour. As opposed to the collage aesthetic of *The Fame Ball*, the 2014 tour displayed coherence in its thematic segments. Strongly influenced by the European and Japanese EDM scenes, the show was conceived of as a rave party, featuring psychedelic colorations and strobe light showcases. Gaga’s looks alternated between futuristic costumes inspired by previous phases of her career. The main stage housed a large Atlantis-esque kingdom with white dome structures that could accommodate the light show, while the elevated runways that extended into and above the audience were translucent so as to allow the crowd to take a closer look at the performances. As is the case with most major corporate

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203 In her essay “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” Judith Butler explicates the inauthenticity of gender which, similarly to the Baudrillardian concept of the simulacrum, bears no original. Butler relied on the practice of drag to postulate that “there is no original or primary gender that drag imitates, but gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original; in fact, it is a kind of imitation that produces the very notion of the original as an effect and consequence of the imitation itself” (261, italics in text).
arena shows employing marketing strategies for audience immersion, the American leg of *The ARTPOP Ball* featured a bar construction attached to the front extended runway where fans with allocated seats could enjoy custom-made Gaga drinks (sponsored by Absolut Vodka) throughout the performance as if they were part of an actual rave event (Kolah 2015). The show’s entertaining objective and repeated mantra, as enunciated by the performer during the tour, was the celebration of art and creativity through the abandoning impulse of the rave/club culture.

The frivolous and artificial nature of *ARTPOP Ball’s* concepts seemed an appropriate terrain for Gaga’s play with camp. The show once again utilized elements of the fantastic in its recreation of an underwater world that featured, among others, dancers dressed as sea-creatures, seahorse-like instruments and Gaga enveloped in a latex costume with tentacles. However, the conjunction of camp with the poetics of rave, a spectacular combination of hyperbole and transgressive performance, are traced in two performative instances of the show. The first one sees Gaga exploring Greco-Roman mythology and galactic explorations in her postmodern embodiment of Aphrodite/Venus. During the second act of the show, the divine alter ego of the artist emerges onstage to perform the song “Venus” (2013). Having already introduced the persona in her promotion of the *ARTPOP* album and the music video of “Applause” (2013), Gaga utilizes familiar stylistic devices for the live performance: her Aphrodite sports a seashell bikini outfit and a voluminous blonde wig. Informed by the traditions of drag and burlesque, Gaga’s performance as Aphrodite is simultaneously titillating and cartoonish. Likewise, the performed song, a sexual call to the Goddess in the context of a narrated interstellar journey, has been deemed as “a space-disco.

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204 The concept alludes and may have, in fact, drawn influences from either Janet Jackson’s *All for You Tour* (2001-02) or Katy Perry’s *California Dreams Tour* (2011-12), both of which were staged as cartoonish fantasies in naively camp fashion.

205 The show includes six acts (encore included) none of which has an official title.
ode to the planet of sex” (Sheffield 2013), which is “almost parodical” (Cragg 2013), with the artist “inject[ing] a touch of humor” (Brandle 2013). The naiveté of “Venus” is effectively brought on the live stage wherein colorful bubbles comprise the visual background and large inflatable flower-like props appear across the runway platforms. Throughout the performance, Gaga, accompanied by her dance crew, extends her arms in V positions and executes a solo with a pink V-shaped guitar while confetti bursts shower the stage.

The vibrant props, the euphoric calls, the lyrics and Gaga’s very own exposed body bring the celebration of (female) sexuality center stage. The risqué act constitutes a camp tribute to hedonism whose deliberate symbolism to female climax as signified by discursive and dramatic connotations—e.g. the pop-up flowers, the V-based gimmicks, and the ejaculatory confetti—are ostentatiously performed. The performance of “Venus” as placed within the ARTPOP stage is rather too specific to invite any further interpretation; at the same time, the referential corpus of its camp iconicity is all too dense, making it a nuanced lush spectacle. Contrary to Gaga’s grotesque and metal camp in the previous shows, wherein identity politics motorized each performance, the “Venus” act here encapsulates the art of camp in its evocation of a gay—both joyous and queer—temporality. Its retro sensibility wishes to establish artistic connections with the 1970s space disco scene in which the voluptuous lyrics and electronic beats were visualized through futuristic aesthetics, while the sexually vibrant performance may even allude to Hair’s “Aquarius” in its tribal dialectics of euphoria. Perhaps significantly, considering that The ARTPOP Ball epitomizes EDM/house rhythms, Gaga’s “divine” performance is historically energized by the position

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206 Space disco, as exemplified by the productions of Giorgio Moroder, Kraftwerk and Boney M, lays emphasis on heavy synthesizer and arpeggiator beats, repetitive lines, and ambient acoustics (Leone 2006). In terms of fashion, the camp glam of space disco could as well be informed by pop culture and cult corpora, such as Star Wars (1977) and Barbarella (1968), and, in terms of lyrics, the allusions to outer space are dominant.
of the diva within the gay disco scene. Similar with the previously explored cases of Madonna, Kylie, and Beyoncé, Gaga too reiterates the tradition of the worshipped diva within the cultural context of disco. What can be argued here is that Gaga’s performance retains a frolicsome, self-parodic approach as opposed to the aforementioned artists’ nostalgic (Madonna, Kylie) or sassily assertive (Beyoncé) one.

As “Venus” indicates, the crossing of temporal borders is a key constituent of camp praxis. The performance sounds and seems completely detached from the present, an organic approach that Lady Gaga herself has time and again explored. Temporal incongruity and confusion—best envisioned in what is identified as retro-futurism in Gaga’s work—instills camp its absurdist edge in its radical break from the present. At the same time, the notion of transcendence inherent both in the euphoria of frivolity as well as in the orgasmic simulation of the performance add to camp’s conscious detachment. Gaga’s camp aesthet(h)ics here incorporate a carnivalesque celebration in which the amalgam of role-play, jouissance and what can be defined as a politics of childishness, a cartoonish engagement with performance that veers from the unserious to the unintelligible, are at work. Camp and the Bakhtinian carnivalesque, in fact, converge in terms of their subversively parodic qualities, for, as Cleto argues:

the two share hierarchy inversion, mocking paradoxicality, sexual punning and innuendos, and, most significantly, a complex and multilayered power relationship between the dominant and the subordinate (or deviant), and finally the whole problem of how far a ‘licensed’ release can effectively be transgressive (or subversive). (32)

In the context of Gaga’s performance, the parodic and sexually-charged culmination deploys double entendres, such as the climactic confetti showers, as a means of moving far beyond the demarcated line of seriousness, even perhaps that of the conventionally sensible. After all,
the absurd logic of camp, a paradox in itself, instills and imagines entropy in the seeming order of the rational reality that surrounds it. For Gaga’s stage, the idea of containment can be identified as the source of unease, but at the same time as the ultimate incentive that energizes her camp toward a queer pushing of conventional boundaries.

Apart from “Venus,” camp’s carnivalesque transgression and the politics of childishness in The ARTPOP Ball are better manifest in the context of the rave. More specifically, the pre-encore fifth segment of the show expectedly stages a rave party, the supposed ArtRave that the tour’s full name (ArtRave: The ARTPOP Ball) indicates. Upon concluding the leather-inspired fourth act,207 Gaga abruptly takes off her wig and proceeds to an onstage costume change. The artist turns her back to the audience and undresses to a backup sound while her styling crew appears onstage to help her into the next outfit. As a matter of fact, the strip act serves as the interlude to the next segment and, rather unorthodoxly, the costume change does not occur backstage. The audience witnesses live Gaga’s transition into a girlie character inspired from Japanese anime and the rave culture. Similar to Kylie’s Manga Girl persona for the KylieX2008 Tour (see second chapter), Gaga’s fashion is ornate and vivid, albeit comprised of futurist neon colors and plastic garments suggestive of an urban club aesthetic, contrary to Minogue’s kabuki references. Solely built on electronic sounds, the segment mainly features the artist executing choreographed performances for the dance singles “Bad Romance” and “Applause.” It is the act finale “Swine” (2013), though, that best materializes the camp/rave dynamism. Throughout the performance, Gaga reenacts a pig, squealing while holding her nose and walking on all fours. Her dancers act likewise; many of them appear in pig masks and eject paint through canons attached to their back. The artist interacts with them in animalistic poses and casually

207 The act apparently pays homage to Gaga’s Born This Way phase, indicative features of which are the leather costumes and the greenish hair.
screams to the audience. Toward the end of the performance, she announces being nauseated and executes a frenetic routine.

In its entirety, the segment successfully stages a climax of and through transition, transformation, and transcendence. The decision to perform the costume change as a live act is rather radical not only due to the risqué approach, but also in terms of challenging the conventional show structure according to which changes traditionally occur out-of-sight so as to facilitate and carefully delineate the transition to the next segment as well as build on the audience’s expectation. Arguably, the backstage space functions as a terrain of technicalities and practicalities, a space that is mythologized because of its ability to house the secret operations of the spectacle and the star performer; if the front stage represents the world of the extraordinary, then, undeniably, the backstage stands for the ordinary, but, simultaneously, the secretive and the revealing. By consciously bringing the dramaturgy of the backstage space to the front and staging it as a striptease act, Gaga debunks any seriousness concerning the constructedness and mythologization of the performer by exposing the mechanics of the spectacle, thus deconstructing the illusion of the signification taken for “real.” It can as well be argued that the titillating act has been set to stir controversy and thus effectively serves as a marketing tactic for the show.208 Whereas the undressing process here may point to the dramatics of burlesque, it is rather more akin to those of drag and its shocking revelation of the inner self to the audience. As a matter of fact, in announcing ARTPOP’s lead single “Applause,” Gaga released a promotional lyric video that presented her in a drag club alongside popular queens.209 The show’s specific act re-imagines

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208 With the commencement of The ARTPOP Ball, Gaga’s onstage striptease made viral headlines through audience recordings of the show which ended up circulating/promoting the raunchy moment of the show across online platforms. This is representative of how modern-day tour spectacles can take advantage of social platforms (and vice versa) as a form of advertising.

209 The drag performers rose to recognition through popular TV contest series RuPaul’s Drag Race (2009-).
and consolidates the artist’s affiliation with the drag scene while congenially making a subcultural nod in the removal of the wig, commonly known in camp circles as the “weave-snatching,” a state of being impressed or shocked.210

By playing up the shock value, Gaga sets the camp tone for her audacious ultra-feminine anime character to emerge and to ultimately reach a rave rapture in “Swine.” The song itself is an EDM track with edgy industrial sounds in which Gaga illustrates a man as a swine. The artist has claimed writing the song about a rape incident she experienced as a young woman entering the music business.211 Music criticism acknowledged the raw eccentricity of the track, describing it as “ARTPOP’s wow-factor centrepiece” (Empire 2013), “a romping, ridiculous synth blart” (Lloyd 2013), “a shrieking industrial number” wherein “[t]he singer sounds physically disgusted” (Lipshutz 2013). The live performance effectively foregrounds the disjointed aesthetic and trance-inducing rhythm of “Swine” thus fueling Gaga’s hectic rave act. In it, the artist’s performance of femininity escalates from cartoonish to mocking to nonsensical, replacing staccatos and high-pitched vocals with squeals and unintelligible cries. Evoking the culture of rave, the segment dramatizes a poetics of disorder and colorful chaos as evidenced from interlude to “Swine.” Inspired by Japanese anime, Gaga’s caricature act alludes to the genre’s stock character of the “magical girl,” an ultra-feminine heroine renowned for her “psychic abilities and interdimensional traveling” (Newitz 4). In addition, one could underline references to Greek mythology and the

210 *Urban Dictionary* defines “snatched” – as in the “the wig is snatched” – as “a popular term in the gay community referring to good looks, fierceness, or something good.” The phrase “to have one’s weave snatched” indicates “being astoundingly surprised,” while “to snatch a weave” is “an action taken in a girl fight when one grabs the hair weave of the other,” which is also common in drag put-downs and catfights. Although there is limited cultural theory regarding the term, it is possible that the term came to wider usage through the queer African-American culture.

211 Gaga talked about “Swine” while being interviewed for *The Howard Stern Show*. The artist said: “The song is about rape. The song is about demoralization. The song is about rage and fury and passion and I had a lot of pain that I wanted to release.” She mainly referred to her performing “Swine” for the 2014 SXSW (South by Southwest) Festival in which she notoriously had performance artist Millie Brown vomit on her onstage.
Homerian account of Circe, the enchantress that eventually drugged Odysseus’ crew and transformed them into swine.\textsuperscript{212} Appositely, the artist’s “magical girl” aligns with the transcendent ethos of the ArtRave and its glamorization of drug culture as is demonstrated and established with previously performed acts, such as “Jewels and Drugs,” “Dope,” and “Mary Jane Holland.”\textsuperscript{213}

Historically, the rise of rave in the late 1980s was largely perceived as a corruptive culture of narcotics and excessive hedonism whose policing and regulation were resultant of a triggered moral panic (Brown 78). Yet, as Simon Reynolds argues, “[a]t the heart of rave lies a kernel of tautology: raving is about celebration of celebration” (86), adding that “rave culture has never really been about altering reality, merely exempting yourself from it for a while” (90).\textsuperscript{214} Although it is true that Gaga’s ArtRave, being an organized corporate event, cannot generate or even replicate the original subcultural edge and spontaneous combustion of the rave culture, it resorts to borrowing its style and mantra in making celebration (of the self, of community) its \textit{raison d’être}. As is the case with her previous shows, the artist’s reenactments of fantastic worlds and colorful utopias, especially those configured with the poetic aid of camp, indicate a disruption of the serious and the orderly normative. The conjunction of camp with rave here is an utterly bizarre collision of queer energy with stylized anarchy the praxis of which unravels in complete \textit{ataxia}, aptly signifying both disorder and mischief. Gaga’s politics of childishness, thus, prefigure a regressive state to being a child, not as in Edelman’s teleological figure of a heteronormative future, but rather as a romanticized intermediate stage with the ability to morph in and out of roles and be

\textsuperscript{213} All three songs are included in the \textit{ARTPOP} album and address Gaga’s drug addiction.
\textsuperscript{214} In arguing that “rave is really a sort of dry run or acclimatization phase for virtual reality” (90), Reynolds makes an accurate point on what is generally understood as the transition from the electronic era [the house scene, the DJ and the vinyl] to the digital one (the internet, the DJ producer and global entertainment).
exempted from the world of seriousness. Throughout *The ARTPOP Ball*, Gaga would call out her audience to let loose and celebrate their diversity and artistic creativity, the two core values nested both in the artist’s very own camp aesthet(h)ics as well as in the joints of pop art and rave.\(^{215}\)

**Concluding Remarks**

The conclusion of *The ARTPOP Ball* eventually witnessed the artist taking a brief hiatus from arena extravaganzas before recently returning to global touring with her *Joanne World Tour*. The camp nuances remain akin in the in-between projects, whether these regard live performance—consider her androgynous transformations into late icons Frank Sinatra and David Bowie for the “Sinatra 100: An All-Star Academy Concert” (2015) and the 2016 Grammy Awards, respectively—or television acting—most famously, her Golden Globe-awarded role of The Countess in FX’s *American Horror Story: Hotel* (2015-16). As regards touring, the artist embarked on a joint tour with jazz singer Tony Bennett as part of their collaborative project, *Cheek to Cheek* (2014). The *Cheek to Cheek Tour* (2014-2015) mainly reached North American music halls and few European jazz festivals. As opposed to Gaga’s major scale enterprises, the production of this show, abiding by the classical/jazz concert tradition, was rather minimal in terms of props, visual effects, and staged narratives. Juxtaposed to Bennett’s formal profile, Gaga would up the camp ante by alternating between flamboyant gowns and elaborate wigs. The complete omission of her standard hits along

\(^{215}\) As Cagle argues, “[u]nlike Dadaists and Surrealists, Warhol (and his pop art contemporaries) didn’t offer specific manifestos or alternatives. Likewise, Warhol was not engaged in the credible procedure of working on a critical ‘problem’ in contemporary art. Pop art was to be accepted instead as a platform for acknowledging artistic enterprises that produced mass-mediated iconography” (10). Pop art’s all-encompassing milieu ultimately renders it, as Simon Frith and Howard Horne suggest, democratizing in practice (120). In the same vein, according to Brown, “[r]aves support the argument that the audience, the consumer, can also be the producer” and that “the crowd is not just a collection of passive individuals who have little or no impact upon the ‘event’ which is being consumed; they are integral part of it. Raves without ‘consumers’ ... lose their social (and democratic) meaning” (78).
with the accustomed theatrics from the show evidently distanced Gaga from the camp/queer-inflected agenda of previous extravaganzas. In *Cheek to Cheek*, Gaga mainly drew from the vast tradition of torch songstresses with her dramatic renditions of classic numbers, such as Edith Piaf’s “La Vie en rose” (1947) and Cher’s “Bang Bang (My Baby Shot Me Down)” (1966), being indicative of a high camp approach. As music critics noted, Gaga’s style was a nostalgic nod to American feminine glamour, with the artist “shape-shifting from approximations of Mae West to Marilyn Monroe to a glittery cat-suited vamp… like an old-time burlesque performer” (Holden 2015); “the singer saved the real spectacle for her show-stopping ensembles… play[ing] well as Bennett’s sidekick, as if the role was just the latest incarnation of her many stage personas – in the same vein as her male alter-ego Jo Calderone or her seashell bikini ‘Venus’ Aphrodite” (Directo 2015). The show’s dazzling camp factor remains attached to Gaga’s costumes in a sense that it foregrounds the artist’s play with camp as an era-specific conceptual project which, similarly to that of *The Fame Ball*’s Candy Warhol, indulges in anachronistic dramatics in its showcasing of a retro reality. At the same time, Gaga’s camp semantically draws from the camp tradition of the torch singer worship (see introductory chapter), abiding perhaps by trends followed by her contemporaries, such as Adele and Lana Del Rey, who have established their pop personae by appropriating the high (melodrama and balladry of the torch songstress.

However, these latest works of the artist seem rather distanced from what she had set in motion, at least for the first five years of her career. Her projects so far are bereft of the distinctive absurdism that fueled Gaga’s notion of spectacle and performance art. The *Joanne World Tour*, as a matter of fact, exemplifies the transition from the radicalism of previous shows, wherein Gaga’s praxis of camp was simultaneously energized with subcultural references and critical twists, to one that is simplistically nostalgic onstage. Although itself a
high-octane production with elaborate staging, the *Joanne Tour* lacks the camp edge that either *Monster Balls* or the *Born This Way Ball* exhibited. Supporting her personal and perhaps most affective album, *Joanne* (2016)—titled after her own middle name, deriving from her late aunt Joanne Germanotta—the tour lays emphasis on the alleged “real self” through intimate and traditional mini narratives. Gone here are the wigs, the surreal costumes and the fairytale-like settings. The massive production follows the act-led format, featuring performed segments in four different stages: the main stage, which is structured out of kinetic platform runways; the minor stage across the other side of the venue; and two circular platforms; all four are interconnected with tele-operated and screen-surfaced suspended bridges. With the album titling to an Americana aesthetic, ranging from generic rock-and-roll to country, Gaga’s Joanne persona is brought on the live stage with a distinctly American kitsch flair, sporting cowboy hats, leather boots, and studded denim. The performances are structured upon an emotional spectrum, veering from pain to joy, to grief to love, while, lyrically, the performed *Joanne* tracks reference the cowboy culture (“John Wayne”), Christian religion (“Angel Down,” “Come to Mama”) and American exceptionalism (“Diamond Heart,” “A-Yo”).

Arguably, the *Joanne Tour* sees Gaga moving from camp to kitsch. As Long argues, “[k]itsch is kitsch because it does not recognize contradictions in value... Innocent of the world around it, kitsch is art without an immune system. It is created without a sense of context” (86). Conversely, the writer underlines that “[c]amp is a conscious response to a culture where kitsch is ubiquitous. Camp is essentially an attitude toward kitsch” (86, italics in text). Gaga’s slip to nostalgic romanticism, whether this is established through the alleged vulnerability in her new sense of the performing persona and/or her championing of traditional values permeating American identity and culture, deviates from her conspicuous
campification of corpora, as was the case, for example, with her ultra-camp treatment of the leather biker culture in *The Born This Way Ball* or her pop art shenanigans for *The ARTPOP Ball*. While the *Joanne* show could benefit from the camp-inflected potential of songs, such as the tongue-in-cheek “John Wayne” or the risqué “Dancing in Circles,”\(^{216}\) it resorts to run-of-the-mill choreographed routines that remain detached from the songs’ contexts. Reviewing the tour’s first American stop at Tacoma, Washington, *New York Times* critic Jon Caramanica complimented the artist’s vocal prowess and dramatic piano delivery; yet, he underlined that “Lady Gaga made her name with ostentation, ironic flamboyance and pseudo performance art. That strangeness once gave her centrist disco-pop real teeth, but it has long since decayed” (Caramanica 2017). Gaga’s shift of focus on the seemingly more authentic profile as this is based on and understood by rock(-and-roll) culture stands in stark contrast with the plasticity and audacity of her camp approach in all her previous projects. Whereas this shift risks confusing Gaga’s audiences, whose appeal, to a certain extent, may originate in camp pleasure, it should be noted that not only has the artist so far sustained a historical camp tradition, but, importantly, has left her own imprint in the culture of camp by creating her very own iconic legacy.

Audiences attending the *Joanne World Tour* seem to embrace the artist’s Americana turn. Fans appear in concerts wearing Joanne’s signature pink cowboy hat as well as copying Gaga’s newly imported looks from recent performances, such as the football-glam style from the Halftime Super Bowl show\(^ {217}\) or the imagery of the “John Wayne” video, while others preserve the artist’s iconicity through references to her past phases. Undoubtedly, her Little Monsters revel in the preservation and promotion of the camp pleasure nested in Gaga’s star

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\(^{216}\) In “John Wayne” Gaga addresses her quest for real men, having the iconic figure of Wayne as an archetype, while in “Dancing in Circles” she performs an homage to masturbation.

\(^{217}\) Gaga performed for the 51\(^{st}\) Halftime Super Bowl (2017) wherein she merged football gear and accoutrements with a glam rock aesthetic.
appeal. In other words, even if Gaga eventually becomes a nostalgia artist, a kitsch act, her audiences’ performative response in emulating her persona will always be a potent praxis of camp forged by Gaga’s camp aesthet(h)ics and the here-and-now communal spaces around her stage. The queer temporality created by the audiences’ conscious embodiment of camp in the context and contours of the star performer can in fact underscore camp as a critical performative device that effectively elasticizes a strictly normative reality. In light of this, it is important to delve into the fan culture surrounding Lady Gaga—along with the fandom regarding the divas previously explored in this project—and the fans that actively engage in the practice of camp through the poiesis of audience drag.
Dressed for the Ball: Audience Drag in the Arena Space

“[D]rag traditionally has been a sampling machine. We have always taken little bits to piece together a bigger story.”
—RuPaul, (Jung 2016)

“Having a ball… Wish you were here.”
—Paris Is Burning

As a mode of entertainment, concert-going entails more than simply attending and enjoying a gig. One has to think of the concert experience as a climactic process that incrementally builds on the excitement of the attendee-to-be. Starting with the first organizing steps, such as booking tickets and planning the route to the site of the concert, and culminating with the actual performance engrossing the audience, the gig wishes to establish itself as a happening, a marked event in the attendee’s memory. Considering the prospective spectator is both an attendee-to-be and a devoted fan of the star performer, the climactic process may even begin from the moment a new album is announced, which more often than not signals or coincides with the announcement of an upcoming tour. Fans may even get exposed to exclusive rehearsal content that performers might make public prior to embarking on tour. Inextricably tied with that is the functional role of the social media which only seems to have amplified the event-nature of the concert in manifold ways. Apart from being utilized as promotional platforms by artists and live entertainment companies, social media are catalytic in bringing communities of fans together to share their personal experiences with regard to the artist or the show in online fora. Fans who may attend on a later date have the opportunity to get a glimpse of the show to be performed thanks to those who were present at an earlier one; likewise, fans unable to attend at all rely exclusively on the shared
material, thus partaking in the concert experience virtually. Although the overall structure of a show usually remains the same, there might be occasional changes in setlist or costuming that render each concert unique, adding to the fans’ enticement and pleasure and thus offering different perspectives of the supposed “original” production. In odd cases, audiences may even experience a completely different version of the show depending on their locale. For instance, Gaga’s two-piece Monster Ball Tour had San Francisco and Toronto as host cities for both versions of the tour, contrary to Mexico City or Sydney whose audiences got to attend only the revamped show. Nevertheless, fans recording and sharing versions of the shows from every tour stop have managed to collectively build and preserve online both Monster Ball experiences.

Undoubtedly, locality and the politics of space play a key role in the audiences’ relation to the spectacle. Major-scale tours, including all the productions explored in this research project, incorporate space, be it geographical, performative or communal, as a significant parameter in the overall experiential procedure. Large productions are mainly accommodated in arenas or stadia in the vicinity of a metropolitan center. Therefore, they remain attached to the physiognomy of urban cultures and their interconnectedness with the host city, contributing to the latter’s micro and macro politics. On a micro level, arena concerts are financial, social and, at times, quasi-political events that may momentarily influence their social surroundings. Host cities are strategically picked by touring companies not only because of their geographical functionality to attract audiences in their broader radius, but also due to their role as consumerist cores. Local market economy may be boosted through businesses catering for concert-goers, from restaurants and convenience stores to lodging and souvenir shops (for attendees coming into the host city). Politics-wise, the character of a show or even the nature of the spectacle as connected with the performing
persona impacts variably on certain locales: consider again possible protests or boycotts against the allegedly provocative spectacles of Madonna and Lady Gaga by local groups standing on the rigidly conservative side of the political spectrum (see first and fourth chapter). On a macro level, concerts brought into a host city on a regular basis gradually morph the local audiences’ taste and sensibility. In the long term, apart from capital locations with established concert market, such as New York City and London (consider their renowned Madison Square Garden and O2 Arena, respectively), cities like Milan, Osaka or Tel Aviv have become standard touring destinations whose cosmopolitan audiences start growing accustomed with the theatrical nature of a concert and, by extension, its sometimes challenging topics regarding the presentation of gender and sexuality.

While audiences vary depending on locale, what can safely be argued is that, in their majority, concert-goers share at least one objective: they are all driven into the spectacle by their relation to the star performer. Attending an arena concert requires that the attendee, in order to be present, has invested emotion, time, and finance upon the performing artist. Chances are that a person neutrally attached to an artist—meaning that they are not devoted fans, but not entirely indifferent either—would still come to a show driven by the star’s magnitude: put simply, one would come to see the latest Madonna show not for the sake of its newness or musical quality, but mainly because Madonna is performing. Emotional, temporal, and financial investment here may exist at a minimum, since the attendee may be content with simply watching Madonna from a random seat in the arena or they may have come driven by nostalgia to hear and see her classic repertoire. On the contrary, hardcore fans’ investment usually reaches a maximal level: they have come to see the artist and the new show because they are probably familiar with past concerts and want to upgrade their knowledge on the star performer; these often congregate in the arena terrain, the “pit,” which
means they may be holders of the much-prized front-row and golden-standing tickets or they may have spent hours outside the concert space waiting for the gate opening. Fans are also often the ones who buy collectibles and memorabilia—whose cost usually exceeds average market pricing—exhibited in the contours of the arena or the proscenium. Above all, fans will appear in tune with the character and aesthetic of the spectacle to be performed.

If artists like Kylie Minogue and Lady Gaga are renowned for a camp spectacle, their audiences are preoccupied with the nature of the show to be presented. For their devoted fans, embracing this camp quality of the spectacle becomes a cognitive way of actively participating in the world that Kylie and Gaga display on stage. Their coming to the live performance signifies the moment when they get to materialize their love for their adored star. Consciously embodying and expressing one’s imagined ideal, especially in the collective space of a live concert, constitute important components for the individual’s pleasure and self-gratification. As Lawrence Grossberg indicates, “[f]ans’ investment in certain practices and texts provides them with strategies which enable them to gain a certain amount of control over their affective life, which further enables them to invest in new forms of meaning, pleasure and identity” (65). In addition, their complete immersion in the world of their adored star, as often signified through fan-operated websites or merchandise regarding the star, marks the nature of the fans as prosumers, namely both consumers and producers of popular culture. In this way, fans engaging into the creative clauses of the star persona reinforces their established bonds with the latter through a perpetuation of an inclusive and direct process that wishes to acknowledge fans as equal contributors to the star persona’s production. According to Detlev Zwick et al., “the ideological recruitment of consumers into productive co-creation relationships hinges on accommodating consumers’ needs for recognition, freedom, and agency” (185). At the same time, the star persona
benefits from a reproduction and circulation of her capital and appeal in a way requiring no effort on her behalf. As George Ritz and Nathan Jurgenson indicate, “prosumers seem to enjoy, even love, what they are doing and are willing to devote hours to it for no pay” (22). As a result, the practices that fans engage in not only fortify their relationship with the star, but also ascribe them with a sense of co-creation and inclusivity in the cultural body of the star persona.

Among those practices that fans invest in, such as accumulating material related to the star or joining fan-led conventions and events, the materialization of their affect in the live context of the concert often comes in the form of dressing. This may range from painting one’s face or adorning one’s body with accessories borrowed from the star performer’s visual arsenal, to a complete sartorial transformation into the star herself.218 Not unusual a phenomenon in the concerts of Madonna or Beyoncé is witnessing fans, both female and male, dressing up as their favorite divas. Their looks derive from the variety of stylistic appearances the artists have made over the years in memorable performances or on album covers. Hence, fans are quite often joining the concert in drag. What this project, therefore, identifies as audience drag is this exact performative practice which, informed by the poetics of drag in the camp reconfiguration of the gendered self, sees fans appropriating the looks of the onstage persona as a means of expressing their affinity with the latter’s brand and projected culture.

218 I use the female pronoun here since the project deals with female performers. I would also like to underline the cultural process of transformation, itself associated with the domains of aesthetics and beautification, as a process of feminization, an argument that I will later address in the context of campification. It is not unusual to see fans of male stars transforming into their icons, such as those of late Michael Jackson or the glam rock band Kiss. Yet, contrary to the male performer or showman, a female artist may offer a diverse pool of ever-changing styles and fashions that fans can draw from, always depending on the occasion. For instance, performers like Rihanna or Katy Perry are renowned for their chameleonic style in comparison to their male contemporaries, such as Justin Timberlake or Drake, whose style does not deviate significantly from the urban/hip-hop agenda.
In order to better understand the praxis of audience drag, one has to conceptualize it as a social activity that merges the collective character of mass entertainment with the carnival of camp in light of the performed spectacle-event. In addressing the nature of this activity, this chapter will, first and foremost, examine the theatrical tradition of drag alongside its gradual emergence from its subcultural environment and movement into commercial terrain of popular culture. Inevitably, this movement raises questions with regard to drag’s cultural capital as well as the politics of queer culture through the circulation of the community’s traditions and practices. In the context of camp, audience drag should always be treated in relation to the mainstream culture that surrounds it. Since camp embodies a parody of (hetero)normative conventions and identities, audience drag is energized by camp which, in turn, validates it as a mechanism of resistance. Drag, as stated in the epigraph, “is a sampling machine” whose pieces aid in the formation of a bigger story, according to popular drag mother RuPaul Charles. Taking into consideration that this story is unattached to the evolution of contemporary queer cultures, it becomes imperative to investigate the openness and broader reception of audience drag when put in the framework of pop industry and global entertainment. What should also be addressed is fans’ attendance in drag, which, although inadequate as an action to solidly verify one’s queer sexuality, it does play on camp—itself denoting queerness/gayness. What does it ultimately signify to bring the subcultural praxis of drag out in the public sphere of mass entertainment and see it exercised out of its designated position upon a stage? In light of this, is it legitimate to view audience drag as a theatrical device that transforms the audience into “spect-actors”? Finally, what is the role of the arena space in the housing of audience drag?
The Popularization of Drag

In the long history of music fandom, fashion has played a key role in engaging and acclimating fans with the music culture that embraces them. As evident in the variety of music scenes and/or movements, such as British punk rock or Japanese kawaii pop, dressing expresses community belonging into which the fan’s identity is baptized through style. Fashion usually stands in concert with the ethos the music culture upholds. Punk rock, for instance, favors ripped jeans and spiked jackets as signifiers of disorder and aggressiveness, whereas kawaii pop adores decorative plasticity and manga-like make-up as indicatives of cuteness and girly innocence. Artists serve as the vessels channeling the fashion of their affiliated music culture, thus becoming stylistic templates for the fans to draw from. For example, Madonna’s style through the 1980s, merging ethnic elements with the sensibility of New York’s club cultures, exemplified a postmodern urban collage which, most importantly, carried a second-hand (“thrift-store”) aesthetic, therefore immediately becoming accessible to her fans. As John Fisk suggests:

[t]he Madonna fans who, on MTV, claimed that dressing like Madonna made people take more notice of them as they walked down the streets were not only constructing for themselves more empowered identities than those normally available to young adolescent girls but were putting those meanings into social circulation. (38)

Dressing is a significant component in allowing fans to express, commune and even politicize their music identities. Madonna’s allegedly provocative sense of style, which to a large extent employed body exposure as a feminist device, provided at the time a progressive view in understanding female empowerment and volition through fashion.
As a tool that expresses lifestyle, personal taste, and political sensibility, style can become perhaps the most instantly recognizable marker of one’s self and identity. The cognitive selection of clothing, accessories, and hair style is what importantly underlines identity as performative. According to Carol Tulloch, everyday style encloses agency in the sense that it becomes part of the self’s identity narrative; the writer views “the styling practices of a layperson’s articulation of everyday life through their styled body as exercising that agency. This is part of the process of self-telling, that is to expound an aspect of autobiography through the clothing choices an individual makes” (5). Without downplaying exogenous factors influencing the self’s formation of style, such as fashion advertising, circulation of trends, and taste of peer groups, agency lies at the kernel of selection and assemblage out of the variety of signifiers. In a postmodern context, fashion is informed by a texture of styles, be they subculture-related, era-specific, or region-inspired, among others, which are made available to consumption in what Ted Polhemus identifies as “the Supermarket of Style” (131). Polhemus suggests that postmodern consumers of fashion emphasize the mixing of styles and the incongruity and ironies surfacing from the mixing process: “[w]hile fashion celebrated change and subcultural style celebrated group identity, the inhabitants of Styleworld celebrate the truth of falsehood, the authenticity of simulation, the meaningfulness of gibberish” (132). Understanding modern consumers as editors of their personal styles helps us toward conceiving dressing—in our case, dressing as part of the concert-event—as ascribing a purpose to one’s selected and selective narrative of style, especially when placed alongside other individual narratives. To revisit Madonna’s American female fans in the 1980s, their style narratives were backed by the purpose of empowerment through gender and body politics against a generally conservative social milieu. The purpose was significantly motivated by Madonna’s hyped narrative of success,
yet simultaneously required from her female fans to take action in breaking ties with traditional views of femaleness and femininity.

Through the lens of camp, dressing revels in the falsehood and artifice that Polhemus attributed to the postmodern fashion supermarket. In camp’s world of style, the figures of the dandy, the effeminate man (the camp), and that of the drag queen, all addressed style as inextricably linked to a consciously stylized image of their social personae, whose destabilizing approach of heteronormative identities would often lead to patriarchy-instigated narratives of risk or even violence. Inasmuch as camp denotes effeminacy, the excessive styles inherent in dandyism and drag have historically become a source of anxiety for heterosexual culture as well as (straight, gay, and bi) masculinity.219 Drag, as a matter of fact, has come to symbolize modern gay culture itself by having become a cross-cultural signifier of the LGBT+ movement due to it being ubiquitously practiced as an inseparable tradition of Pride parades or as a form of theatrical entertainment.

Being a performative device and a performed tradition, drag has deployed the power of style in its parodying of normative genders. Therefore, the camp style associated with drag encloses a dynamic of mockery and artifice that can elasticize traditional understandings of gender. Insofar as camp has infiltrated pop culture and music, drag too has entered the popular culture domains by establishing itself as a comedic style of performance. Nevertheless, in the case of audience drag explicated in this project, it is important to imagine the camp practice of drag as inextricable with the queer culture that has surrounded it and significantly contributed to it being shaped and narrativized into the form we currently know. Considering there is an apparent, if evolutionary, development that sees drag moving from its liminal status to it being casually practiced out in public—at least at the site of the

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219 One would only think of Oscar Wilde’s infamously criminalized outspoken queerness or the flamboyant queens against police forces in light of the Stonewall riots.
Historically and prior to becoming synonymous with queer culture, drag has been located in the world of theater. Evolving from religious practices and rituals, drag entered the theatrical stage as an act of magical transformation, mainly of a man into a woman, and rarely vice versa. Laurence Senelick traces the tradition of cross-dressing in cultures where shamanism was practiced. Through a series of cross-cultural examples taken from the shamanic history of China, the Philippines, Scandinavia and Greece, to name just a few, the writer establishes that “[t]he shaman’s conflation with the actor, particularly an actor of exceptional allure credited with both magical abilities and sexual heterodoxy, has the most archaic origins” (18). Senelick postulates that, although the drag of shamanism was not necessarily connected to homosexuality, shamanic practices would often entail same-sex and polyamorous activities as part of their trance-inducing rituals, while transgenderism was commonly identified with prostitution, eventually leading to the popular association of theater-acting itself with effeminacy and prostitution (23-31). What is worth paying attention to here is how shamanism relied on the practice of cross-dressing as a transgressive act that veered between the binaries of gender and sex, but also the physical and metaphysical realm. As the writer indicates, shamanic practices and the culture of shamanism, especially in European territories, would come to be regulated with the advent of Christianity and philosophical reasoning, thus becoming confined into a status of a threatening form of sorcery (23-31). Senelick argues that the male priest risked being identified with a woman in his being penetrated by a “spirit” which, first and foremost, equated the act of being penetrated with a female receiver and, also, reinforced patriarchal evaluations of femininity as “physical frailty” (24). As a result, the writer concludes, “[t]he fear of the transvestite
magician was compounded with an ingrained misogyny to create an aversion to the effeminate male that eventuates in the ‘homophobia’ of modern society” (24).

Drag in theater, thereafter, absorbed and performed all the populist associations of what a woman is and looks like as well as what happens to a man becoming or behaving like a woman. As opposed to the nature of drag within the religious practices, which would often highlight the body as androgynous, thus instilling in it a cosmic, archetypal value by means of ritualistic transcendence, theatrical drag usually relied on a Manichean perception of gendered reality that often interpreted femininity as non-serious and emotion-based, the opposite to male reasoning. With women excluded from the stage, female roles were performed by men; rather than sexual or political, the practice of drag in that case served more of a functional role, reflecting power relations between women and men nonetheless. In cases, though, where, instead of femaleness, drag alluded to effeminacy, the Greek stage would utilize cross-dressing as a metaphor and a potent critique of politics and gender. Ferris makes a well-put argument in establishing that feminine embodiment via Greek tragedy “allows the masculine, virile self to undergo an emotional range denied men in normal, civic life” wherein “[e]motions are gender-identified as feminine” (12). It can be argued that the classical Greek stage provided a firmer basis as to drag’s pedagogic character

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220 Representations of gender in Greek theater, for example, inevitably abided by then social order of gender, according to which men engaged with the polis, the public sphere, while women remained in the oikos, the domestic one (Senelick 46).

221 Global period drama followed the same gender-dividing structure in both casting and narrative arcs as evident in the theatrical traditions of the English Renaissance stage, Japanese Kabuki and Noh theaters, and Chinese opera (Garber 40).

222 In the classical Greek period, according to Ferris, “the unstable meaning of the transvestite was used as a thematic underscoring of some of the playwrights’ vital concerns” (11). The writer provides the examples of Aristophanes’ Thesmophoriazusae and Euripides’ The Bacchae to underline the critical possibilities cross-dressing and the act of embodying a women entail: the Aristophanean work utilizes cross-dressing “to expose the comic hypocrisy of tragic poets – Agathon and Euripides,” while the Euripidean one presents an ambiguous function of transvestism via a femininely empowered Dionysus and a punished cross-dressing Pentheus (12).
in its potency to reveal more expressive patterns of identity, especially masculine ones, through codified clothing.

While it is widely known that the reception of male-practiced drag has been challenging, the same applies to women appearing in drag. With female actors excluded from the Classical stage, women in drag were usually encountered in ritual practices, mythological discourse and, periodically, in prostitution circuits. Women in drag or women obtaining the clothing lexicon of men raised social concern with regard to female status. Catherine Edwards argues that female prostitutes in Rome, for instance, would challenge the public opinion not only by means of their already marginal profession, but also through their transgressive clothing choices (82). In the more recent post-Enlightenment era, during which cross-dressing was altogether penalized in most Western countries, women would utilize the decoy of drag to either express their lesbianism or “pass” as men (Kappeler 1995). What is made apparent here is that women in drag generated anxiety not only because they rejected feminine standards, but, most importantly, because this rejection meant that they were able to claim male agency in the sense that they practically assumed socio-political presence and visibility in the male-ordered universe of civic affairs. In both cases of male and female drag, what is ultimately being jeopardized is masculinity: men in drag practically risked exclusion from their patriarchal status by being degraded as effeminate, whereas women’s potential usurpation of male power created tension in societies wherein femaleness was associated with weakness and sentimentalism, not agency and reasoning.

In the now millennial history of drag, there exists a global variety of models, each accruing from, and pertaining to local histories and gendered idiosyncrasies. Widely known

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223 The writer underlines that “[p]rostitutes were also distinguished for wearing toga, that uncomfortable garment otherwise worn only by male Roman citizens—a blatant display of their exclusion from the respectable social hierarchy. The female prostitute was antithetical to the male Roman citizen” (81).
non-Western models may include the Turkish köçek, a handsome male youth in feminine attire serving as an entertainer and at times a concubine in seventeenth-century Ottoman Empire (Haynes 2014), as well as the similar model of hijra most commonly encountered throughout India and South East Asian territories (Bullough and Bullough 1993). When factored in are ethnic and racial modifiers, the social status of and general attitude toward these models certainly vary. It would be erroneous to conflate, for instance, the Euro-American conventional understandings and expressions of drag with those of Asia, itself an immensely nuanced gendered canvas, due to differentiations in gender structures and dominant ideologies. Serena Nanda argues that “[i]n India, for example, persons crossing or bridging sex/gender boundaries are considered inherently powerful and auspicious, while in Polynesia and the United States, alternative sex/gender roles are basically mundane” (3). The writer postulates that ethnographic readings of non-Western genders has often failed to adumbrate the existent gender diversity simply because these readings are applied through the Euro-American gender perception wherein alternative gender identifications are misconstrued as derivatives of homosexuality (3-4). What is noteworthy here is that in either Western and non-Western cases, the practice of drag remains closely connected to the idea of transformation and performance. If we were to draw a link between all the variable models, there emerges a common drag ethic that favors the spectacle of gender as this becomes materialized upon the body. It can be argued that, cross-culturally, drag retains elements of gender transcendence, weather this is interpreted in spiritual terms, as exemplified by the Indian model, or purely parodic ones, as in the Euro-American one. Thus on a global level, drag is to be understood as the art of transformation that crosses traditional models of gender identity for purposes of self-expression, satire, even spirituality.

224 For more on the global models of drag, consider Bullough and Bullough (1993).
The praxis of drag has always alluded to queer sexualities and non-binary gender expressions. However, its emergence as a firmly queer expression and, by extrapolation, as a symbolic subcultural practice does not occur until the mid-eighteenth century. This more concretized association of drag with Western queer and, in particular, gay male culture, results from the formation of more vibrant, self-identified, and party visible queer communities. According to Senelick, “glamour impersonation was not so much a natural evolution from pre-existing models as an offshoot of a thriving transvestite demimonde that impinged on the world of popular entertainment” (302, italics in text). Though drag was commonly practiced in variety shows and circuses, thus carefully enveloped within stage theatrics, it was subcultural scenes such as London’s molly-houses, as Senelick’s account indicates, that established a coherent relation of drag with (homo)sexuality (302). Much like brothels, molly-houses were inns and clubs catering for men’s sexual proclivities, but instead of female prostitutes, young men in drag provided service. In the public mind, drag quickly grew to be a queer-associated praxis, although one that would progressively dissociate itself from transvestism and prostitution and would tilt to a more skillful, if artistic, form of gender performance. By the early twentieth century, performances of drag had already started mushrooming within Western queer subcultures, such as those of Berlin, Amsterdam, Paris, and New York, among others.

Intra-communal practices of drag, which gradually grew in terms of visibility, frequency, and consistency, not only established it as a queer tradition, but significantly aided toward forming and sustaining communal bonds among queer groups. The case of

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225 Also factoring in the parameter of period popular culture, Senelick places drag within the context of a queer subculture that imitates, parodies, and attacks social codes and affairs of the time. Similarities with Classical Greek satire drag are apparent here; yet, subcultural drag signifies a more conscious embracing of queerness as this derives its political power from then emerging queer culture and its marginal reality. Senelick establishes that drag and cross-dressing, in general, started being more solidly connected with the mid-eighteenth century queer sexual subcultures (302).
New York’s drag balls is noteworthy here. Gay drag balls, according to George Chauncey, rose to popularity in 1920s Manhattan and derived their festive structure from the centuries-long tradition of masquerade balls, which were rather common in late nineteenth century (291). Importantly, as the writer argues, queer culture adopted an allegedly heterosexual convention and instilled into it a new essence that would later be branded with their own queer insignia (291). It is also understood at this point that queer practices like drag balls, having not derived *sui generis*, may point to queer people as appropriators of heterodominant culture; simultaneously, their conscious queering/campification of it underlines ironic subversion and ideological resistance as vital queer politics against dominant power structures. As a result, drag became aligned with the political valence of queerness and itself acquired a queer edge within the tradition of the balls.

Despite the auspicious position drag enjoyed within the subcultures, the drag balls were certainly no queer utopias. Adversities within the ball circuit were a given and usually translated into classism and racism, homophobia and persecution. With regard to queer life at the time, cross-dressing as well as sodomy constituted a felony. Chauncey argues that “[l]ike cafeterias, speakeasies, and cabarets frequented by homosexuals, the drag balls organized by lesbians and gay men were subject to raids and other forms of police harassment, since the police and the courts construed the disorderly-conduct stature in ways that criminalized any public gathering of homosexuals” (295). Similar to Britain’s “gross

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226 Most significantly, by carrying the urban sensibility of queer New York, itself an amalgam of racial and ethnic elements, the drag balls welcomed in diversity and cultural convergence. As is currently known, Harlem’s notorious black and Latino drag balls of the 1920s eventually gave birth to the subsequent voguing scene and Houses (see first chapter).

227 Although most of the times drag balls were events of mixed groups, it can be argued that an invisible racial barrier existed between the ball culture of Greenwich Village and that of Harlem. Both being neighborhoods with sensible queer flair and artistic production, Harlem and the Village became renowned for attracting bohemian queers, whose lifestyle, though vivid and art-oriented, faced the socio-economical challenges Manhattan’s urban milieu posed to working-class and marginal communities. For more information, consult Chauncey’s analysis of the two neighborhoods (227-236).
indecency” laws that prohibited same-sex intercourse but would also often incriminate cross-dressers on the basis of immorality and sodomy associations, American legislation tolerated neither homosexuality nor alternative gender expressions. Locally, Chauncey underscores, “[t]he drags faced special legal difficulties as well, because a New York law prohibited people from appearing in public in disguise or masquerade” (295). Though at times drag balls could be legally accessible as long as they were under police surveillance and considering that participants had to present police-initiated license of attendance allowing masquerading (Chauncey 295-96), cross-dressing was still regulated to a large extent. This partial institutional elasticity with the practice of drag within the context of the balls would demonstrate how drag as a staged performance was more tolerated compared to other cross-dressing acts, such as street transvestism, not to mention transgenderism in prostitution circles.

While transgenderism, prior to entering the political umbrella of the modern LGBT+ movement, has been frequent in cruising and prostitution cultures, thereby becoming established as a fetishistic act that is meant to fulfill sexual pleasure through cross-dressing, drag has represented its theatrical equivalent. Roger Baker distinguishes transvestism from drag by arguing that the transvestite is “the man who finds relief and personal satisfaction as a woman (or, rather, as he feels a woman should be treated), who hopes to pass as a woman in public but who has no wish to undergo surgical transformation” (16). Conversely, “[drag] subverts the dress codes that tell us what men and women should like in

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228 I use transvestism here as interchangeable to transgenderism. In fact, transvestism is an act of transgenderism through which the individual identifies with their supposedly opposite gender by means of clothing. Transvestism highlights the act of a male individual appropriating female attire and vice versa; thus, transvestism (as its Latin root vestis for “clothing” and “attire” indicates) concerns mainly external appearance. Transgenderism regards the psychic association and identification of a male with the female gender and vice versa.

229 Baker here does not make any reference to women cross-dressing as men. He also erroneously assumes that “[the transvestite] is happy in his maleness and is generally heterosexual” (16), without any reference to queer transvestites.
our organised society. It creates tension and releases tension, confronts and appeases. It is about role-playing and questions the meaning of both genders and sexual identity” (16). In raising concerns and tackling them by means of irony and parody, drag is ultimately theater. Politically, even pedagogically speaking, drag, as Baker concludes, “is about anarchy and defiance” (16). Precisely due to its theater roots, though, drag has acquired artistic connotations and, more importantly, it has somehow through its parodic approach of gender and its comic treatment of reality, eased the anxieties transgenderism has generated to conventional understandings of gender. In this sense, it can be argued that drag has usually been located in the sphere of comedy and spectacle, a fact that may point to its political mitigation. By being safely placed in the contours of a stage or within the limits of its subculture, drag has grown to popularity in part because, in the public mind, it does not seem to pose any serious threat to systemic gender, contrary to the political, legal, and medical disturbance that transgenderism (not to mention transsexualism) has caused. The general attitude toward onstage drag or subcultural drag, both exercised in clientele-specific locales, venues or sites, helped drag develop rather uniquely and contributes to our knowledge of its evolution and popularization.

In light of the above, the politics of space must be taken into consideration when approaching the social and historical development of drag. Stage has more often than not functioned both as a protective platform whereupon drag has been safely positioned, and an artistic vehicle that smoothly propelled its queer practice into mainstream culture. Stage drag and drag queens, after all, have been in the theatrical limelight for centuries, thus allowing audiences (especially Western ones) to acclimate with the practice of drag as a histrionic device meant to satirically upset the gender order and elicit laughter. The stage has thus served as that private, if limited, spatial territory where the camp of drag is commonly
accepted. On the contrary, drag queens taking to the streets seem to have always unnerved
the majority of the public, because their flaunting of queerness would make manifest a
rampant queer culture. In her ethnography of the mid-century drag subculture, Newton
explicates the then-division of female impersonators into stage and street queens: “the street
pattern is a *fusion* of the ‘street fairy’ life with the profession of female impersonation. Street
fairies are jobless young homosexual men who publicly epitomize the homosexual stereotype
and are the underclass of the gay world” (8). Conversely, “the stage pattern,” Newton argues,
“*segregates* the stigma from the personal life by limiting it to the stage context as much as
possible. The work is viewed as a profession with goals and standards rather than as a job” (8, 
italics in text). Insofar as drag is confined within its controllably delineated and staged
environment, its practice is perceived as a knowledgeable profession, whereas street drag
remains more akin to transgenderism and prostitution. The juxtaposition, thus, created
between stage and street, or between the isolated subcultural lifestyle and the clash of
subcultural lifestyle with the mainstream, is one of a private/public dichotomy.

Public manifestations of homosexuality, which are usually linked to dressing and
posture, have triggered problematic responses by both heterosexual and homosexual cultures. While, historically and cross-culturally, heterosexual culture and, more specifically, conservative groups within it not only have been patronizing over queer lifestyle and behavior, but have sought ways to incriminate and penalize queer practices, the same also holds true for the conservative spectrum of homosexual cultures. Cases of individuals engaging in same-sex activities and relationships and wanting to dissociate themselves from the idea of a vividly queer culture have been steadily prevalent. Arguably, closeted homosexuals seem to comprise the core groups within these cases. These notions seem to accrue from a socially established and institutionally perpetuated fear of the queer Other and
its open manifestation (flaunting) of queerness. Patterns of intra-cultural conservative attitude may also predominantly concern men who openly have sex with men, yet they wish to distance themselves from any association with gay male culture due to the alleged effeminate and promiscuous stigma of “the scene.” Standing metonymically for gay culture, drag’s closet-defying practice stimulates similar response when taken out of its stage confines and brought into wider view. For instance, popular arguments against the concept of Pride parades will often target the conspicuous campiness of drag and, by extension, that of gay culture, proposing instead a more toned-down demonstration of gay pride and identity. Those requests favoring the downplaying of Pride’s queerness/gayness, which are still encountered across countries, evince the persistent anxiety that the subject matters of drag and camp can generate. On the contrary, drag may seem more natural or, to put it less essentialist, more innocuous upon a stage since spectacle has traditionally depended on values of transformation and shock as well as erected the safety of the fourth wall between performance and audience, affirming thus the nature of drag as ultimately a theatrical device.

Coming to an awareness of drag as a potent, if militant, device against the predominance of the gender binary, queer culture has rather effectively politicized its parodic praxis. The unsettling sentiments cross-dressing has for years exerted upon mainstream social circles not only have been located in moralist discourse, but, most importantly, they have multifariously materialized through institutional power. As has already been explicated, narratives of pathologization and penalization throughout the nineteenth and twentieth century attest to how the gender binary informed the medical and legal system toward punitively regulating practices of cross-dressing, thereby directly and indirectly affecting

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230 The scene, i.e. the gay scene, is an updated colloquialism of “the circuit,” namely, the hubs and locales of homosexual interest, such as gay bars, clubs, baths, even cruising spots, where gay culture reifies. For more information on the historical and social rise of the gay circuit, consider Levine (1997).
communities of queer people that failed to meet the imposed gendered standards. According to Andrea Ritchie, “[f]or much of the twentieth century, police used sumptuary laws to punish gender non-conformity among drag queens, transgender women, and butch lesbians of color” (131). “Trans women and self-identified drag queens of color were often rounded up and arrested on the basis of cross-dressing laws” (131), the writer reiterates and argues how “[f]eminine attire worn by transgender women is pervasively cited by police as grounds for suspicion that they are engaged in prostitution or ‘lewd contact’” (132). In America, law enforcement raids and pursuits of trans-/cross-identified individuals infamously culminated with the Stonewall riots in the Village, yet the outburst was rather resultant from and indicative of, as the history of drag ball surveillance attests, a century-long suppression of homosexuality and cross-dressing practices—the latter historically ingrained in the lawful exercise of the gendered order by Victorian England, colonial America, and medieval Europe. With the advent of queer collectivity in light of the 1960s liberation movements, the need to demedicalize and decriminalize both homosexuality as well as non-conforming gender expressions drove queer communities in America to variably employ cross-dressing as a form of activism that was simultaneously forged with camp parody and political resistance.231

Having extensively populated the world of theater and art, drag practitioners, be they glamour queens or male/female impersonators, progressively entered the mainstream terrain of popular culture through which the camp praxis of drag managed to reach a wider audience. Among the first and most important platforms that helped popularize drag is musical theater. The stages of Broadway and the West End have frequently been material sources for the

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231 Consider, for instance, how the queer activist group Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence in late 1970s San Francisco took to the city streets in full drag; dressed in nun attire and employing Catholic imagery; SPI satirized religious and political morals in order to draw attention to the social injustice pervading queer communities.
production and diffusion of works that do not simply utilize drag as a histrionic device that ruffles gender on stage, but foregrounds it as inextricably linked with the queer culture drag is affiliated with. By featuring characters in drag as protagonists, productions such as *The Rocky Horror Show* (1973), *Torch Song Trilogy* (1982) and *M. Butterfly* (1988), to name just a few, centralized their narratives around the praxis of drag and the queering of identity; their subsequent film adaptations not only established these works as widely appreciated queer texts—consider the cult reception of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975)—but firmly embedded them in the history of queer art-making. Film-wise, drag has occasionally served as a comic tool employed to provide relief in mainstream movies—a point I will address shortly—but, as a gay-associated tradition, its existence has rather been limited within queer cinema. For instance, films, including *Pink Flamingos* (1972), *La Cage Aux Folles* (1978), and *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (1994), now belong to the filmic camp canon and have variously been revisited throughout popular culture and within academic theories of cultural and LGBT+ studies. Last but not least, apart from the mediated narratives presented on stage and screen, drag and, more specifically, subcultural drag rose to popularity through local scenes and celebrity culture.232

Inasmuch as drag’s history has been one of defiance and resistance, to use Baker’s words, it has also been a history of cooptation and exploitation. Mainstream cinema has often employed drag in a way that, although at times detached from gay culture, may have in part disseminated misconceptions about cross-dressing, effeminacy, and the queer self. Widely popular texts such as *Some Like It Hot* (1959), *Tootsie* (1982), and *Mrs. Doubtfire* (1993)

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232 Popular drag personae emerging to national and international fame from their respective locales, such as African-American queen RuPaul and British queen Lily Savage (aka Paul O’Grady), as well as queer groups and enclaves, including 1980s Manhattan’s Club Kids (featuring, among others, the self-proclaimed “celebutandes” James St. James and Amanda Lepore) and voguing Houses, assertively enveloped their performances in celebrity narratives and propelled their praxes of drag into stardom.
have all incorporated cross-dressing (specifically, female drag) as a deceptive practice that assists the men in plot to “pass” as women. Though not directly drawing from gay drag, these were examples presenting feminized men as intentionally deceiving and exploitative of women’s expressive lexicon, an image that seems to pile on stereotypes of effeminate gay men. Conversely, queer artists extensively utilized drag in their texts by drawing from its cultural tank of camp. John Waters, Pedro Almodovar, and Harvey Fernstein are among those directors who have radically portrayed gay drag on screen and made their names synonymous with its camp content. Currently, gay drag enjoys the limelight of publicity across various platforms. Original Broadway hits featuring drag characters, such as *Rent* (1994), *Victor/Victoria* (1995), *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (1998), and *Kinky Boots* (2012), are frequently running global productions, while RuPaul’s television contest series, *RuPaul’s Drag Race* (2009~), has majorly impacted mainstream pop culture by making its way into prime time television, social media, and meme culture.

**Camp Fandom**

In light of the above, it becomes clear that the terrain drag has historically occupied is linked with the space of the stage and the poetics of spectacle. In order thus to conceptualize audience drag and, in particular, drag performed by the audience in the openness of the arena space, one must take into consideration the leap the camp of drag has taken from stage to audience, from subculture to popular culture, and, ultimately, from private to public sphere. Camp’s infiltration into mainstream pop provided the latter with colorful multiplicity and thus geared it toward favoring, even celebrating, identity flux and lush styles. Camp has traditionally reveled in alternating between images as well as queering popular texts by

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233 Adapted from the MGM production (1982), itself based on the original German work *Viktor und Viktoria* (1933).
means of humor, irony, and artifice. The popularity drag has attained in the past few years—not only manifest in the queens achieving celebrity status, but also in the widespread dissemination of drag culture, expressed through the high usage of camp talk and the gendered play—seems to mount the influential surge of camp in pop. In other words, camp has elasticized pop in becoming flexible enough to house the praxis of drag and place it on trend circulation. Such attainment would not have been achieved had not Western LGBT+ movements paved the way for queer visibility and flexibility of gender expression. To a large extent, queer culture has extensively relied on pop to move out of its peripheral position toward an epicenter—although still the prevalence of homophobia and sexism prove that this motion center stage has a glass ceiling. It can as well be argued that the (neo)liberal politics of the LGBT+ movement sought to underline the uniqueness of modern gay culture by promoting it as a vibrant and, most importantly, productive source of fashions, trends, and expressions. Simultaneously, inasmuch as gay culture has marketed its way through pop into mainstream culture, the latter has also benefited from and largely cultivated the socio-economic capital carried in practices of the former. Therefore, drag making inroads into popular culture is simultaneously a demonstration of queer culture’s progress-making as well as a result of savvy marketing by the mainstream and queer culture alike.

At the time being, drag in pop, as a practice emerging from and attached to gay culture, rejoices in its trend-setting position as well as the years of historical liminality it has withstood (or still withstands). As contemporary pop embraces gender fluidity, consumers of popular culture adopt a more flexible, certainly playful and fashion-conscious image of gender identity. In light of this, the trend of drag has interestingly spawned a wave of styles and fashions whose cultural roots are ingrained in its gendered philosophy of
transformation. While the future of drag’s popularity certainly invites more debate, especially if factored in is the futility of trends within the pop industry, what should be noted is that practices of gender transformation by means of style are increasingly becoming popular among consumers of pop. Fans from a variety of popular culture domains, including music or film fandom, express their affinity with their accustomed field not only through fashion and style, but also through role-playing and identity reconfiguration. The pop text they engage themselves in provides an arsenal of expressive, stylistic, and iconic vocabulary that allows fans to mould themselves into their favorite pop persona or even come up with their own personae.

Demonstrative of that, for instance, is cosplay, a practice that has grown in popularity over the past decade. Embracing role-playing through costuming, the practice has flourished within genre conventions, such as manga/anime, comic literature, fantasy, and science fiction, whose consumers enjoy dressing up and acting out popular characters while interacting with each other. Fans of *Lord of the Rings*, *Harry Potter* and the *X-Men* as well as *Doctor Who*,

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234 Consider, for instance, the case of faux queens (also known as bio queens), i.e. heterosexual women adopting the stylistic and expressive lexicon of drag queens—conversely, faux kings are male individuals performing in male drag (Harrington 2016). Faux queens’ performance of femininity is a deliberate parody of their cisgenderism, namely the state according to which their gender expression (femininity) is in socio-cultural alignment with their biological sex (femaleness). The drag of faux queens ends up being a double female parody, a female female impersonation or, in other words, female-to-female drag. As the usage of the terms indicates, the *faux* (i.e. artificial, fake) in *faux queen* presumes that the drag of women performing as women is only an imitation of the “original” drag in which the “real” queens are always males—specifically, queer ones—impersonating women. However, the culture of faux queens remains under the umbrella of drag with which it does not want to dissociate itself. Because of their affiliation with “original” drag, which they pay homage to, faux queens are well-received within gay culture and, more often than not, appear to be LGBT+ allies. For example, celebrity faux queens, such as Michele Visage and Ana Matronic of the Scissor Sisters, have each foddered their personae with the camp of drag and remained akin to the queer scene they have been part of. Interestingly, the female-to-female performance of faux queens also points to the plastic performance of femininity within neo-burlesque practices. The performative lexicons of both practices certainly overlap. See more on the neo-burlesque performances in Claire Nally’s essay on “Grrrrly Hurly Burly: Neo-Burlesque and the Performance of Gender.”

Spider-Man and Wonder Woman, among others, have each established their own cosplaying conventions where they interact in full drag and get to manifest their knowledge on their particular character or text. These live action fora can function as spaces of community formation where individuals have the opportunity to establish forms of belonging as well as acquire and demonstrate cultural capital. The practice of cosplay and, in fact, any similar drag/costuming praxis akin to pop attests to the fact that, in terms of reception, audiences have sought new ways of identification with the pop text/characters they invest in, which moves away from the now dated concept of the passive consumer of popular culture in favor of that of the prosumer (see Introduction). At the same time, this proves that pop, the paradigm of financially-driven modus operandi, will infinitely offer new ways of audience immersion, proving its ever-elusive capitalist nature.

Arguably, music fandom does not deviate from this pattern. With regard to the costuming of the self, music fans have likewise channeled their love of pop icons into stylistic transformations. The public persona of pop artists, as this is presented and mediated to their audiences, is always-already a performed identity with particularly expressive vocabulary, aesthetic sensibility, and social kinesis. As a result, this cultural lexicon surrounding the persona is readable and can become accessible to fans. The latter may select through a variety of codes offered by their adored persona and incorporate them into aspects of daily life, as explained earlier with the case of Madonna. Apparently, though, there exists a distinguishing line between dressing, say, like Madonna and immersing oneself fully in the performable aspect of the Madonna persona. While adopting elements from the persona’s stylistic vocabulary and fusing them with one’s own everyday style narrative is rather mundane in nature, a full-on drag requires an estimated amount of fan investment and largely points to a ritual-like practice. Not only do fans craft elaborate costumes out of their divas’
fashion arsenal, but they are also attentive to supportive details, such as props, as well as kinesis, thus rendering the drag performance a meticulous and certainly painstaking process.

Here, space and temporality are also two important factors that add up to this differentiation: fans in drag will either seek or create an occasion, such as a concert-event or a thematic convention, wherein they will act out the persona, whereas stylistic appropriations may smoothly integrate with the individual’s social routine and surroundings. It can be argued that impersonation, as perhaps the ultimate manifestation of fan devotion, binds the artistic persona with the consumer—or, in other words, the spectacle with the audience—in an act that strategically immaterializes the artist into icon and renders her/him performable and, by extrapolation, available to the fan. Tribute acts are exemplary of that: consider how Elvis impersonators have for years preserved and nurtured the cultural legacy and performative star of Presley. As Matt Hills argues, “Elvis impersonation is a project; it represents recourse to an archive (the precisely catalogued set of jumpsuits and outfits worn on-stage by Elvis; images of Elvis; set-lists and conventionalised details of his stage show), and recourse to a powerful set of memories; those of the fan’s lived experience as a fan” (165, italics in text). Similarly, audience drag sees fans immersing themselves into the cultural data and meta-data of the star performer, paying careful attention to all kinds of trivia that surround the performer in order to instill accuracy, precision and devotion into their drag delivery. The amount of detail and expertise pertinent to this dramatic reconfiguration of one’s social self into a popular persona not only points to maximal levels of emotional investment, but also underlines the praxis of drag as a skilful craft.

Approaching audience drag as a craft aligns the practice with camp’s philosophy of transformation and resistance. Camp has traditionally been an expressive mode attached to dominant culture, though existing as a rather distorted reflection of it. The images and
discourses promoted by high culture as serious, or those crudely enjoyed by low culture, are filtered by camp in manifold ways, ending up being playful, grotesque or risqué, among others. Such distortion requires that camp knowingly absorb the details of dominant culture in order to mould its own version of it by means of irony and parody. Simultaneously, the need to do so points to a desire for an alternative reality that divests itself the veil of seriousness and embraces frivolity. Gay men, as a matter of fact, have employed camp as a feint attack against heterodominant culture. The strategies of double entendres in camp talk or the queer appropriation of texts and images indicate how gay culture has strategically camouflaged its practices under those of the dominant one. A craft at times crafty, camp absorbs the discursive power of dominant culture and turns it into arcane knowledge shared amongst the queer few—at least, when camp would be practiced within subcultural and closeted queer circles prior to entering wider circulation by and through mainstream culture. Drag, in particular, has been a camp praxis that has paid scrutinizing attention to the heterodominant gender formation so as to achieve a consciously artificial performance of it by imitating every gendered detail. The ability of queer people to utilize transvestism for cross-identification and thus “pass” as real women and men attests to its status as camp artifice. Likewise, contemporary drag performance, which to a great extent is a self-conscious spectacle of gender—at times, a political one as well—has managed to maintain camp as an art of craft.

Drag is indeed a performative task that requires skillfulness and knowledge. In camp’s perception of a theatricalized reality, the dramatic reconfiguration of the self accrues from acknowledging and reiterating the mechanisms of gender ideologies. The discursive pool of femininity that camp so endlessly plunges into has served as the tank wherefrom drag derives its histrionic expression, as well as the socio-cultural position which the camp self
identifies with. Practitioners of drag and female impersonators, in general, have acquired and exercised the skill to interpret the performative lexicon of femininity before reenacting it on stage. Similarly, the camp self has learned to operate the poetics of flamboyance, such as effeminate body posture, highly stylized vocabulary or risqué humor, both as a queering praxis as well as a defensive mechanism. The esteemed status of the many diva icons and their worship within gay culture attest to the fact that camp—and drag, in particular—sees the highly constructed image of the diva as a terrain of dramatic action that has grown into form through role-playing. Simply put, the icon of the diva is a set of performative pieces assembled in glamorous craftsmanship. Camp and drag take pleasure in tracing the joints of the star body and having the opportunity to direct, reassemble and perhaps manipulate the diva text into new narratives. The identification with or impersonation of the diva instill into the camp self agency through the process of partaking in the construction of glamour.

To return to audience drag, considering how fan cultures devote themselves to their character of interest and engage in self-transformation, it can be argued that the act of fan drag is a craft exercised through meta-textual camp performance. As a matter of fact, audience drag can be classified among those other fan-oriented practices, such as collection of memorabilia and meta-textual production. Fans in drag acting out divas, in particular, rely on and act upon their investment in and familiarization with the specific gimmicks of the star persona, including her sensibility, her own performance of femininity as well as her

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236 For instance, camp talk has notoriously been used as a defense mechanism against heterodominant culture. By utilizing extremely formal vocabulary to the point of incongruity or by humorously renaming people or situations, the speaker wishes to parody and neutralize certain aspects of the oppressive mainstream culture. For more consider Keith Harvey’s work on “Translating Camp Talk: Gay Identities and Cultural Transfer.”

237 As a practice that yet again points to the nature of fans as prosumers, meta-textual production, usually found in the domains of comic literature and fantasy, sees fans developing and reimagining their own texts, versions and narratives of their adored pop objects. Fans of the Pokémon franchise, for instance, have for years created their own versions of Pokémon characters with alternate narrative structures, thus establishing fan-made stories parallel to the original franchise. Likewise, the genre of manga has witnessed fan-made literature of popular Japanese comic characters, including Sailor Moon and Naruto, allowing thus fans to partake in the production process of their objects of interest.
social demeanor in and out of stage. Apart from the metonymic understanding of craft as skill and knowledge, though, there is the corporeal manifestation which reifies fans’ expression of adoration. Impersonation is above all a process that practically sees the fan of the star persona becoming the star persona. The material needed for this transformation, from wigs and make-up to costumes and signature props, makes the fans’ experiential prosumption of the star persona tangible. Their embodiment of the latter, therefore, is physical through and through. For instance, Lady Gaga’s fandom has notoriously seen costuming and impersonation as part and parcel of the diva’s stage theatrics. The means by which fans approach the icon of Gaga are demonstrative of a do-it-yourself (DIY) aesthetic. In utilizing every kind of material, they can showcase a homemade version of Lady Gaga that successfully imitates the prototype in appearance, manner, and posture. Drawing from the diva’s large repository of images and performances as these are mediated toward them, fans will reenact a specific version of Lady Gaga. When fans in drag eventually coalesce into the communal space of the spectacle, Gaga’s visual and stylistic artistry becomes a performed canvas embodied by her audience.

The reason why audience drag, more often than not, flourishes within the pop diva spectacle is due to the fact that the personae, stage, and cultural appeal of the latter are in constant experimentation of and contestation with the domains of gender and sexuality. Though typical concerts from global male artists, such as Justin Timberlake, Bruno Mars, or Justin Bieber, are generally more gig-oriented, the diva concert embraces theatrical elements.

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238 YouTube in fact abounds in video tutorials which present techniques to dress up specifically as Lady Gaga. 239 Music videos and album covers usually serve as the commonest sources of the cited performance and are indicative of a plurality of looks, each signifying a different phase of the artist that best expresses the fan’s personal relationship with her: for example, fans in drag citing from the Born This Way era favor the gothic-rock looks and iconicity of videos, such as “Born this Way” and “Judas,” while those adoring Gaga’s debut album and early career hits dress up in plastic and vinyl material evident of the “Poker Face” and “Paparazzi” aesthetic.
which, to a great extent, allow for dramatic fluidities when it comes to gender performance and the role-playing persona on stage. The diva audiences are, thus, in tune with that histrionic aesthetic of the performed show. Apart from that, the camp appeal of drag culture and that of cross-dressing as a gimmick have been favored by pop divas—especially those examined here—and have occasionally been cited as artistic material. Madonna, for instance, has frequently been joined by drag queens onstage who were dressed as her own lookalikes; an appearance at an MTV awards show broadly reminded her influence on drag culture.\textsuperscript{240} Lady Gaga has also been in constant communication with the drag scene; apart from crafting her own male alter ego, Jo Calderone, the artist brought focus on drag shows when she decided to feature popular queens in one of her promotional videos.\textsuperscript{241} From Cher and Jennifer Lopez to Miley Cyrus and Katy Perry, an array of pop divas have actively engaged with the drag culture, thus establishing their stage personae as infinite sources of imitation not only for professional female impersonators, but for audiences as well.

In camp culture, the desire to act upon the diva text has been an identificatory practice which has for years nurtured queer individuals with a sense of empowerment and community. Enclosed in camp’s kernel, transformation and resistance are those quintessential qualities that have energized the diva identification and have thus been transferred into the practice of audience drag. The diva emulates an empowering role-model who encloses narratives of emotionality, vulnerability, and passion alongside highly-stylized looks and assertive attitude. What gay audiences, specifically, find appealing in divas is also

\textsuperscript{240} In the 1999 awards show, MTV paid tribute to Madonna with a brief drag catwalk performance featuring queens that impersonated the diva in some of her most popular acts, including those of “Express Yourself,” “Vogue” and “Frozen,” to mention just a few.

\textsuperscript{241} The promotional lyric video for “Applause” featured drag queens who eventually became widely known through RuPaul’s contest series. The video widely impacted music television as the lead single of Gaga’s then-forthcoming \textit{ARTPOP} album, prior to being replaced with the official one (dir. Inez and Vinoodh) which also celebrated the art of transformation.
partly linked with the rejection of an identification with the male stars whose impossible masculinities may indeed serve as objects of queer desire, yet they seldom allow for effective queer identification. Conversely, the diva’s feminine pathos does serve as an expressive position wherefrom queer individuals can draw symbolic power and interpret their life narratives through the diva’s dramaturgy. As a celebrity star, the diva’s own life narrative is made available to the fans in mediated forms, which rather function as magnifying lens and may distort the reality around the diva; hence, the diva narrative in and out of stage becomes extra-reality, a fantasy. Fans, of course, are aware of the celebrity artifice into which they consciously indulge. Yet, what arguably fuels the queer appeal of the diva nests in the trading of conventional reality for an alternative one wherein the queer self is freed, perhaps partly and momentarily so, from gender-imposed expressions and identifications.

This is further sustained by the qualities of transformation and resistance found in the diva text: the life and career narratives of female star personae abound with discourses of challenging phases, survival skills, come-back stories and image reinventions. The star narratives of the divas examined in this project, including Kylie, Beyoncé, and Lady Gaga, align with those of Liz Taylor, Diana Ross, and Judy Garland that so endlessly foddered the camp canon of yesteryear. In other words, the challenge of survival and the need to adapt to adversities usually comprise the social reality of queer life when placed in a heterodominant and patriarchal context in which discrimination over, fear of, and, at times, violence against the queer self require from the latter to be constantly defiant and agile. Referring to Judy Garland, Richard Dyer underlines that the diva’s star appeal is based on a combination of strength and suffering to which queer audiences respond (2004, 144-45). Rich in themes of empowerment and assertiveness, diva texts are variable and polysemous, which means that a plurality of meanings will appeal to each individual idiosyncratically. However, the qualities
they carry can address the socio-psychic basis of queerness as this experientially accrues from the queer *modus vivendi*. Always aware of possible essentialisms behind this argument, it should be noted that throughout the global history of queerness, there have been patterns of frequency and consistency shared alike by most queer individuals: deviance from conventional social genders that lead to discriminatory practices, whether these entail violence, hierarchy or invisibility, are arguably encountered in most societal structures. As queerness and the social living of it become a point of reference in the life of a queer individual, it is understood that, on a collective level, the sensibilities and perceptions of queer people, *mutatis mutandis*, are more likely to converge. The fact that diva worshipping is a practice encountered across a variety of queer cultural models, each, of course, pertaining to cultural and local specificities, demonstrates that star narratives encompass thematic strands and emotional maps that resonate within queer imagination worldwide. As a matter of fact, world divas with strong queer following such as Dalida, Maria Callas, and Selena seem to have exemplified this pattern through their tragic icons and life narratives.

Though identification through empathy has been fundamental in establishing solid queer fandom around the personae of some of the most popular divas, it is a poetics of attitude that equally informs the divas’ appeal to queer imagination. Whereas empathy addresses the queer emotional basis connected to vulnerability and the feeling of being misfit in a heterodominant reality, expressing thus some sort of passivity, attitude reflects an active means of coping with that reality. Sassiness, aloofness as well as the fads and quirks of divas constitute some of the characteristics that add up to their attitude, instilling in their behavior, posture and performance an extra-ordinary quality. As celebrities, divas are public figures whose private life is constantly in the spotlight. Developing attitude partly demonstrates their response to an inquisitive and hectic lifestyle that demands from them to behave in a very
specific and, at times, staged manner.\textsuperscript{242} Of course, attitude may also be a derivative of luxury and leisure along with a sense of superiority and vindictiveness, qualities largely found in camp practices as well.\textsuperscript{243} In all cases, its expression points to a sarcastic weapon against uncomfortable, hostile situations or extremely trivial conventions. As a result, queer audiences often revel in divas’ sassy demeanor and may usually internalize and reproduce that certain attitude both as camp pleasure and a form of counter-response. The welcoming of divas in queer culture and their worshipped status within camp traditions attest to them being collectively agreed-upon models of empathy and attitude, variously fulfilling, foddering and cementing queer fantasies, desires, sentiments, and mentalities. To identify, thus, with a diva is a practice entailing the individual and their own interpretation and engrossment of the former’s star text.

Apart from empowerment, diva-worshipping is a practice entailing collective queerness, thus acquiring a communal character. Fanpages, online accounts or fora dedicated to a diva are, of course, some of the ways that facilitate intra-fanbase communication. Fan communities are certainly not a new phenomenon, but in the digital era it has evidently become much more direct, fast and plural. Yet, the actual spaces of fan congregation, which is where collective queerness materializes, have traditionally been sites of community manifestation and formation. In the past, the discotheque, of course, served as a queer communal space. Diva tribute parties, especially those held by queer bars, are certainly...

\textsuperscript{242} Consider the case of Britney Spears’ infamous breakdown in 2007 and her sassy response in her comeback album \textit{Blackout} (2007).

\textsuperscript{243} For instance, the practices of “throwing shade” and “reading” (or put-down) have been common within camp culture, requiring wit, smart-strike focus, and swiftness, so as to be as effective as possible. Eloquent queens will take a jab at each other or third parties in verbal battles that prove how each has honed the craft of vindictive camp talk. Camp talk has time and again come across as crude and virulent, yet it has also forged effeminate men who practice it with an aggressive quick response and disarming humor that accrues from their oppressed position within patriarchy-ordered social structures. See more in E. Patrick Johnson’s \textit{“SNAP! Culture: A different Kind of Reading”} (2003) and \textit{No Tea, No Shade: New Writings in Black Queer Studies} (2016) as well as Marlon Ross’s \textit{“Camping the Dirty Dozens: The Queer Resources of Black Nationalist Invective”} (2000).
another case in point. Most importantly, though, diva concerts, which are the primary focus of this project, are the communal space of queer fandom par excellence due to the divas’ live immediacy and the gig’s event-nature. In them, the communal character of the diva worshipping pattern seems even more concrete as it operates in a combined framework of space and temporality concerning the live event. Sites of congregation where queer/camp expression converges and is provided with the necessary affective ground, aid toward a corporeal manifestation of collective queerness.

Again, the case of Judy Garland and her gay male fandom here serves an interesting case in point and a noteworthy historical reference to queer fan collectivity of the past. Attracting numerous gay men, Garlands concerts served as spaces of free queer expression and interaction. As Daniel Harris argues, “[a]lthough Garland was in many ways a brilliant performer, homosexuals came to regard her simply as the catalyst for the raucous, gay pride ‘love-ins’ that erupted spontaneously during her concerts”(17). The star’s role was crucial in bringing gay men together who often joined the concert not only to see her performing, but also for the sake of interacting with each other. Harris underlines that “[Garland’s] uncritical mass appeal helped overcome our fragmentation to create for only a few hours, within the safe confines of the auditorium, an ephemeral, transitory ‘community’ that lured us out of the closets in order to experience the unforgettable thrill of a public celebration of homosexuality” (17). The writer makes an accurate point in establishing the site of the concert as a public space that creates temporary communal bonds and offers its contours for emotional interplay. Considering the time frame of Garland’s performing career, homosexuality, let alone a public manifestation of it, remained largely clandestine. The idea of expressing one’s queerness in public entailed a certain degree of risk, since exposure often equaled public ridicule and brutality. For gay men, to be able to freely interact with each other publicly
required that a safety net was provided. The fact that Garland’s concerts could function as such bespeaks of an empowerment that derived both from the relationship of those gay men with the performing diva as well as from the actual and tangible kinship formed between them. The diva concert, thus, offered itself as the occasion during which the dream of an out-and-proud manifestation of queerness, indeed a utopia at the time, could become a reality.

In the context of the contemporary diva spectacle, the arena space is conducive to queer expression and collectivity and, by extension, embraces the practice of audience drag. As has been made apparent, the camp of drag may come across as radical when taken out of a theatrical environment and brought out in public. Fans in drag attending a concert most of the times appear at the arena space already dressed up, which means that the costuming preparation and drag transformation happens elsewhere, possibly at a domestic environment. The itinerary from one’s starting point to the concert means that a part of the drag performance takes place in the openness of the streets, which at times can be an unpredictable environment for camp expression. A person in drag, especially drag that is not utilized for “passing,” but to flaunt one’s queerness, can often be vulnerable to conservative attitude and condemnation; homophobic and transphobic behaviors are, in fact, not uncommon acts against effeminate targets. This is always locale-specific, though, and should be examined as such: namely, certain metropolitan centers, such as New York City or Amsterdam, appear more acclimated with flamboyant styles and queer fashions when compared to others, such as Moscow or Jakarta, which are renowned for their generally conservative public (see chapters one and four). On the other hand, it could be argued that since international diva tours usually impact local media news, the host city in large is probably aware of the forthcoming event and may become more of a tolerating space for fans appearing in diva drag publicly. Though diva drag alludes to a fan culture and may come
across as less radical than actual cross-dressing because of its playful theatricality, it still is a practice run on a certain degree of risk as well as the fan’s repository of emotional strength needed to accomplish a public drag performance. Transvestism remains largely connected to queer sex and cruising activity, a fact that instills radicalness in drag acts performed in public, outside the contours of stage or subculture.

Juxtaposed to the above, the space of the arena seems to compensate for the potentially hostile environment of the streets. The performing persona and the content of the show per se are indicative of the sensibilities of an estimated majority of the attending audience. Persona and show are quintessential markers of the audience’s musical appeal, fashion sense, and expressive tastes. These markers establish the appropriate aesthetic environment where audiences are welcomed into. For example, hip-hop gigs usually point to racially diverse urban youth, whereas classic rock concerts might gravitate toward much older and less diverse audiences. In a diva show, audiences are predominantly comprised of female and gay male audiences. In term of aesthetics, the diva stage allows for a theatricalization of the surrounding environment and, most importantly, sets the camp tone in action. Hence, flamboyance, choreographed structures, dramatic ballads as well as dance-inflected tunes are those core elements that fill the audiovisual space of the arena and will, thus, nest into the spectatorship. For queer audiences and fans attending in drag, the camp-tinged concert provides the space of the arena with a much-needed sense of a histrionic expression when it comes to gender identity. The here-and-now of the performed show instills in the practice of audience drag a sense of socio-cultural relevance that sees fans revolving around the axis of the diva body. Pointing to a camp utopia, wherein flamboyance, effeminacy, and, generally, queerness vividly fit into place, the diva concert, apart from incorporating camp leitmotifs, traditions, and subcultures, significantly braids pop
entertainment with queer collectivity. Examining performance sites as utopic spaces, Jill Dolan perceives “the audience as a group of people who have elected to spend an evening or an afternoon not only with a set of performers enacting a certain narrative arc or aesthetic trajectory, but with a group of other people, sometimes familiar, sometimes strange” (10). “Audiences form temporary communities, sites of public discourse that,” as the writer argues, “along with the intense experiences of utopian performatives, can model new investments in and interactions with variously constituted public spheres” (10). Dolan underlines here the pedagogic character of theater and performance in suggesting that audiences might bring into their social routines the affect and sensibilities they receive from their participatory activity (10-11). Likewise, diva audiences partaking in a camp-fueled and queer-embracing spectacle develop a more flexible understanding of gendered performance and become familiar to aspects of queer culture.

As a social practice, audience drag demonstrates that divas can motivate queer fans into acquiring a self-assertive gender expression even by means of camp. With drag’s popular surge, the utilization and dissemination of camp expression has much vitalized gay identities and has reaffirmed/reclaimed the campy queen, the stereotyped target and fear of gay and straight machismo, as a vital component of queer culture. As the aesthetic and political embodiment of camp, the drag queen specifically—drag kings, perhaps worriedly, have remained in her shadow—becomes a dual template that reflects both heterosexual and queer culture: with a rather unquestionably “gay” sensibility, her mockery of femininities and assaults on masculinities expresses all those gendered fantasies, fears, desires, and anxieties that heterosexual culture has projected upon the queer one, and vice versa. Copying highly popular divas, drag queens have often aspired to stardom and,

244 See Halberstam’s essay on “Oh Behave! Austin Powers and the Drag Kings” (pp. 125-151) in In a Queerer Place and Time: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives (2005).
simultaneously, have been bound to the limits of their stage. Approaching racial drag in the spaces of subcultural bars and clubs and through the text of *Paris Is Burning*, Daniel Contreras sees “drag as emblematic of unrequited love and dreams of utopia. This is drag as pathos; drag as *Hollywood* pathos is perhaps the most compelling consideration...The ‘suffering woman’ occupies much of [the writer’s] thought about gay men of color and their relationship to the world at large” (76, italics in text). The model of audience drag proposed here wishes to acknowledge the pathos of the drag queen, but also place it alongside the frivolity and gaiety of entertainment; after all, melodrama and playfulness co-exist in camp’s arsenal. Moving beyond the confines of drag bar into the openness of the diva concert as well as trading the stereotype of a pathetic femininity with a self-empowering one, audience drag attests to a modern and certainly updated view of gay culture which has grown intimate with its flamboyant side. Queer fans in drag actively celebrate the camp tradition of the diva worship and, thus, organically help to envision a queer utopia within the microcosm of the diva spectacle. Channeling their inner divas, fans become involved in the theatrics of gender and consciously camp up their performances. Therefore, audience drag is deeply a spectatorial practice through which fans, both consumers and performers of spectacle, have come to somatically respond to its dramatization.

To be able to celebrate the camp of drag out of its subcultural liminality is undoubtedly demonstrative of a progress with regard to gender appreciation and the politics of gay culture. What would have been unthought-of not more than thirty years ago, when the anti-queer rhetoric accompanying the HIV/AIDS epidemic had reached a climax, currently enjoys a public spot and is a practice favored by both queer and fan cultures. Arguably, female impersonation and diva worship have proven to be lasting shared traditions in the history of camp. Though the role-models upheld are idiosyncratic and locale-specific, the
practices themselves are cross-culturally adapted and performed. Global-wise, each queer culture features their own pantheon of adored divas, while there are models with an international appeal outreach, such as the diva cases examined in this project. What has to be understood, though, is that divas are flexibly marketable models. The fact that they inhabit an esteemed place within queer cultures should not point to any absolutisms. Divas are after all cultural products of the pop industry created to cater to all possible consumers. It would be erroneous to claim that audience drag, for that matter, as a diva identification practice is gay-specific and only allows for queer expression. The diva text is flexible enough to accommodate both queer and non-queer identificatory praxes like impersonation. For instance, Beyoncé and Lady Gaga’s fanhood is largely comprised of heterosexual women who share the same amount of emotional and financial investment in their adored star personae with the queer fanbases. Undoubtedly, the divas’ camp appeal has widely connected them with queer cultures, a fact that renders the practice of audience drag a potent camp praxis whose flair remains akin to the flamboyant performance of gayness/queerness. This should not by any means mean that it is queer-exclusive. Heterosexual girls in diva attire may as well acknowledge and pay homage to the practice of drag as a queer-related one or may simply be drawn to the entertaining practice of role-playing and costuming while attending a concert; both might as well be the case.

The popularity of audience drag, indeed a convergence of drag culture with music fandom and DIY costuming practices, is inextricable with consumer and celebrity cultures and its future (or futility) in part depends on the mechanics of the latter. Referring to professional impersonation, Nightingale argues that:

impersonation generates another experience, a re-creation of the star not as an image but as a story about capitalism, often as the story of a contradiction in capitalism. As
the ‘star’s’ personal narrative is recreated and explored by the impersonator, another performance, another personal narrative is pursued—the impersonator’s life as the star. (qtd. in Hills 160)

The desire for star materiality and star material per se are noticeable objectives in the practice of fan drag which sees fans performing their own consumer status. Audience drag, indeed a capitalist-bound praxis, plays upon both the commercial and emotional link developed between divas and fans. The performatives of drag and diva tribute are the tangible reenactments of the diva-fan relationship and, by extension, an endorsement of the camp culture enveloping both. Fan practices cannot possibly be conceived of outside the framework of market economy because this is what practically gives birth to them; hence, the contract established between stars and fans will always be of consumerist nature. Seeing also camp’s indulgence in celebrity narratives and images of glamour, one cannot help but notice the contradiction, as Nightingale has pointed out, behind the practice of fan drag. Divas texts serve as fodder material for camp which thrives and feeds on them; simultaneously, camp responds by sanctioning the means of exchange, thus, perpetuating a circulation of the socio-cultural capital operating the relationship.

In Livingston’s seminal *Paris Is Burning*, the queens seem to face daily struggles in their subcultural environment and while they practically enjoy impersonating stars fêted by the voguing scene, they do not seem to eschew from the pursuit of glamorous lifestyle they so fervently oppose. The paradox lies at the core of their camp praxis, which simultaneously criticizes and idolizes celebrity culture. On the one hand, when we juxtapose the performance of drag within the voguing houses to the one performed in the openness of an arena concert, another paradox unfolds. Though the leap from liminal to public as regards the performance of flamboyance is evident of a progressive appreciation of queer expression,
one has to reassess the means by which the camp of diva worship is realized. Space is important here: the subcultural position of the voguing queens had been a daily challenge that continually contested their relationship to the diva culture; on the contrary, the fan practice of drag is celebrated in the arena concert environment, the entrance to which presupposes financial and emotional investment, thereby endorsing the diva spectacle without actually challenging it. Diva culture is habitually idolized, but barely criticized. Audience drag, thus, is indicative of how the camp of drag has largely been accommodated by and into mainstream popular culture. On the other hand, the coming of age of queer culture and its moving toward a more visible place are facts that should be neither underestimated nor downplayed. The fact that diva concerts provide welcoming ground for queer expression and collectivity serve as a reminder of the socio-historical trajectory of queer communities from oppression and liminality to a less peripheral and self-loathing position. Rather than being the sole result of finding relief from oppressive narratives and realities, queer expression in the concert space is geared toward the spectacle of flamboyance and collective entertainment. As stated in the epigraph of this chapter, *Paris Is Burning* stars “were having a ball” and addressed all those outside their circle with an ambisem: “wish you were here” is inviting (i.e. we wish you were here) and taunting (i.e. you wish you were here), at the same time. Celebratory and flaunting, communal and simultaneously glitzy, the diva concert upholds the said mantra and carries on the tradition of camp.
Conclusion

In approaching contemporary diva spectacles and queer audiences, this research has explicated the correlation established between the two through the lens of camp performance. The tour spectacles of Madonna, Kylie Minogue, Beyoncé, and Lady Gaga have served as the template upon which this correlation has been examined. The decision to approach the said performers and their tour shows is governed by the logic that, apart from their large queer fan following, their live stage houses a plethora of queer references, be they acts that directly draw from the artistic repository of queer culture or showcases that bear strong queer resonances as well as praxes that are energized with the poetics of camp. In addition, since the abovementioned artists are queer icons with a global appeal, and the tour concert is the live medium (digital media aside) through which audiences are reached, the spatiotemporal constituents of the concert-event have also been taken into consideration as queer audiences and, generally, reception from local communities worldwide tend to be idiosyncratic and, occasionally, unpredictable. What this thesis establishes is that diva camp spectacles, as a fusion of the rock concert and musical theater with additional citation from opera and disco, largely rely on queer praxes, traditions, and fashions as a means of queer-baiting their audiences, simultaneously serving though as socio-political sites that promote freedom of sexual and gender expression through a politics of diversity and inclusion. In terms of reception, it has been demonstrated that queer audiences endorse the diva spectacle by immersing themselves in the camp culture presented through the diva persona and her stage, most evidently through the practice of audience drag, a costuming transformation of the fan body into the adored diva that has its origins in drag culture and exemplifies a contemporary cosplay practice materializing in the public space of the concert-event.
More specifically, this research has proposed that the music diva has emerged as the dominant diva model within camp culture and (Western) queer culture in general. Though diva adoration prior to the rise of an out and proud queer culture was almost exclusively connected to Classical Hollywood female stars, with queer individuals identifying with and indulging in the camp icons of, say, Marlene Dietrich, Bette Davis, and Joan Crawford, it is argued here that the music diva has largely replaced her filmic counterpart as demonstrative of a contemporary model of adoration. Contrary to the film text, which usually offered female models driven by pathos and punishment, the music text and its narrative visualization present more self-assertive and empowering role-models as exemplified by female artists such as Diana Ross, Cher, and Madonna. With queer focus gradually shifting on this newly-emerged model, music divas, acknowledging their queer appeal, have managed to directly connect their icons with queer culture, though simultaneously retaining those elements that guaranteed them a cross-over mainstream career. Not only does this research project argue that diva performances operate on queer aesthetics, but also annotates common artistic sources, intertextual references and, most importantly, an active employment of camp poetics and campification processes on their behalf, all constituting the core of their queer appeal. Contemporary music divas, as opposed to the diva models of the past, seem to claim authorial positions in terms of image promotion and show production (at least partly so, considering that the showbiz industry heavily relies on popular demand and trends), and their conscious engagement with queer culture marks the nature of their spectacle with inclusivity and openness. This is the reason why music diva camp has been consistently popular with queer audiences over the past three decades.

In addition, the diva spectacle, as analyzed in the four case studies of this research, draws from the tradition of musical theater in featuring narrative act(s) and promoting role-
playing. This is an important component in queer pleasure since alternating setting and fluidity of identity are effective in foregrounding a plural self in terms of gender and sexuality. Manifestly different from a typical male pop show, let alone a traditional rock concert, the diva show theatricalizes the concept of the music concert in a way that creative and thematic arcs ultimately give creators the opportunity to play with conventions of all kind as well as stage acts that are socially and politically aware. Traditionally, the female pop concert has been deemed as feminine/-izing, apolitical, and lite, contrary to its male counterpart and, especially, the male rock concert, which, following the discursive steps of its musical genre, has been viewed as masculine, serious, and bearing political edge. This thesis challenges this very idea by establishing that the diva spectacle, though never eschewing a frivolous approach, can as well be governed by a socio-political ethos that wishes to inform and, at times, instruct its audiences. With regard to queer culture, diva spectacles have time and again engaged with queer topics on stage, from romance and sex to identity and advocacy, thereby remaining sensitive to queer reality and, of course, in close proximity with queer audiences.

Of primary importance for this research has been to historicize, contextualize and, at times, challenge praxes of diva camp as well as critically assess their reception from a global perspective. Since all divas examined as case studies here as well as the spectacle they sell are permeated with concepts and views (especially those pertaining to gender and sexuality) of a Western background with additional markers of race, class, and ethnicity, it has been imperative to place each act and praxis into a cultural context that takes into account local and global politics, understandings of gender expression, specificities as regards the origins of queer practices and traditions in tandem with processes of cultural appropriation, borrowing, and homage, and, last but certainly not least, the impact of each diva’s icon.
More specifically, the camp of Madonna has served as a dense cultural body of work in dissecting the concepts of camp nostalgia and tribute acts as well as delving deeper into the queer scenes of disco and vogue. The persona and spectacle of Kylie Minogue has raised some important questions with regard to gendered transformations and the cult of glamorous femininity, and further allowed for critical insight into camp’s gender-coded system in which notions of femininity and effeminacy collide and simultaneously coexist with masculinity. Beyoncé’s performance of black camp was crucial in tracing racial inflections, traditions, styles, and mannerisms inherent in camp’s queer lexicon, thus helping toward a more nuanced evaluation of the politics and poetics of camp beyond its conspicuously white canon. A camp politics of inclusion and radical opposition against normative moulds was the focal point of Lady Gaga’s camp acts, whose narrative structures with their moral concepts as well as their elaborate staging that draws from the genres of fantasy and musical theater have significantly vitalized camp’s entertaining frivolity with socio-political awareness. All things considered, this thesis has proposed the concept of audience drag, an immersive fan practice, by historicizing its praxis in drag culture and evaluating it as a creative and potent performance that operates on the poetics of camp in not only asserting queer audiences’ diva appeal, but, most importantly, cultivating freedom of gender and sexual expression as well as serving as a communal praxis that promotes queer collectivity.

In conclusion, this research has been carried out with the ethos of critical gender studies which it hopes to bolster further. The idea of a stigmatized camp culture that has for years been guilt/shame-ridden, with queer individuals being of course the recipients of those feelings and attitudes, is what this project seeks to challenge without overlooking ills and flaws behind it, aligning thus with the queer school of thought that turn a critical eye both inter- and intra-communally. In recuperating camp as an assertive performance, as
exemplified by the contemporary diva models, and an artistic weapon against dominant cultural norms, as variably exercised by queer generations globally, this thesis highlights the importance of carrying on a tradition of camp, which despite its cooptation by mainstream culture or its commodification by its very own affiliates, still manages to enclose a potent critique in its queer kernel. With the hope of further contributing to its fields of interest, namely LGBT+ studies, performance studies, and popular culture studies, this research presents itself as an annotation of queer cultural praxis as well as a methodological tool that can critically navigate its reader through issues of discrimination, shaming, and rejection and counter-argue for collectivity, expressivity, and inclusion.
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Interviews

Jamel Prodigy (Derek Auguste)

This interview has been conducted via online recorded message. The interviewee has willingly agreed to the material being published within the scope of this dissertation.

KC: The ballroom scene of the 1970s-80s New York has inspired great cultural, social and academic interest. What is your personal experience from it (if any)? What, in your opinion, has changed over the years?

JP: My personal experiences from the ballroom scene have been actually quite amazing. I grew up in ballroom, my discovered ballroom, at around sixteen-seventeen, but at that time I actually wasn’t a competitor. I’d just been so amazed by this genre of dance that allowed you to just be so free an express yourself and your authenticity. When I was younger, I went to the Broadway art school, danced and trained, I auditioned, joined companies, and always tried to join many companies. I just felt like that I was a great dancer, but because of my size – and I was so much more petit then, you know – I just wasn’t booking a lot of gigs, you know, and it was very difficult for stage producers to actually find a place for me in productions. So, it kind of discouraged me as a performer. I started to look further into voguing and, you know, I saw that they celebrated feminine, petit, slender, you know, boys, and I was like “Oh my God! OK, That’s me!” you know, and “I can dance!” and “I can definitely do that!” […] From that moment I realized that that’s where I was to perform, that was my niche. And, so, it became super-fine for me. I just couldn’t stop voguing; I vogued every night. I probably went to almost every ball, I tried to go to every ball every weekend, and, you know, I just wanted to just get better and better, and trained. I got better and I was winning and, you know, and the rest is history.

And so much of ballroom has changed over the years and has changed for the better, because mainstream media has been, you know, slowly but surely receptive to our contributions to media, and to so many creative artists and brands. We [are] finally getting the reputation that we desire; for the ballroom scene is full of creative talent and, you know, artists, or creative artists. We were never really conditioned to take our ballroom or / (slash) stage dance into other board rooms, you know what I mean. It’s like we were told that, you know, our ballroom names actually… we couldn’t put on resumes at one time. But it wasn’t until, you know, people like Jose Xtravaganza and Willie Ninja and Pony Zion and Leiomy Maldonado broke those barriers. […] They made sure that, you know, we can use our names like, this [is] what we do. We are creative artists.

So, the scene has definitely evolved. There’s so much […] talent and the youth, and they have so much inspiration now; and they are actually training a lot more than we probably did, because we didn’t have access to studios. You know, back in the days, you didn’t vogue in the studio; you learned how to vogue probably somewhere you weren’t supposed to be in the nightclub; dancing on the dancefloor, playing with your girlfriends and your latest fashions, or your fresh beat face, you know… So, now it’s amazing to see that vogue is being taught at Alvin Ailey or Broadway Dancing and there are so many people
abroad that are learning from the culture. And now, you know, there are brands that are hiring vogue performers […] as specialty or featured artist to contribute to commercials and productions. So, the scene is definitely evolving and it’s elevating and it’s changing. The venues are changing. And again, it’s just becoming a much more diverse and serious scene. You know, it’s not so underground anymore.

KC: Being a professional dancer yourself, how would you characterize voguing? Is it attitude? Is it theater? Is it language?

JP: Voguing is definitely 40 maybe 50% attitude [smiles]. 25%… I wanna [sic] say 25% theatre and 25% language. Attitude? You’d be surprised. When you’re confident and, you know, you’re really feeling it, you’d be surprised. You can compete and battle someone who has had the most amazing training; who can do spins, flips, and splits all over you. But if your attitude is opulent […] and you’re displaying that you’re not pressed or intimidated those are the […] factors that make you a winner. Because you already know you’re a winner. You know what I mean, you’re not really trying. It’s nothing to you, it’s effortless. And, so, voguing is really so much more; it’s so much about confidence and just being comfortable in your skin. You know I’ve been voguing for over fifteen year […] Now, I’m not gonna [sic.] say my voguing has changed. I just got more comfortable with who I was. And if you look at any other vogue performers and watch their development, you’ll also see that their movements didn’t really change. They just learnt who they was [sic] and got more comfortable with who they was [sic]. So, yeah. It doesn’t really change. […] You just grow into yourself and you learn yourself and you believe in yourself more. But again it’s 50% attitude, definitely.

KC: In terms of performance and choreography, voguing has been acknowledged for its gender-bending qualities. What, in your view, testifies to that?

JP: Well, yeah. Well, there are several categories to voguing: you have the Old Way, which focuses more on kinda [sic] like a spin-off, popping and locking and it’s the lines and precision and… it’s a sort of a feminine, effeminate qualities, but it’s much more masculine, you know. It’s a little bit more serious. And then you have Vogue Femme which is all around your femininity, whether it’s being dramatic or soft. It’s all around being feminine and celebrating your flamboyance, or you’re gayness. And you have the New Way which is around precision and stretching, being agile and flexible. Vogue definitely is gender-fluid. Think about it: the butch-queen, which is male, a male who is feminine, voguing femme; so its butch-queen vogue femme. It’s all around a male who can portray the movements of a female. You know what I’m sayin’? It’s really a place where you can actuall be free, you know […] and be gender-queer, and just let go. So there’s really no real/wrong way. Voguing or vogue performance is somewhat genderless. It’s really just around your feeling and who you want to be in your performance in the moment.

KC: In the past, the vogue culture created strong communal bonding among its members, mainly through the formation of collectives, i.e. Houses (e.g. House of Prodigy). Do you think this form of kinship still exists? What is your account of the Houses?
JP: Oh, yes. Houses are extremely tight. In my experiences in the House of Prodigy, I’ve been in the House of Prodigy. I was an original member and I being a member of the House of Prodigy for about twelve to thirteen years. About twelve-thirteen years. There’s a camaraderie and kinship. You know what I’m sayin’? There are parental roles, parental figures, there is a brotherhood. You know, a lot of us are performers or creative artists or make-up artists, directors, producers, hair-stylists, culinary artists, chefs etc. It’s like we’re all, we all contribute to each other, you know, and each other’s projects, and we try to support each other. And, that’s what it’s about. The camaraderie. It’s about that structure.

The concept of ballroom was created around this community that was rejected by mainstream society. And it’s like “OK, we need to create own sense of celebrity and our own world for ourselves.” So, when the house scene was created, it was pretty much creating these families or you know these extended families or brotherhood, where people were actually gonna [sic] be themselves and learn about life without being judged or being, you know what I’m sayin’ [sic], rejected, or humiliated […] Houses to this day are, you know, developed for several reasons. Now, because the scene is becoming so much more, you know, commercialized and appreciated in mainstream media, you have some Houses that are being developed strictly as production companies. And that’s amazing to me, because, you know, instead of functioning, targeting or targeting the ballroom, you’re targeting mainstream media or the mainstream industry, and working as a ballroom House. So, to me, that’s so amazing.

And, then, you also have Houses that are, you know, structured around just really creating a family environment for the young gay kids that are coming out, that are not really focused on being a professional artist, but are really just seeking, you know, suffrage and some place, a place that they can call home, and a safe zone. So, yeah, it still exists very strongly. I, personally, am not a parent, I don’t have any gay childrens [sic], but I definitely have a slew of brothers and sisters that I consult with. I support, I console, you know, and it’s an amazing feeling to know that you contribute positivity to some people’s lives.

KC: As a practice – one would say tradition, as well – voguing can now be found and has been adopted by LGBT communities in all parts of the globe. In addition, international superstars, such as Beyoncé and Lady Gaga, feature voguing in their choreographies. Do you see the popularization of it as something positive? Would you say that, in this way, it still maintains its former power and esteem?

JP: Yes, of course. The popularity of ballroom and the exposure of ballroom – I’m not gonna say exploiting – but the exposure that artists, like Lady Gaga and FKA Twigs, have created for the ballroom kids is doing amazing things, is giving people the whole… they can actually think what they’ve been doing and turn it into dollars, they can turn it into fashion, they can turn it into a career. And those are the things we were told that we couldn’t do younger as creative artists. Because people connect so much of what we do to our sexuality and it really hasn’t nothing to do with our sexuality. It’s just our form of expression.

That’s why I’m telling younger generations to educate themselves, and to study, to go to school. And, because, again, ballroom is going now, it can easily slip out our hand, when
we’re not educated enough. […] When we want to talk about appropriation and, you know, now is the time. And I don’t think that anything can be appropriated if we make sure that we are part of any projects that’s being done. You know what I mean? It’s appropriated when someone who has never been to a ball, who doesn’t understand this scene or the culture or the concept is taking it, because they think it looks well. You know what I mean? And then, you have many ballroom or affiliates. That’s an easy exploitation. So, that’s why I encourage the youth to just consider to study training, take their crafts seriously, because the opportunities [are] out there, the jobs [are] out there […] And, it doesn’t have to be a bad thing. We don’t have to play victim anymore. Our story has far surpassed Paris Is Burning. We’re here and we’re here to stay.

KC: Voguing derives from, appeals to, and is vitalized by the LGBT experience. Is it solely entertained by LGBT audiences?

JP: Of course not, of course. You know, it originated in the LGBT community because we created our own sense of entertainment for ourselves, by ourselves. Again, we were not included in certain environments. So, we had to create our own world. It’s so entertaining, it’s so fun, and it’s so liberating. We attract so many artistic individuals, whether they’re straight, gay, trans, bisexual, it doesn’t even matter. We attract anyone that appreciates authenticity and just free…be free… freedom of being. And that’s just anyone. You’ll see a lot of heterosexual males that come to the balls just for inspiration or, you know, just because they want… not for inspiration for creating, but more for inspiration… being free […] It’s really liberating being someone, actually to let go and do what they wanna [sic] do. You know what I mean? So, we are entertaining everyone. It’s not strictly to our community.

KC: What is your view about the future of the dance and the ballroom lifestyle?

JP: The future is femme. You know what I mean? I’m totally confident that voguing and our culture is going to change the world in such a great way. Because, again, voguing is not at all about just the movement; it’s primarily all about freedom of expression and […] that’s why we’re really pushing “Be yourself. Be authentic. Living your truth.”
William Baker

This interview has been conducted in a live setting and the transcript below appears slightly refined for purposes of readability. The interviewee has willingly agreed to the material being published within the scope of this dissertation.

KC: What’s the typical process when designing a tour – the venues, the costumes and all of that. How does this work?
WB: It really happens, like usually I think it takes between six months and a year to do it properly. I mean in a very loose sense from having an idea like “Oh! That would be great” to properly starting work on it, which is about six months really. That’s it, like six months before you kind of have to design the stage set and really start working on it.
KC: But you have the album first, right?
WB: Um, yeah…
KC: Or simultaneously?
WB: I mean, it really depends. Like, it’s all different ways, different tours, different ways, sometimes I had just a concept and wanted to use that concept, so it didn’t really mattered what the album was. Do you know what I mean?
KC: Yeah, totally.
WB: And then, like, *Fever* (*KylieFever2002* Tour) was very inspired by the album and the sound of “Can’t Get You Out of my Head” really. And, *Kiss Me Once* (Tour) was based on *Kiss Me Once* I think. I can’t really remember *Kiss Me Once*.
KC: Let me help you.
WB: What were the tracks? “In my Arms” and… yeah. *Kiss Me Once* was…
KC: “Into the Blue” and “Sexercize”
WB: That wasn’t based on the album really, no. I’m sorry no, I’m getting it wrong. *Kiss Me Once* was based on the album. But then, my favorite part of *Kiss Me Once* was like Bauhaus Disco, which was [sic] nothing to do with the *Kiss Me Once* album
KC: But, all of the tours are like that. They don’t have to be based on the concept of the album. They can expand, right?
WB: Yeah. I mean *Kiss Me Once* was very difficult because I don’t think people knew the songs. Like, when we were touring the songs, they just weren’t very good live, to be honest, I mean that was something we found out very quickly. We did actually cut a lot of them out as we went along and it was only things like “Sexercize,” I guess because the video was so visual, because it was kind of known, even though the song didn’t have everyone in a frenzy.
KC: But, it managed to leave its mark, let’s just say, for the time.
WB: I think so, yeah.
KC: So, does this make it more difficult…
WB: But then, “Into the Blue,” which wasn’t a particularly big hit, was really a massive live track for her. And it was funny that even though the audience didn’t know it, it just had that instant thing they can connect very easily. You know, it’s like “La la la” or “Ah ah ah,” it’s just something that an audience can connect straight away, right?
KC: Um-hum. So, does this make it more difficult if the song is not known by the audience? How do you approach it? How do you stage it?
WB: Well, sometimes you just don’t care. But then, I think there’s times [sic] that I don’t think it really matters if a song is not known, but it obviously helps. I think some of the best songs that she does live aren’t necessarily really known. The live from *Impossible Princess*, I mean I guess all the fans know it, I don’t know if anyone else knows it. Or, when we’ve done things like “G.B.I.” and “Skirt” I think… when there are times when she’s offstage changing.
KC: The interludes.
WB: Yeah, it’s good to use…
KC: As material, as backdrop.
WB: And especially because they have a kinda cool sound, I think.
KC: What about the costumes, approaching fashion designers?
WB: That usually happens… Yeah, I usually have a specific idea of who I want to work with.
KC: Do you design?
WB: Sometimes, but usually the people that we work with a lot, I kinda give them a specific brief, and then you kinda comment on it and it’s like back and forwards. So, you know, it’s collaboration.
KC: Being the creative director, do you have the final say?
WB: Yeah, yeah.
KC: What about Kylie?
WB: Yeah, she does, I mean, yeah, of course *she* does. But you know we have the final say.
KC: So you are the head, let’s say, along with Kylie and the musical director, maybe? The three of you? Or just you and Kylie?
WB: I come up with the treatment for the show. Usually, it’s like a document I have to write, something done for every song. The first thing I normally do, actually, is come up with a list of songs…
KC: Like a setlist.
WB: Yeah, it’s kind of like a setlist, but it’s so unrefined that it’s not a setlist, do you know what I mean? And then somehow, I just kinda have to listen to it for weeks and somehow they find an order. You know, like, if there’s a song that she’s never performed from her back catalog or something like she has not performed, “blah blah blah,” in the last couple of years.
KC: So, you just make the suggestions, let’s say, and then all of you decide to pick what’s best?
WB: Well, yeah, you know, she says “I don’t want to do that,” or… I mean really it’s between her and me. And once I have done the creative treatment, then I have to give the musical guy, Steve, I have to give him a brief.
KC: Steve Anderson.
WB: Yeah, to come up with, usually, quite specific briefs and kind of references of what we’ve made and that goes through a kind of process to get right and stuff.
KC: Here’s another question: do you have a budget provided by the production company that you work on?
WB: No.
KC: You just provide the ideas?
WB: Yeah. I mean, obviously there is a budget, but I’m definitely not aware of it at that time.
KC: So, you just provide the ideas and the production team decides how this can be staged?
WB: You kinda have to stage in your head, because that is part of like designing the stage. To do a stage you really have to know what you’re doing.
KC: Yeah, but, first of all, you have to know what venues you are doing, right? If you are doing arenas or…
WB: Oh yeah, if you doing arenas or theaters, obviously that. We just assume that we do arenas, normally, that’s the kind of set, I think.
KA: *Aphrodite*, for example, went arena, but when it moved on to the United States it was for a theater, right?
WB: Yeah, usually, we have to come up with three shows, like an A show, a B show, a C show. And the B show is what *Aphrodite* went round on [the] Americas. And then, the C show is even less than that, which is like…
KC: Really stripped down.
WB: It is, basically, her and the band, and the dancers and the video. And that goes to places like Thailand or, you know, places that…
KC: Japan.
WB: Yeah. Like places that she hasn’t got much of a market… Like when we did South America. I think these were basically C shows.
KC: Yeah, yeah.
WB: That can be really depressing.
KC: Really? To see the whole thing stripped down.
WB: Right. And it happens all the time.
KC: I think that was the case in Athens.
WB: Finally, with those gigs the audience loves it more, because it’s more her, like, you know, there’s nothing, it’s really about…
KC: Her.
WB: Yeah.
KC: OK. Here’s another question: Are you influenced from your personal experience and tastes?
WB: Yeah, definitely.
KC: Can you give me an example?
WB: I think on the X (Tour) I wanted to do something that was very, I don’t want to say gay, but very kinda like masculinity.
KC: The Showboat segment?
WB: Apart from that. After Showgirl, I wanted it to be a bit darker, I think, and a bit weirder, like weird kinda sexual, “Lika a Drug” kind of thing
KC: Right.
WB: And not so frothy.
KC: Yeah, I get it, yes.
WB: I always think she works better when things are more theatrical and kind of darker and that’s a constant battle I have.
KC: Why?
WB: Because I don’t think many people think that. It’s quite difficult to do that.
KC: But she feels comfortable with it.
WB: Sometimes, yeah.
KC: Do you have to convince her sometimes to do things? Be part of a concept?
WB: Oh yeah, for sure. In *Kiss Me Once* she really wasn’t into the Dolls’ House.
KC: Oh really? But she felt so natural in there. Wow, she’s good.
KB: Yeah. I think in the end she’s got it. You know, she takes time to process things. But that was one she really wasn’t into. But *Kiss Me Once* was… oh sorry, I keep saying *Kiss Me Once*. *X*, the *X Tour*, like, that was the worst production period. Because literally everything went wrong. The whole stage design, the whole stage set.
KC: The video floor and all?
WB: Yeah, the set design just didn’t work at all. Because the video floor was wrecked, the rig was wrecked, and we were supposed to have all these video screens that kinda moved like around, like this (showing inward movements)… anyway… and then rig was wrecked and then they all went like… poof!
KC: Oh my God!
WB: I mean swinging around. And basically that wasn’t fixed. And then, the night before we opened, they just put a stage into Paris and you know, there was like a middle third lift.
KC: Yes.
WB: It was a big lift that went right across the stage and split into three. They were doing some tests and put the middle one down and middle one shut-up and the stage was like, it wasn’t built… And the whole stage went like (crashing sound) like that. That was the night before we opened.
KC: The night before opening?! Oh God.
WB: Everyone was there right to rehearse. Anyway they had to fly people in the middle of the night from London.
KC: Really? Wow!
WB: Yeah. To at least get it down. And the video floor actually worked, you know, but the lifts didn’t work for weeks, which was bad. And also the thing that she was revealed on was like… black. Oh, just everything went wrong. I actually got a picture of that.
KC: You mean the hoop with the wires.
WB: Yeah, that’s what we kinda… OK, here it is (showing picture with the original stage for the *X Tour*). It was supposed to be like that. So it had all these video screens that were six different screens and she was supposed to come through this platform and stuff. Anyway, it never really [happened]…
KC: But it never really flourished.
WB: No, but it was more like kinda a bad design really.
KC: But it worked through rehearsals, right?
WB: No it never worked. As soon as we started rehearsals and we loaded the stage into the arena to rehearse, nothing worked. I mean the video floor worked and the thing, you know. But, the panels didn’t work. So, we were just trying to think… Basically, we had to, you know, design a new show. The video screens were supposed to form different areas on the stage. Yeah, so we choreographed it really quickly. Anyway, I think it was kind of fine in the end.
KC: It was. It is probably one of my favorites.
WB: I think it’s one of mine, as well.
KC: I mean the whole thing was flawless. Especially, the Naughty Manga Girl session.
WB: The which one?
KC: The Manga Girl. It’s my favorite.
WB: Oh, yes. I loved that.
KC: I loved that, too. It was great.
WB: Well, that was an example where we used a song that no one knew.
KC: “Sometime Samurai”?
WB: Yeah. Or even “Nu-Di-TY” wasn’t really known.
KC: Yeah, but it was on the X (album). I mean it didn’t really gained such momentum. It was still new.
WB: Yeah.
KC: She was great in there. She was great, I think.
WB: I think the album was really good. Yeah.
KC: Yes, very good productions in there.
WB: Yeah, I don’t mean X was a particularly… I mean I don’t know, you really have to talk to someone else, because I am really not the person to talk to. But, I don’t think it was a particularly expensive tour, do you (know what I mean)? Unlike Aphrodite (Tour).
KC: Yeah, Aphrodite was like up there, right?.
WB: Yeah. I don’t think X was that.
KC: OK. Do you cite from other artists? Are you influenced…
WB: Oh, you asked me if I cite from my personal experience…
KC: Yeah, yeah, and you said yes…
WB: Oh, yes, I do. Like, I think that you have to. I mean what else would you do? I don’t know. I really wouldn’t know how to do it. I mean you kinda would…
KC: Get inspired.
WB: I mean it’s obviously not about me, but I have to like it for it to work, do you know what I mean?
KC: Yeah.
WB: Otherwise if I hadn’t liked it, then I’m not going to…
KC: Well, you have to convince yourself first, right? And then “sell” it.
WB: Yes. And I think there was a lot of *Kiss Me Once* that I don’t really like… But I think we actually cut a lot of it … So, you probably never saw it and the bits that we cut. But, you know, there’s a lot that comes from, you know, your own personal tastes and… I mean that’s what you’re paid for really, I guess.

KC: Yeah.

WB: And other artists. Yeah, totally. Like, I think yeah. I think all those shows… everyone looks at these shows and like “I want the biggest show”…

KC: Exactly.

WB: I mean I always look it like… I’ve never seen a Gaga show. Because I don’t like her. No, I love *her*, but I don’t like her aesthetic.

KC: OK, what is it that you don’t like?

WB: I just find it quite messy.

KC: Messy?

WB: Like quite ugly. I just don’t know. I just don’t, really. You know there’s bits [sic] of her career that I’ve loved and bits that I’ve hated. I mean, I think she’s amazing.

KC: She is.

WB: But I don’t really think she speaks to me.

KC: Yeah, OK, I get it. But, you know, her shows are more full

WB: Full? But that’s, like, her. I mean it’s not…

KC: Let’s just not say superfluous, but, you know, full.

WB: Yeah, but that’s what I think her problem is. She has so many ideas.

KC: Do you think she has to tone it down? You know, make less changes during the show?

WB: Well, I’ve heard that she’s constantly making changes, that she constantly changes things throughout. But, you know, she’s a very creative person, but I think that has to be harnessed. Not that, she like… spent a fortune, like literally, more money than she had on some of her productions, because she kept changing everything. And I think there’s a point where you just gotta go “This is it” even if you don’t like it, do you know what I mean? “This is it. I’m going to do it and it’s done.”

KC: That’s it.

WB: Because, I think having too many ideas like that means you have to edit ideas, I think. And someone (that) has too many ideas means they can’t really make their mind up and they don’t really have faith in a single idea. I think the strongest things really are the simplest usually, in my experience.

KC: Yeah, that’s interesting. OK, let’s just move on to the other question: Kylie frequently adopts new fashions and styles. How do you two work together reinventing Kylie on stage, the Kylie persona, let’s say. Reinvention, that’s what they always talk about, transformation and reinvention. Stylie Kylie. How do you…

WB: The whole kind of fashion/styling thing on stage with Kylie is, you know… I find it really difficult to talk about that because it’s something that just happens, I think. Obviously, there’s times when it’s very kind of act-led or section-led in a tour, like the Japanese section.

KC: The Manga Girl.
WB: Yeah, the Manga thing or the Loveboat bit or, you know, I can’t even remember what *Kiss Me Once*... oh yeah.
KC: The Dollhouse?
WB: Yeah. The Dolls’ House thing. But, I think, you know, *Kiss Me Once* was less costume-y, which I personally don’t like.
KC: Compared to *Aphrodite* which was, you know, super-extravagant.
WB: OK, I think like Gaultier is amazing to do costumes, like proper costumes. I mean he’s the king. I think from *Blond Ambition* (Madonna’s Tour) was... he just created these iconic pop moments, whereas I think Dolce & Gabbana are more about kind of looking fabulous and glamorous and stuff like that, which are... they obviously are great at costume design, but it’s less about costume and more about fashion with them in a way. I mean like the *Aphrodite* costume.
KC: Which one?
WB: The white one. The white “Aphrodite,” you know, the one that she’s revealed in with the thing.
KC: Yeah, with the (headpiece).
WB: Yeah. It’s not really a costume. Do you know what I mean by that? Costume? Whereas... I think the outfits of Gaultier have always been kind of costumes.
KC: Well, for the *Showgirl* they were. All these burlesque costumes.
WB: Yeah, I can’t remember a lot of the costumes. I mean I like the costumes that kind of, are more, you know, as I say, more “costumes” basically than just something that you could wear day to day. Like, I actually I loved what Gaultier...
KC: Dolce?
WB: Dolce did in the “Cupid Boy” section of *Aphrodite*, that big thing, then you have another thing.
KC: It was beautiful.
WB: I mean, yeah, they are both really brilliant, but they both have different kind of... two different aspects to them that you would go for different things, you know.
KC: Do you work only with those two fashion designers?
WB: No, we’ve worked with others, but I think they’re the best ones, you know.
KC: Most appropriate, let’s say.
WB: Yeah. I mean we’ve worked with a lot of kind of young British designers, but they never have the... you know, they have to produce so many versions of the same outfit and they just never have the kind of factory support to be able to do it really. So, you have to go to somewhere...
KC: Who is traditionally...
WB: That’s a big name, you know, yeah.
KC: OK, a Kylie show, more often than not references a variety of musical and theatrical scenes. How, for example, these...?
WB: Oh, sorry, sorry. I was just thinking.. But then Dolce & Gabbana as well have done... you know... the cat-woman costume from *Homecoming*, the leopard.
KC: Yeah, yeah. That was Dolce?
WB: That was Dolce, yeah. And Galliano we worked with as well, John Galliano on the *Showgirl* and *Homecoming* opening. Everyone. They were great. You just feel kind of what’s right and also, finally enough, Gaultier. I was gonna say that you try to stay away from whom anyone else works with, but the fact the he works with Madonna is never really… I think that was kind of good, because in a way that’s what I want him to bring to her. That kind of iconic feeling.
KC: The Madonna iconic.
WB: Yeah. I don’t mean like… because he does Kylie in a different way, but like that strength or that thing that is easily recognizable.
KC: Is your stage influenced by Madonna?
WB: I think that everything in pop music done by a female is influenced by Madonna really, don’t you?
KC: I think so, too, yeah.
WB: I think that everything in pop music done by a female is influenced by Madonna really, don’t you?
KC: I think so, too, yeah.
WB: I mean like the modern pop concert experience was created by her really and her *Blond Ambition* show. That’s what I think has become the template for the theatrical kind of pop show which is split into sections that pretty much everyone copies or everyone is inspired by.
KC: This iconic feeling that you say. How do you work on that? What makes an act iconic?
WB: Well, I just think that they must have something that other people don’t. I mean I don’t think that you approach it really “This person is iconic.” It just kind of happens […] But, I guess with Kylie, how it’s worked, is… I’ve always tried to think of really iconic characters or situations or roles that she would play in a show. Like, off the top of my head, there’s the *Sunset Blvd.* kind of thing on the American tour.
KC: *For You, For Me*?
WB: And Aphrodite or there’s the… on the American tour, as well. And on the *Fever* tour the Kyborg thing, the robot thing. Yeah, it just all comes from different strong female characters or not so strong female characters. I think there’s a way of, you know… by a female performer doing a pop concert or any performer doing a pop concert. You want to make them look iconic, because that’s what they’re paying you to do. And the whole point of them being up there and being elevated into this kind of star is, I think, very important. And, you know, I was always hugely, really, really, influenced by Madonna. If I hadn’t seen *Blond Ambition* when I was at school, I don’t think I would do what I do today, because that’s what makes me want to do it. And that’s what formed my way of looking a show. I mean I wasn’t particularly… I’m still not particularly interested in pop concerts. I mean, of course, I have to be, to an extent, but like I said I’ve never seen Gaga. I always find Beyoncé quite an interesting thing live.
KC: She is. How did you get into this? What made all this start?
WB: I think it was just all a…
KC: Coincidence?
WB: Not necessarily coincidence, but it just grew out of the relationship with Kylie really, like a kind of friendship. You know, a working relationship.
KC: How do you start in this business?
WB: I think what’s interesting, you know, now, there’s always like a battle between us about, you know, the band. For me, I’d be quite happy to do it to track, do you know what I mean? I’d rather the money went somewhere else and she loves the band and the musicality and performing with the band. I mean she would much rather do that than put on a theatrical show.
KC: Oh, really?
WB: Yeah. We kind of lock heads about that quite a lot. But I think, in terms of your PhD work, that musicality or that thing with performing with the band is really important to her relationship with her audience, because I think there is where she really works hard on stage as a performer and really connects with the audience, you know.
KC: Yeah, but people expect…
WB: Like in Aphrodite, right, where she… I can’t remember the song… “Better Than Today”
KC: Yeah, yeah, and “Put Your Hands Up” and all that.
WB: All that. She’s with her band and the audience and you can’t get her off stage, like, she literally would add songs every night.
KC: Wow.
WB: And like, she loves being in that kind of…
KC: Feeling, let’s say.
WB: Feeling, yeah. She doesn’t really like dancers.
KC: Really?
WB: No. I mean they don’t really interest her at all, to be honest.
KC: But she’s got the moves. She can pull it off.
WB: Yeah. But I think it’s also, you know, in the past as well you always try to kind of do things with her, like push the choreography, like using Rafael (Bonachela) or Akram Khan, kind of contemporary dance choreographers and not people that do the same old shit, do you know what I mean? Because I think she is not a great dancer, but it’s just that people don’t think of Kylie as, you know. The thing is that Beyoncé is a great dancer, do you know what I mean? Like, Madonna’s a great dancer. Kylie is not a dancer like that. She can dance and she can move, but…
KC: But not in the choreography kind of way that Beyoncé does.
WB: I think she’s much more…
KC: Stagey?
WB: She always has this kind of energy between her and the audience.
KC: That’s nice.
WB: It’s like an exchange of energy. Like, when we did the Aphrodite thing, she then goes “Oh, I’ve had enough of this. I just want to do without… I just want to go out with the band and really minimal…” And, she then did the Anti Tour.
KC: Exactly, yeah. She wanted to do that and it was a really, really small tour, right? I mean it was just the band and her.
WB: Yeah, it was just the band and her. But, you know it was like a few lasers and stuff like that. It was very simple.
KC: The audience identifies with Kylie because of that whole spectacle though, right? They got to know her through these extravagant shows.
WB: Well, I think that is a relationship with her fans. I think she really loves her fans and she is very conscious of them. Actually, she’s very conscious of them not being ripped off, to be quite honest... Like, when we were doing Kiss Me Once it was like... They knew it was going to be smaller and “blah blah blah.” She was like “I don’t want people to think it’s going to be like Aphrodite. I want people to know that it’s...” Yeah, yeah. She’s really good like that. She wanted to do that thing, the Anti Tour, as like a present to them, because it was all the songs she never really done live and only fans like. Like, you know, the places she performed were really small.
KC: Yeah, yeah. So what’s her relationship with the audience and, specifically, the gay audience? She has a lot of gay fanbase, right?
WB: Yeah. What do you mean?
KC: What is the relationship, I mean she’s a gay icon. How does she manage to keep, to preserve this relationship alive through all these years through the shows?
WB: I think she has a very gay sensibility. You know, gays like that.
KC: How do you find that?
WB: I think gay people... Actually, I read this kind of book that you should read, called Straitjacket. It was written by the editor of Attitude and he was talking about this... what white gay people like, Cher and, you know, Bettie Miedler and “blah blah blah” you know all these kind of, you know, all the sweeping generalizations and why they all love Beyoncé, why they all like Madonna and why they love Kylie. But he was saying, which I’d never heard before, but actually thought it was really interesting is this whole thing about the gay thing was about being rooted in shame. And, the thing about Kylie is, like, when she was starting out as a performer or all her song were about being second best, you know, “I Should be so Lucky,” “Got to be Certain,” you know, “Hand on Your Heart.” They’re all like, all of them are kind of... “Better the Devil You Know” is about going back to someone that has cheated on you and whatever better the devil, do you know what I mean? It’s all about not being the super-strong “Put your love to the test” like “Express Yourself”... And I think that is really part of it. I mean I really don’t know if it is as deep and as subconscious or as conscious. I think it’s definitely like a kind of vulnerability to Kylie. I think that people and the gay people are attracted to. And, also, you know, gay people have grown up with her really. I think gay culture has really...
KC: Been influenced.
WB: Really grown. I mean the modern gay culture has really grown up with her, I think, since she was on TV. It’s almost like, you can almost chart to gay marriage, you know.
KC: I agree. Exactly.
WB: You know, you can almost chart the rights of gay culture to her career really. So, I think there are a lot of thing like in common as to why that is. I don’t really know.
KC: When she got the GLAAD award, Boy George introduced the whole thing by saying “Kylie has put the K in camp.” How do you respond to that?

WB: Well, I think there’s this other thing I’ve had, a constant battle that we had with Parlophone is that camp is like a bad thing. You know people think it’s a bad thing. Like, Parlophone were really, famously unsupportive of “Your Disco Needs You.”

KC: Really?

WB: And really didn’t want to put the Kylie and Dannii (Minogue) duet on the Christmas album (A Kylie Christmas). Just because they hate camp.

KC: They hate camp?

WB: Yeah. And I think they would argue, in their defense, that she’s better than that. But it’s just a part of her. It’s something that she’s like. It’s fun. I think she was kinda camp before I came along, so I don’t think that I can get the blame for it…

KC: Do you think you put all that camp glamour in that.

WB: Well, you know, I love that. I love camp glamour. I think it’s very funny, I think it’s very kinda entertaining and I think it’s very, you know, camp. It’s very glamorous. At the same time, I really like her being dark…

KC: Camp can be dark.

WB: Camp can be dark, yeah. I think what’s great about Kylie is that she can be all those different things. But, again, I do think there’s a general conception, especeially in gay culture really that camp is not a good thing, that camp is bad… But why? I mean it’s just part of who we are, isn’t it really? And it’s part of our legacy.

KC: It is. It has become a tradition.

WB: Yeah. I mean why is Liza Minnelli camp? I think that those people, you know, the great kind of camp icons have an element of tragedy to them.

KC: Of course. And melodrama.

WB: And melodrama. And kind of sadness, you know. They’re all kind of survivors. And I think this is what is great about them. What has always inspired me about Kylie was the kind of sadness, even though it’s not… she’s not necessarily a sad person.

KC: Yeah, yeah, of course.

WB: But that’s what I always loved, from the Fever Tour, from The Crying Game and… She does have that kind of grandiosity, like Lisa and Julie (Andrews)…

KC: Yes, yes, I know. Like the “Over the Rainbow” performance.

WB: Yeah.

KC: But it’s all these contrasts in the gay culture: you have the camp and you have the muscle culture, as we say. The feminine/masculine thing. Well, how do you perceive that?

WB: Well, you know, the Dolls’ House was camp as tits. And it’s just pink, do you know what I mean? I just think it’s all bollocks! Like, I think the muscle culture is just like another clone, another ideal of the mustache and leather jacket from the seventies, eighties. I think it’s just… I have a very hard… I personally have a hard time… I am going to be very controversial.

KC: Be, please! It’s OK.
WB: I don’t know, one of the things that I loved about being gay was being different, do you know what I mean? And I don’t strictly… I mean am not particularly… Of course, I’m a supporter of gay rights, but I don’t particularly want to get married. Because, if I wanted to get married. I mean I don’t say if I wouldn’t want to get married, I would have been straight, but if… I think I’m a really big fan of the art and the kind of legacy of underground gay culture when it’s like form of the underground…You know, Quentin Crisp on the X Tour with the sailors and like, you know…
KC: Yeah, yeah.
WB: I love all that and I think it’s all really important.
KC: Do you think that we’ve gone mainstream at some point? I mean, is this underground vibe still…?
WB: Well, I think there is no underground in anything anymore, for me. I think that, you know.
KC: Anymore. So, do you think there used to be?
WB: Yes, definitely, definitely. And you know, like, when we did Fever, right, one of the big inspirations that I had for Fever, which she probably wouldn’t even know that it’s an inspiration, was Grace Jones’ One Man Show, it’s just a TV show. And I remember trying to get hold of that at that time, it was impossible. And also we did… I can’t even remember what… David Bowie did a documentary called Cracked Actor and, when he was all smacked out. I mean these things were really, really impossible to find and now with Internet you can get anything like that. So, suddenly, everyone has the same references, which I don’t think it’s really a good thing, you know. Everything is, like, very easy, I think.
KC: Global culture.
WB: And now there’s almost this kind of “OK, this has gotta be different. It’s gotta be different.”
KC: How is it going to be different if everything keeps converging?
WB: Yes, yeah. Anyway, that’s my kind of Rent. But I don’t really know if that’s… Ironic, I think it’s not the same, you know, gay culture is, you know… And I think it should be something that is kinda preserved really.
KC: Of course.
WB: And I think…
KC: Well, I think it is preserved. You keep watching all these musicals being restaged. For example, you did Rent, right? You know, it’s part of the gay culture.
WB: Yes, yeah. I mean I love all that. I mean I don’t know if it speaks to any
KC: Younger generations? I think it does.
WB: But I love it.
KC: Yeah, OK. How much do the audiences’ demands influence the final outcome of the stage? I believe you pay a lot of attention to the audiences, right? What do they want? How do you know what they want?
WB: Well, I kinda listen to a lot of … Steve Anderson is much worse than me. But, like, he’s very in touch with what Kylie fans say and what they do, how much they hate me “blah blah blah”

KC: Come on.
WB: I’m joking. Well, I’m kind of joking… Yeah, he’s really in touch with all that stuff. And, I just know […] when they all go what the songs are going to be… “This would be amazing. If she did this.” I always look at stuff like that. But then with the fans… I think it’s really important for Kylie as well to take the show out into the audience, do you know what I mean? So, it’s not so on the stage… You kind of take it out and there’s a show for kinda everyone, 360 degrees… I mean, I don’t know. Apart from that there are specific things that I kind of, to be really honest, commercially-led, like, you know, the Splash Zone.

KC: Yeah, yeah. It was beautiful.
WB: Yeah, you know, you charge a bit more and have this kind of party, this exclusive party in there which kind of came from… You know, when I worked on the Britney’s (Spears) Circus Tour with Steve Dixon, with whom I also worked on the Aphrodite, and Nick (Whitehouse) the lighting guy, one of the things that we did was have these little circus booths all around the stage which was like, you know, a premium ticket. And I think that’s just a way of bringing extra income, not necessarily for them to make more money, but so you have more to do… what you want to do on the stage.

KC: Yeah, yeah. What is the production companies’ expectations of that? I mean, do they want from you… of course, they want from you to bring as much as possible financially.
WB: Well, the production companies… Well, sometimes they really fuck me off. But like I hate it when they sell behind the fucking stage. I mean, why would they do that? I just have no comprehension why anyone would want to do, would sell a ticket that’s behind the stage, do you know what I mean? Because, I mean as amazing as all as show productions are, you play out at the front, you never can play… do you know what I mean? They see the shit and all the mess. I just think it’s, like, cheap, and what’d you call it, it’s being greedy, I think. I don’t know if people have a good time seeing an eighth of a show, do you know what I mean?
KC: Yeah, exactly.
WB: I just don’t really feel that should be kind of offered.

KC: The meet-&-greet, let’s say, kind of thing.
WB: Do you know what I mean. You know, if I was a massive fan of somebody and I’m, you know, like, I go to a Doctor Who convention…

KC: Really, you’re a Doctor Who fan?
WB: Yeah. I mean I think for a fan those things are really great, you know. I think it’s unfortunate because I think being on this, you know, those meet-&-greets are the last thing an artist wants to do that time. Because they just want to go and…

KC: Perform.
WB: Yeah, and whoever you are, doing that and going on stage, and performing, you know, it takes a huge amount of energy.
KC: Of course. Well, sometimes they do meet-&-greets before the show.
WB: Yeah. So, I think it’s a very weird kind of like false... You know, I think as a fan, they are really important. You know, if I was, like... Of course, you want to go in.
KC: Of course. It’s a chance to get up, close and intimate, let’s say. OK. Is there something you haven’t done with Kylie or you want to try out in the future? You’ve done a lot of things.
WB: I don’t really know. I mean, yeah, there must be.
KC: Is there any particular idea that you wanted to stage but you didn’t have the time to do it or the money to do it?
WB: Not really. I mean, I don’t really think like that. Do you know what I mean? I think more... I think kinda mostly kind of like creatively more... I don’t think that kind of deliberately or that. I’d like to do some other stuff with her, but I don’t really know that is yet.
KC: You just let the moment guide you, let’s say.
WB: Yeah, yes. I mean, at the same time there’s things that I don’t want to do with her.
KC: For example?
WB: And I think that... I love being creative with her and, you know. I think it’s very difficult for a star as they get older, especially a woman.
KC: Why do you say that?
WB: Because it is, I think. You know, everyone is really ageist in the press and, you know, like... I think Madonna takes things to an extreme.
KC: There is a new boundary to push.
WB: Yeah. I mean there’s the thing that, you know, if you cover up that you’re a granny, for instance, or like, if you’re trying too much to be trendy or...
KC: It doesn’t work.
WB: I think it’s just very difficult, you know. You just have to get on with it really.
KC: Yes. But once these boundaries are pushed, I mean, you can have a new standard. I mean, Madonna says “I keep pushing the envelope, especially for ageism, currently, and I make way for all the young performers to come and they won’t have to deal with that problem when they get old.”
WB: But, does anyone really think that?
KC: I don’t know. Currently, no, honestly.
WB: I mean, I don’t know. She’s an incredible woman that she can still do it on stage, do you know what I mean?
KC: Yes, of course.
WB: I didn’t actually see that kind of... I always mean to look up, but I’ve never actually done it... That one-off show she did in Australia.
KC: The Tears of a Clown.
WB: The Tears of a Clown. I don’t know... I’d love to see that.
KC: It was beautiful.
WB: Was it?
KC: It was. That was more of an acoustic gig. She performed songs that she never got to do, just like [Kylie’s] the *Anti Tour*. But it was a one-off, that was all. But, she got more personal. I think she addressed her relationship with her son and her daughter. I think she was drunk at some point, I don’t know.

WB: Yeah. But that’s the thing, you know. She gets slapped for being drunk on stage. I mean if that was Mick Jagger…

KC: Yeah, it would be acceptable. Exactly. Isn’t that sexist? I mean we find it natural…

WB: Yeah, or she’s, like, a bad mother. No one ever says how Mick Jagger is a bad father.

KC: Of course.

WB: Or, like, you know. So, I do think that they’ve…

KC: It’s still hard for women to make it out there.

WB: I think I’d like to do some things. Sorry, you asked me…

KC: Yeah, sure, sure.

WB: I’d like to do something like kind of technological. Like, I really liked doing *Aphrodite*, that was never really done before. But on that kind of scale. The water thing.

KC: The water thing.

WB: But, it was a real challenge. It was really, really challenging.

KC: How did you come to think all of that?

WB: I don’t really know. It’s Esther Williams. I watched a lot of her films, like, kind of Busby Berkeley.

KC: Busby Berkeley, yeah.

WB: And we just always wanted to do a…

KC: Vegas type of thing.

WB: Yeah, but it was in particular, it was that Busby Berkeley film (*Million Dollar Mermaid*), I don’t remember now actually… When we did “All the Lovers” on the TVs, we kinda staged it on a cake.

KC: Yeah.

WB: Because there is, you know, that famous Busby Berkeley image of the thing, the fountain, and that was the starting point for that really. And then, Aphrodite was born out of the sea.

KC: Of course, you needed the water element.

WB: Yeah. It was just all, you know… and then there was the large fan things. I just think that “All the Lovers” in particular was such a kind of uplifting song. I mean, it just really needed something…

KC: It was euphoric, as I say.

WB: Euphoric. You needed something kinda visually euphoric. I’d love to do something like that again.

KC: With technology. How did you manage to convince all the people around you to get a water show?

WB: I mean, there’s a lot of convincing.

KC: Lots of power point work?
WB: Yeah. It’s just… Because I think you know it’s going to be really good, do you know what I mean? To kind of pull it off. That’s why I don’t think *Kiss Me Once* really knew what it was… I just really didn’t bond with it.

KC: Boy, you hate it.

WB: I don’t hate it. You know, I don’t hate it at all. But, I think you know some bits of it were really good and some bits of it just, like, I got no desire to watch it again really. And I think things didn’t really work out…

KC: It’s like an abject child, let’s just say. But, if you didn’t like it, wouldn’t you want to re-stage it, just change some things while on road?

WB: Because I think the problem comes with, you know, the music, I think.

KC: OK, yeah.

WB: And I just don’t really buy, you know, the idea of Kylie being down at the disco, Saturday night, being all sexy… I mean it’s just not real. And I think it’s so blatantly not real. I feel like it’s kind of inauthentic and think people can kind of… Well, I personally can’t… It doesn’t inspire me. It feels like you kinda working against it somehow.

KC: Exactly.

WB: You know, it’ very hard to kind of do that. I mean I really like the… Actually, you know, I really like the kinda of “Can’t Get You Out of my Head” style, I really liked that. And I really liked Bauhaus disco and I kind of really liked the Dollhouse really.

KC: You’ve got a lot of influences from disco, from the disco scene. I mean, why is that?

WB: Yeah. Well, you know, disco was a fundamentally gay music, wasn’t it?

KC: It was.

WB: That was another reason, you know, Kylie and kinda eighties, early nineties was the equivalent of disco then. Disco was in the seventies. You know, dance music has always come out of the gay.

KC: House scenes.

WB: I think so, yeah. I mean, like, I’m not a big music expert but, you know, that disco sound and that kind of house sound came from the gay clubs really and…

KC: And, you get to find disco segments in every Kylie tour.

WB: Oh yeah. There’s always [one]. You have to stick them somewhere.

KC: But that’s nice. I mean…

WB: But there’s always kind of songs you can never think of that are just like “What the fuck am I gonna do with it?” Like, how many times can you re-do this? I think that is what it’s difficult. Always trying to, you know… I really don’t want her to become, like, a nostalgia artist. You know, I think that’s really important for me.

KC: She has to preserve that tradition and do new things and that’s the hardest part.

WB: Yeah. Whether those new things are successful or not… I just think that she really needs to do it.

KC: Do you get to influence her work musically or you just do it on stage? How does she pick music? I mean does she do it on her own, with her production team? Are you in there?

WB: What do you mean? When she makes a record?
KC: When she makes a record, when she decides the final cut.
WB: She kind of plays it to a few people. And goes… “blah blah blah.”
KC: “What do you think?”
WB: I’m not the best person to put things in front of. Because…
KC: But, you’re an essential part for her stage. I mean…
WB: Yeah, but you just kind of deal with what you get, don’t you really? I mean I think there’s times that have been… Like, I think the collaboration with Stuart (Price) was incredible.
KC: It was.
WB: And I don’t think… Some people go “Oh, yeah she… and he worked with Madonna and (nagging).” But, I think he made a great album for both of them.
KC: Exactly. And with the Pet Shop Boys. I mean, this guy is incredible.
WB: Yeah. He’s an incredible person. He’s, like, a lovely, lovely guy. You know, when he did, back in the day, when he had his own band, Zoot Woman, it was very creative and they had such a good look, do you know what I mean.
KC: Yeah, yeah.
WB: He’s really clever. But then, I think … she’s very difficult musically. I don’t know who… You know, I’ve been in real trouble for saying… like I said something…
KC: I won’t give it away.
WB: No, but I said something, you know… I just don’t think straight men get her. Do you know what I mean? And I think that is kind of… I think it takes a very special straight man, like Stuart, to kind of understand her
KC: To get her… where she goes.
WB: And Steve Anderson to kind of get her. Otherwise they’re just trying really to make her do what everyone else is doing.
KC: Go with the flow.
WB: Yeah. And I think it’s… Well, she’s Kylie because she’s not those other girls. So, why are you trying to put her with the look, the latest…?
KC: Exactly. Well, she worked with Calvin Harris, for example, right? But she worked on an early stage [of his career].
WB: Yeah. And I think they really got off well.
KC: Yeah, it was good, but I don’t think a collaboration right now with the sound Harris has adopted would work. I don’t know. It was good for that time. Now…
WB: I mean “I Was Gonna Cancel.” I don’t know… I mean I just don’t really know… That was, like, just a complete disaster…
KC: The video was interesting.
WB: I mean I had nothing to do with it. I mean I just don’t really get the whole fucking…
KC: Thing.
WB: Yeah. I think it’s actually a good song, but I think it’s an example of how you get a creative really wrong in, you know…
KC: Just get you in the wrong direction maybe.
WB: Yeah. And it always really, really frustrates me that people don’t… I think there’s a real reluctance to accept that Kylie’s fans are predominantly gay. And, you know, I go to the fucking concerts, do you know what I mean? They are predominantly gay.

KC: They are.

WB: are, do you know what I mean? And it’s like for some reason they don’t want to acknowledge that.

KC: They don’t?

WB: No. I think the people that make the records…

KC: Yeah, but it’s her market. I mean she is successful with these audiences.

WB: That’s what I’m saying. I think the one thing that gay people, the gay audience kind of requires is an authenticity and I think that’s where Kiss Me Once (album) went wrong. You know, because it’s not Kylie really. Very generally… The song “Kiss Me Once” I think it’s great, “Into the Blue” I think it’s great, but like… “Sexercise” is like… It’s just not really her.

KC: And the whole hip about the song was all about Sia, the production of Sia.

WB: Well, it was just a crap song. I mean, like, Sia has just an…

KC: Amazing catalog of songs.

WB: Amazing songs. Yeah, an amazing catalog of songs. And Kylie and Sia are very close… I know that Kylie is very inspired by her… “And then my skirt came down” (“Skirt”)? It’s just like… It’s so not Kylie. She has a kind of class that I think.

KC: She’s not for that, yeah.

WB: And I think that those American artists are, you know, predominantly youth-aimed and I think that those lyrics are kind of appropriate for that audience because that’s girls are like seventeen or, you know, they’re very sexually, you know… They send pics of their tits and dicks to each other.

KC: Yeah, but…

WB: “Blah., blah, blah.” But Kylie is… you know, she’s not like that.

KC: Well, maybe they have to…

WB: And they didn’t do so. You know, I just think “Sexercise” would have been very different if it had been camp, do you know what I mean? Because I think that’s what it kinda needs. It was, like, there was no humor into it whatsoever… I even remember that kind of number they did… I think it might have been Calvin, I’m not sure who it was… But it was when they did a workout video and all the girls have massive tits… But that was really funny. It was kinda like sexy and funny and in a way it’s camp.

KC: Yes.

WB: And I just think “Sexercise” needed something like that. It just kinda suffered for for trying to be too cool and I think humor is really important to what Kylie does.

KC: Of course, humor.

WB: I mean I think that’s a lot of a reason why a lot of the stuff Madonna did a few years ago didn’t really work was because she had no sense of humor.

KC: Yeah, yeah.
WB: You know, *Blond Ambition* and *The Girlie Show* were really fun. There’s a lot of humor in there. Even like, now, she’s got that humor back with the *Tears of a Clown*…
KC: The *Rebel Heart* [Tour].
WB: And I just think that’s really important.
KC: So, companies, industries have a lot of influence on that, when they target the audiences... Maybe artists go the wrong way.
WB: Well, I find it very weird with Kylie how people think “Oh let’s make a sound like that…” or “Let’s make her like Rihanna. Let’s make her like…” Because she’s so successful on her own. I mean she’s Kylie.
KC: She has her own fame.
WB: Make a fucking Kylie record, not one like…
KC: Wouldn’t that be, you know, repetitive and that’s when we would talk about nostalgia.
WB: If she made a Kylie record? No, because I think that she she’s very good musically… She produces really interesting, good music when she’s left to her own devices I think. Like, what’s his name? I can’t remember his name.
KC: Tell me. He’s an artist?
WB: “Sleepwalker.”
KC: (Fernando) Garibay.
WB: Yeah, Garibay. I think the stuff she did with him was, like, much more interesting than fucking “Skirt” or shit like, because…
KC: Even the (Giorgio) Moroder track.
WB: Yeah. And even if it’s not great, amazing…
KC: It’s Kylie, after all.
WB: You know, I think it’s really honest stuff coming from her. And, I think that was of her artistic expression.
KC: She get to make it…
WB: More genuine than, you know, “bounce, bounce” (“Sexercise”).
KC: Yeah, I get it.
WB: And you know the Moroder thing… That is a really Kylie record song.
KC: He’s a legend, yeah. The two would make a bomb record. OK.
WB: I said horrible things.
KC: No, it’s OK. Thank you. Thank you for this interview.